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Let My Prayer Be Set Before Thee: The Burning of Incense in the Temple Cult of Ancient Israel

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This survey paper discusses the burning of incense in its relation to the temple cult of Ancient Israel. The burning of incense is studied in its context of the religions surrounding Israel, and the ingredients in Exodus 30 are considered. Various rabbinic commentaries are also surveyed, and a Latter-day Saint interpretation is given for this ancient Israelite temple ritual.

Much work has been done on the details and meaning of the temple cult in ancient Israel in academic and religious research. Unfortunately the burning of incense has not been treated as thoroughly as most of the other elements of the temple rites.¹ This is surprising given that the burning of incense played such a central role in the worship of the various religious groups surrounding

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¹ The following works treat the temple cult in general, but only treat the burning of incense superficially: *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994); *The Temple in Time and Eternity*,

Israel.² We will first attempt to situate the cultic use of incense in Israel within the religious practices of the day. We will then discuss the composition of Israel's sacred incense and its use in their religious rites. Finally we will discuss some possible LDS interpretations of this religious act. A book would be necessary in order to adequately cover any of these topics, however, we hope to provide a survey of these interesting subjects to facilitate a more thorough investigation in the future.

Incense in the Ancient Near East

The offering of sacrifice and the burning of incense are the two most attested forms of worship in the ancient Near East. Evidence for the use of incense can be found in Arabia, Syria, Mesopotamia, Israel, and Egypt. In ancient Egypt the evidence for this is especially abundant. Multiple depictions of the burning of incense can be found on most Egyptian temples and tombs.³ Evidence of the ancient use of incense extends far from the center of our current study into such distant areas as China and Mesoamerica. Thus, the burning of incense was both common and nearly universal in the ancient world.

ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999); William Brown, *The Tabernacle and its Priests and Services, Described and Considered in Relation to Christ and the Church* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1899; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996); Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services, Updated Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994); Richard N. Holzapfel and David R. Seely, *My Father's House* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft). Kjeld P. Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986) is one exception.

² See 1 Kings 11:8, 22:43 (for additional references see footnote 9).

³ See Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000). pp. 29, 191, 205, and 211 for examples of incense depictions in temples. See also *Valley of the Kings*, ed. Kent R. Weeks (Italy: Friedman/Fairfax, 2001), 232–233, 236, 244–245, 314 for similar depictions in tombs.

Incense was used in secular settings to combat normal, everyday odors. As one researcher has pointed out, the cultures that used incense the most “[were] all situated in warm climates, which cause[d] odors from sweat and putrefaction to develop fast. There is no doubt that the use of incense materials [was] furthered in an attempt to do away with such unpleasant smells.”⁴ Thus, it would not be surprising if the use of incense to alleviate unpleasant odors in everyday life migrated into religious life. This is especially likely in light of the prevalent practice of offering animal sacrifices at cultic centers. This practice undoubtedly increased the foul odors surrounding the cultic center where the animals were slaughtered, and thus increased the need for some form of aromata.

From its more practical uses, incense gained abstract significance once it entered the temple cults. For example, to the Egyptians incense had a purifying power, cleansing the air both literally and ritually.⁵ The Egyptians also considered the smoke of the incense as a stairway connecting the earthly abode with that of the heavenly. Thus, to the Egyptian, incense provided both a means of ascent and communication.⁶

The use of incense was also common throughout the Arabian Peninsula. Although there are no ritual texts from Arabia to explain the details of their use of incense, several altars have been found in Arabia with the names of various aromata inscribed upon them.⁷ Furthermore, incense was commonly imported from Arabia into Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Palestine.

⁴ Nielsen, 1.

⁵ As an example see *The Book of the Dead*, ch.133 “There shall be made a sky with stars purified with natron and incense.” Faulkner, “The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead” (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1985), 122.

⁶ Nielsen, 9–10. In later Christianity this thought was assimilated and incense was used in funerary settings, where the ascending smoke represented the ascension of the deceased. Udo Becker, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Symbols* (New York: Continuum International, 2000), 156.

⁷ Nielsen, 17–19.

Incense was also common in ancient Canaan. The biblical text is replete with descriptions of the use of incense by the Canaanites and the Israelites who were swayed by Canaanite religious practices. The Bible describes the burning of incense by the Canaanites both upon sacred “high places” and in sacred “groves.”⁸ Also, many small horned altars have been found in Palestine. These smaller altars were most likely used for the burning of incense.

Incense in Ancient Israel

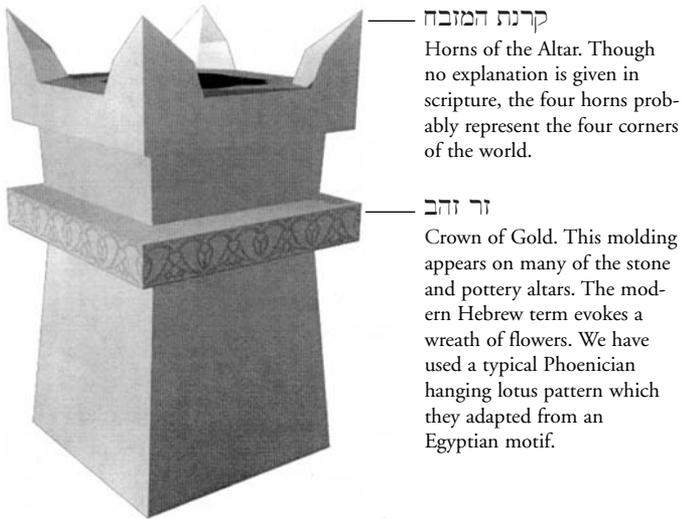
The ancient Israelites came from the land of Egypt, where the burning of incense was central to religious worship, into the land of Palestine, where its use is well attested. The Israelites were situated very near the Arabian Peninsula from which they could easily import large amounts of incense. Thus, the Israelites would have had easy access to incense, and they would have been well acquainted with the use of incense in religious worship. It is therefore understandable that the offering of incense was one of the required sacrifices under the Law of Moses.

Given the painstaking detail in the Pentateuch concerning the various sacrifices offered at the tabernacle, it is little wonder that the composition of the incense to be burned in the tabernacle is strictly prescribed in the Pentateuch. Exodus 30:34–38 states:

And the LORD said unto Moses, Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense: of each shall there be a like weight, and thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy. And thou shalt beat some of it very small, and put of it before the testimony in the tabernacle of the congregation, where I will meet with thee: it shall be unto you most holy. And as for the perfume which thou shalt

⁸ 2 Kings 12:3; 14:4, 23; 15:4, 35; 16:4; 17:11; 18:4; 22:17; 23:5, 8; 2 Chronicles 25:14; 28:3–4; Isaiah 65:3, 7; Jeremiah 19:4.

מזבח הקטרת
The Altar of Incense



make, ye shall not make to yourselves according to the composition thereof: it shall be unto thee holy for the LORD. Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people.

This passage gives very specific instructions on what ingredients are to be used in the cultic incense, how it is to be mixed, and a proscription against using incense composed of these materials for unholy purposes. Given these simple instructions it should be easy to reproduce the cultic incense of ancient Israel. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Although we have the names of the substances preserved in our records, the actual knowledge of what these ingredients are has been lost. Many different—and often contradictory—hypotheses have been set forth as to the

identity of the ingredients of the cultic incense. Unfortunately, there has been very little research comparing the strengths and weakness of the various hypotheses.

The Bible describes the burning of incense as a type of sacrifice. The offerings of blood sacrifice, and apparently the burning of incense as well, were done away with at the death of Christ (3 Ne. 9:19). However, Joseph Smith, the first Latter-day Saint prophet, taught that the offering of sacrifice would return before or at the second coming.⁹ It may be that the burning of incense will be restored as part of the law of sacrifice. We feel that this possibility makes the discovery of the composition of the Israelite's temple incense a valuable contribution. The following sections will attempt to summarize the various theories as to the identities of the ingredients of the temple incense.

Stacte. Stacte, the first of the four ingredients mentioned by name, is the usual English translation of שֶׁטֶף in the Hebrew Masoretic text. The Hebrew root שֶׁטֶף means “to drip,” an accurate description of how gum resins are formed. The only other place in the Bible where the Hebrew word is used is Job 36:27, describing drops of water.

In the Septuagint, שֶׁטֶף is translated as ΣΤΑΚΤΗ, which is where our English word comes from, and, like the Hebrew שֶׁטֶף, means “to drip.” There is sufficient evidence that the Greek ΣΤΑΚΤΗ was a form of myrrh.¹⁰ The Septuagint's translation was most likely in error because it seems unlikely that שֶׁטֶף is a form of myrrh, which would usually have been rendered מִרְרָה, which is the extremely common form for myrrh. This form for myrrh was used earlier in the same chapter in reference to the anointing oil. If שֶׁטֶף is not myrrh it seems that its translation in the Septuagint as ΣΤΑΚΤΗ was made simply because both שֶׁטֶף and ΣΤΑΚΤΗ mean “to

⁹ Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 172–173.

¹⁰ Nielsen, 61, 63.

drip.” Therefore our English translation of נֹטֶף as *stacte* in the King James Version is unfortunate, because it stems from the Greek mistranslation.

By the time the Talmud was written, the Hebrew צָרִי had replaced the word נֹטֶף for this spice, as can be seen in the Talmudic list of the ingredients of the sacred incense.¹¹ צָרִי is a word that occurs elsewhere in the Bible. It is mentioned with spices that were carried by Ishmaelite traders in Genesis 37:25, and then in Genesis 43:11 as a gift from Jacob in the land of Canaan to Joseph in the land of Egypt. Later in Jeremiah, it is translated into English as “balm” and seems to hold some medicinal qualities. In every instance where the word צָרִי is used, it is translated into the Septuagint as ρητινῆς. Although there are other possibilities for צָרִי, it can be most likely identified with one of the storax trees¹² or with the balsam tree.¹³ Balsam, according to Josephus, grew in Palestine¹⁴ and thus seems to fit the requirement put forth in Genesis 43:11 that it be native to Palestine. However, since balsam seems to be more directly related to בִּשְׁמ, *bosem*, the storax tree seems more likely. Our word storax may even come from the Hebrew צָרִי.

The Talmud states that נֹטֶף comes from a tree.¹⁵ Because of this description and the Talmudic association of נֹטֶף with צָרִי, some commentators believe that נֹטֶף also comes from the storax or balsam tree. However, some commentators believe that נֹטֶף is of the *Cistus* genus, a type of flower.¹⁶ This is most likely incorrect

¹¹ Nielsen, 62.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ United Bible Societies, Committee on Translations *Fauna and Flora of the Bible* (London: United Bible Societies, 1972), 178.

¹⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, IV, V, 2.

¹⁵ Jacob Neusner, trans., *Tractate Keritot* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 1.6.7.

¹⁶ *Fauna*, 178.

because the rabbis were clear that this ingredient came from some sort of a tree. Furthermore the ingredient was most likely formed from dripping sap because of its name, a process not usually associated with the aroma of flowers.

In conclusion, נטף was not of the *Cistus* genus because it must have been a tree. נטף was also not simply myrrh because the Hebrew word מר would have been the more logical choice to describe myrrh. נטף most likely either came from the balsam tree, or one of the many types of storax trees.

Onycha. The Hebrew and Greek words for *onycha* betray its mystery. The Hebrew שחלת, comes from a root meaning “to roar.” The Greek translation ονυξ means “fingernail” or “claw.” The Talmud, whose Hebrew is of a later date than the Bible, refers to the substance as צפרן which also means “fingernail.”¹⁷ The word שחלת also seems to be related to שחלים, a type of cress. The term cress refers to a large variety of plants including the more common “water cress.”

Another possibility comes from the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, which defines שחלת as the shell of an aromatic mussel that lives in the Red Sea.¹⁸ Cansdale supports this idea, indicating that the operculum of a species of strombus was the ingredient for the incense.¹⁹ He also states that opercula were used for incense “until the end of the last century.” Henk K. Mienis of the National Mollusk Collection at Hebrew University also believes that שחלת came from a mollusk and notes that burning opercula was a home-made remedy even as late as the middle of the twentieth century.²⁰

¹⁷ Nielsen, 65.

¹⁸ *Encyclopedia Judaica* (New York: Macmillan, 1971–72), s.v. “onycha.”

¹⁹ George Cansdale, *All the Animals of the Bible Lands* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 232.

²⁰ Henk K. Mienis, “Human uses of opercula,” <http://manandmollusc.net/operculum_paul.html> (15 September 2002).

However, an Ugaritic text lists the substance among types of vegetables, implying that שחלת is also a vegetable and therefore not from a mussel.²¹ The Talmud specifically states that although שחלת is not from a tree, it does grow from the ground.²² To further complicate things, around the eleventh century, the Jewish commentator Rashi said that שחלת was “an aromatic root that is smooth and shiny like a fingernail.”²³

According to Winifred Walker's *All the Plants of the Bible*, שחלת is a form of rock rose, *Cistus ladaniferus*, and produces a resin called labdanum. The bush is described as having petals with markings like fingernails, thus its connection with the Greek ονυξ.²⁴ Labdanum is defined as any resin that comes from a *Cistus* plant.²⁵

שחלת is the most difficult ingredient to identify. Given its linguistic background and Talmudic interpretations it seems more likely to be a plant than an animal, and thus not the shell of any mussel. שחלת seems either to come from an unknown cress, an unknown white root, or a plant from the *Cistus* genus.

Galbanum. Galbanum (חלב בנה, ξαλβανη), the third ingredient for the incense, is one of the easiest to identify. The Greek is simply a borrowing of the Hebrew word, so there is no chance of error in translation from Hebrew to Greek. The Hebrew root for this word, חלב, means “milk,” suggesting that the plant resembles milk in some way.

²¹ Nielsen, 66.

²² Keritot 1.6.7. The Talmud also discusses how onycha was prepared, stating that “Iye of leeks was rubbed over onycha to beautify it, and Cyprus wine was used for steeping the onycha to intensify its odor” (Keritot 1.6.2).

²³ Rabbi Abraham Ben Isaiah and Rabbi Benjamin Sharfman, trans. and ed., *The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary* (Brooklyn: S.S.&R, 1950), 391.

²⁴ Winifred Walker, *All the Plants of the Bible* (New York: Harper, 1952), 158.

²⁵ *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G & C Merriam, 1956), 2nd ed., s.v. “labdanum.”

²⁶ Walker 86, *Fauna*, 123.

Galbanum, the sources agree, comes from the *Ferula galbaniflua* plant, which is a member of the carrot family.²⁶ Galbanum grows in the Mesopotamian area, and thus had to be imported in biblical times.²⁷ The gum was collected by slitting the stem a few inches above the ground and letting the milky substance flow out and harden.²⁸

The Talmud describes galbanum as smelling bad.²⁹ The rabbi speaking notes that “without being told that item, I never would have been likely to include it.” Galbanum is also described as “stinking,” and symbolizes, according to Rabbi Hana bar Bizna, sinners that participate in ordinances with Israel.³⁰ However, some modern Bible commentators claim galbanum has a pleasant smell.³¹ Philo praises galbanum, comparing it to air and calling it sweet smelling.³² In some personal correspondences with those who have smelled the sap from the *Ferula galbaniflua* we have been told that it smells strange in its natural state, but smelled good when burned. This may explain the contradictions in the descriptions of the galbanum’s smell, and provides further evidence for the identification of galbanum with the *Ferula galbaniflua* plant.

Frankincense. Frankincense (לְבַנֹּן, λιβανωτο) is the most common incense mentioned in the Bible. The word that is usually translated as “frankincense,” is translated as simply “incense” in the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. The root לְבַן means “white,” indicating the color of the substance or perhaps the white smoke that it produces. The substance comes from a type of tree in the *Boswellia* genus that grows in southern Arabia.³³ That frankincense

²⁷ Walker, 86.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Keritot 1.6.7.

³⁰ Ibid, 1.6.9.

³¹ *Fauna*, 123; Walker, 86.

³² Philo, “Who is the Heir of Divine Things,” 41.197 in *The Works of Philo*, trans. and ed. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 292.

³³ W. W. Müller, “Frankincense,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol II, 854.

comes from Arabia is attested in the Bible: Isaiah 60:6 and Jeremiah 6:20 both describe frankincense coming from Sheba on camels.

Unlike the other ingredients of the holy incense, frankincense was also used in other parts of the temple. The flour offerings and meat offerings were both required to have frankincense mixed in (Lev. 2:1,15; 6:15). Frankincense was also required to be on the shewbread in the Holy Place (Lev. 24:7). It was specifically forbidden to add frankincense to a sin offering (Lev. 5:11), or to an offering to recognize adultery (Num. 5:15), perhaps indicating its holy nature. Levites were specially assigned to watch over it (1 Chron. 9:29). Also unlike the other spices, frankincense was specifically mentioned as a fragrance for the Israelites' secular use (Song of Sol. 3:6) in addition to its use in the temple. It was very valuable even into New Testament times, and was one of the three kingly gifts given to Jesus at his birth (Matt. 2:11). The Talmud tells us that each year the frankincense surplus from the previous year was used to pay temple craftsmen.³⁴

Rabbinical Traditions about Incense. In Talmudic times the list of ingredients grew from four to eleven.³⁵ The rabbis claimed that all eleven spices were mentioned to Moses on Sinai. They most likely arrived at this number by homiletical exegesis. They said that the first mention of the word "spices" actually refers to two unnamed spices, because the word is plural. The next three spices are given by name, which makes a total of five ingredients. Then the next use of the term "spices" somehow meant that the number of spices should be doubled, making ten. Then the final ingredient, frankincense, was added, making a total of eleven ingredients. To reach eleven spices, the rabbis added myrrh, cassia, spikenard, saffron, costus, aromatic rind, and cinnamon to the original four ingredients. They also added a few minor ingredients that steep the mixture and make the smoke rise higher.³⁶

³⁴ Keritot 1.6.2.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. 1.6.7; see also *Encyclopedia Judaica* (New York: Macmillan, 1971-72), s.v. "Incense and Perfumes."

As is typical of the writers of the Talmud, there is quite a bit of commentary over very minute details in the Exodus verses. In discussing the required weight for each ingredient, the Talmud notes that the ingredients mentioned in the actual scripture share the greatest weight in the incense, and the other ingredients were all in lesser quantities.³⁷ This is perhaps reflective of their later addition. Earlier, Rabbi Judah infers that accidentally adding too much of a spice is acceptable, because “the Holy One . . . takes note of the overweight.”³⁸

As noted earlier, the verses in Exodus dealing with the temple incense mention that those who “make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people” (Ex. 30:38). The Talmud expands upon this statement, noting that a person who made the incense in order to learn how to make it was not under condemnation, but those who make it simply for the pleasure of smelling it were those who were cut off.³⁹ They added that the act of smelling something holy was not sacrilege, but burning the leftover incense for secular purposes after the sacrifice was performed was forbidden.⁴⁰ Burning the incense before the sacrifice was offered was allowed, presumably to allow the mixture to be tested.

However, the desire to keep people from profaning the holy incense could be taken to extremes, even for the rabbis. The Levitical family of Abtinas was in charge of making the incense for the temple, and they refused to release their recipe to anyone, lest someone use it to perfume profane things instead of holy things.⁴¹ They were not remembered fondly, despite mild praise for their good intentions. The only time the writers of the Talmudic account had positive things to say about this family was when an old

³⁷ Ibid, 1.6.2.

³⁸ Ibid, 1.5.3.

³⁹ Ibid, 1.6.1.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Yoma, trans. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 3:11.

man surreptitiously gave a copy of the recipe to Rabbi Yohanan ben Nuri.⁴²

The Burning of Incense in Ancient Israel

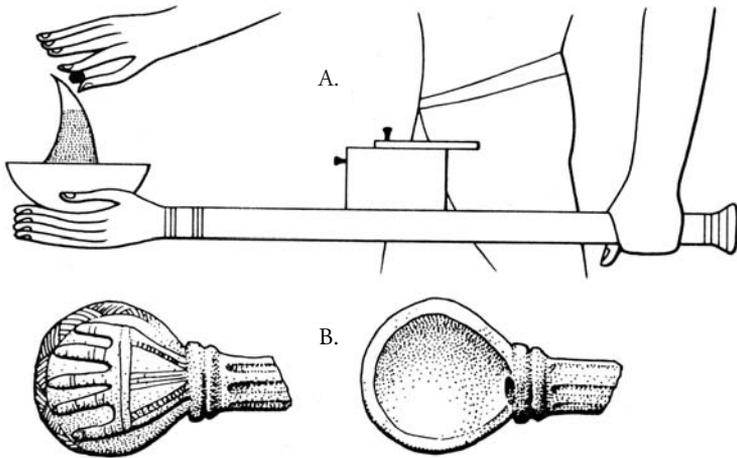
Once the priests prepared the incense, it was brought to the temple or tabernacle. The incense was burned upon a special altar made from shittim wood, and overlaid with gold. This altar had four horns upon its corners, similar to the Canaanite altars found in Palestine. The altar of incense was placed within the Holy Place, directly before the veil of the temple. Coals were brought from the altar of sacrifice and placed upon the altar of incense with either tongs, a shovel, or a golden censer.⁴³ The incense was sprinkled over these coals by the high priest twice daily (Ex. 30:7–8), once in the morning and once in the evening when the lamps were also cared for. By second temple times the privilege of lighting the lamps and burning incense upon the altar was extended to the other priests.

On the Day of Atonement the high priest made a special offering of incense. Upon this day he entered the Holy Place, and placed blood from the sacrifice upon the four horns of the altar of incense. Then he entered the Holy of Holies, where he burned incense in a special censer. The exact shape and composition of this censer is unknown. It may have been similar to the spherical hanging censers that became common in Christianity, or it may have been shaped like the cupped hand common among the Egyptians.⁴⁴ The burning incense created a cloud of smoke before the ark, similar to the cloudy pillar from which Jehovah

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See Isaiah 6.

⁴⁴ Nielsen, 39. We do know that censers of this shape were used by Israelites. It is unclear whether they were part of their traditional religion, or in some form of syncretic worship.



Incense was often burned in special holders made in the form of a cupped hand, the “golden spoons” of Exodus 25:29. From the Egyptian version (A) at Beni Hasan, c. 1100 B.C., to an actual steatite example (B) found at Meggido, the “filled hand” (the Hebrew letter *kaph* means “palm”) is the widespread sign of offering sacrifice.

communed with the children of Israel during the Exodus.⁴⁵ It was from behind this cloud that Jehovah could commune with the priest (Lev. 16:2, 12–14). This idea is similar to the Egyptian idea that incense formed a connection between earth and heaven.

The Symbols of Incense

Latter-day Saint scripture encourages readers to liken the scriptures to themselves (1 Ne. 19:23). By taking this perspective, one can begin to discuss what a scripture or a particular symbol means to the individual. This tends to leave the world of scholarship behind. Discussing a personal interpretation or a personal experience is not especially scholastic; yet, it is in the personal that the power of the religious is found. Each individual that

⁴⁵ It is also similar to the cloud veil described in Ether 3.

approached an incense altar, whether in a temple, in a grove, or on a mountaintop, saw in this act of worship a symbol of some religious idea.

According to the Psalmist, the rising smoke of incense is a representation of prayer: “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (Ps. 141:2). This idea of incense as a symbol of prayer had been clearly reinforced by the time of the rise of Christianity.⁴⁶ Yet it is unclear how each element of the very ritualized instructions for the burning of incense represented prayer. Because there is so little information on this subject we are left to our own impressions. As in many symbolic matters, there may be no right or wrong interpretation, as the symbols were intended to be flexible in order to remind a sincere seeker of what they most needed at the moment. What follows then is one possible LDS interpretation of the symbols of the Israelite temple cult.

The incense altar was placed before the veil of the tabernacle or temple. Perhaps this is because God can only be approached through prayer, and it is sacred and sincere prayer that has the power to pierce the veil and bring us into the very presence of God.⁴⁷ The coals upon which the incense was burned were brought from the altar of sacrifice.⁴⁸ This may be because prayers and sacrifice are related. Today, prayers are offered in the name of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins so that we could be purged from our sins, making us clean that we may stand in the presence of the Lord. On the Day of Atonement, the blood of the sacrifice was placed upon the four horns of the altar. Horns usually

⁴⁶ See Luke 1:8–10, 13; Revelation 5:8; 8:3–4

⁴⁷ Joseph Smith–History 1:13–16; Ether 3.

⁴⁸ William Brown, *The Tabernacle and its Priests and Services, Described and Considered in Relation to Christ and the Church* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1899; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 130; Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services, Updated Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 127; also Isaiah 6:6; LDS Bible Dictionary, s. v. “Incense.”

represent power, and the blood clearly represents the blood of the lamb; therefore, the blood of Christ has power to cleanse even the four corners of the world as individuals pray for repentance.

The coals that cause the incense to burn are reminiscent of the power of the Spirit, which burns within our hearts, revealing to us that which we should pray for (Eph. 6:18; Rom. 8:26) as well as giving us the Lord's answers to our prayers (D&C 9:7–8). In this sense the burning coal may represent not only the burning of our hearts, but the sea of glass and fire that will one day become a means of pure revelation to all the faithful (D&C 130:6–11).

The incense was composed of rare and valuable materials, apparently as valuable as gold. Frankincense and myrrh were gifts worthy of a king. Perhaps the destruction of such valuable commodities in the religious worship is meant to remind the worshipper that in order for prayers to be heard there must be a willingness to give up worldly possessions and dedicate the intent of the heart to the Lord. It is little wonder that fasting and the giving of fast offerings are considered so essential in preparing the hearts so that the prayers may be heard.

Conclusion

Understanding the composition of incense and its place in other Near Eastern cultures is essential to understanding its use in ancient Israel. The burning of incense, far from being a side note to Israelite temple worship, was in fact a central aspect. Similarly, the Lord considers prayer an important and central part of life, and a prerequisite for the performance of other acts of worship. “Ye must not perform any thing unto the Lord save in the first place ye shall pray unto the Father in the name of Christ, that he will consecrate thy performance unto thee, that thy performance may be for the welfare of thy soul” (2 Ne. 32:9).