

The Burnt Offering – Burnt Completely?

Notes for a more precise understanding.

Peter Schmidt. 2019. Quotes from NASB.

Was the burnt offering (also: “whole-offering / holocaust”) burnt completely?

In principle, yes. However, this does not mean the animal was simply laid onto the altar in its entirety. The following qualifications apply:

- The animal was skinned/flayed, and **the skin was given to the priest.**

Lev 7:8 says:

Also the priest who presents any man's burnt offering, that priest shall have for himself the skin of the burnt offering which he has presented.

Apart from the skin, neither priest nor worshipper received any part of the animal. In the peace offering, the worshipper and the priest received some portions.

- **The animal was first taken apart** / sectioned; then partly washed (for removing the dung) and then arranged on the altar.

Lev 1 states:

⁶ He shall then skin the burnt offering and cut it into its pieces. ⁷ The sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire.

⁸ Then Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head and the suet over the wood which is on the fire that is on the altar. ⁹ 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.

- The washing of some parts is mentioned in v. 9 *after* the “arranging” in v. 8. Rendtorff (BKAT, 2004) thinks the reason is that the washing is an action on the side. Discontinuity is marked through the order *we X yiqtol*: The object “its entrails and its legs” is fronted. Hieke (HThKAT, 2014) also mentions Knierim's view that the entrails and legs are the less important parts and are added last. In this case there would indeed be two steps: first the burning of the main pieces, then the washing and burning of the entrails and legs (discussion continued below).

That the parts which needed washing were not exempted from being burnt becomes clear from the phrase “all of it”. The commentators agree on this, see below. Also, there would be no reason to wash those parts if they were not offered as well.

Wenham (Leviticus, NICOT, 1979) says (on Lev 1:9, p. 54):

Then the animal was chopped up by the worshipper and the priest burned it bit by bit on top of the altar, beginning with the head and the fat. While the priest was doing this, the worshipper prepared the other parts. He washed the hind legs⁵ and the viscera of the animal to remove any traces of excreta (cf. Deut. 23:13–15 [Eng. 12–14]). ... Then the priest burned everything, apart from the skin (see Lev. 7:8), on the altar.

⁵ *Kārā'ayim*: *hind legs* (so TEV and Snaith, p. 31) clearly denotes the back legs of hopping insects in 11:21. The same sense is likely here, since the hind legs are more likely to be soiled by excreta. But the rarity of the term makes this uncertain. LXX understood “feet,” and this idea is followed by NEB “shins.”

Milgrom (Leviticus 1–16, AB, 1991) says on the phrase “all of it” in Lev 1:9 (p. 161):

..., that is, including the entrails and shins, the incineration of which has not been mentioned (Wessely 1846. The unique distinction of the burnt offering in the sacrificial system is that all of it, except for the skin (7:8), is consumed on the altar ...

Hartley (Leviticus, WBC, 1992) says *ad loc.* (p. 22):

Since dirt and excrement defile the altar, the entrails (קרב) and the legs (כרעים) are to be washed to make sure that they are completely clean. The entrails must be emptied of fluids and partially digested food in order for them to burn and so as not to defile the altar. The legs, which would be soiled by dirt and other filth, must also be cleansed. כרע means (lit.) “to bend” and most likely refers to “the lower hind legs.” ... The priest now burns (הקטיר) the entire animal on the altar. Since this is a whole offering, the text specifically says that the priest burns אֶת־הַכֹּל, “all.”

That the entrails and legs were burned as well becomes clear also from the slightly more explicit special case in Lev 9:13f.:

¹³ They handed the burnt offering to him in pieces, with the head, and he offered them up in smoke on the altar. ¹⁴ He also washed the entrails and the legs, and offered them up in smoke with [עַל] the burnt offering on the altar.

Now **עַל** is somewhat ambiguous, it could mean “on top of” or “in addition to”. The latter would not necessarily imply that all parts were burned up together.

Wenham translates:

Then he washed the intestines and the hind legs and burned them on the altar on top of the burnt offering.

Hartley translates:

He washed the entrails and the legs and burned them on top of the whole offering on the altar.

Neither comments on his choice.

Milgrom translates:

He washed the entrails and the legs, and turned [them] into smoke on the altar with the burnt offering.

... and explains (at 3:5, p. 208):

Others render ‘*al*’ here as “beside” ... or “on” ..., but the use of ‘*al*’ meaning “with” is attested throughout the Priestly cultic texts (see at v 4).

But perhaps Lev 1:8-9 reads more easily as a sequence (see above): the entrails and the legs were added last, and put on top of the other parts. This understanding is **supported by Lev 8:20f.**, another example for a burnt offering. The wording there is again slightly different from both 1:8f. and 9:13f. Lev 8:20 says **the head and the pieces and the suet were “offered up in smoke”** already, before the entrails and legs are dealt with in v. 21. Probably, the main parts were still burning when the rest was added. Therefore, being specific by translating ‘*al*’ as “on top of” can hardly be wrong.¹

- In the case of **birds** being offered, another qualification applies. Lev 1:15-16 read:

¹⁵ The priest shall bring it to the altar, and wring off its head and offer it up in smoke on the altar; and its blood is to be drained out on the side of the

¹ The Mishnah could probably clarify this, but I have no way of checking it quickly.

altar. ¹⁶ He shall also take away its crop with its feathers and cast it beside the altar eastward, to the place of the dashes.

The interpretation of the underlined phrase is difficult. Milgrom translates this as follows:

“He shall remove its crissum by its feathers [and he explains this is here the tail wing]”

(The “crissum” is “the part of a bird surrounding the cloacal opening; also: the feathers covering that region: the under tail coverts” (merriam-webster.com).)

Whichever interpretation is followed, **this part of the bird was not burned** on the altar.

Translation

- Regarding Lev 1:9 (see text above): A literal translation of the first sentence could sound as if the washing of those parts happens in contrast to the burning of the other parts.

NLT07 avoids this impression by inserting “first”:

But the internal organs and the legs must first be washed with water.

GCLNR00 does the equivalent:

Die Eingeweide und Unterschenkel muss der Betreffende vorher mit Wasser säubern.

Engl.: Before this, that person has to clean the entrails and the (lower) legs with water.

There is a slight imprecision in both versions in that the wording sounds like the entrails and legs are already included in the word “pieces” (or “Stücke” respectively) in v. 8, which is probably not so in Hebrew.

- Regarding the preposition ‘*al*’ in Lev 9:14, the English versions are divided between just saying “with” or explicitly “on top of”. NLT07 solves it by saying “along with the rest of the burnt offering”. The Hebrew text is not totally clear. Saying “on top of” is a likely possibility, but not really necessary.