

UNIT 55

THE ALTAR OF INCENSE

(Exodus 30:1-20; 37:25-29)

Why this section occurs after the unit of chapters 25-29 is a mystery. Critics see it as a later stratum of P, P not having an altar of incense in the tabernacle. In 30:10 an annual rite of the atonement is performed on it, and Leviticus 16 does not know about it. Part of the problem is the ambiguity of “the altar” in Scripture, without specifying which it is.

We would have to say that either there was an original unit of instruction, chapters 25-29, to which a few things were appended; or, there was a thematic arrangement that put the altar of incense and the laver after the completion of the unit. No satisfactory explanation has been given for this. It may be that the items discussed in chapter 30 were more important after the tabernacle worship had begun, but there is no compelling reason to argue this way. The items starting here--altar of incense, money, laver, oil and incense and willing artisans--do all seem to center on the people's needs and participation.

The altar of incense is discussed in verses 1-10. Exodus 30:1-5 tells how to make it, 30:6 where to put it, 30:7-10 the proper use of it. So verses 1-6 tell of the preparation for this functional object (and so preparation for the function, but verses 7-10 tell of its use in worship--there must always be incense burning, and once a year atonement is made on its horns.

The general understanding (supportable quite easily) is that this was the place of prayer, that incense ascending to heaven represented the prayers ascending. That means that the blood of atonement was pleading to God for the people. The point is that a sweet aroma would please the LORD. So the passage would be saying that *God requires his people to make provision for pleasing, powerful intercessory prayer*. By making the altar for this purpose, intercessory prayer was made more intentional and special. For atonement, they will plead the blood of the sacrifice, and that pleases God. For morning and evening prayers, they will have to ensure that they please God (the symbol of the incense). Fragrant prayers are 1) from true believers, 2) according to the will of God (one who is sanctified pleading for something that God promised, or something that

harmonizes with God's plans).

I would follow the same format as was laid out in chapter 25. The instructions for making it show that

I. God requires his people to prepare a place for prayer (1-6).

This was a permanent part of the Sanctuary, and so the service. This was placed in front of the ark on the outside of the curtain.

The instructions for its use that follow show that

II. God expects that his people's prayers will be pleasing to him (7-10).

See passages like Psalm 141: 2-4, Luke 1:10-13, Hebrews 9:25 and Revelation 8:3, 4. The warnings against strange incense or meat offerings shows that this is intercessory and not offertory. Nothing could be given here--only submission and pleading. This is a most holy place. It was where the priest offered the daily prayers, and where the High Priest interceded on the Day of Atonement.

One thing that probably should be stressed is that this prayer more than likely was corporate prayer of assembled worshippers. Individual prayers could be offered there, but this seems not the frequent use.