THE USES OF INCENSE IN THE ANCIENT ISRAELITE RITUAL

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1. The spices were, for the most part, the products of distant lands — Southern Nubia and Arabia—but for centuries, as is well known, they were brought along the caravan routes to the centres of civilization of the Fertile Crescent and even to the Mediterranean countries 1). The use of spices, or of a mixture of their fine powder (which is the “incense”, Heb. qērēṯ, of the Old Testament) was a regular feature in the religious rites of all the Ancient World. It is against the background of this widespread practice that the rites of the Old Testament are to be viewed.

In the ritual practices of the Old Testament spices are used in three different ways, all of which can possibly be traced back to parallels with the cults of the Ancient Orient. In the following pages we shall consider these uses one by one.

A. Spices as a Supplement to Sacrifice

2. The first of these ritual uses of spices took the form of adding the powder of the spice as a supplement to a sacrifice, namely a meal-offering (minḥāḥ). In this case, the spice was usually part of the “memorial portion” (ʿazḵārāḥ) of the meal-offering, and as such was burnt up on the altar. The spice generally employed in meal-offerings was frankincense (ṭḥōnāḥ, Lev. ii 1, 15; vi 15 et al.). There is no instance of spices being added to sacrifices of animals or birds, but possibly in these cases it was customary to scatter some spices on the altar from time to time, to catch fire and mingle with the smoke of the offerings and thus ameliorate the stench of the burning flesh. Of course, in the case of an animal or bird sacrifice, no spice was offered up by the sacrificer himself nor demanded of him. But the


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priests may have seen to it that the altar was not without some trace of spices, the delicate fragrance of which turned the thick smoke into something like the finer fumes of the "incense" (qērēf). This would explain the frequent use of the verb qṭr in the bip'il conjugation, to indicate the burning of the fat and the sacrificial portions, a usage which is especially characteristic of P's style 1). It may also be that the "pleasing odour" which, in Biblical descriptions, accompanied the burning of the sacrifices and which God was accustomed to savour, is a further indication that the smoke was not merely that of burnt flesh, but was usually blended with a more fragrant odour of some spices 2).

B. The Censer Incense (The Ordinary Incense)

3. The second use of spices took the form of offering them as a separate sacrifice. In several passages of the Old Testament, where both spices and meal-offerings are mentioned, it is difficult to decide whether a separate spice-offering is meant, or whether the spices are regarded merely as a supplement to the meal-offering (Is. xliii 23-24; Jer. vi 20, xvii 26, xil 5; also Neh. xiii 5, 9). But there are other passages, especially in the Priestly sources, in which the existence of a separate spice-offering is clearly recognized. In every one of these passages the noun qērēf ("incense") is used, indicating the mixed powder of ground spices which gives off a fragrance when burnt.

4. A separate incense-offering is mentioned by Ezekiel in his vision of the seventy elders in the Temple, led by Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan (Ezek. viii 10-11). The prophet denounces them for the idolatrous intention of their deed, for its being performed before "every form of creeping things, and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel", portrayed upon the wall round about. But the act of offering incense as such is not regarded by him as unfit for legitimate ritual. In two other apparent references to a

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1) Occasionally, also, in other sources than P, e.g. 1 Sa. ii 15-16, 2 Ki. xvi 15. On the use of this verb in the bip'il and in the pīēl see below, § 6.

2) Hence even the burning of those meal-offerings which contained no frankincense (namely, the one which served as a substitute for a sin-offering [Lev. v 12] and the one offered by an unfaithful wife [Nu. v. 26]) nonetheless might be expressed by the verb qṭr in bip'il. An animal sacrifice is also apparently meant by the "incense (qērēf) of rams" mentioned in Ps. lxvi 15. Löhr (op. cit., pp. 169-170) was baffled by this use of the verb qṭr in connection with sacrificial portions of animal offerings.