

ALTAR

An altar is a kind of table or platform where sacrifices of animals or other offerings are made to God. Several different kinds of altars are mentioned in the New Testament:

1. **Altars that were used for making sacrifices**
 2. **Altars that were used for purposes other than making sacrifices**
 - (a) The altar for burning incense in the Temple
 - (b) The altar mentioned in Revelation, where prayers were offered and incense was burnt
 3. **Altars that were used for making sacrifices to other gods**
-

1. Altars that were used for making sacrifices (Greek *θηυσιασθηριον*)

Historically, there were several different kinds of altars for making sacrifices that are mentioned in the Bible:

Stone altars built in the open air in Old Testament times

In Old Testament times, especially before the Tabernacle or the Temple were constructed, altars were built in the open air for the purpose of making sacrifices. God instructed his people to make the altars from earth or large stones, piled together to form a platform. If they were made from stones, the stones were to be in their natural state, not cut to a regular shape (Exodus 20:24-26).

At each of the four corners altars often had a piece sticking up. This was called a “horn”. The high priest smeared the blood of the sacrifice on the horns of the altar (Exodus 29:12, Leviticus 4:7ff.).

The sacrifices were of animals, such as cattle, sheep or goats, or of offerings of grain. See the article on SACRIFICE.

See: Genesis 8:20; 22:9; Exodus 17:15; 20:24–26; Deuteronomy 27:5–6; 1 Kings 18:30; 19:10.

ILLUSTRATION TO BE INSERTED

In the New Testament there are two references to this kind of altar: Romans 11:3; James 2:21. Both passages refer back to incidents in the Old Testament.

In James 2:21 the sacrifice was brought to the altar, but not actually sacrificed. The story in Genesis 22 makes this clear.

James 2:21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

 Suggestions for translating James 2:21:

Did God not consider Abraham our father to be righteous because of what he did,	
+ when he put his son Isaac on the altar (to sacrifice him?)	+
+ when he was ready to sacrifice his son Isaac to him?	+
+ when he offered his son Isaac to God as a sacrifice?	+

The altar for making sacrifices in the Tabernacle and the altar for making sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem

The portable altar for making sacrifices in the Tabernacle was made of acacia wood, covered with bronze. A description is given in Exodus 27:1-7:

Make an altar out of acacia wood. It is to be square, 7½ feet long and 7½ feet wide, and it is to be 4½ feet high. ² Make projections at the top of the four corners. They are to form one piece with the altar, and the whole is to be covered with bronze. ³ Make pans for the greasy ashes, and make shovels, bowls, hooks, and fire pans. All this equipment is to be made of bronze. ⁴ Make a bronze grating and put four bronze carrying rings on its corners. ⁵ Put the grating under the rim of the altar, so that it reaches halfway up the altar. ⁶ Make carrying poles of acacia wood, cover them with bronze, ⁷ and put them in the rings on each side of the altar when it is carried. ⁸ Make the altar out of boards and leave it hollow, according to the plan that I showed you on the mountain.

It may have looked something like this:

ILLUSTRATION TO BE INSERTED

In the Temple in Jerusalem (as also in the Tabernacle) there were two altars, a large altar called “the altar of burnt offering”, and a small altar called “the altar of incense” (see section 2a below).

The altar of burnt offering stood in an inner courtyard which was outside the Holy Place. In the first Temple, which King Solomon had built, the altar measured 9 meters long, 9 meters wide and 4.5 meters high (30 feet x 30 feet x 15 feet). When Herod the Great had the Temple rebuilt not long before the birth of Christ, he had the altar enlarged to measure 14.5 meters long, 14.5 meters wide at the base, and 4.5 meters high (48 feet x 48 feet x 15 feet). It was made of earth and uncut stones. On the southern side of the altar there was a ramp 14.5 meters (48 feet) long, which enabled the priests to climb up to it without difficulty. The priests kept a fire on it all the time for burning the animals which people brought to sacrifice to God. There were also two smaller fires, one for lighting the altar of incense, and one that burnt continuously.

ILLUSTRATION TO BE INSERTED

Both the altar in the Tabernacle and the altar in the Temple have horns at each corner, as illustrated in the pictures above.

1 Cor. 9:13 . . . those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings

“Those who serve at the altar” means those who offer the sacrifices at the altar, namely the priests. The meaning of this verse is that the priests receive some of the meat from the animals that have been sacrificed. For details of the regulations on this, see Leviticus chapters 1–7.

Heb. 7:13 For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar.

See also: Matt. 5:23–24; 23:18–20, 35; Luke 11:51; 1 Cor. 10:18; Rev. 11:1.

Suggestions for translating “altar” in sense 1:

- place/platform/fireplace where people offer sacrifices (to God)
- platform for (killing and) offering sacrifices
- (fireplace) stones for/of sacrificing things

If sacrificing animals is something that is done in the receptor-language culture, then consider whether there is some cultural equivalent for an altar. Make sure that the translation makes it clear that the sacrifice is being offered to God.

Warning: In some South American languages, a word for “altar” may have been borrowed from a major language such as Spanish or Portuguese. It may, however, have a restricted meaning, sometimes referring to the shrine of a particular saint, or to the front section of a church, or to a patriotic shrine. When a borrowed word of this kind occurs, always check carefully what meaning it has for speakers of the receptor language in order to know whether or not it is suitable.

The actual form of the altar is not in focus; the important fact is that it was a place where sacrifices were made.

A figurative use of “altar”

Heb. 13:10 We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. (NIV)

In Heb. 13:10, “altar” refers figuratively to the sacrifice of Christ, as the context that follows explains. See also the note on this verse in TABERNACLE.

Suggestion for translating Hebrews 13:10:

A sacrifice has been offered for us, but those who continue to offer those sacrifices of former times cannot/may not benefit.

2. Altars which were used for purposes other than making sacrifices

(a) The altar for burning incense in the Temple (Greek *τημιιατφριον* or *τηυσιαστφριον του τημιιαματος*)

This altar was a box-like table, made of wood. It measured 45 cm long, 45 cm wide, and 90 cm high (18 inches x 18 inches x 36 inches) (Exodus 37:25). It was covered with beaten gold. It stood inside the Holy Place in the Temple in Jerusalem and a **priest burned incense on it daily and prayed to God.** ¹

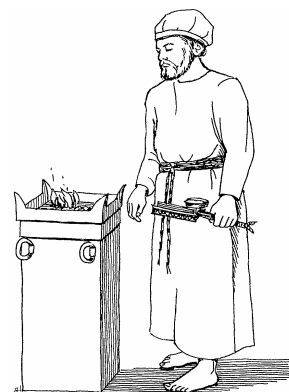
Luke 1:11 And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

Heb. 9:4 . . . gold altar for the burning of incense . . . (TEV)

 Suggestions for translating “altar” in sense 2a:

the table/place/brazier where people used to burn
incense to/for God
oil which smelt sweet

If there is any comparable kind of table or charcoal stove used for ceremonial purposes in the receptor language culture, this may be an appropriate word to use.



(b) The altar mentioned in Revelation, where prayers are offered and incense is burnt (Greek *την θυσιαστωριον*)

Rev. 8:3 And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne

See also: Rev. 6:9; 8:5; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7.

This altar is described as standing in front of God's throne. The **smoke and scent** of the incense which burned there rose up to God together with the prayers of all God's people. The Greek word used here is *θηυσιασθριον*, which usually refers to an altar where sacrifices are made. But this altar was not used for offering animal sacrifices.

Beware, therefore, of translating these references in Revelation as if this altar were a place for offering animal sacrifices. Suggestions for translating sense 2a are more appropriate in these contexts.

In Rev. 16:7 the word “altar” is used figuratively (personification):

Rev. 16:7 And I heard the altar cry, . . .

TEV Then I heard a voice from the altar saying, . . .

NLT And I heard a voice from the altar, saying. . .

This refers back to Revelation 6:9 (“I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne”).

As mentioned in Revelation 8:3, and 3:5, the priests also used censers to burn the incense. A censer is an open topped pan, tray or bowl, into which burning coals or charcoal were placed and incense was then sprinkled over the fire. See also Leviticus 16:12, Numbers 16:17,18.

3. Altars that were used for making sacrifices to other gods (Greek *βωμοσ*)

The word *βωμος* is the common Greek word for an altar, referring to local worship places or shrines where non-Jews made sacrifices to their gods. It is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint, LXX) to refer to that kind of altars, thus distinguishing between pagan altars and altars used in Jewish worship. In the New Testament, this word occurs only once.

Acts 17:23 I found also an altar on which is written, 'To an Unknown God' (TEV)

¹ Illustration by Louise Bass, copyright 1994 British and Foreign Bible Society

 Suggestions for translating “altar” in sense 3:

If there is a word in the receptor language for a shrine or a place where offerings are put for fetishes, this may be appropriate.

For further study

Mitchell, T.C. *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 1, article on “altar”, pages 34-37
CHECK R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel. Its Life and Institutions*, 1961, pp. 406-414,
Hastings Bible Dictionary, article on “censer”.