

Translation Aids

קטר *qtr*: Burning Sacrifices or Incense? A Discussion Regarding 1-2 Kings, Jeremia and Ezekiel

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Quotes are from NRSV unless indicated otherwise.

Any highlighting by underlining is mine.

The question

The question we ask is: When קטר *qtr* stands without any object, what is the implied object?

1Ki 3:3 says:

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.

The *Handbook* comments:

He sacrificed and burnt incense at the high places: The Hebrew text has two participles at the end of this verse, and both indicate repeated action; that is, this is something that Solomon did on more than one occasion. The first participle means “to sacrifice [slaughtered animals]” and the second one means “to let [a sacrifice] go up in smoke.” The verb from which this second participle comes is sometimes ambiguous since it can refer to the burning of animal or vegetable offerings or to the burning of incense. Because of this ambiguity, some translations say that Solomon sacrificed and burnt incense (RSV/NRSV, NAB, NJB, Peregrino, ITCL), while others say that he slaughtered and burnt sacrifices, with no reference to incense (GNT, REB). Either interpretation is possible.

This verb is used many more times in 1-2 Kings, and it is worth taking a closer look at it. When the object is not made explicit, the easiest way to find out which object is implied, is to look at those places where it *is* given. Unfortunately, they are very few.

The data

In 1-2 Kings, קטר *qtr pi*. occurs in 1Ki 22:44; 2Ki 12:4 [Engl.3]; 14:4; 15:4; 15:35; 16:4; 17:11; 18:4; 22:17; 23:5(2x)/8. All places are about illicit worship, with the so-called “high places” almost always being mentioned in the same verse. **In all these cases, an object is never given.**

Noteworthy is the **standard phrase** הָעָם מְזַבְּחִים וּמְקַטְרִים בַּבָּמֹת “The people continually sacrificed and made smoke on the high places.” It is found in 1Ki 22:44 [Engl.43]; 2Ki 12:4; 14:4; 15:4; 15:35. Variations occur in 2Ki 16:4 par. 2Ch 28:4 and elsewhere.

קטר *qtr hi*. occurs in 1Ki 3:3; 9:25; 11:8; 12:33; 13:1-2; 2Ki 16:13/15. The *hi.* is used where the kings (Solomon, Jeroboam, and Ahaz) are involved in the offering. With the exception of 9:25, these places are also about illicit worship. Again, the object is not indicated.

Exceptions are 1Ki 13:2, where the prophet foretells the burning of **human bones** on the altar in Bethel, and 2Ki 16:13/15, which talk about **burnt offerings** being offered on Ahaz’s new altar.

Even **outside of 1-2 Kings, קטר *qtr pi*.** never takes קְטֹרֶת *q^otoret* ‘incense’ as object. In fact, there are only three places where it takes an object at all (DCH). These are “a thank offering of leavened bread” in Amos 4:5, the “fat” in 1Sam 2:16, and קִטְיֵר *qittēr* in Jer 44:21. Although *qittēr* is cognate to the word for ‘incense’, its meaning is debated (HALOT: “hapax legomenon: ... exact meaning uncertain; suggestions include: ... what has been sacrificed ... smoke of sacrifice”).

קטר *qtr* hi. takes קטרַת *qṭōret* ‘incense’ as its object in the following places only: Ex 30:7/8; 40:27; Num 17:5; 1Sam 2:28; 2Chr 2:3. They are not prominent in number, compared with all other places that name other objects, like animals or parts thereof, or bread; and **they mostly deal with worship at the central sanctuary.**

Discussion

Some arguments for and against the view that incense is the implied object are the following:

- קטר *qtr* and קטרַת *qṭōret* ‘incense’ are cognate words, thus incense is the most likely object for the verb even where it is not mentioned.

But as NIDOTTE and others show, there is an emphasis on the smoke, thus “let go up in smoke” is a valid rendering, and this can refer to animals as well (cf. Ps 66:15 “with the smoke of [the sacrifice of] rams”). Leviticus regularly uses the hi. form of the verb in the way how the Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew defines it:

to set alight and cause smoke to rise from the sacrificial fat parts of an animal, of grain and other offerings, including incense ... – to set alight, burn.

- The only places where the author of Kings provides an object for *qtr* pi./hi. are, firstly 1Ki 13:2, which describes a very unusual case, and secondly 2Ki 16:13/15 with burnt offerings as object. This is at least some indication that the author might have the same in view where he does not specify the object.

- 2Ki 18:4 stands out in that it mentions the bronze serpent that Moses had made: “... for until those days the people of Israel had made smoke to it; it was called Nehushtan.” On the one hand, it is a bit difficult to imagine that the bronze serpent had its own altar on which sacrifices were made; it is easier to think of people approaching the sculpture and burning incense in front of it.

On the other hand, 1Ki 12:32f. say three times that Jeroboam “offered up [Ø object] on the altar” (וַיַּעַל עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ), and 13:1 continues (*liter.*) “... Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make smoke ...”. If his action referred only to burning incense, then there would be no need to approach the altar. It could be done right in front of the golden calves. Also, in 13:2, it says (*liter.*) “... he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make smoke on you, ...”. It would be a bit strange if the priests’ ministry were characterized mainly by burning incense, when the whole passage underlines how Jeroboam erected a (probably sizeable) altar. (Similar is 2Ki 23:5.)

Conclusion

Grammatically, it could well be that ‘incense’ is the implied object of קטר *qtr* pi. But where קטר *qtr* pi. does take an object, be it within 1-2 Kings, or outside, it is not קטרַת *qṭōret* ‘incense’. קטר *qtr* hi. can take it, but does not do so in 1-2 Kings, and not very often outside of it. Nothing strongly suggests that incense should be implied.

The meaning

If we suppose that incense is not in view, then we need to ask: What does the verb *qtr* contribute to the overall meaning? Above we quoted as **standard phrase** הָעַם קִוְּבַחִים וַיִּקְטְרוּ בְּבָמוֹת “The people continually sacrificed and made smoke on the high places.” Now if “sacrificing [animals]” is already mentioned, then what does *qtr* add? – זבח *zbh* does not have to mean “to sacrifice”. It can also mean more specifically ‘to slaughter’ (e.g. Dtn 12:15). (Cf. HALOT and NIDOTTE, although both list ‘to slaughter’ only for the qal, and we are dealing with pi. places.) The suggested understanding is therefore not “to offer sacrifices and burn incense” (so all NIV, GNB, NET, and NLT), but **“to slaughter [animals] and let [them] go up in smoke”**. This is a hendiadys expressing the whole process. We may cite the instructions for the burnt offering in Lev 1. There, although the verb for the slaughtering is שָׁחַט *shṭ* qal (v. 5), after further preparations, the last verb in the procedure is קטר *qtr* hi.: “... Then the priest shall turn the whole into smoke on the altar as a burnt offering ...” (v. 9).

Translation

In many languages, the implied object of *qtr* will need to be made explicit. Above, we interpreted the **standard phrase** in the following sense: **“to slaughter [animals] and let [them] go up in smoke”**. How these last words can be translated more naturally needs exploring in the given receptor language. One way could be to say something like “to burn (up) / to offer up in smoke”.

In 1Ki 22:44 [Engl.43], REB says “...;the people continued to sacrifice and burn offerings ...”, and NJPS says “...;the people still sacrificed and offered at the shrines.”

Appendix: Incense-burning in Jeremiah and Ezekiel

In the discussion above, we concluded that it was safer not to explicate “incense” where it is not implied clearly enough. However, the possibility of incense being in view could also not be excluded. Below we explore some of the texts related to this question.

What is known about **incense-burning at the high places**? There is no text in which קִטְרֶת *q̄ṭoret* ‘incense’ and בָּמֹת *bāmōt* ‘high place’ occur together in the same verse.

It could look like incense burning was not a regular part of the idolatrous practices. But ISBE (s.v. incense, vol. 2, p. 817) points to some evidence that needs to be taken into account:

Archeologists have unearthed a number of small, stone altars in Palestine, generally dating from the 8th to the 6th century. The top is square, flat, and often has a “horn” at each corner. ... On the basis of Nabatean parallels, many scholars identify these altars with the mysterious *ḥammānīm*, which are mentioned disapprovingly in several biblical passages. It is generally agreed that they were used for burning incense.

The above-mentioned object חַמָּאֵן *ḥammān* ‘incense altar’ occurs, for instance, in the following verses:

2Ch 34:4 In his [i.e. Josiah’s] presence they pulled down the altars of the Baals; he demolished the incense altars that stood above them. [The last phrase “that stood above them” is difficult.]

Ezk 6:6 Wherever you live, your towns shall be waste and your high places ruined, so that your altars will be waste and ruined, your idols broken and destroyed, your incense stands cut down, and your works wiped out.

This indicates that they were widely in use, and are mentioned in connection with the high places. Thus we can conclude that **incense-burning was part of the idolatrous practices**. For a picture of an incense altar, see, for instance, the *Realia Handbook*, § 4.2.1.1., p. 236.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah uses the pi. of *qtr* as a fixed expression to describe idol worship. In ch. 44 it occurs ten times. The first occurrence however is Jer 1:16:

And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings (וַיִּקְטְרוּ) to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands.

Commentators (e.g. Keil, Harrison (TOTC)) acknowledge that the verb can be used in both ways and are divided in what they prefer. Fischer (HThKAT, 2005) translates with ‘räuchern’ (‘burn [incense]’) without discussing the verb at all. Thompson (NICOT, 1980) speaks of “burning offerings”. In a footnote on 1:16 (where he translates with “burning offerings”) he describes the question that we are dealing with, without strongly rejecting either view.

The verb *qtr* is translated “burn incense” in most English versions. This meaning is frequently correct. But the verb is also used in the OT for the burning of

offerings of the fat of animals (1 Sam. 2:16; Ps. 66:15) or of meal (Amos 4:5). The verb may even have the more general meaning of “burning sacrifices” (so NEB).

In 44:5 he translates with ‘to make sacrifices’, with a comment similar to his footnote above. I.e. he does not choose exactly the same rendering throughout the book.

The *Handbook* on Jeremiah says (here on 1:16):

Burned incense (similarly NJB, NAB, NIV, BP) translates a Hebrew verb that means “let [something] go up in smoke.” It is possible that the reference is to incense, though it seems more probable that the burning of sacrifices is intended (so TEV, GECL, LU, NEB, TOB). NRSV has “made offerings to other gods.”

A place that calls into question the idea of burning sacrifices is Jer 19:13. It reads:

And the houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah shall be defiled like the place of Topheth—all the houses upon whose roofs offerings have been made to the whole host of heaven, and libations have been poured out to other gods.

Practically speaking, it seems unlikely that sacrifices, at least of larger animals, would have been made on rooftops. Burning incense – be it on small altars or with hand-held censers – is, however, quite conceivable. Jer 44:19 supports this in that it mentions cakes – another offering of a smaller size than animals (cf. also 7:17f.).

And the women said, “Indeed we will go on making offerings (*qtr*) to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her; do you think that we made cakes for her, marked with her image, and poured out libations to her without our husbands’ being involved?”

Thompson (NICOT, 1980) comments on 19:13:

A further reason for uncleanness was the pollution caused by the pagan worship conducted on the rooftops of the houses, where burnt offerings were offered to the host of heaven, the Mesopotamian astral deities (cf. 7:16-20), and where libations were poured out to other gods (cf. 32:29). Among the astral deities Astarte (Ashtaroth) was especially important. Texts from Ras Shamra include a ritual which was used when offerings were made on rooftops to astral deities and celestial luminaries.

Unfortunately he does not tell what kind of offerings they were.

Fischer (HThKAT, 2005), in his comment on the same verse, says in a footnote that P. J. King (Jeremiah. An Archaeological Companion. 1993, XXV) “mentions about Ashkelon that incense altars were found that had been placed on roofs” [transl. mine].

We tentatively conclude that Jeremiah has incense burning in mind when he speaks of the action of *qtr* happening on rooftops (cf. also 32:29) – and possibly in other places as well.

One further observation may be made on Jer 44:21 (which contains the debatable noun קִטְרָה *qittēr*). It says:

“As for the offerings that you made in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, you and your ancestors, your kings and your officials, and the people of the land, did not the Lord remember them? ...

The mentioning of “streets” is interesting. Jer uses it several times, but it stands out in comparison to other books, because often times the locations for idolatry are the high places. Now it happens “everywhere” (cf. also 11:13).

Conclusion: There are three possibilities: Jeremiah has the burning of sacrifices in view, or the burning of incense, or both are included. This could also vary in different passages.

Thinking of incense burning as the only kind of offering seems too restrictive. It is questionable, for instance, in 11:13. The verse speaks of “the altars you have set up to shame, altars [מִזְבְּחֵי] *mizbēh* to make offerings [קָטַר] *qtr* to Baal”. The word *mizbēh* certainly can be used for incense altars (see Ex 30:1), but whether this is all that is intended here is uncertain.

Excluding incense burning altogether does not seem right either, because in some places this is the more likely understanding.

In translation, then, it seems best to use the general expression “to burn offerings”.

Speaking of “burning [animal] sacrifices” is not recommended when it happens on rooftops.

Ezekiel

The texts in Ezk give us a mixed picture. They never use the verb *qtr*. Ezk 20:28 enumerates in hindsight various idolatrous offering practices, but **does not mention incense**:

For when I had brought them into the land that I swore to give them, then wherever they saw any high hill (גִּבְעוֹת *gib‘āh*) or any leafy tree, there they offered (זָבַח *zbh*) their sacrifices (זֶבַח *zebah*) and presented the provocation of their offering (קָרְבָּן *qorbān*); there they sent up their pleasing odors, and there they poured out their drink offerings.

Ezk 8:11 tells us as part of a vision what the prophet saw happening **in the Temple in Jerusalem**:

Before them stood seventy of the elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had his censer in his hand, and the fragrant cloud of incense was ascending.

Averbeck (NIDOTTE) comments:

To be sure, this passage refers to idol worship, but it reflects what appears to have been a relatively common practice of offering incense as offerings in handheld censers not only in the ANE but also in Canaan and by the Israelites (see Haran, 231-41; Nielsen, 1986; see esp. the sketches of censers on pp. 4, 28, but also the archaeological data and textual issues discussed throughout the volume).

As to the **incense stands** (altars) mentioned in Ezk 6:6 (quoted above), Block (NICOT, 1997) puts forward an alternative view to the older consensus. He translates חַמָּאֵן *hammān* with the word ‘chapel’(!) and explains (on Ezk 6:4-7):

chapels. The word *hammānīm* is usually thought to derive from a verb *hāmam*, “to be hot,” and interpreted either as “incense altars” or some object associated with the sun cult represented by the deity Baal-Hammôn, a deity referred to on a 9th-century Phoenician text from Zincirli, and later worshiped as the patron divinity of Carthage. However, both this etymology and this interpretation now seem doubtful. Evidence from Ugarit suggests that the word *hmm*, “to be hot,” and the name of the deity Hammôn derive from different roots. The confusion arises from the requirement in Hebrew that the letter *hēt* represent two distinct Semitic letters, *hēt* and *hēt*. Although the root *hmm*, “to be hot,” does occur in Ugaritic, the name of the deity Hammôn is written with *h*, which opens the possibility of a link with the Semitic root *hmh*, “to protect.” Furthermore, the evidence of several Palmyrene inscriptions suggests that *hmn* is not to be identified specifically with incense altars. The foundation inscription of the goddess Allat’s temple equates *hmn*’ with *nws*’ (= ναός), providing convincing evidence that *hamānā*’ denotes a sanctuary or chapel of some sort. The plan of this cultic installation included a massive stone structure, with a *maššēbā* of Allat enthroned inside between two lions. In front of the building, out in the open, was an altar.

This picture of the *hamānā*’ accords with every occurrence of *hammān* in the OT, and is particularly helpful in elucidating 2 Chr. 34:4, which speaks of tearing down the altars of Baal “and the *hammānīm* that were high above them.” It is difficult to

visualize incense altars to meet this description, but if the *hammānīm* are understood as cultic buildings, the statement makes perfect sense. The same is true of the present text. When Ezekiel talks about “smashing” (*šābar*) and “hewing down” (*gāda*) the *hammānīm* of the mountains of Israel, he has in mind the elimination of all the chapels which housed the pagan deities and in which their rituals were performed.

Even if one does not immediately fully adopt this view, it cautions about some assumptions. However, at this point, out of nine English and five German translations no-one translates the way Block suggests.

Archeological evidence

ABD contains an extensive article on ‘incense’ by Nielsen, and another one on ‘incense altars’ by Fowler. Both authors express a considerable degree of **caution regarding the interpretation** of the archeological evidence. Nielsen says (III 406):

Altars and burners of various forms that have been unearthed give the impression of the frequent use of incense in public worship, as well as in private homes. However, the problem attached to these finds is the question, To whom did these vessels really belong – to “Israelites” or to “non-Israelites”? ... Do the finds reflect the rituals which are described in the Hebrew Bible? ...

Regarding places like 1Ki 22:44 and Jer 19:13, he says (III 407):

The meaning of this root [*qtr*], however, is unclear. Consequently, it is impossible to identify the activity with any certainty.

Fowler (III 409) points out that, apart from its use in religious ritual, incense could also be used, for example, as deodorant and insecticide. Objects that have been taken for “incense stands” could also serve as plant holders, libation stands, and devices for keeping warm food and drink. He even says that “Many so-called “incense burners” show no signs of combustion whatsoever; ...”. In concluding, he says (410):

On the above evidence, it is clear that many artifacts identified in scholarly literature as “incense burners” were probably nothing of the kind. Although there can be no doubt that incense featured prominently in Israelite ritual, in ancient Israel the burning of incense had different uses in different places, and the precise function of any particular object is seldom apparent.

Finally, we may also ask how easy it was for “the man on the street” to buy incense. The substance had to be imported. While there is ample evidence for trade in aromatic substances, this might not mean it was readily available and affordable for everybody.

Summary and translation

קטר *qtr* is ambiguous in regard to its object. The context decides. The various authors do not all use the same vocabulary, and they emphasize different aspects in how they talk about idolatry. Some archeological findings give evidence for the use of incense, but there remains uncertainty about by who, and how, and for what purpose it was used.

In **1-2 Kings**, the author criticizes that besides the worship for the LORD in the central sanctuary, other gods were worshipped at the high places. There is little reason to make the use of incense explicit when translating *qtr*. More likely, sacrifices are in view, and that is described with the pair *zḥ* and *qtr* – “slaughter and burn”.

Jeremiah describes idolatry as taking place “in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem” – everywhere. He uses *qtr* in a general sense to refer to idolatry (e.g. 7:9). In translation, it is probably best to speak of “burning offerings”, without restricting the kind of offering to either animals or incense. Where *mizbēḥ* ‘altar’ is mentioned, animals might be in view. But when worship practices on rooftops are in view, a translation implying animal sacrifice should be avoided, and speaking of incense seems appropriate. Probably

the same is the case in ch. 44, which talks about celestial gods, although rooftops are not explicitly mentioned.

Ezekiel reports of the elders offering incense in the Temple, and mentions what has commonly be taken as incense altars in 6:4/6, alongside *mizbē'āh* 'altar', thus showing that incense burning was quite common. He does not use the verb *qtr*.

Translating *qtr* is an example that shows two things: neither can we strive for mechanic consistency in translating a term within a given book and between various books. Context matters. Nor can we approach the matter lightly, arguing that we cannot know what the object of the verb is and therefore it does not matter what we fill in, and where we do so. Sometimes, the context makes some interpretations more likely than others.