

ALTAR OF INCENSE, RANSOM EXODUS 30:1-16, 34-38

The instructions for building the Altar of Incense are revealed next.

The details for the construction of this small Altar of Incense are not unlike many of the details concerning the other Tabernacle articles of service.

Exodus 30:1–5 “Moreover, you shall make an altar as a place for burning incense [קִטְוֶרֶת]; you shall make it of acacia wood. “Its length shall be a cubit, and its width a cubit, it shall be square, and its height shall be two cubits; its horns shall be of one piece with it. “You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and its sides all around, and its horns; and you shall make a gold molding all around for it. “You shall make two gold rings for it under its molding; you shall make them on its two side walls—on opposite sides—and they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. “You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold.

This Altar was used exclusively for burning incense; it was to be put to no other use. It was made of the durable acacia wood that was used to build all the other Tabernacle furniture. It was 1.5 feet square and 3.5 feet in height. It had horns on the four corners just as the altar for burnt sacrifices had horns on each corner. It was overlaid with pure gold and it had a molding around the top. It also had rings so it could be carried by acacia wood poles also overlaid with gold.

Incense, קִטְוֶרֶת, means smoke, incense, or the smell of a burning sacrifice. In this context, it obviously refers to incense. This isn't just any smoke; this is the odor produced from mixing a specific blend of spices which, when burnt, produce an aromatic, sweet smelling smoke that was pleasing to God. These spices were an

element of the order of worship that was to be provided by the people. Generally speaking, when people get involved in the process of doing something, they have a personal investment in seeing to it that it is done right.

Exodus 25:3, 6 This is the contribution which you are to raise from them ... spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense

The smoke of the incense represented the prayers of God's people going up into His presence where He presumably recognized those prayer requests. At least that seems to be unanimous opinion of theologians and when the entire analogy of Scripture is considered, that seems to be an accurate position to hold.

The only real Old Testament reference is a simile that may or may not accurately reflect God's intended purpose for the incense.

Psalm 141:2 ²May my prayer be counted as incense before You; The lifting up of my hands as the evening offering. [NASB]

Prayer was an integral part of the ceremony each morning and evening when the incense was burnt in the Temple. That fact is represented in the Gospel of Luke.

Luke 1:10 ¹⁰And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.

The book of Revelation reinforces the link between the Altar of Incense and people's prayers.

Revelation 5:8 ⁸When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Revelation 8:3–4 ³Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. ⁴And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand.

Some theologians claim only the High Priest could minister at the Altar of Incense, but this seems to be highly unlikely. For example, Unger believed the High Priest alone ministered at the Altar of Incense until the period of the second Temple when the lower ranking priests took over the duties.¹ The references to “Aaron” tending the light and the Altar of Incense in Exodus 30 could be a general reference to the Aaronic Priesthood and not just to the High Priest. It also seems unlikely the High Priest could physically tend to the morning and evening duties in the Holy Place every day year after year. We know by the time of the Lord the priests were performing those duties. Edersheim detailed those procedures and we will examine them in a moment. The author of Hebrews referred to the priests, not the High Priest, who were “continually entering the outer tabernacle [meaning the Holy Place] performing the divine worship” (Heb. 9:6). Just before he died, David established the various divisions of the priests who were to perform the duties of the priests in Solomon's Temple. This included being in charge of the service in the house of God. The Scripture doesn't explicitly say the priests ministered at the Altar of Incense, but it certainly is implied.

1 Chronicles 23:27–28, 32²⁷For by the last words of David the sons of Levi were numbered from twenty years old and upward. ²⁸For their office is to assist the

¹ Merrill F. Unger, s.v. “Incense,” *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed., ed. R. K. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 615.

sons of Aaron with the service of the house of the LORD, in the courts and in the chambers and in the purifying of all holy things, even the work of the service of the house of God, ... ³²Thus they are to keep charge of the tent of meeting, and charge of the holy place, and charge of the sons of Aaron their relatives, for the service of the house of the LORD.

It appears that from the time of the first Temple, Solomon's Temple, the High Priest was not exclusively ministering at the Altar of Incense. Whether or not that was true of the Tabernacle as well is not revealed, but my assumption is the lower ranking priests also performed its service. The High Priest did have the sole responsibility to minister at the Altar of Incense on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:12-13).

The Altar was set right in front of the veil separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. In that way, the smoke was ascending upward in front of the place God said He would dwell among them. It was placed at the midpoint of the veil's width and that marked the closest point the priest could come to God while ministering in the Holy Place. At the death of Christ, the veil was ripped apart opening the way for the believer to directly approach God through prayer.

Exodus 30:6 ⁶“You shall put this altar in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over *the ark of the testimony*, where I will meet with you.

Hebrews 9:4 confuses people because it says the Altar of Incense was in the Most Holy Place alongside the Ark of the Covenant. Obviously, we know it was in the Holy Place on the other side of the veil from the Ark. What this is emphasizing is the function of the Altar of Incense rather than its location. The pur-

pose of the Altar of Incense was to carry the prayers of the Israelites before God. As the incense on the Altar burned, the smoke wafted up and penetrated the Most Holy Place behind the veil, over the top, and at the bottom and went into the presence of God. The Greek in Hebrews 9:4 does not say “Altar of Incense” [θυσιαστηριον τοῦ θυμιάματος]. According to Fruchtenbaum, it says “the incense thing” [θυμιατήριον]. He wrote, “It refers to something connected with the incense, but it does not state exactly what that something is. The author does not say that the Altar actually stood in the Holy of Holies; he simply states that the Holy of Holies had ‘the incense thing’ since the purpose of the incense was for the Holy of Holies.”² Fruchtenbaum’s point is valid, but I couldn’t verify his Greek exegesis on this point. The word in Hebrews 9:4, θυμιατήριον, means censor³ but it is widely assumed to mean and is translated as “Altar of Incense” which may not be correct either in terms of translating the Greek word.

Incense was not invented by God specifically for Judaism; pagans used incense in their false worship practices so it wasn’t an innovation instituted for Israel alone. That may be why God specifically formulated His own incense and no one was allowed to duplicate it. The basic ingredients were apparently not a secret; they were identified in Exodus 30:34 and the people were forbidden from copying the formula implying it was known. Other sources indicate, however,

² Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel’s Bible Commentary: The Messianic Jewish Epistles: Exposition from a Jewish Perspective: Hebrews-James, I & II Peter-Jude* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2005), 114.

³ Moises Silva, ed., s.v. “θυμός,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis: vol. 2 E-K*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 2:472-474.

there were other ingredients and how well known they were at the time is not, as far as I can tell, known to us. There may be sources that identify the incense ingredients the Canaanite pagans used, but I didn't find any. On Wiccan web sites you can find instructions for making incense and they seem to suggest that any combustible, aromatic spice can be used and there are ingredients that will make them combustible, if necessary. Pagans make incense for many reasons: love, lust, medicinal, divination, and meditation to name a few. The only purpose for incense in the Tabernacle was to be a symbolic representation of the prayers of the saints going before Yahweh. It wasn't intended to manipulate reality as pagan incense was supposed to do. The end result is, I suspect, the incense the Israelites used was different from the pagan incense the Canaanites used, but I can't prove that to be fact.

The Bible indicates pagans used incense in their false worship.

1 Kings 11:8 ⁸Thus also he [Solomon] did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods.

Jeremiah 48:35 ³⁵"I will make an end of Moab," declares the LORD, "the one who offers *sacrifice* on the high place and the one who burns incense to his gods.

In Leviticus 26, under the penalties for Israelite disobedience, the Lord promised to destroy the pagan high places the Israelites established in defiance of Him. Other Scriptures also reveal Israel's rebellion in the form of pagan idolatry part of which involved burning incense to pagan gods.

Leviticus 26:30 ³⁰I then will destroy your high places, and cut down your incense altars, and heap your remains on the remains of your idols, for My soul shall abhor you.

Jeremiah 11:12 ¹²“Then the cities of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will go and cry to the gods to whom they burn incense, but they surely will not save them in the time of their disaster.

During the reform instituted by Hezekiah, the Israelites threw the pagan altars and the altars of incense into the Kidron Valley, and because of Josiah's faithfulness, God promised to destroy Judah and Jerusalem for idolatry, but not in the king's lifetime.

2 Chronicles 30:13–14 ¹³Now many people were gathered at Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the second month, a very large assembly. ¹⁴They arose and removed the altars which were in Jerusalem; they also removed all the incense altars and cast *them* into the brook Kidron.

2 Kings 22:17 ¹⁷“Because they have forsaken Me and have burned incense to other gods that they might provoke Me to anger with all the work of their hands, therefore My wrath burns against this place, and it shall not be quenched.”

God was jealous for the prerogatives of his priests. We've already talked about the rebellion of Korah when he attempted to usurp Aaron's position as High Priest (Num. 16:1-35). Centuries later, King Uzziah took it upon himself to burn incense on the Altar of Incense in the Temple, and God struck him with leprosy.

2 Chronicles 26:16–20 ¹⁶But when he became strong, his heart was so proud that he acted corruptly, and he was unfaithful to the LORD his God, for he entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. ¹⁷Then Azariah the priest entered after him and with him eighty priests of the LORD, valiant men. ¹⁸They opposed Uzziah the king and said to him, “It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful and will have no honor from the LORD God.” ¹⁹But Uzziah, with a censer in his

hand for burning incense, was enraged; and while he was enraged with the priests, the leprosy broke out on his forehead before the priests in the house of the LORD, beside the altar of incense. ²⁰Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and behold, he was leprous on his forehead; and they hurried him out of there, and he himself also hastened to get out because the LORD had smitten him.

The ritual involved with the morning and evening worship services became rather involved over time. That included the burning of incense on the Altar in the Holy Place. By the time David established the courses of priests, there were so many of them the priest who served the Altar of Incense once could never do it again in order for the other priests in his cohort to have the chance to do it. Edersheim explained the order of service for the second Temple. How much that changed over time from the inauguration of the Tabernacle, I don't know. The brief explanation Edersheim provided seems to be a bit contradictory in a place or two. Only the wood of the fig tree could be used for the fire on the Altar of Incense because it made the best charcoal sufficient for the task. A number of priests were assigned to the task of cleaning the Lamp and the Altar of Incense. Two priests performed this task while the sacrifice was being offered outside the sanctuary. As the lamb was being slain, one priest gathered up the coals needed for the Altar of Incense, placed them in a golden vessel, took them inside the Holy Place, and left them there. The third lot of four used in the service was cast in order to determine the priest who would actually ignite the incense on the Altar. This priest and some helpers filled a golden censer with incense and filled a bowl with hot coals from the Altar of Burnt Offering. They cer-

emoniously marched back into the sanctuary where the two priests removed all the instruments they used to trim the Lamp and clean the Altar of Incense. One of the helpers spread coals on the Altar of Incense and the other arranged the incense for use after which everyone left except the priest who was to ignite the incense. The president gave a command that “the time of incense had come” and the people prostrated themselves in the outside court in silent prayer while the incense was lit. At that point, a lengthy corporate prayer was offered. The priest emerged from the sanctuary and was joined by the others who had assisted in the sanctuary and he led the people and the priests in a blessing (Num. 6:24-26).⁴

The priests were commanded to burn the incense every morning and evening. As long as the Tabernacle and the Temple were in operation incense was supposed to be burning in the Holy Place.

Exodus 30:7–8 ⁷“Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it; he shall burn it every morning when he trims the lamps. ⁸“When Aaron trims the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense. *There shall be perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations.*

The prohibition on strange incense was instituted at this point. Nothing else was to be offered and burnt on the Altar of Incense and no drink offering was to be poured out on it. The prohibition on offerings may have been necessary since some of the offerings on the bronze altar of sacrifice did combine with incense

⁴ Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ* (1874; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1997), 107-116.

and were offered together as one offering. This command alleviated any confusion that may attach to the two different procedures for the two different altars.

Exodus 30:9 ⁹“You shall not offer any strange incense on this altar, or burnt offering or meal offering; and you shall not pour out a drink offering on it.

The strange incense would have been any incense made contrary to the approved formula, incense made by an unauthorized person, or used in an unauthorized manner. Whatever the strange fire was Nadab and Abihu used also involved the use of incense. They put incense on the coals in their firepans which was probably not part of the procedure. I believe the proper procedure involved placing the coals on the Altar of Incense and then the incense was put on the hot coals while they lay on the Altar. It wasn't placed on the coals in the firepans and then poured on the Altar. The sin of Aaron's two sons involved using unauthorized fire which made it strange fire and the unauthorized use of incense making it strange incense.

Leviticus 10:1 ¹Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them.

The only exception to any offering on this Altar, if it can be called an offering, concerned the horns on the corners of the Altar. On the Day of Atonement, some of the sacrificial sin offering's blood was smeared on those horns for the purpose of cleansing it of sin. This was an annual event performed by the High Priest.

Exodus 30:10 ¹⁰“Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year; he shall make atonement on it with the blood of the sin offering of atonement once a year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD.”

Keil and Delitzsch had a good explanation of the differences between the Altar of Sacrifice and the Altar of Incense. You can make a case they over spiritualize this pericope, but the basic connections and distinctions they make between the two altars and the sacrifices on each one are valid. “As the altar of incense was not only marked as a place of sacrifice by its name *מִזְבֵּחַ*, ‘place of slain-offering,’ but was put on a par with the altar of sacrifice by its square shape and its horns, it was important to describe minutely what sacrifices were to be offered upon it. For the burning of fragrant incense is shown to be a sacrifice, by the fact it was offered upon a place of sacrifice, or altar. Moreover the word *הִקְטִיר*, to cause to ascend in smoke and steam, from *קָטַר* to smoke or steam, is not only applied to the lighting of incense, but also to the lighting and burning of the bleeding and bloodless sacrifices upon the altar of incense [sic, sacrifice?]. Lastly, the connection between the incense-offering and the burnt-offering is indicated by the rule that they were to be offered at the same time. Both offerings shadowed forth the devotion of Israel to its God, whilst the fact that they were offered every day exhibited this devotion as constant and uninterrupted. But the distinction between them consisted in this, that in the burnt or whole offering Israel consecrated and sanctified its whole life and action in both body and soul to the Lord, whilst in the incense-offering its prayer was embodied as the exaltation of the spiritual man to God; and with this there was associated the still fur-

ther distinction, that the devotion was completed in the burnt-offering solely upon the basis of the atoning sprinkling of blood, whereas the incense offering presupposed reconciliation with God, and on the basis of this the soul rose to God in this embodiment of its prayer, and was thus absorbed into His Spirit. In this respect, the incense-offering was not only a spiritualizing and transfiguring of the burnt-offering, but a completion of that offering also.”⁵

The incense was made with five ingredients although other sources claim it had more the Bible doesn't reveal. Whether these other additional ingredients were part of it from the start according to the pattern shown Moses on the mountain and not revealed in the text, or whether they were later additions is not known. The third option is these other spices don't exist and the claim is therefore false. However, Jewish sources do indicate other spices were used. If some spices were added apart from any instruction from God to Moses, then that incense would seem to fit the definition of “strange incense” in Exodus 30:9.

Exodus 30:34–36 ³⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “Take for yourself spices, stacte [שֶׁטַח] and onycha [שֹׁהַלֹת] and galbanum [הַקְּבִנָה], spices with pure frankincense [לְבוֹנָה]; there shall be an equal part of each. ³⁵“With it you shall make incense, a perfume, the work of a perfumer, salted [salt: מֶלַח], pure, and holy. ³⁶“You shall beat some of it very fine, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I will meet with you; it shall be most holy to you.

Except for the frankincense and the salt, exactly what the other ingredients are is uncertain. It is the same situation we faced trying to identify the stones in the High Priest's breastplate. We simply don't know the exact identity of these

⁵ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, vol. 1 (1866-91, repr.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d), 1:457-458.

things. That does not affect the fact we know they were some sort of spices available to the Israelites that could be used to burn as incense and produce an aromatic smoke suitable for burning before God in the Tabernacle, but we are left not quite knowing the exact identity of these plant products. The lexicons and other sources of information are noncommittal and ambivalent concerning the identity of these spices, but some are more confident of their definitions than others. The spices are equal in terms of the proportion used in each batch with the exception of the salt which was a lesser amount in the formula. God considered this formula to be pure and holy.

Stacte, שֶׁטַח, refers to a gum resin; it is related to a word meaning drip, pour, or drops. This was possibly a species of plant resembling myrrh and some theologians believe it be hardened drops of resin from the myrrh bush. The Jewish encyclopedia says it is a storax-gum, but the Rabbis believe it to be balsam.⁶

Onycha, שֶׁהֶלֶת, is the processed claw shaped closing flap of a certain type of mollusk with a pungent odor when burned. Others claim it is the powder obtained by scraping the shell of a mollusk and the word actually means “aromatic shell.” Some theologians simply call it “mollusk scent.” It is found in the Red Sea and, if it is the same organism, still used for incense and medicine. The Red Sea is warmer than the colder Indian Ocean and supports a number of mollusks in its waters.

⁶ The information on the spices is from the Jewish Encyclopedia, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8099-incense> (accessed 22 March 2018).

Galbanum, *הַלְבָנָה*, is a yellowish to green or brown aromatic, unpleasant smelling, bitter gum resin. Ancient sources thought it to be from a plant called narthex but modern sources believe it was the ferula herb. If it is the ferula plant, it is a Mediterranean Sea coastal plant. “Galbanum acts in the manner of a scent preservative, so when mixed with other ingredients in a perfume, it tends to allow the distribution of the scent over a long period of time.”⁷

Frankincense, *לְבוֹנָה*, is a fragrant, milky or white semitransparent resinous gum from the *Boswellia* tree in North Africa.

These spices were all crushed into a fine powder using a mortar and pestle. Whether or not the tools were made of gold for use in the Tabernacle is not known, but they were gold for use in the Temple. One source claimed the golden mortar and pestle can be seen depicted on the Arch of Titus in Rome along with the Lampstand.

Salt was added to it. Some sources claim the salt of Sodom had to be used. Salt, *מֶלַח*, was used as a preservative, but whether or not the mixture of spices actually needed preservation in a hot, usually dry climate is unknown. Some theologians don't believe they did need the preservation salt ordinarily provided. Figuratively, the word suggests purity and holiness, hence, the incense was salted, pure and holy.

⁷ Douglas K. Stuart, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Exodus* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 646.

Edersheim cited rabbinic sources that report mixing in seven other spices he didn't name plus something called Ambra and an herb that produced a dense smoke.

According to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Maimonides also claimed seven other additional spices were used: myrrh, cassia, the flower of nard, saffron, kostus, cinnamon, and cinnamon bark.

Also, according to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Josephus wrote about thirteen ingredients: among them Jordan amber and another herb which caused the smoke to rise. Where they got all that information is unknown because all Josephus said was on the Altar of Incense thirteen kinds of sweet-smelling spices were burned.⁸

A huge amount of incense was required each year. "Three hundred and sixty-eight minas of incense were prepared once a year, in the Temple, one for each day and three extra for the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement. Some of the ingredients had to be specially prepared, as, for example, the onycha, which was first soaked in Cyprus wine to take away the tartness. Great care was bestowed upon the comminuting [reduced to minute particles or fragments] of the ingredients, each of which was pounded by itself; and the man who performed that work incited himself by repeating the words, "hadeḳ heṭeb" = "make it very fine." The incense was pounded in the mortar twice a year, and required

⁸ William Whiston, trans., "The Wars of the Jews" in *Josephus: The Complete Works* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 5.5.5, 848.

care otherwise. On damp days it was piled up; on warm, dry days it was spread out for drying.”⁹

During the period of time when the Herodians ruled Israel, a family named Abtinias produced the incense. They added an ingredient from the stem of the date tree which cause the smoke to rise, spread out, and then descend covering the space. They wouldn't reveal their formula which angered the rabbis so they were fired. Other druggists from Alexandria were brought in but they couldn't duplicate it so the rabbis had to hire the Abtinias family back who demanded twice the wages to come back.

Moses recorded the final command concerning the incense prohibiting any duplication of it for personal use. It is easy to see how people might want something like this to use in their homes, but it was holy and set apart for use in only the Tabernacle.

Exodus 30:37–38 ³⁷“The incense which you shall make, you shall not make in the same proportions for yourselves; it shall be holy to you for the LORD. ³⁸“Whoever shall make *any* like it, to use as perfume, shall be cut off [כָּרַת] from his people.”

This was serious business. To be cut off, כָּרַת, means cut off or cut down; it refers to severing an object from its source or cut into parts implying a violent action. Most theologians believe it is referring to being put to death. It could mean banishment from the covenant community which would be tantamount to a

⁹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8099-incense> (accessed 23 March 2018).

death. They wouldn't be able to work or go to the Temple or engage in social relationships, if they were cut off by means of banishment.

The next command involved the occasion of a census probably for the purposes of conducting a war as they did in Numbers 1. When they did that, each male twenty years of age and older was to contribute to the Tabernacle as a ransom to the Lord.

In the ancient world, there seemed to be two primary reasons for conducting a census. One was to identify the men eligible for conscription in the army in order to fight a war. Israel's wars were not fought simply because the leadership wanted to fight a war; they were fought at the behest of God on behalf of God. Or, that's the way it was supposed to be. David ran afoul of this concept when he ordered a census that brought God's judgment upon the people (2 Sam. 24:1-17). The other reason was for purposes of taxation and that was almost certainly the reason Joseph took the pregnant Mary to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-5). Rome needed a census for purposes of taxing the people they controlled in their empire. The Jews were exempt from forcible induction into the Roman Army; therefore, that could not have been the reason for the census. The third option for a census was simply to count the number of people under the government's jurisdiction. It was a display of power Rome later exercised in order to remind the people they were subjugated to and under the authority of those who were in control of their nation. The text does not actually provide the

reason for the census, but theologians universally assume it was for purposes of taxation.

Exodus 30:11–16 ¹¹The LORD also spoke to Moses, saying, ¹²“When you take a census of the sons of Israel to number them, then each one of them shall give a ransom [כִּפָּר] for himself to the LORD, when you number them, so that there will be no plague among them when you number them. ¹³“This is what everyone who is [עֵבֶר] numbered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as a contribution to the LORD. ¹⁴“Everyone who is [עֵבֶר] numbered, from twenty years old and over, shall give the contribution to the LORD. ¹⁵“The rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel, when you give the contribution to the LORD to make atonement [כִּפָּר] for yourselves [נַפְשׁ]. ¹⁶“You shall take the atonement [כִּפָּרִים] money [קֶסֶף] from the sons of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may be a memorial for the sons of Israel before the LORD, to make atonement [כִּפָּר] for yourselves [נַפְשׁ].”

This census had two purposes. One was to ransom the Israelites from the harm that would otherwise be inflicted for conducting a census. A census had the idea behind it the people lacked faith God could take care of them which was a sin for which they needed to make atonement. Atonement, כִּפָּר, refers to the reestablishment of fellowship with God broken by personal sin; it does not refer to justification salvation. It is a word referring to reconciliation or reparations made in order to bring about reconciliation. The other purpose was to raise money for the ongoing operation of the Tabernacle. The Tabernacles was already paid for by the Israelites' voluntary contributions of material, but as time passed, funds would be needed to keep it operating. Paying this ransom was one way to raise the necessary funds.

Ransom, כֶּפֶר, means a ransom, a bribe, or a half-shekel. The Israelite men were literally providing a ransom for their lives or for their souls, נַפְשׁוֹ. If this command wasn't followed, God would send a plague on the nation for its disobedience and people would die.

In the Old Testament, redemption or ransom could be defined as “freedom from obligation, bondage, or danger ... secured by the payment of a price, a ransom, bribe, satisfaction, favor, or reconciliation. People may redeem property, animals, and individuals (slaves, prisoners, indentured relatives) who are legally obligated to God or in bondage for other reasons. God alone, however, is able to redeem from the slavery of sin, enemy oppressors, and the power of death.”¹⁰

The concept of ransom is not unfamiliar to believers in this dispensation. Christ Jesus paid the price through His blood and His death on cross to ransom us from sin and death.

1 Corinthians 6:19–20 ¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? ²⁰For you have been bought with a price...

Matthew 20:28 ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom [λύτρον] for many.”

1 Timothy 2:5–6 ⁵For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus, ⁶who gave Himself as a ransom [ἀντίλυτρον] for all...

¹⁰ Ronald F. Youngblood, gen. ed. s.v. “redemption,” in *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2014), 972.

God instituted the concept of kinsman-redeemer in the Mosaic Law (Lv. 25:23-34) which provided for the redemption of houses and land by a relative in order to restore it to the owner. The book of Ruth revealed how this doctrine worked in a real-life situation. This book identified the origins of the line of David through whom the Messiah would eventually come. The concept of the Israelite kinsman-redeemer was a type of the Kinsman-Redeemer mankind has in Christ Jesus who, on the cross, paid the ransom price for people who are in bondage to their sin nature. The Greek word λύτρον means ransom or price paid for redeeming captives, freeing them from their bonds, and setting them at liberty. This word is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word כֶּפֶר meaning ransom. The Greek word ἀντίλυτρον relates a ransom specifically to the means or the price of redemption.

There is a definite sense of a census for purposes of a military engagement in this pericope. In verses 13 and 14, the words “Everyone who is numbered” contains the Hebrew word עָבַר which means to cross over. The idea being the person responsible for recruiting soldiers would assemble the men twenty years of age and older and present God’s call to war. Those who volunteered would “cross over” in order to display their commitment to serve.

The ransom price was half a shekel of silver. It is called atonement money, כֶּפֶר הַכֹּהֲנִים. This was in the form of silver, כֶּסֶף, because bullion coins had yet to come into existence as currency. The shekel was a unit of weight measuring about a fifth of an ounce although that varied in actual practice from area to

area. Another estimate I found was about one-third of an ounce to just under a half an ounce. Everyone paid the same amount irrespective of their personal wealth. After the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity, they committed to contributing an annual amount of “one third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God” (Neh. 10:32). By the time of the Lord, there was a two-drachma annual Temple tax (Mt. 17:24).