

On the Burning of Incense: Some Basic Distinctions

This is a general introduction, and a compilation of relevant passages. I do not discuss translation-related questions in detail. Peter Schmidt, 2018. Quotes are taken from NRSV.

Relevant passages:

Exodus 30:1-9/34-38; 40:26-27;
Leviticus 2:1-2; 10:1-7; 16:12-13; 24:7;
Numbers 3:4; 16:16 – 17:15 [Engl. 16:16-50];
2Chronicles 26:16-20;
Luke 1:8-11;
Revelation 8:3-5.

1. Daily *versus* yearly burning

We need to distinguish two basic occasions and places of offering incense, as ISBE says (vol. 2, p. 817):

(1) the *tāmîd* (“perpetual”) incense, burned every morning and evening upon the altar of incense (Ex 30:7f.);

(2) the censer offering, performed by the high priest in the holy of holies once every year, on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:2/12f.).

The relevant passages read as follows:

Ex 30:1-9:

¹ You shall make an altar on which to offer incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. ... ⁷ Aaron shall offer fragrant incense on it; every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall offer it, ⁸ and when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening, he shall offer it, a regular incense offering before the Lord throughout your generations. ⁹ You shall not offer unholy incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering; and you shall not pour a drink offering on it.

Ex 40:26-27:

²⁶ He put the golden altar in the tent of meeting before the curtain, ²⁷ and offered fragrant incense on it; ...

Lev 16:12-13:

¹² He [i.e. Aaron] shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord, and two handfuls of crushed sweet incense, and he shall bring it inside the curtain ¹³ and put the incense on the fire [i.e. the (burning) coals] before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the covenant, or he will die.

Incense was **also part of the grain offering**, as we see from Lev 2:1-2:

¹ When anyone presents a grain offering to the Lord, the offering shall be of choice flour; the worshiper shall pour oil on it, and put frankincense on it, ² and bring it to Aaron’s sons the priests. After taking from it a handful of the choice flour and oil, with all its frankincense, the priest shall turn this token portion into smoke on the altar, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord.

In contrast to the cases mentioned before, this frankincense was **burnt on the Bronze Altar**, the Altar of Burnt Offering.

Lastly, frankincense was also required to be **added to the showbread**. Lev 24:7 says:

You shall put pure frankincense with each row, ...

2. Incense *versus* frankincense

Further, we need to note the **vocabulary for the substances used**.

Lev 2:1ff. speaks of לְבֹנָה *l̄bōnâ* ‘frankincense’. This is incense from a certain kind of plant. The *Plants Handbook* says:

Frankincense *Boswellia sacra* is a yellow or reddish gum produced by one of the fifteen aromatic species of *Boswellia*.

Other places speak of קִטְרֵת *q̄ṭōret* ‘incense’. The *Semantic Dictionary of BH* defines it. *q̄ṭōret* does not come from a certain kind of plant. It is, more generally, a

substance ◀ made from tree gum or bark; ▶ to make a sweet smell; + burnt in censer or on open fire; ≈ to provide a sweet aroma pleasing to God – perfume; incense.¹

Ex 30:34-36 tells us how the incense that was to be used inside the Tabernacle had to be made; frankincense was *one ingredient* of this incense mixture:

34 The Lord said to Moses: Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense [*l̄bōnā*] (an equal part of each), 35 and make an incense [*q̄ṭōret*] blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; 36 and you shall beat some of it into powder, and put part of it before the covenant in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you; it shall be for you most holy.

The phrase קִטְרֵת (ה) סַמִּימִים *q̄ṭōret (has)sammîm* “fragrant incense” is always used only of the incense that is appropriately utilized in the Tabernacle or the Temple, not for pagan worship. It does seem to denote this specially fabricated incense from Ex 30:34f. The complete list of occurrences of the above phrase is this: Ex 25:6; 30:7; 31:11; 35:8/15/28; 37:29; 39:38; 40:27; Lev 4:7; 16:12; Num 4:16; 2Chr2:3; 13:11.

Note, then, that the *specific word* “frankincense” is used for what a normal worshipper could offer, whereas the more *general word* “incense” is used to refer to the unique substance that was handled by the priest.

(The phrase נִיחַיִּת נִיחַיִּת “a pleasing aroma” (e.g. Lev 2:2) is not used exclusively of incense.)

3. Legitimate versus illegitimate burning

Apart from these regulations about certain kinds of offerings, offerings of incense are talked about in **a few more instances, all of which are unusual**.

Lev 10:1-2:

¹ Now Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them. ² And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.

Num 3:4 says (referring to the same event):

Nadab and Abihu died before the Lord when they offered illicit fire before the Lord ...

Num 16:5-7 and 16-18 and 35:

⁵ Then he [Moses] said to Korah and all his company, “In the morning the Lord will make known who is his, and who is holy, and who will be allowed to approach him; the one whom he will choose he will allow to approach him. ⁶ Do this: take censers [מִזְבְּחֵיהֶם], Korah and all your company, ⁷ and tomorrow put fire in them, and lay incense on them before the Lord; and the man whom the Lord chooses shall be the holy one. You Levites have gone too far!”

¹⁶ And Moses said to Korah, “As for you and all your company, be present tomorrow before the Lord, you and they and Aaron; ¹⁷ and let each one of you take his censer, and put incense on it, and each one of you present his censer before the Lord, two hundred fifty censers; you also, and Aaron, each his censer.” ¹⁸ So each man took his censer, and they put fire in the censers and laid incense on them, and they stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron.

³⁵ And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the two hundred fifty men offering the incense.

¹ Cf. the definition from dictionary.com: “an aromatic gum or other substance producing a sweet odor when burned, used in religious ceremonies, to enhance a mood, etc.”.

Num 17:11-13 [Engl.16:46-48]:

⁴⁶ Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer, put fire on it from the altar and lay incense on it, and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them. For wrath has gone out from the Lord; the plague has begun.” ⁴⁷ So Aaron took it as Moses had ordered, and ran into the middle of the assembly, where the plague had already begun among the people. He put on the incense, and made atonement for the people. ⁴⁸ He stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stopped.

2Chr 26:16-19

¹⁶ ... [Uzziah] entered the temple of the Lord to make offering on the altar of incense. ¹⁷ But the priest Azariah went in after him, with eighty priests of the Lord who were men of valor; ¹⁸ they withstood King Uzziah, and said to him, “It is not for you, Uzziah, to make offering to the Lord, but for the priests the descendants of Aaron, who are consecrated to make offering. Go out of the sanctuary; for you have done wrong, and it will bring you no honor from the Lord God.” ¹⁹ Then Uzziah was angry. Now he had a censer [מִקְטָרֶת] in his hand to make offering, and when he became angry with the priests a leprous disease broke out on his forehead, in the presence of the priests in the house of the Lord, by the altar of incense.

Luke 1:9-11:

⁹ he [i.e. Zechariah] was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

Rev 8:3-5:

³ Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. ⁴ And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. ⁵ Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

4. Altar versus censer

As to the **equipment and vessels used**, the above passages talk about the following:

The Incense Altar is called מִזְבֵּחַ הַקְטָרֶת *mizbēh haqq̄ṭoret* ‘altar of incense’, e.g. in Ex 30:27. (Note that the word for ‘altar’ is the same as is used of the Altar of Burnt Offering.). In Ex 30:1 only is it called specifically a מִקְטָר קְטָרֶת *miqtar q̄ṭoret* ‘place-of-smoke of incense’. It can also be called “the golden altar” (e.g. Ex 39:38).

The word מַחְטָה *maḥtâ* refers to a range of tools, or to a tool that had a range of functions:

- In Ex 25:38 it is associated with the **lampstand** and apparently means small **trays for burned wicks**.
- In Ex 27:3 it is a utensil for the **Altar of Burnt Offerings** and probably refers to a kind of **shovel for moving and turning coals on the altar**, and/or for carrying coals.
- In Lev 16:12f. and Num 16:6f. it is clearly used for **hand-held censers**.

The word מִקְטָרֶת *miqteret* is only used in 2Chr 26:19 and Ezek 8:11. In the second place, it is clearly used for ‘**censers**’. But when we consider the varied usage of the word *maḥtâ* above, then it should not be surprising that the word *miqteret* can be used for a kind of ‘**firepan**’ as well – and this is more fitting in 2Chr 26:19 (cf. below).²

² For a more complete list of words and references, including pictures, see the *Realia Handbook*, § 4.2.4 Incense altar, pp. 240-242; § 4.4.5 Small shovel, firepan, pp. 255f.; and § 4.4.7 Censer, pp. 256f.

5. Appendix: Later Jewish Practice

These texts are added in order to confirm some of the above, and to **clarify how the offering of incense was actually carried out.**

1Makk 4:49-50 (about the new sanctuary):³

And they made ... the altar of incense ... And they burned incense on the altar ...

Mishnah Tamid 6.1-3:⁴

¹ They [the two priests] began to ascend the steps of the vestibule. Those who had won the right to remove the ashes from the inner altar and from the Menorah went before them. The one who won the right to remove the ashes from the inner altar went in and took the basket and bowed down and went out again. ...

² The one who had won the right to do the firepan [service], made a heap of coals on the top of the [inner] altar and then spreading them out with the bottom of the firepan and bowed down and went out.

³ The one who had won the right to the incense [service] took the censer from the spoon and gave it [the censer] to his friend or his relative [of his choice]. If some of it spilled into the spoon, he [the friend or relative] would give it to him [the priest] and put it into his hands. They would instruct him: Be careful not to begin [by dropping the incense] in front of you or else you may burn yourself. He then began spreading the incense and then went out. The one who burned the incense did not do so until the appointed one said to him, "Burn the incense." If it [the one offering] was the Kohen Gadol he would say to him: "Master Kohen Gadol, burn the incense." The people went out and he [the priest] burned the incense, he bowed down and went out.

I quote the phrases underlined above also by the translation of Herbert Danby:⁵

¹ ... He whose lot it was to clear the ashes from the inner Altar went in and took the ash-bin, ...

² He whose lot it was to bear the firepan piled up the cinders on the [inner]* Altar, smoothed them with the back of the firepan, ...

³ He whose lot it was to bring the incense took the dish from the midst of the ladle [footnote: See above, 5⁴. – There, it says: “4. He to whom fell the lot of [offering]* the incense took the ladle. The ladle was like a large golden three-*kab* measure, holding three *kabs*; within it was a dish, heaped up full of incense. It had a lid and over this a kind of covering [footnote: Or ‘hanger’ ...]”] and gave it to his friend or kinsman. If aught was spilled from the firepan into the ladle he gave it to him into his two hands. ... He began to smooth it down and came out. He that offered the incense did not offer it until the officer said to him, ‘Offer the incense!’ ... When all were gone away he offered the incense and prostrated himself and came away.

* addition in translation by HD

From this later source we are to conclude, apparently, that more than one priest was involved in the whole procedure, and that indeed a **“firepan” was used to carry coals to the Altar of Incense – or at least to arrange the ones that were there already – and two further vessels (a “censer / dish” and a “spoon / ladle”) were used to carry the incense to the altar.** (It is not clear to me which two different steps are involved when the text speaks of “spreading / smoothing down”, and then of the actual “burning / offering”.) Whether or not the exact same procedure already applied in Old Testament times we do not know, but this quote gives a possible explanation for two assumptions that the text in 2Chr 26 might be making:

- The Golden Altar of Incense was not an altar on which there was a constant fire fed. I.e. the coals had to be carried there before an offering could be made.
- The “censer” that Uzziah carried might only have been for carrying coals, in order to prepare the altar. It is implied that incense had to be brought as well – at the same time, or afterwards – in a separate dish.

³ NETS.

⁴ www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Tamid?lang=bi (2018-11-29).

⁵ <https://archive.org/details/DanbyMishnah>. (2018-12-29).

I conclude tentatively that **the *miqteret* mentioned in 2Chr 26 served for carrying coals to the altar. Incense was brought separately. The burning of the incense** – if Uzziah had gotten that far – **would have taken place on the altar**. This is in line with v. 16, which says: “... entered the temple of the Lord to make offering [same verb] on the altar of incense.”

That we have to distinguish between censers for burning incense and vessels for storing or presenting incense is also suggested in ISBE, s.v. “Incense, dish for” (vol. 4, pp. 818f.). After describing some archeological findings, it says:

The problem with interpreting these objects as incense burners is that they do not show convincing evidence of burning. They may have been simply reservoirs of incense, receiving their supply through the hollow tube. One additional example from Megiddo was made of ivory and so could hardly have been for burning incense.

About the incense that was put on top of the **showbread**, Josephus says (Ant. 3.10.7 (255-257))⁶:

256 Two golden dishes [footnote with comment: “In Ant. 3.143 they are called φιάλαι, i.e. cups, and are so depicted on the Arch of Titus.”], filled with incense, are situated above them [i.e. the bread loaves] and remain until the next Sabbath. Then others are brought in place of them, and the former ones are given to the priests for food, and the incense is burned on the sacred fire on which they burn all whole burnt-offerings, and other incense is placed above the loaves of bread instead of that.

DDL, in its article on incense, describes incense burning like this (p. 850):⁷

Incense offerings were made by removing pieces of coal from the altar of burnt offering with a shovel or scoop, sprinkling powder on the glowing embers, and placing the contents of the shovel on the incense altar.

This explanation at least addresses some of the questions regarding incense. Unfortunately it comes without sufficient documentation on the details. As we look at the Biblical and Mishnaic texts above, we see that the description is imprecise. – Nevertheless, the article contains further interesting information on incense in antiquity.

⁶ <https://pace.webhosting.rug.nl/york/york/index.htm>.

⁷ Dictionary of Daily Life (DDL) in Biblical and Post-Biblical Antiquity. Complete in One Volume, A–Z. Edwin M. Yamauchi and Marvin R. Wilson (eds.). Hendrickson, 2017. Robin G. Branch: Incense, pp. 849-864.