

Translation Aids – Offerings and Sacrifices

The General Terms קָרְבָּן *qārbān* ‘Offering’, זֶבַח *zēbah* ‘Sacrifice’, and אִשָּׁה *iššeh* ‘Gift’

An initial orientation. 2018.

On the distinction between offering [קָרְבָּן] and sacrifice [זֶבַח]

Averbeck explains (NIDOTTE, Offerings and Sacrifices, vol. 4, pp. 996-1022):

(996f.) In Leviticus, and throughout virtually the entire OT, both the nom. sacrifice [he is talking about *zēbah*] and its cognate vb. sacrifice are used only in reference to peace offerings.

Therefore, strictly speaking, from an OT point of view one should limit “sacrifice” to animal offerings and, even more specifically, to instances where an animal was slaughtered and eaten as part of a communal meal, thus excluding burnt, sin and guilt offerings. ... In this article, on the one hand, the word “offering” will be used as a comprehensive term for animal and vegetable offerings, even those slaughtered specifically for communal meals. On the other hand, “sacrifice” will be limited to animal offerings slaughtered for communal meals (i.e., peace offering sacrifices; the Passover lamb, which was a kind of communal sacrifice; and the ordination offering, which was a variant form of the peace offering.

1. קָרְבָּן *qārbān* ‘offering’

(80 x)

Renderings

Majority of English versions: **(bring / present an) offering** / GNB, CEV (offer a) sacrifice.

Key passages

Lev 1:2:

NASB: ‘When any man of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of animals from the herd or the flock.

Lev 7:37-38:

NRSV: ³⁷ This is the ritual of the burnt offering, the grain offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering, the offering of ordination, and the sacrifice of well-being, ³⁸ which the Lord commanded Moses on Mount Sinai, when he commanded the people of Israel to bring [qrb hi.] their offerings [qārbān] to the Lord, in the wilderness of Sinai.

Dictionaries

The root is *qrb* ‘to draw near / approach / offer’.

HALOT’s entry says:

offering, gift (the commonest and vaguest expression for sacrifice).

NIDOTTE (# 7933) translates with ‘offering / gift’ too and says:

The use of this nom. with its corresponding cognate vb. at the beginning and end of the main offerings section in Lev 1-7 is indicative of its broad application to all the categories of offerings included within the priestly system.

Translation

The commonly used term “offering” is appropriate. In many contexts, “sacrifice” is not wrong. GNB, while using “sacrifice” in Lev 1:2, correctly uses “offering” in Lev 7:38, where “grain offerings” are included (see v. 37).

2. זָבַח *zēbah* ‘sacrifice’

(174 x)

Renderings

Majority of English versions: **(offer) sacrifice(s)**.

Some examples

Even before Sinai, the word is used of a **sacrifice connected with a communal meal**. Gen 31:54 (NRSV) says:

and Jacob offered [*zbh*] a sacrifice [*zbh*] on the height and called his kinsfolk to eat bread; ...

The root (here the verb) can be used for **referring to sacrifices without specifying the kind**. In Ex 3:18 (NRSV) we read what Moses shall ask from Pharaoh:

...; let us now go a three days' journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice [*zbh*] to the Lord our God.'

Likewise, when Jeroboam refers to the service in Jerusalem, he does so by saying (1Ki 12:27, NRSV):

If this people continues to go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, the heart of this people will turn again to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and return to King Rehoboam of Judah."

However, in the majority of cases, *zēbah* **refers to the peace offering**. This often happened at festive occasions, like Solomon's dedication of the Temple, 1Ki 8 (NRSV):

⁶² Then the king, and all Israel with him, offered sacrifice before the Lord. ⁶³ Solomon offered as sacrifices of well-being to the Lord twenty-two thousand oxen and one hundred twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the people of Israel dedicated the house of the Lord.

Note that the full phrase *zēbah šēlāmîm* occurs next to the word *zēbah* by itself.

2Ki 5:17 is one of the cases where **“burnt offering” and “sacrifice” occur in combination**. The verse reads (NRSV):

Then Naaman said, “If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord.

Dictionaries

The root is *zbh* ‘to slaughter / slaughter for communion sacrifice / offer’.

NIDOTTE (# 2284) translates with ‘communal sacrifice’.

HALOT:

communal sacrifice = sacrifice of slaughtered sheep, goat or cattle to create communion between the god to whom the sacrifice is made and the partners of the sacrifice, and communion between the partners themselves.

Translation and special phrases

Looking at the root and the usage, one essential component is the slaughtering of an animal. The word choice should express or imply that.

זָבַח שְׁלָמִים *zēbah šēlāmîm* ‘peace offering’

Out of the total of 174 occurrences, *zēbah* occurs 48 times in construct and followed by *šēlem* – *šēlem* with or without article. (*šēlem* by itself already means “peace offering”.)

NIDOTTE concludes:

(1070) ..., there are numerous instances of the sing. or pl. of *zēbah* standing in construct to *šēlāmîm*, apparently meaning sacrifice(s) of peace offering(s). This suggests that the *šēlāmîm*, peace offering, was a variety of *zēbah*, sacrifice.

It might be justified, at least in some places, to translate with ‘peace offering’, even where *zēbah* occurs by itself, because often a difference between *zēbah* and *šēlem* or *zēbah šēlāmîm* can hardly be established[?].

עֹלָה וְזָבַח ‘*ōlāh wāzebāḥ* ‘burnt offering and sacrifice’

This phrase, and variations of it, occur in the following places: Ex 18:12; 24:5; Lev 23:37; Num 10:10; Deut 12:6/11; Josh 22:27; 1Sam 6:15; 15:22; 2Ki 5:17; 2Chr 7:1; Isa 43:23; 56:7; Jer 7:22; 17:26.

An example for this combination is found in 2Chr 7:1:

NRSV: ... fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; ...

If the receptor language has only one term for “offering” and “sacrifice”, then in a sentence like the one above one needs to either translate “burnt sacrifice and other sacrifices”, or “burnt sacrifice and peace sacrifices”.

3. הַשְּׂחָה *iššeh* ‘gift’

(65 x; almost exclusively in the Pentateuch.)

Renderings

Majority of English versions: **offering** (made) **by fire** / NET *also*: gift / NLT special gift / REB food-offering / GNB food offering / offering.

Items that are called *iššeh*

NIDOTTE (# 852) explains:

(542) The term *iššeh* applies to the offerings on several levels. First, it can refer to the various kinds of offering or portions thereof that were burned upon the altar. Second, it can be used for the kinds of offerings or portions of offerings that were presented to the Lord but then consumed by the priests or their families, not upon the altar. Third, it can be used in a general sense to refer to all the offerings that the sons of Israel presented to the Lord, whether they were consumed on the altar, by the priests and their families, or by the Levites.

Example

Lev 1:9

NASB: Its entrails, however, and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall offer up in smoke all of it on the altar for a burnt offering, an offering by fire of a soothing aroma to the LORD.

Dictionaries & commentaries

According to HALOT, הַשְּׂחָה is derived from שָׂחָה *šāḥ* ‘fire’. HALOT translates “offerings made by fire”, with hardly any discussion at all.

NIDOTTE, after presenting the discussion about the etymology, concludes (# 852):

(541) The derivation of the term is certainly debatable. ..., even if it derives from *šāḥ*, fire, its meaning developed beyond this original derivation. On one level it appears that *iššeh* may have essentially taken over the more general meaning of *minḥāh*, gift, present, offering in levitical contexts where the usage of the latter is limited almost completely to its more narrow meaning, grain offering. The more general translation “gift” or “present” is probably best. This seems to be supported by the various usages of the term as well as the standard targumic translation of *iššeh*.

Milgrom (Numbers, JPSTC, 1990) (on Num 15:25):

an offering by fire Rather, “gift” (of food). Hebrew *iššeh* cannot mean “fire offering,” for then there would be no reason to exclude the purification offering, listed separately in the next phrase, which was also burned, in part, on the altar ... Furthermore, the term *iššeh* is applied to oblations that are never burned on the altar, such as wine (v. 10), the priestly allowance from the well-being offering (Lev 7:30/31-36), and the bread of display (Lev 24:9). ...

Hartley (Leviticus, WBC, 1992) also translates “gift”.

Special phrase

רִיחַ נִיחֹחַ *rê(a)ḥ nîḥô(a)ḥ* ‘soothing aroma / pleasing odor’

This phrase occurs frequently before or after *iššeh* (ca. 30 x, only in Ex-Num), and is sometimes followed by the phrase “for the LORD”.

Translation

I would follow Averbeck (NIDOTTE) and translate ‘gift’. One could consider distinguishing between those places where “offering by fire” makes immediate sense, and those where it obviously cannot be applied.

There are several cases where the word *iššeh* could seem redundant, because a specific word for offering or sacrifice was already used in the same verse. As an example, I refer to Lev 1:9 (quoted above). The *Handbook* brings up the problem, but does not make detailed suggestions:

As a burnt offering, an offering by fire: these words translate two Hebrew technical terms that are simply put together in this verse. The first term is discussed under the title of this section, “Sacrifices Burnt Whole” or “holocaust.” The precise meaning of the second term is not known, but it is similar to the word for “fire” and has sometimes been translated “an offering by fire.” It is used of whole burnt offerings and of fellowship offerings alike (see chapter 3). Both TEV and NEB take it to refer to “a food offering.” This may be taken, then, not as a separate sacrifice, but as another way of referring to the burnt offering already mentioned. ...

This challenges us to analyze more fully what the additional thought is that the author wanted to convey (see Ex 29:18 for a similar instance).

Two further remarks: In Deut 18:1, NET mis-translates *iššeh* as “burnt offering”.

The Levitical priests a – indeed, the entire tribe of Levi – will have no allotment or inheritance with Israel; they may eat the burnt offerings of the LORD and of his inheritance.

This cannot be. The priests had no share in the burnt offerings.

NLT’s rendering “special gift” I find problematic, because it uses the same for the wave offering. And like there, it is not clear in what way an *iššeh* is “special”.