

Prayer

Take control of our lives, Almighty God. Come and speak the words we need to hear, come and draw us near to You in faith and love, come and minister to us Your peace. Then, as we yield our all to You, may we learn to rejoice in the liberty of Your will, and find ourselves complete as people committed to You, our Maker and Redeemer: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: 'New beginnings'

Pray that God will do new things in our midst to refresh our spirits and bring us new life. This week, pray the He will do this for you, for your family and your church, and for the world in which we live.

On-going prayers

- *Continue to pray about world tensions over Iran and recent elections*
 - *Pray about waste disposal, and your own attitude to this issue*
 - *Give thanks for the gift of music and its use for worship within churches*
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Meditation

In a world full of beautiful sights and the marvels of creation,
Save us, good Lord, from blindness and insensitivity:

In a world full of water, air, and natural resources and elements,
Save us, good Lord, from polluting ourselves to death:

In a world full of plants and animals all dependent upon each other,
Save us, good Lord, from brutality and destruction:

In a world full of trees, plants and a enormous array of vegetation,
Save us, good Lord, from exploiting this gift for greed:

In a world full of people with vast potential for creativity and love,
Save us, good Lord, from using others to meet our needs:

In a world full of the evidence of the mighty hand that made it,
Save us, good Lord, from believing it is ours, not Yours.

Bible Study - Exodus 30 (1-3, 6-8, 9-19, 22-30, 34-36)

¹ 'Make an altar on which to burn incense, and make it of acacia wood. ² It must be a cubit in length and breadth, square, two cubits in height, and its horns made with it. ³ You shall overlay it with pure gold ... ⁶ Put it in front of the curtain that covers the Ark of the Testimony ... where I will meet with you ... ⁷ Aaron will burn fragrant incense on it every morning when he dresses the lamps ... and at twilight ... throughout your generations. ¹⁰ Aaron will make atonement on its horns once a year. He will make this annual atonement with the blood of the atoning sin offering throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD.'

¹¹ The LORD said to Moses, ¹² 'When you take the census of the Israelites to count them, each one must give the LORD a ransom for his life when you count them, so that no plague will come on them when you count them. ¹³ Each one who is counted in the census must give half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs); half a shekel as an offering to the LORD. ¹⁴ Everyone who is counted in the census from twenty years old upward must give the LORD's offering. ¹⁵ The rich shall not pay more, and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel.'

¹⁷ The LORD said to Moses, ¹⁸ 'Make a basin of bronze with its bronze stand for washing. Put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and put water in it ¹⁹ for Aaron and his sons to wash their hands and their feet ...'

²² The LORD said to Moses, ²³ 'Take the finest spices ... and a hin of olive oil. ²⁵ Make out of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it is to be a holy anointing oil; ²⁶ and with it you are to anoint the Tent of Meeting and the Ark of the Testimony, ²⁷ the table and all its utensils, the lampstand and its utensils, the altar of incense, ²⁸ the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand. ²⁹ Consecrate them so that they may be most holy; and everything that touches them must be holy. ³⁰ Anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, so that they may serve me as priests ...''

³⁴ The LORD said to Moses, 'Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (there shall be an equal part of each), ³⁵ and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy ... For you, it will be holy to the LORD. ³⁸ Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people.'

Review

In the studies for today and tomorrow, we complete the round of regulation given to Moses by God while he was on the top of Sinai, and after this, Exodus continues with an important story about Aaron and the 'golden calf' (32-34). All the instruction about setting up the Tabernacle (chapters 25 to 29) are about establishing a place where God would dwell with His people, and the setting up of a priesthood and regular ministry of worship before God in the Tabernacle (and later, the Temple). The instructions are detailed and specific; what else could possibly be required! Our passage today is a description of five further items required, and in tomorrow's reading (chapter 31), this section of Exodus concludes with God's commissioning of people to do this great and holy work, along with the instruction that they should not work on the Sabbath!

The five items in our passage are the altar of incense (30:1-10), the 'Tabernacle Tax' (or as Jesus knew it, the Temple Tax – see Matthew 17:22-27) and its application (30:11-16), a large bronze basin for washing (30:17-21), the formula and instructions for making anointing oil (30:22-30), and the instructions for making incense (30:34-36). The passage has been shortened for ease of reading, but the entire text is found adjacent to the main Bible study.

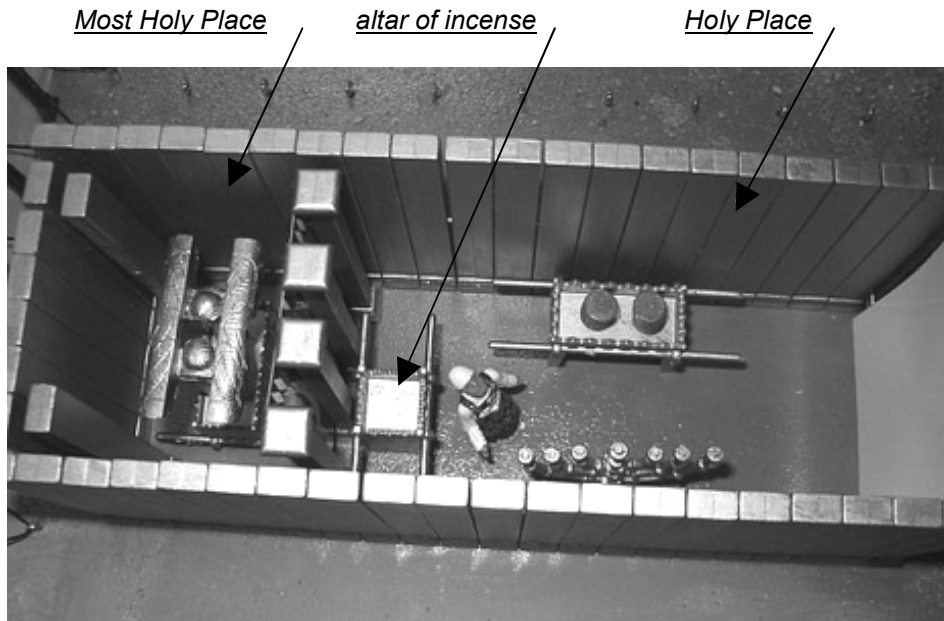
The list begins with an altar of incense; this is a small altar, similar in construction to the main sacrificial altar positioned in the Tabernacle courtyard (27:1f. see illustration below), decorated with gold (30:3) instead of bronze (27:2), and placed close to the curtain dividing the 'holy place' from the 'most holy place' (see picture below). In ancient times, incense symbolised prayer, and although the passage does not say this, it is safe to assume that the offering of incense represented the offering of prayer by the High Priest on behalf of God's people; such incense (and the prayers it accompanied) were very holy (30:35). The value of this offering of prayer and incense was so high in God's eyes that the altar was decorated with gold and placed as close as possible to the Ark within the Tabernacle tent. Incense (together with prayers) was offered as part of the daily ritual of the morning and evening sacrifices (29:38f.), and while sacrifices were offered on the main altar outside the Tabernacle tent, the High priest went into the 'holy place' to perform this task and trim the wicks of the lamps on the candlestick (30:7f.). In addition, the altar of incense was re-dedicated once a year during the annual ritual of atonement (30:10).

Another significant item required was a large bowl (30:11-16). It is easy to work out why this was required, for we have already come across references to washing (see 29:4,17, and 30:19f.); washing indicated purity, but it was also necessary because of the nature of what was done (the killing of animals etc.). In addition to this, God specified the formula for making oil for anointing (30:22-33). There are a number of references to anointing in this part of Exodus (e.g. 29:7,36), and it indicated God's blessing, bestowing His 'holiness' on the person or objects anointed. Every part of the Tabernacle and its equipment had to be anointed with oil before it could be used (30:26,27f.) so that it was all 'holy'.

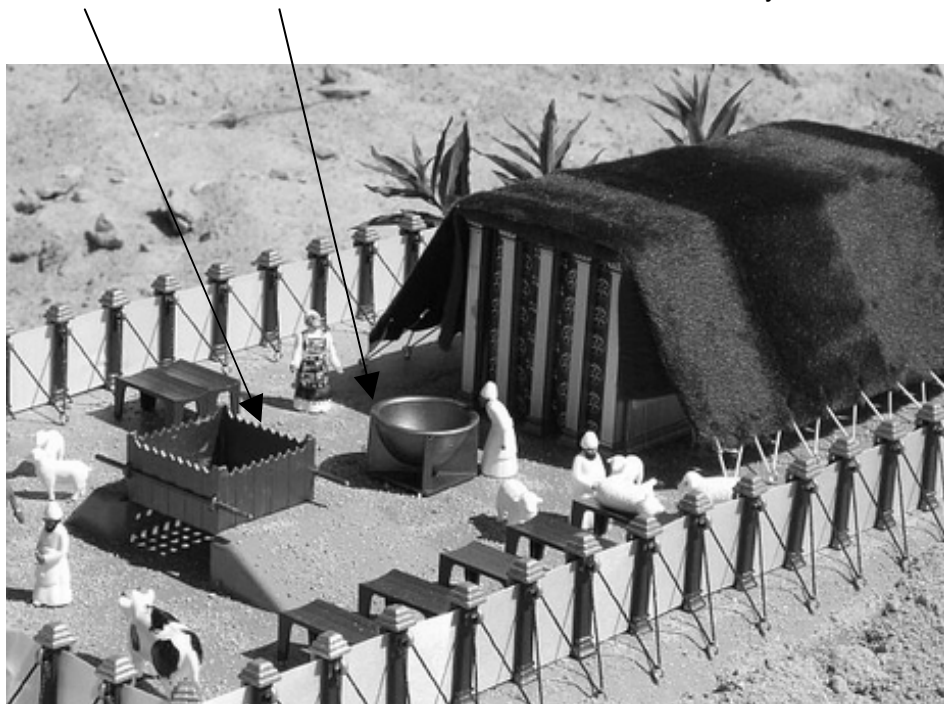
The reading also gives instructions about what to do when taking a census. What was so important about this that it warranted a mention in the midst of instructions about the making of the Ark? The taking of a census was required in ancient times for two reasons, either to exact a tax from people or to prepare for war. Of course, Israel could only go to war at God's command, and the taking of a census indicated to them that war lay ahead (the whole point of the journey to the Promised Land was to take it by force). The information provided by a census meant that Israel could be taxed, something necessary for the upkeep of the Tabernacle. In later years this tax was called the 'Temple Tax' (see Matt 17:22-27).

All these instructions laid the foundations for Israel's future relationship with their God through worship.

Below, see the altar of incense behind the priest and placed close to the screen dividing the 'holy place' from the 'most holy' place.



Below, see the main altar and the bowl outside the Tabernacle tent in the courtyard.



Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- How important was incense to the Tabernacle, and what are the horns of an altar?
- What do the rules about the taking of a census mean?
- How important was the 'basin' for washing, and does this relate to baptism?
- Why did God require anointing oil and incense to be made according to special formulae?

Notes on the text and translation

V13 'the shekel is twenty gerahs' There is some disagreement amongst scholars about the word 'gerah', which is Babylonian in origin. Because of this, some say that this passage must have been

written very much later than the time of these events; however, the word could well mean some other measure of silver coinage of which we know nothing. Many weights and measure in the Old Testament cannot be verified from any other source.

V29 ***‘for everything that touches them must be holy.’** This verse is closely linked to 29:37, where the same expression is used concerning touch and holiness. Most versions of the Bible say ‘everything that touches them will be holy’. However, there is no other mention in scripture of holiness being transferrable, and it is perfectly correct to translate the sentence with the last verb as the grammatical ‘gerundive’ (‘must be ...’). This changes the meaning of the sentence completely (see study).*

Going Deeper

How important was incense to the Tabernacle, and what are the horns of an altar?

We have already noticed that the importance of the altar was symbolised in its proximity to the curtain dividing the holy place and the most holy place. If you were to look back over the instructions for the making of the Tabernacle, you would find that the metals used were more valuable according to how close they were to the Ark itself and the mercy seat on top of it (like a lid). Everything in the Holy place and the most holy place was covered with gold, inside and out, (ch. 26 and 27). In addition, the vestments of the High Priest had gold ornaments, and the ephod and breastpiece, the most symbolic and holy of the vestments, were held together with chains of gold (28:11f. and 28:20f.). As the only person allowed into the holy place to minister, only the High Priest wore gold; the other priests (the sons of Aaron) wore plain linen vestments and undecorated sashes (28:40f.). Going further away from the most holy place, the bases of the Tabernacle frames were silver (26:19f., 27:10f.) as was the decoration of the poles screening the Tabernacle courtyard, and the equipment used in the outer courtyard were made of bronze, including the main sacrificial altar (27:2f.) and the basin (30:18).

This grading of the metals was purposeful, and given that people outside could see into the holy place but not the most holy place, the effect was dramatic. It was a demonstration of the holiness of God in earthly materials, and God required this of His people so that the people could appreciate His holiness, and the ministry of worship respected.

One aspect of the design of altars remains something of a mystery to us today, which is the design feature called ‘horns’, usually specified as being made on each corner of the altar and of ‘one piece’ with it. In the Old Testament, most altars had horns (e.g. Gen 22:13, Lev 4:7, Numbers 23:22 etc.), and the main altar in the Tabernacle was no exception (27:1f.). There is no place in the Old Testament where the purpose of these horns is described, and there is no mention of them that gives a clear picture of exactly what a ‘horn’ was or looked like. Following the logic of the word ‘horn’, we imagine that each corner of the altar had a projection in the shape of a horn, perhaps like a ram’s horn. Such projections could be used as securing points to tie the sacrificial carcasses and wood placed on the altar for burning. These horns might then represent strength, and a number of Old Testament references suggest that the horns were associated with strength, for example, ‘God, who brings them out of Egypt, is like the horns of a wild ox ...’ (Numbers 23:20). If we go one stage further, then we can imagine that the horns of an altar might represent the most potent form of whatever the altar symbolises.

This last idea then gives us a possible explanation of our passage, where it tells us that the High Priest was instructed to make atonement for the altar (to make it holy) once a year. This act was to be done on its most symbolic and powerful parts, the horns (30:10). It all sounds odd to us, but it undoubtedly meant a great deal to the people of those days who understood all the principles involved far better than we do today!

What do the rules about the taking of a census mean?

In verse 12 of our passage, we read ‘when you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must give the Lord a ransom for his life ... so that no plague will come on them’. Clearly, the taking of a census was regarded as dangerous, and the threat of a plague meant something that greatly offended God. Plagues came on Egypt because Pharaoh stood in the way of God’s work.

In the first part of our study we noted that a census would be taken in ancient times either for taxation purposes or for going to war (to count the people of age to fight), but there is more for us to consider from within this text. When a census was taken, each man over twenty (30:14) was required to pay money not for a tax, but to redeem his life. In order to understand this, we must remember that the world in which the Israelites lived held beliefs about the meaning of a person’s name and the power of using it. To know a name of someone meant having power over him or her; so when all the people of Israel declared their names to God, this gave Him authority over them for their lives. It was right that they did this, of course, but it was not something to be done lightly, and only when God commanded, and it is thought that a census was

taken when God summoned all adult males (and their families) were told to present themselves to God (Ex 23:17, 34:23).

In the case of war, this would have had poignant meaning due to the imminent threat of loss of life. However, at times of peace, God required each Israelite to pay a small amount, rich and poor alike (30:14,15) as a 'ransom' in order to redeem their lives from God; so through the payment of half a shekel God would give back His life to each person. This sounds very strange to us, and something more like a tax than a deeply meaningful religious rite. However, the giving of this money symbolised giving life to God, to receive it back again under His authority, and spiritually, this 'redemption' is how God works to save His people. He saves those who give themselves to Him.

The principle of redemption is essential to what the Bible says about God's work of salvation in the world. Isaac was redeemed at the price of a lamb (Genesis 22) and the Passover ritual celebrating Israel's release from Egypt focussed on the redemption of Israel's first-born through the sacrifice of a lamb. In the New Testament, Jesus redeems the life of all people through giving His own life to God in sacrifice, on the Cross. In other words, the simple example of redemption through the ransom paid of half a shekel, is one small Old Testament example of how God saves the world!

How important was the 'basin' for washing, and does this relate to baptism?

There would be great value in having a facility to wash near to where sacrifices were being made! On a purely practical level, washing was important in order to limit the spread of disease, but spiritually, washing symbolised the proper way of preparing to enter into God's presence by the removal of human 'filth'. Washing represented purity, and not only did the priests need to wash whilst going about their business (Aaron's sons), the High Priest (Aaron) was required to wash before entering the holy place (30:20). They were required to wash their hands and their feet, probably symbolising the cleansing of their work (hands) and their walk with God (feet); though any such interpretation is ours to make, it is not stated in scripture.

The instructions about the making of the bowl are almost non-existent; we are merely told that it is bronze. Later instructions for the equivalent bowl provided in the Temple describe it as a 'Sea' (1 Chron 18:8) because of the large dimensions of its equivalent, made for the Temple; however, no shape or design features of the bowl are given in our text or in those passage describing the building of the Temple. The text moves on rapidly to tell us about the importance of the bowl. We tend to pour scorn on the spiritual principle of washing to indicate 'purity' today, but we forget that in the days before soap, let alone antibiotics, vast numbers of people died because of infections passed on through dirt. This was simply unknown to the people of the day. God's instructions were life saving, and when the text says 'they must wash with water, so that they may not die' (30:20) it is rather ignorant of us to read this merely as a threat. Undoubtedly, it stressed the importance of obeying God's commands, though it was also a truthful and wise warning from God about things of which the Israelite knew nothing.

In terms of preparation for worship, the rules for washing acted as a discipline of obedience, for although they may not have understood the meaning of washing as we would today, they would have understood the idea that washing represented the need to be pure in heart before God. It is important to remember that in Jesus' day, the rules advocated by the Pharisees about ritual washing before eating (Mark 7:1f.) were put together by later generations of Jewish people in an attempt to apply these principles to everyone. Jesus condemned this on every occasion He came across it, because the effect of these additional rules that were not a part of scripture, was to make people slaves to regulations. The practice of ritual washing in Jesus' day was far removed from the principles outlined here or elsewhere in Scripture. Therefore, when we dismiss ritual washing just as Jesus did, we should be careful to dismiss irrelevant human regulations, but seek to understand what God was saying to His people through the original rules here in Exodus (and elsewhere in Scripture).

Many Christians rightly say that ritual washing is irrelevant to faith. However, making sure that we are pure before God when we approach Him in worship is very important, and however we do it, we forget this at our peril. His is God and He is pure; we are not, and the distinction needs to be remembered. I fear it is not.

Why did God require anointing oil and incense to be made according to special formulae?

The special formulae for the making of anointing oil (30:22-30) and the incense (30:34-38) are extraordinary. There is a massive contrast between the lack of detail we have had to deal with in trying to understand the making of the altar of incense and the bowl for washing, and the great detail provided here in the recipes for these two items. Both the oil and the incense were costly and made in large quantities. Indeed, although there are some arguments about the details, most of the items mentioned here have been comprehensively identified as products available in ancient times.

People wonder how the Israelites could have obtained these things in the wilderness, but we would be foolish to imagine that half a million Israelites travelled through the Sinai desert without coming across the many traders who travelled through that region. They carried these and many other items, transporting them

from where they were produced (as far as places such as India) to where they were consumed (Egypt to the west and south, and Mesopotamia to the North and East). Indeed, the trade in these spices and fine products was a lucrative business, because they were used in ancient 'cosmetics', and commanded a high price amongst the rich and ruling classes. It is probably because of this that God forbade the use of these oils and incense for personal use (30:32,37). The most costly and the most precious was to be dedicated to God, just as people of past generations reserved their best architecture for God (in building churches), and we do our best to present the best of our music (for example) to God.

Application

As with the other items in the Tabernacle, Christians are not required to keep to the specific details of these instructions because Jesus has completed the requirements of sacrifice and all the regulations that accompanied this. However, we can learn from the dedication and the spirit of such worship, because this can help us to grow in our worship of the Lord. We should be supremely grateful that Jesus has made it possible for us to learn from this rather than be bound by it.

So what can we learn from all this? Some Christians use incense in worship today, and some use special formulae that are intended to be similar to what is described here. However, Jewish people would be horrified by this use of incense because Exodus states specifically that it must only be used in the Tabernacle (or Temple)! It is not used in Israel or in Judaism at this moment in time because the Temple does not exist (the site is now the Muslim 'Dome of the Rock'), and the absence of incense indicates the mourning of Israel that its worship cannot be complete! Something as apparently innocent as this formula for incense has become something with immense political ramifications! However, this illustrates the trouble we can get into by attempting to stick to rules that no longer apply to us because of Christ.

Amongst many things that can speak to us within this text, we can learn several things, alongside the importance of holiness and purity in worship. The position of the altar of incense indicates the great value God places on prayer. Prayer is talking with God, and God talking to us if we will give Him the time and space, and we also listen. In the whole elaborate sacrificial system of the Old Testament, it is remarkable that whilst the whole sacrificial system was important, prayer was most highly valued by God because what He wants more than anything else is a real relationship with us, His creatures. Jesus Himself prayed at crucial points in His ministry (Matt 14:23, 26:36, Luke 9:28 etc.) and the disciples were so impressed by Jesus' prayer life that they asked Him to show them 'how to pray' (Luke 11:1-4). When Jesus went into the Temple He shouted out 'my house should be a house of prayer ...' (Matt 21:13), because He knew that without prayer, the Temple meant nothing. If we have read Exodus 30, then we know that Jesus was completely correct in His assessment of the purpose of the Temple. Prayer, then, is essential to our worship and is something that should be engrained within the life of the disciple.

In addition, numbers are important to God. Scripture is full of lists of people and records containing genealogies. Two of our Gospels have lists of the names of those who are the ancestors of Jesus (Matt 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38). Elsewhere Jesus preached a strong message saying that everyone is precious to God within His Kingdom (the parable of the lost sheep - Luke 15:4 etc.). Although the census in Exodus 30 raised a tax for the upkeep of the Temple and probably to number the people for war as well, the connection with the idea of 'redemption' is crucial. All who are numbered in Israel are the 'redeemed of the Lord' (Psalm 107:2). This reminds us that even within the church, we need to know who are committed to Christ, and willing to be numbered as one of His 'saints'. In some countries, people do not like the idea of 'church membership', preferring to keep their own business private, but surely, unless being known as a Christian might put our lives at risk, we should want to declare our faith openly and take pride in our being numbered with Jesus! The list of those who are part of God's church in any place is a precious thing, to be kept with care and used according to God's wisdom and instruction. It is no casual matter.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss whether the five items mentioned in this passage have any special meaning for Christians today.
2. What does this passage say about the meaning of prayer and its place within Christian worship?
3. What part of this passage of scripture would provide a text for a preacher, and what message could be given from it?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

There is no doubt that reading these parts of Exodus is difficult. I have found it interesting, nevertheless, to learn that God had certain things in mind when telling His people what they should do to worship Him. It is obvious that prayer was important to God because it was important to Him that His people talked to Him; this was the evidence of real communication. It reminds me that today, we have a great deal to learn about worshipping the Lord through collective prayer.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Imagine you were setting out a system of prayer for morning and evening. What would you place on your list for prayer on each occasion, and why? Remember to include not just prayer asking God to do things, but praise and thanksgiving. This may be something you do regularly, but re-assess this and let God speak to you about what He wants from you, not just what you want from Him.*
- *Pray for the people of God, that they might learn to pray together and honour the God in whom they believe by talking to Him and keeping in touch with Him.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, You ask each of us to do things we do not understand, and perhaps never will, until we meet You in Glory. By the power of Your Holy Spirit, may we maintain our commitment unhindered by our worldly troubles, content to do whatever You ask of us; to Your praise and glory: AMEN

Full text

¹ 'Make an altar on which to burn incense, and make it of acacia wood. ² It must be a cubit in length and breadth, square, two cubits in height, and its horns made with it. ³ You shall overlay its top and around its sides and its horns with pure gold, and make a moulding of gold around it. ⁴ Make two golden rings under its moulding on two opposite sides of it you shall make them, to hold the poles with which to carry it. ⁵ Make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. ⁶ Put it in front of the curtain that covers the Ark of the Testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is above the testimony, where I will meet with you. ⁷ Aaron will burn fragrant incense on it every morning when he dresses the lamps, ⁸ and also when Aaron lights the lamps at twilight, this is a regular incense offering before the LORD throughout your generations. ⁹ You must not offer unauthorized incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and you shall not pour a drink offering on it. ¹⁰ Aaron will make atonement on its horns once a year. He will make this annual atonement with the blood of the atoning sin offering throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD.'

¹¹ The LORD said to Moses, ¹² 'When you take the census of the Israelites to count them, each one must give the LORD a ransom for his life when you count them, so that no plague will come on them when you count them. ¹³ Each one who is counted in the census must give half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs); half a shekel as an offering to the LORD. ¹⁴ Everyone who is counted in the census from twenty years old upward must give the LORD'S offering. ¹⁵ The rich shall not pay more, and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel.' ¹⁶ Take the atonement money from the people of Israel and give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the LORD, to make atonement for your lives.'

¹⁷ The LORD said to Moses, ¹⁸ 'Make a basin of bronze with its bronze stand for washing. Put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and put water in it ¹⁹ for Aaron and his sons to wash their hands and their feet. ²⁰ When they go into the tent of meeting or come near the altar to minister and to burn a food offering to the LORD, they must wash with water, so that they may not die, ²¹ and they must wash their hands and feet, so that they may not die. For them, it is a statute forever, even to him (Aaron) and to his descendants throughout their generations.'

²² The LORD said to Moses, ²³ 'Take the finest spices; 500 shekels of liquid myrrh, half as much (250 shekels) of sweet-smelling cinnamon, 250 shekels of aromatic cane, ²⁴ 500 shekels of cassia, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and a hin of olive oil. ²⁵ Make out of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it is to be a holy anointing oil; ²⁶ and with it you are to anoint the Tent of Meeting and the Ark of the Testimony, ²⁷ the table and all its utensils, the lampstand and its utensils, the altar of incense, ²⁸ the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand. ²⁹ Consecrate them so that they may be most holy; and everything that touches them must be holy. ³⁰ Anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, so that they may serve me as priests ³¹ Say to the people of Israel, "This shall be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations. ³² It must not be poured on the body of an ordinary person, and nothing like it in composition is to be made. It is holy, and it shall be holy to you. ³³ Whoever mixes anything like it or whoever puts any of it on an outsider shall be cut off from his people.'"

³⁴ The LORD said to Moses, 'Take sweet spices; stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (there shall be an equal part of each), ³⁵ and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy. ³⁶ Beat some of it very small, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I will meet with you. It will be most holy for you. ³⁷ You shall not make for yourselves the incense that you make according to this composition; for you, it will be holy to the LORD. ³⁸ Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people.'