

Where the Blood Goes: “on the altar all around” / “on the side of the altar” / “at the base of the altar”

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The following three phrases need to be distinguished:

(1) The phrase **עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ סָבִיב** *‘al-hammizbē(a)ḥ sāvīb* “on the altar all around” occurs in Ex 29:16/20; Lev 1:5/11; 3:2/8/13; 7:2; 8:19/24; 9:12/18; (Num 3:26; 4:26 are not relevant here.)

(2) The phrase **עַל קִיר הַמִּזְבֵּחַ** *‘al qîr hammizbē(a)ḥ* “on the side of the altar” occurs only in Lev 1:15 and 5:9.

(3) The phrase **אֶל-יְסוֹד (הַ) מִזְבֵּחַ** *el-y^sôd (ham)mizbē(a)ḥ* “at the base of the altar” occurs in Ex 29:12; Lev 4:7/18/25/30/34; 5:9; 8:15; 9:9. Lev 5:9 contains both phrases (2) and (3).

How do they differ?

On the first phrase, the comment in the *Handbook* on Exodus is brief. It says (at 29:16):

Round about is one word meaning “all around.” Since the altar had four sides, TEV and CEV have “against all four sides of the altar.”

The *Handbook* on Leviticus says (at 1:5):

... the priest caught the blood in a container as it flowed from the arteries of the animal. According to later Jewish tradition it was then tossed against the northeast corner in order to cover the north and east sides. Next he threw the remainder against the opposite corner to cover the other two sides so that all four sides were covered.

This information is also found in Hartley. Neither Houtman nor Stuart discuss the wording (at Ex 29:16).

Milgrom affirms (at Lev 1:5): “*against* (‘*al*): Not atop the altar but on its walls (*b. ‘Erub. 57a*), and further explains:

all sides. sāvīb, lit., “round about.” Tannaitic sources claim that the blood manipulation was carried out in two throws, by splashing the opposite corners of the altar (*Sipra, Nedaba par. 4:9; m. Zebah 5:4*), thereby fulfilling the verse requirement in the most economical way. The rabbis also aver that in all sacrifices the blood rite for quadrupeds was performed on the lower half of the altar (*b. Zebah 10b, 53a*), with the exception of the blood of the purification offering, which was daubed on the altar’s horns (4:25, 30, 34). ...

On the second phrase, the *Handbook* on Leviticus does not comment in 1:15. In 5:9, it points to 4:7 – but the phrase there is not identical.

Milgrom translates the second phrase “against the side of the altar” and explains (at 1:15):

The term qîr refers to the outer vertical surface, for example, of a city wall (Num 35:4; Josh 2:15) or of a fence (Num 22:25). The LXX reads instead “toward the base of the altar” ..., which probably reflects a rabbinic halakha ... based on the apprehension that blood tossed on the altar’s side would impinge instead on the ramp, rendering the sacrifice invalid ...

On the third phrase, the *Handbook* on Exodus says (at 29:12):

At the base of the altar is literally “unto the foundation of the altar.” This implies that at least some of the blood was to touch the altar. Fox has “you are to throw

against the foundation of the altar.” If this is correct, both TEV and CEV seem to give the wrong picture. Another way to express this is “then take the rest of the blood and throw it down against the bottom of the altar.”

[TEV: at the base of the altar / CEV: on the ground next to the altar] (But TEV can probably be understood in two ways?)

Houtman and Stuart (on Ex 29:12) both address the question whether the pouring out of blood contributes to the cleansing of the altar. In passing, Houtman (p. 535) speaks of “the extremities of the altar, the horns and the base”, thus expressing the view that the base is the bottom part of the altar, not just the ground in front of it. Stuart is less explicit when speaking of “the area at the top of and around the base of the altar”.

The *Handbook* on Leviticus says (on 4:7):

elsewhere the word translated **base** means “foundation” (Micah 1.6; Psa 137.7) or “beginning.” Here it refers to the bottom part of the altar. It may be equally well translated “at the foundation of the altar.” NJB has “at the foot of the altar....”

Neither Hartley nor Levine comment on either of the phrases (2) or (3) (at Lev 1:15 / 4:7), except for Hartley mentioning the difficulty of the preposition ‘*al*’ ‘on’ in the Notes.

Milgrom translates the third phrase “at the base of the altar” and comments (at 4:7):

To judge by the detailed description of the sacrificial altar in Ezekiel’s visionary temple (Ezek 43:13-17), the base probably contained a trough, probably a trench dug around the base (1 Kgs 18:32; cf. Wright 1987:158), that collected the sacrificial blood. Ezekiel’s altar had two such troughs (*heq*), one at the base and the other in the middle (Ezek 43:14, 17), the latter to catch the purification blood daubed on its corners (Ezek 43:20). The altar in Solomon’s Temple may also have contained a middle trough, for it was divided into an upper and a lower section (Ezek 16:24-25, 31, 39; cf. 43:13). So did the altar in the Second Temple, the bottom half also being called by this name, *yěsôd* (*m. Mid.* 3:1; *m. Kelim* 17:10).

...

Conclusion

Phrase (1) There is common agreement that *sābīb* means that all four sides should be included.

Phrase (2) is clear.

As to phrase (3), although nobody carefully argues the case and excludes the possibility that *el-y^sôd mizbē(a)h* means “onto the ground before the altar”, the general assumption seems to be that **the bottom part of the altar itself** is in view. Milgrom’s references from the later Jewish sources substantiate this.

Since phrase (1) is also explained as, in practice, being done on the lower half of the altar, the difference between phrase (1) and (3) is not in the height in which the blood was poured out, but whether it was tossed against all sides or just disposed on one of them.

Translation

Phrase (1): Good possibilities include: “**against/on all sides of the altar**” (NRSV, NLT; NJPS), “against all four sides of the altar” (GNT), “against the four sides of the bronze altar” (CEV).

Phrase (2): The meaning is “on the side/wall of the altar” (e.g. NRSV, NET), probably expressed more clearly as “**against the side of the altar**” (NIV, GNT). In NLT, a plural crept in (only in Lev 5:9): “against the sides of the altar”. This is to be avoided, because it blurs the difference to Phrase (1).

Phrase (3): Almost all English versions have “at the base of the altar”. The problem is that “at” is somewhat ambiguous and could be taken as “in front of”. But according to what the *Handbook* and what Milgrom say (see above), at least some of the blood was to touch the altar. Therefore, saying “**against/on the base/bottom of the altar**” is recommended.

Appendix: The short phrase “on the altar”

The short phrase **עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ** ‘*al-mizbah*’ ‘on/at/against the altar’ is rare. The only places in the Pentateuch where it occurs with regard to blood are Lev 17:6 (with the verb *zrq*) and Deut 12:27 (with *špk*). [In this usage, *mizbē(a)h* never comes with the article.] The *Handbook* does not comment in either place.

The preposition ‘*al*’ has to be interpreted in light of the more complete phrase (1) above, **עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ סָבִיב** ‘*al-hammizbē(a)h sāvīb*’ “on the altar all around”.

In Lev 17:6, Wenham rightly translates by “splash the blood against the Lord’s altar”. Hartley translates “dash the blood on the altar of Yahweh”, but notes that LXX’s reading reflects “round about the altar”. He points to 1:5. Milgrom, who translates “dash the blood against the altar of YHWH”, refers to 3:2, which is even more appropriate, because chapter 3 deals with peace offerings. Both 1:5 and 3:2 have the verb *zrq* and the phrase (1).

In Deut 12:27, Thompson, Tigay and McConville all simply speak of “on the altar”, without taking up our question at all.

Translation: The English preposition “on” (NASB) might be brought enough to be appropriate, and the verb might help with the right understanding too; anyway, the idea of “onto the altar” in the sense of “on top of the altar” must be avoided. Therefore, “against the altar” is clearer (so NRSV and several others), and GNTD’s “against the sides of the altar” even more so. NRSV / NIV11R “beside the altar” is beside the point, if it means the blood does not touch the altar (see discussion further above).

In German, “an den Altar” (so several versions) is right, Lu84NR06 in Deut 12:27 “soll gegossen werden auf den Altar“ is not. In French, *asperger l’autel* (so several versions) is probably broad enough, but I suppose *répandre sur l’autel* (NVS78Col), or even *verser sur l’autel* (PDV2017) are prone to be misunderstood as “on top of the altar”.

Also, the wording of the prepositional phrase in both Lev 17:6 and Deut 12:27 should be coordinated in the translation, even if the verbs differ. Not all “big versions” do this (GNTD; Lu84NR06; FC97).