

Translating “Drink Offering / Libation” (נֶסֶק *neseq*)¹

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Abstract

The translation question whether the drink offering was poured out on top of the altar or at its sides, is what lead me to looking at the drink offering more closely. Some reference works do not say much about the drink offering at all, therefore I felt compelled to deal with more general questions first. I concentrate on references that speak about the libation as it is required in the Mosaic Law. I make some suggestions for the word choice for “drink offering”, and address potential mismatches between libations in the Bible and those in the host culture. The best answers regarding the exact location of the act of pouring come from the intertestamental period and point to the sides (or foot) of the altar, not to its top where the sacrificial animal was burnt.

Key texts

Genesis tells us about one drink offering. Gen 35:14 says:²

Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it.

Law: There is no passage that explains the purpose and procedure of the drink offering. In Exodus, the drink offering is mentioned as part of the morning- and the evening offerings (Ex 29:40-41). In Leviticus, the word occurs only three times, namely in the chapter about the feasts, and only one specification is given (a fourth of a hin of wine; Lev 23:13). The word occurs frequently in the chapters in Numbers that specify in detail what kind of offerings are to be presented at which occasions – i.e. **Numbers 15 and 28-29**. From this we gather the following standard amounts:

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the input that I received from several colleagues.

² Biblical quotes are taken from NASB.

Table 1: Amounts of drink offering for various sacrificial animals		
Animal	Amount	Approx. equivalent
Lamb	1/4 hin	0.9 liter
Ram	1/3 hin	1.2 liter
Bull	1/2 hin	1.8 liter

What does the word תִּשְׁבֵּק mean, and how can it be translated?

Definition:

The Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew defines and translates תִּשְׁבֵּק as follows:

= action whereby humans pour out a liquid, such as wine, oil, or even blood before a deity ► as a sacrifice – libation; drink-offering.³

I prefer the term *libation*. A *libation* is defined as the “pouring out of wine or other liquid in honor of a deity”, or “the liquid poured out” (dictionary.com).

Significance:

It is difficult to be precise on the concept behind libations. NIDOTTE says:

The idea behind this combination of food offerings seems to be that a good meal would not be complete without meat and bread as well as drink combined.⁴

However, the Bible Background Commentary explains (on Num 15:1-31):

Unlike sacrificial offerings in the rest of the ancient Near East, however, those to Yahweh were not designed to nourish the god (see the famished gods at the end of the flood story in the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic). They only were presented in a ritually correct manner (“an aroma pleasing to the Lord”) in order to obtain God’s blessing or forgiveness. ...⁵

Similarly, Anchor Bible Dictionary says:

... Did these offerings of food and drink represent meals given for Yahweh’s sustenance? Here Israel decisively parted company with the neighboring

³ *Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew*. www.sdbh.org [31.08.2018].

⁴ *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (NIDOTTE). W. A. VanGemeren (ed.). 5 vols. Zondervan, 1997. S.v. תִּשְׁבֵּק *nesek*, p. 115.

⁵ *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*. John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas. InterVarsity Press, 2000.

cultures of Canaan and Mesopotamia, where the mythological texts are full of descriptions of gods banqueting on priestly offerings (*ANET*, 69; Pope 1972). In Israel’s scriptures Yahweh himself is never depicted as eating or drinking (*Anclsr*, 449-50); ...⁶

Translation:

Disappointingly, none of the *Handbooks* (UBS) on Exodus, Leviticus, or Numbers discusses how to translate this functionally and anthropologically challenging *ter* תִּשְׁבֵּק.⁷ Some Bible dictionaries do not even have an entry on drink offering. – Where libations are unknown, a word needs to be found. Where they *are* known, mismatches and misunderstandings could arise. Some issues that might need attention are these:

- The Bible does not suggest that God drinks the liquid.
- The drink offering is also not intended for the priest.
- Does the fact that an alcoholic drink is involved in a holy ritual cause irritation? Or, to the contrary, is it surprising that the liquid that is used is wine, instead of hard liquor?
- If libations are known to the audience – be it as a practice among themselves, or as a practice among foreign groups –, what idea is connected with them? E.g. Are they normally devoted to the ancestors?
- Some cultures have drink offerings that are *not* poured out, but presented in a vessel and left standing to evaporate (or being poured out for disposal eventually). In others, only a part of the drink is poured out.

One might have to clarify things in a glossary entry; nevertheless, a fitting word choice has to be made.

Word choice: The English term *drink offering* (or the German *Trankopfer*) is not the best starting point when looking for a translation. To begin with, the Hebrew root *nsk* means ‘to pour’. (The idea of offering is expressed by the verbs. The verbs used with תִּשְׁבֵּק as an object are נָסַךְ, שָׁפַךְ, עָשָׂה, קָרַב, עָלָה, קָטַר, שָׂאָר.⁸ No act of drinking is suggested by these verbs.) Several solutions can be considered:

⁶ *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (ABD). 6 vol. David Noel Freedman et al. (eds.). Doubleday / Yale University Press, 1992ff. S.v. “Eating and drinking in the Old Testament”, vol. 2, pp. 250-254, here p. 253.

⁷ *Handbook*” always refers to the UBS Handbook Series. United Bible Societies.

⁸ *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (DCH). Vol. 1-8. David J. A. Clines et al. (eds.). Sheffield Academic Press / Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993-2011. S.v. תִּשְׁבֵּק *nesek*.

The term in the receptor language could be based on the word for ‘pouring’, as e.g. in Russian (возлияние – with the prefix suggesting that the liquid is poured *onto* something, not just poured *out*). CARS adds the adjective жертвенное (возлияние), ‘offering-pouring’.

Turkish (TCL02) has it the other way round: It uses an adjectival form of the verb for ‘pouring’ plus a noun for ‘offering’: *dökmelik sunu* ‘being-poured offering’.

The Arabic translations use a noun or a verb based on the root *skb* (*sakaba* = ‘to pour’). Besides this, the Sharif translation also uses *qurbān al-šarāb* ‘drink offering’.

If a precise technical term exists that is also known to non-experts, that one can be used. Some French versions say *libation*. FCL came up with a strikingly simple translation. It speaks of *une offrande de vin*, “an offering of wine”. Besides avoiding technical language, the phrase is self-explanatory, because it names the liquid.

Another possibility to consider would be using an adjective, as in “liquid offering / gift”.

What kind of vessels were used?

The vessels used for the drink offering are associated with the **table for the Bread of the Presence**. Ex 25:29 says:

You shall make its dishes and its pans and its jars and its bowls with which to pour drink offerings; you shall make them of pure gold. [Cf. Ex 37:16.]

The Hebrew text only contains the verb *nsk* ‘to pour’ without any object. However, even NASB adds this meaning, and without marking it by italics. That this **explication is justified** becomes clear from Num 4:7, which does contain the word for drink offering. It says:

Over the table of the bread of the Presence they shall also spread a cloth of blue and put on it the dishes and the pans and the sacrificial bowls and the jars for the drink offering [תִּצְּקַת], and the continual bread shall be on it.

Presumably, the liquid was kept in the jars, and when a libation was made the liquid was first poured into one of the bowls, and then poured out.

Remark: In Num 4:7, NET just says “the pitchers for pouring” instead of using the term *drink offering*; NLT07 leaves out the word completely. This could be due to some uncertainty whether it was really these vessels that were used in every-day practice (see the discussion below). However, these seem to be overly cautious translations.

What kind of liquid was used? And where was it poured out?

The answers to these questions are required in certain languages that cannot use the verb “to pour out” without saying what was poured, and where. Apart from this, readers – for instance in some African countries – might assume that libations are poured on the ground, because that is their own practice. To avoid this misunderstanding, the translator might need to explicate the place.

Usually, the drink offering was wine (e.g. Num 15:5). (In this discussion, I do not deal with exceptional cases, where water, oil, or blood were used; I am mainly concerned with the regulations in the Law.) Num 28:7 is exceptional in that it speaks of שָׁכָר ‘strong drink’ as libation. Ashley comments on this word:

Elsewhere the drink offerings are wine (Num 15:5, 7, 10; 28:14). Some scholars have proposed that *strong drink* here should be related to an Akkadian word for libations found in Babylonian cultic ceremonies (*šikaru*). An alternative is that *strong drink* here is any intoxicant made from fruit or grain, i.e., a generic term, as perhaps in 6:3 above.⁹

Taking the word as a generic term seems the safest. – The *Handbook* says:

As noted at 6:3, the Hebrew word for **strong drink** refers to any kind of intoxicating drink, such as wine and beer. It is unlikely that beer was used for libations, so here **strong drink** probably refers to some sort of wine (compare 15:5, 7, 10) that was distinct from the ordinary kind (so Alter, page 832; Rashi). Hence GNT has “wine.”

Since we do not know in what way this wine would have been special, and since the normal word for wine is used in the same chapter (v. 14), and in chapter 15, GNT’s solution might be the simplest.

Where was the libation poured out?

Scholars readily admit their uncertainty about where the libation was poured out. The *Handbook* on Ex 29:40 states:

It is not clear whether it was poured on the lamb, or on the altar, or at the foot of the altar.

The *Handbook* on Leviticus says:

A “libation” (NJV) is a liquid offering, usually wine, given to a deity. It is quite common in Middle Eastern cultures. In the case of the Jews, it was poured out at the base of the altar of sacrifice or on the ground. Compare Numbers 15:5 as well as Genesis 35:14.

⁹ Ashley, Timothy R.: *The book of Numbers* (NICOT). Eerdmans, 1993.

Ashley comments:

As for the drink offering, some have been prepared to conjecture that, since it is called *a fire offering of pleasing aroma to Yahweh* in v. 10, it may have been poured over the sacrifices, much as was done in Greece [with references]. Others have seen in the clause *a fire offering ... a general description of the whole procedure rather than a description of the drink offering as such*. These scholars usually point to the much later practice of pouring the drink offering at the foot of the altar (Sir 50:15). [*Footnote*: This is the more common position; ...] The evidence is insufficient to make a decision on this point.

The Old Testament is not explicit anywhere about the exact place for the libations. We can only gather hints. Even if certainty cannot be achieved, the translator is forced to make a decision. I will now discuss some of the evidence, and for which potential places it speaks.

Onto the ground?

We have several pieces of evidence that point to the pouring out of libations onto the ground as a pagan practice. Since the Old Testament is not explicit, we need to take these practices of neighboring peoples into consideration. The Israelites could have done the same.

- TWOT¹⁰ mentions a text where Baal is offered honey in the field. Of course, where there is neither altar nor animal, a libation cannot be poured onto either of them. Nevertheless, when there is an altar, we cannot automatically assume that the libation must be poured onto it.
- Another text is Jer 44:17:

... burning sacrifices to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, just as we ... did in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; ...”.

No altar or animal is mentioned. Therefore, the drink offering might have been poured on the ground. (As to the verb *qtr*, which comes without any object, instead of saying “burning sacrifices”, it would be safer to render it as “burning incense”, or just “offer offerings”.)

- In 2Sam 23:16, there is nothing that suggests anything else than that David poured the water out on the ground.

¹⁰ *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT). R. Laird Harris et al. (eds.). Vol. 1 and 2. Moody, 1980. s.v. תִּשְׂבֵּק nāsak.

- The *Lexikon zur Bibel*¹¹ shows a relief of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal pouring out a libation over a lion that lies on the ground, in front of an altar with further offerings on it.¹² Thus, the libation is poured out over the animal, but not over the altar.
- Ezek 20:28 (“... wherever they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices and ... there they poured out their drink offerings.”) is too general to be of help.

Inside the Holy Place?

The one reference that does specify a location is **Num 28:7**. It reads: “..., in the holy place [שֶׁבֶט] you shall pour out a drink offering ...” Milgrom comments:

Possibly *ba-kodesh* should be rendered “in the sanctuary,” that is, inside the Tent of Meeting, where the golden libation cups on the table of display were stored. It is clear that these cups were used for libation and, being of gold, they could be used only *inside* the Tent. Only there – and nowhere else – was gold used on the cult objects and structure. Where this libation was made is not clear. ...¹³

He also says: “Besides, the preposition *be*, “in”, would not be appropriate for a libation on the altar.”¹⁴

Milgrom’s observation about gold being reserved for inside the Tent deserves attention. On the other hand, the jars and bowls on the table are not the only objects that raise questions. Ex 25:29 (see above) speaks of “dishes and pans” as well. If the bread was presented in two piles, then what were these dishes there for? Did they have a decorative or symbolic meaning? Were they used in preparing the dough for the bread? If so, this probably would have happened outside the Tent, certainly the baking would. This is to say that jars and bowls on the table are no proof that they were *not* used outside the Tent, or that there could not have been additional vessels that were used outside. Also, the altar itself is part of the “holy equipment”. **In spite of the phrase שֶׁבֶט in this verse, it is not presumptuous to think of holy vessels being used at the altar, or between the altar and the Tent.**

The *Handbook* recommends:

¹¹ *Lexikon zur Bibel*. Fritz Rienecker et al. (eds.). SCM, 2013. S.v. Opfer, p. 876.

¹² The relief can also be found online, e.g. under www.alamy.com/stock-photo-king-ashurbanipal-of-assyria-668-627-bc-pouring-a-libation-over-dead-30781773.html.

¹³ Milgrom, Jacob: *Numbers* (JPSTC). Jewish Publication Society, 1989.

¹⁴ Milgrom 1989:326, note 23.

The Hebrew word for **holy place** (“sanctuary” in NRSV) is *qodesh* (see the comments on 3.28). Here it seems to refer to the holy altar of sacrifice (see the comments on 4.15), so GNT renders **in the holy place** as “at the altar,” and CEV has “on the altar.” Another possible model is “at the sacred tent” (NIRV).

שְׁבֵק can denote the Holy Place (as in Ex 26:33), but it seems we cannot always restrict it to that (cf. e.g. Ex 35:19); 2Chr 35:5 is another reference where it makes best sense to think of the vicinity of the altar, not the sanctuary itself. Given the broad meaning of שְׁבֵק and the difficulties associated with it, both “in the Holy Place” (NLT07) and “on the altar” seem more specific than we can or need to be. In the verse Num 28:7, “at / by / near the Holy Tent” is preferable.

At an altar? – And if so, where exactly?

- We know of **Jacob** (see Gen 35:14, quoted above) that he used a pillar, not an altar; but he **did not pour the liquids onto the ground**.
- Ex 30:9 says about the *incense altar*:

You shall not offer any strange incense on this altar, or burnt offering or meal offering; and you shall not pour out a drink offering on it.

This prohibition leads some to believe that **another altar must be the appropriate place** for the libation.

- **Num 15:5** reads:

and you shall prepare wine for the drink offering, one-fourth of a hin, with [לַעֲלֹת] the burnt offering or for the sacrifice, for each lamb.

The preposition לַעֲלֹת means ‘on’, and could be taken to mean “on top of (the animal)”, which would suggest the libation is poured out over the animal. However, לַעֲלֹת can also mean ‘**in addition to**’ (HALOT s. v. 6. d). This meaning is less common, but because Num 15 is about the *objects and amounts* of the sacrifice, not about the *procedure* of sacrificing, it is here the preferred interpretation, and found in NASB above, and in other versions. – **This verse, then, does not inform us about the exact place.**

- **2Ki 16:10-16** tells us how King Ahaz replaced the altar with a new one. Its make-up was inspired by one he had seen in Damascus. Verses 12-15 speak about the actions that take place at the altar:

¹² When the king came from Damascus, the king saw the altar; then the king approached the altar and went up to it [or: and offered up on it?] [וַיַּעַל עָלָיו],
¹³ and burned his burnt offering and his meal offering, and poured his drink offering and sprinkled the blood of his peace offerings on the altar

[תִּשְׁבֵּק הַלְּבַב].¹⁴ The bronze altar, which *was* before the LORD, he brought from the front of the house, from between *his* altar and the house of the LORD, and he put it on the north side of *his* altar.¹⁵ King Ahaz commanded the priest Uriah, saying, “Upon [לְבַב] the great altar offer the morning burnt offering, and the evening grain offering, and the king’s burnt offering, and his grain offering, with the burnt offering of all the people of the land, their grain offering, and their drink offering; then dash against it all the blood of the burnt offering, and all the blood of the sacrifice; but the bronze altar shall be for me to inquire by.”

The **preposition** לְבַב ‘on (the altar)’ is used several times, but **in none of the cases does it occur unambiguously joined with the verb or the noun of the root *nsk***. Anyhow, the overall description gives the impression that all actions of offering took place immediately by the altar. These verses do not suggest that the libation was poured simply onto the ground anywhere between the Temple and the altar.

- Two references inform us about the **Jewish practice during the intertestamental period**. The first in Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 50:15 reads:

Rahlfs: ἐξέτεινεν ἐπὶ σπονδείου χεῖρα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔσπεισεν ἐξ αἵματος σταφυλῆς, ἐξέχεεν εἰς θεμέλια θυσιαστηρίου ὄσμῆν εὐωδίας ὑψίστω παμβασιλεῖ.¹⁵

NETS: he stretched out his hand to a libation bowl and made a libation of grape blood; he poured at the foundations of the altar an odor of fragrance to the Most High, the King of All.¹⁶

Milgrom¹⁷ also refers to Josephus (Ant. 3.234). There, we read:

... τὸ δ’ αὐτὸ μέτρον τῷ ἐλαίῳ καὶ οἴνου παρήγον, σπένδουσι δὲ περὶ τὸν βωμὸν τὸν οἴνον.

They brought moreover the same measure of wine as of oil, pouring the wine as a libation around the altar.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Septuaginta*. Alfred Rahlfs (ed.). Vol. 1-2. Württembergische Bibelanstalt Stuttgart, 1935. Deutsche Bibelstiftung Stuttgart.

¹⁶ *New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations*: Traditionally Included under That Title (NETS). Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright (eds.). Oxford University Press, 2007.

¹⁷ Milgrom 1989:326, note 23.

¹⁸ Quoted from: Loeb, *Josephus*, vol. 4, pp. 428f.

The word βωμός is ambiguous. According to LSJ, it can mean “*raised platform, stand, for chariots ...; base of a statue, ...; but, 2. mostly, altar with a base, ...*”.¹⁹ Menge-Güthling gloss: “**Erhöhung**, ... Insb.: a) Postament, Sockel, Fuß, Fußgestell, Piedestal (einer Statue). b) Gestelle (eines Wagens) ... c) **Altar** (aus Erde, Stein, Rasen, erhöht auf Stufen stehend ... ; an oder auf ihm ließen sich die Schutzflehenden nieder), ...”²⁰ – I.e. it is not altogether clear whether the altar as a whole is referred to or just its base. However, in either way there is a contrast to what Josephus wrote just before, namely that the *flour* was “devote[d] to the flames on the altar”.

These two matching records from Sirach and Josephus seem to be a quite strong argument for **suspecting the same practice in earlier centuries**. At the very least, it shows that the Jews of that time considered that practice appropriate for doing justice to the Law.

- The Greek noun σπονδή is used in the Septuagint, but does not occur in the New Testament. The apostle **Paul uses the verb σπένδω ‘be poured out as a libation’** metaphorically twice:

Phil 2:17: ἀλλὰ εἰ καὶ σπένδομαι ἐπὶ τῇ θυσίᾳ καὶ λειτουργίᾳ τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν, χαίρω καὶ συγχαίρω πᾶσιν ὑμῖν·

Engl.: But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all.

2Tim 4:6: Ἐγὼ γὰρ ἤδη σπένδομαι, καὶ ὁ καιρὸς τῆς ἀναλύσεώς μου ἐφέστηκεν.

Eng.: For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

Noteworthy is ἐπὶ ‘**upon**’ in **Phil 2:17**. It sounds as if the background is a pouring-out over the sacrificial animal. This would reflect a different practice as the one in Sirach and Josephus. The *Handbook* comments helpfully on this question:

The meaning of the preposition “upon” is conditioned by Paul’s allusion to the sacrificial system. If the allusion is to Jewish usage, the meaning is “in addition to,” since the Jews poured the drink offering, not over the sacrifice, but beside or around the altar. NEB favors this view by rendering “to crown that sacrifice.” On the other hand, if the allusion is to pagan ritual, the

¹⁹ *Greek-English Lexicon* (LSJ). Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott. Accessed through www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper.

²⁰ Menge-Güthling. *Enzyklopädisches Wörterbuch der griechischen und deutschen Sprache*. Erster Teil: Griechisch-Deutsch. Langenscheidt. 1913. 19. Aufl. 1965.

meaning is “upon” or “on,” since the pagans poured the drink offering on the sacrifice that was on the altar. This interpretation is adopted by the majority of translations, including TEV, **on the sacrifice**. In view of the fact that most of the Philippian Christians were converts from paganism, it is more likely that Paul would draw his illustration from the pagan sacrificial system (cf. 2Cor 2:14ff).

While some doubts remain, this would reconcile the use of ἐπὶ in this place with a different offering practice in the Old Testament.

Conclusion

It is clear that in the Mosaic Law libations had to be offered by the Altar of Burnt Offering. It is not clear where exactly. A pouring out on the ground in front of the altar is improbable, although it might not have been perceived as “wrong” either. If translators have to explicate the location, then they seem to be on the safe side if they reflect the later Jewish practice of pouring the libation at the base of the altar. This avoids questions about how the liquid affects the fire under the sacrifice.