

UNIT 50

THE HIGH ALTAR

(Exodus 27:1-8; 38:1-8)

The first section of Exodus 27 describes the high altar for the burnt offering, the main altar in the courtyard. Very little is said of its purpose here; the passage is rather straightforward: the size and shape of the altar (v. 1), the horns on the corners (v. 2), the utensils (v. 3), the grate (vv. 4, 5), the staves (vv. 6, 7), and its hollow nature according to the pattern shown (v. 8).

The altar was a hollow frame made out of acacia planks and then overlaid with bronze. It was about 7 and 1/2 feet in length and breadth and 4 and 1/2 feet high. At each corner was a horn projected outwards. Round the altar, halfway up, was a projecting ledge (for the priests to stand on) supported at its outer edge by vertical grating that rested on the ground.

The horns were an indispensable part of the altar. The blood of the sin offering was applied to them (29:12; Lev. 8:15; 4:25, 30, 34; 9:9; 16:18; Ezek. 43:20). A criminal seeking asylum clung to them (1 Kings 1:50; 2:28). If we compare the size of Ezekiel's horns to his altar (18' square, 16 and 1/2, high, with horns 1 and 1/2' long), we would have these horns about 7' long. Horns were used on altars in Greek and Semitic cultures besides this. Many theories have been presented, but one that is fairly plausible is that they are stylized horns of the animals being sacrificed there. And they were practical too, serving to make it easier for the priests to bind the sacrifices with cords to the horns of the altar (at times several animals would have been piled up to burn).

Here too the exegesis will have to determine the purpose of the various utensils in order to discover the theological ramifications: pans to catch the fat as it ran down with the ashes, shovels for taking the ashes away, basins for tossing the blood against the side of the altar, and flesh hooks and fire pans.

The instructions given here are problematic. Nothing is said of a top to it, nor of where the fire was, nor of the chance of the hollow wooden structure burning up (if the fire was kindled on the ground. Modern critical scholarship sees this section as "P's" attempt to construct a portable altar along the lines of the massive structure of Solomon, which was a departure from tradition (reason: it is

difficult to harmonize this passage with 20:24f.).

But the purpose and function of the altar are not in question. Here the worshippers would make their sacrifices to God in order to find forgiveness and gain admission into His courts. God was instructing His people to prepare for sacrificial worship, for no one could worship God apart from the prescribed substitutionary sacrifice at the altar. Every act of worship begins with and is based on the many truths conveyed at the altar. So too in the Church do we find the sacrificial atonement of the Lamb the foundation and center of worship. The comparable instruction on our level would be that

***Believers must ensure that the foundation and center of their worship
is sacrificial atonement the altar,
(that is, the form and function of worship must immediately reveal this).***

Christians do this spiritually in the contents of their worship, and physically in their preparation for the Eucharist. But the trappings in the sanctuary should also reveal that the atoning sacrifice is the heart of their worship and the foundation of their faith. In this way both the practical and symbolic use of the altar as well as the meaningful fulfillment of its use will be brought forward to the New Testament. The application would be for believers to ensure that this is maintained and communicated.