



ISAIAH

Week 5: Isaiah-Chapter 6

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SL #1 INTRO

SL#2 PRAYER

Isaiah starts out with “The vision...”

Isaiah called to be a prophet to his community, which includes the royal line and the whole of the ministry through Isaiah was a part of the larger, global God story.

Why is this called a “vision?” “I saw...”

Visions have purpose.

A purpose...multiple purpose’s.

They are not given for entertainment nor are they the personal imaginings of the prophet.

Dr. Hayford-“the Hebrew word usually meaning divine revelation of truth.

Isaiah’s prophecy was revealed to him by God. Vision describes the content of all 66 chapters, arranged in acts and scenes like a play.”

An accumulation of messages from God to specific groups/leaders/nations, messages about the destiny of the world, poetry, and historical narrative.

Isaiah 1–12: Messages about Judah and Jerusalem, with references to King Ahaz

Isaiah 13–23: Messages about the nations around, with a reference King Ahaz

Isaiah 24–27: Messages about the destiny of the world around, with no reference to specific kings

Isaiah 28–39: Messages about Judah and Jerusalem, with references to King Hezekiah

36-39 historical narrative

Isaiah 40–55: Messages about Judah and Jerusalem, with references to King Cyrus

Isaiah 56–66: Messages about Judah and Jerusalem, with no reference to specific kings¹

Today we’ll be exploring Chapter 6-The vision Isaiah received of God.

RECAP:

What have we learned about Isaiah, the man, so far?

- Name-Yahweh is Salvation
- Ministered for about 70 years
- Son of Amoz & according to rabbinic tradition, also a prophet & the brother of King Amaziah, so Isaiah would have been the king’s nephew.
- May have been a priest. Ch 6 tells us he has a vision of God in the temple. Does this mean Isaiah was in the temple serving when he had this vision of God & it was superimposed over the reality Isaiah was currently in OR was Isaiah shown this vision & in the vision it was happening in the temple?
- Part of the upper 10% of Hebrew society
 - Educated-his mastery of Hebrew is rich
 - Given his family connections, he was exposed to royal life/priestly life

¹ Goldingay, J. (2015). [Isaiah for Everyone](#) (p. 258). Westminster John Knox Press; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.



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- Factual as he presents experiences [versus emotions]
- Public figure, private man
- Married to a prophetess & had 2, maybe 3, boys we know of: Maher shalal hash baz, Shearjashub & potentially Immanuel
- The OT prophet most quoted in the NT

His setting:

- 4 Kings & their time of rule/their courts. [Part of the group he was prophesying to was family-how did that impact the dynamic?]
 - Uzziah/Azariah=God [uncle]
 - Jotham=Good [first cousin]
 - Ahaz=Bad [second cousin]
 - Hezekiah=Good [third cousin]

[why doesn't it say the vision during the days of 5 kings?]

 - Manasseh=Bad [fourth cousin-tradition has Isaiah martyred by Manasseh-sawn in two, potentially the reference in Heb 11:37]
- Civic/their community
 - A false, government-aided prosperity
 - Encouraged a corrupt luxury
 - Accompanied by oppression of the poor
 - A sensual, immoral, heathenish religion
- Geographic:
 - Centrally located within the region, access to crossroads
 - Multicultural traffic

SL#3

Isaiah 6: [Isaiah saw]

1 In the year that King Uzziah died,

[Isaiah was minding his own business, going about his duties...just happened to him while he was already living a life devoted to God & serving Him.]

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, [theophany^]

high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple.

SL#4

THEOPHANY (θεοφάνια, *theophania*). A visible appearance of God to humans.

Etymology

The term "theophany" never occurs in the Bible; it originates in Herodotus' description of the festival at Delphi, where statues of the gods were displayed (*Hist.* 1.51). It is formed from the Greek compound θεός (*theos*, "god," "God") and φαίνειν (*phainein*, "to appear"), and it describes a category of narrative in which God appears to human beings. Although the term is not found in the Old Testament, the passive form of the root ראה (*r'h*, "to see") comes closest to describing this term as it often occurs in the context of theophany, "to appear" (e.g., Gen 12:7; Num 16:19, 42; [MT 17:7]; 2 Chr 7:12).



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SL#5

2 Above it stood seraphim^B;

SL#6 SERAPHIM

[Multiple fiery serpents with wings, flies, announces God's holiness. Some sources list them in the order of angels, but we're not specifically told they are angelic beings. We are told they have faces, feet, wings, a voice that is powerful enough to shake things, can speak & cry, hands.]

each one [not told how many]

had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

[what is the point of covering? The seraph's response to God's holiness?]

3 And one cried to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;

The whole earth is full of His glory!"

[was this one seraph crying to another, or were they taking turns?]

[in response to this cry or cries, the door of the temple was shaken & the house [the temple] was filled with smoke.]

4 And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.

[Keep in mind, Isaiah is ONLY seeing at this point & it doesn't involve him yet-now he responds to what he is seeing/experiencing]

SL#7

5 So I said:

"Woe is me, for I am undone! [Isaiah's OMG moment-watch what he becomes aware of...]

Because I am a man of unclean lips,

And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;

For my eyes have seen the King,

The LORD of hosts."

We have to have a healthy understanding of our sinfulness in light of a holy God. If we don't, have we actually met God?

[what he witnesses of God & the seraphim's response to God's presence/holiness causes Isaiah to become aware of his sinfulness & the sinfulness of the people and he can't help exclaiming that. Interesting that Isaiah's most commonly used name for God is "the Holy One of Israel"—was it because of THIS revelation?]

From this point, Isaiah becomes included in/participating in the heavenly vision-the seraphim see him & respond to his response.

SL#8

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar^C.

7 And he touched my mouth with it, and said:



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[seraph speaking to Isaiah now]

**“Behold, this has touched your lips;
Your iniquity is taken away,
And your sin purged.”**

What is the significance of the live coal from the altar?

- The importance of it’s being *live*.
- The importance of its being from the *altar*.

The seraph is being an agent for God by bringing the coal to Isaiah but has no power of itself to cleanse iniquity/sin, only God can do that.

SL#9

The earliest altars mentioned in the Old Testament are associated with the patriarchs. Noah (Gen 8:20), Abraham (Gen 12:7–8; 13:4, 18; 22:9), Isaac (Gen 26:26), and Jacob (Gen 33:20; 35:1–7) all constructed sacrificial altars. These altars were built in connection with a promise or instruction from God, and were likely used for worship or commemoration...

The offering of sacrifices was a sacred rite that was performed according to careful instructions. Since altars were used to offer sacrifices to God, they were considered holy and used carefully (Exod 30:10; 40:10; Lev 4:1–5:13; 16:1–34). The priests wore specific garments when approaching the altar in the holy place (Exod 28:43). Those who were sick or unclean were not permitted to approach the altar, for fear of defiling it (Lev 21:16–23).

Specific to this time period in history:

Jeroboam constructed an additional altar at Bethel and appointed non-Levite priests to offer sacrifices upon it (1 Kgs 12:31–32). King Ahaz also installed a new altar in the temple court. It was built according to the specifications of the altar in Damascus and was placed between the bronze altar and the temple (2 Kgs 16:10–15). Manasseh erected an altar to Baal and other deities in Jerusalem, just as Ahaz had done in Samaria (2 Kgs 21:3–5). Josiah tore down the altars of Manasseh and Jeroboam in his attempt to reform the worship practices of the Southern Kingdom (2 Kgs 23:12–16).

SL#10

8 Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying:

[so Isaiah hears God talking aloud to ..? Himselfes? All the creatures around?

“Whom shall I send, [interesting that this is singular, is this the Father talking?]

And who will go for Us?”

[someone is needed to be sent [Sent where? Why? Sent to whom?], and this someone will be representing [being an ambassador or emissary] for “Us.”

Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.”



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[Isaiah is moved to respond, offering himself & interjects into God's question. It doesn't seem to matter to Isaiah what this might entail.]

[God takes him up on his offer, looks like immediately.]

SL#10

**9 And He said, "Go, and tell this people:
'Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'
10 "Make the heart of this people dull,
And their ears heavy,
And shut their eyes;
Lest they see with their eyes,
And hear with their ears,
And understand with their heart,
And return and be healed."**

This can appear as if God doesn't want this people to hear, to understand, to see, or perceive. That is not the case.

"The same message that softens a receptive heart also hardens an unreceptive heart. So, in sending forth the message to a people known to be unreceptive, their condition is worsened. However, their end is caused by their own rejection of God, not by God's predetermination; and God's ultimate goal is to redeem the remnant who is willing to be redeemed."

New Spirit Filled Study Bible, Dr. Jack Hayford, page 881 in reference to Isaiah 6:11-13

SL#11

[now Isaiah asks for parameters-what boundaries does God have with this ask?]

**11 Then I said, "Lord, how long?"
And He answered:**

**"Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant,
The houses are without a man,
The land is utterly desolate,
12 The LORD has removed men far away,
And the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.**

**13 But yet a tenth will be in it, [HOPE]
And will return and be for consuming,
As a terebinth tree or as an oak,
Whose stump remains when it is cut down.
So the holy seed shall be its stump."**



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The presence of the Lord is evident.

The power of the Lord is evident.

The holiness of the Lord is evident.

This foreshadows the coming Messiah. Israel, Mankind's only hope.

Does that make Isaiah's God-task easy? No.

About now is he wondering what he got himself into?

SL#12 ISAIAH 6:5 WOE

SL#13 HANDOUT:

[inspired by Pr. Michelle's message on Devotions last week-let's take these questions into our Quiet time this coming week.]

- Isaiah had a vision.

In your relationship with God, how has He communicated to you?

- Isaiah realized God's profound holiness & came to see his personal sinfulness as a result.

Can you describe a time when you had an understanding of your sinfulness in light of God's holiness? What impact have you experienced to Jesus' cleansing of your sin?

- Isaiah immediately wanted to serve the Lord without even having a full understanding of what that would mean for his life—that didn't matter! Whatever God wanted him to do was worth it.

What has God asked of you?

- As Isaiah sees, our God life impacts our family, our community, and could have a global reach. His life, his service, doing what God told him to impacted the destiny of individuals & nations. One individual.

If someone were to watch your life, what do you think people would understand about God?

This week, ask someone for their honest feedback.

- Isaiah was going to be speaking to people whose hearts were already hardened toward God and he was faithful regardless of their response. No doubt that had to have been hard & uncomfortable at times. He was eventually martyred for his service.

What are my expectations for people's reactions when I share about Jesus?

Find someone this week who you see demonstrates a commitment to continuing in their God walk regardless of what may look like positive results or negative results and ask them what inspires them to be faithful?



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NOTES:

A:

THEOPHANY (θεοφάνια, *theophania*). A visible appearance of God to humans.

Etymology

The term “theophany” never occurs in the Bible; it originates in Herodotus’ description of the festival at Delphi, where statues of the gods were displayed (*Hist.* 1.51). It is formed from the Greek compound θεός (*theos*, “god,” “God”) and φαίνειν (*phainein*, “to appear”), and it describes a category of narrative in which God appears to human beings. Although the term is not found in the Old Testament, the passive form of the root רָחַרַח (*r’h*, “to see”) comes closest to describing this term as it often occurs in the context of theophany, “to appear” (e.g., Gen 12:7; Num 16:19, 42; [MT 17:7]; 2 Chr 7:12).

Old Testament Theophanies

Theophany takes varied forms in the Old Testament, functioning within narratives as a demonstration of divine revelation, in which God’s presence is made visible to both individuals and groups.

Contexts of Theophany

In the patriarchal narratives, theophanies are marked by their announcement of divine promises and are typically followed by the patriarch erecting an altar to commemorate the place where the promise was made (Gen 12:1–8; 26:24–25; 28:12–19). In the Sinai theophanies, God manifests His presence to Israel as a nation, beginning with Moses on the mountain where He reveals the divine name, Yahweh (Exod 3ff), and later where God appears to groups as at Sinai (Exod 19:16–25; compare 16:10). One such example recorded is when the 70 elders of Israel—along with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and Joshua—experience a vision of God (24:9–18) that immediately precedes instructions for the construction of the tabernacle (Exod 25–40).

God also appears in order to commission a prophet for a particular task (e.g., 1 Sam 3:1–14; Isa 6:1–13; Jer 1:1–19; Amos 7:15–17). Many of God’s appearances were the source of the prophet’s claim to speak for God (e.g., 1 Kgs 19:9–18; Amos 7:1–9; Jer 1:11–19). Prophets also experience visions that include the hope that God will appear at a future time to restore Israel (Isa 35:2; 46:13; Jer 24:4–7; Amos 9:13–15; Zech 9:14).

Judgment constitutes yet another theme of theophany (Num 12:9–10; Psa 18:13–15; Isa 30:27). God’s appearances are sometimes specifically related to the cult or worship (Gen 28:10ff; Exod 19; Lev 9:4, 6; Psa 63:2 [MT 3]; 84:7 [8]; Rainer, *History of Israelite Religion*, 33, 56).

Theophanic Places



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God appears at springs (Gen 16:7), rivers (Gen 32:22–32 [MT 32:23–33]), and trees (Gen 12:6–7), but biblical theophanies most often occur at mountains (Gen 12:8; Exod 19; Psa 48; Mindlin, *Figurative Language in the Ancient Near East*, 131–34). Mountains connected the earthly world with the underworld, reaching to the heavens—a place where the gods were known to dwell, thus uniting the three spheres of the universe known to ancient Near Eastern peoples. The two most significant mountains to Israel are Mount Sinai and Mount Zion.

Sinai marks the place where God reveals His name, Yahweh, to Moses from a burning bush (Exod 3). It will later be the place where Moses brings the freed Israelites when they are delivered from Egypt (3:12). Later still, God appears to the Israelites and invites them into a covenant relationship where they will represent Him to the nations (Exod 19:5–6). Sinai is the site where God reveals his Ten Commandments and other moral and ritual laws that will govern Israel's life in the future (Exod 20). God will also appear to the Israelites at Sinai to confirm His covenant with them (Exod 24). In another episode, Moses takes refuge in a hiding place in the rocks of Sinai and observes God's back (Exod 33:18–23). Later, Moses will hear God pronounce the divine name and the epithets that characterize Him (Exod 34:6–7). Sinai—also known as Mount Horeb—was also the place where God appeared to Elijah the prophet (1 Kgs 19; compare Exod 33:18–23).

Outside of the Pentateuch, Mount Zion becomes the preeminent place of God's self-disclosure. Zion was the name of a hill on which the Jebusite fortress of Jerusalem was built—later captured by David (2 Sam 5:7). Zion was subsequently equated with the name Jerusalem, the city of David (1 Kgs 8:5; 1 Chr 11:5). The Temple Mount at Mount Zion was known as the dwelling place of God (Pss 9:11 [MT 12]; 76:2 [3]; Joel 3:17 [MT 4:17]). It is at Zion where God goes to war against Israel's enemies (Psa 18:6–19 [MT 7–20]; Joel 3:17–21), and where He executes judgment on both Israel and the nations (Pss 50:1–6; 97; Isa 2:10; Ezek 10:18). The prophets also experience God's presence within the confines of Zion (Isa 6:1–13; Ezek 1; Amos 1:2; Mic 1:2–4; Zeph 1). Zion also marks the place that God will return after the exile (Isa 52:7ff; Ezek 43:1–9; Joel 3:17).

Theophanic Manifestations

In the Old Testament, God appears in various ways—including as a force of nature. These forms are manifested in storms, accompanied by thunder and lightning (Exod 19:16; 2 Sam 22:12–16; Pss 18:9–12 [MT 10–13]; Amos 1:2; Zech 9:14). Closely associated with these natural appearances is God's manifestation in the form of fire (Gen 15:7; Exod 3:2; 19:18; Deut 1:33; Judg 6:21; 2 Chr 7:1; Neh 9:12, 19) and smoke (Exod 19:18; 2 Sam 22:9; Psa 18:18; Isa 4:5; 6:4). God's presence is sometimes accompanied by things similar to volcanic activity (Exod 19:18; Deut 4:11; Pss 97:5; 104:32; Nah 1:5, 6) as well as earthquakes (Exod 19:16–25; Pss 68:7–8; Isa 29:5–6), and clouds (Exod 13:21; 34:5; Num 9:15–22; Ezek 1:4).

Outside of these elemental theophanies, God is pictured in human forms as well. Adam and Eve hear the sound of God walking in Eden (Gen 3:8), Abraham is visited by three men at Mamre (Gen 18:1–2), Jacob wrestles with God as he appears as a man (Gen 32:24, 28), and Moses views God's back (Exod 33:18–23). The Angel of the Lord, who conveys divine messages



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(Gen 16:7–12; 21:17–18; Num 22:32–35), sometimes turns out to be God himself (Gen 18:16–17; Num 22:22–35; Judg 6:11–23; 13:3–22; Zech 3:1–2). God also appears as a divine warrior, leading Israel into battle (Exod 15; Deut 33:2; Psa 24:8) and at times fighting against Israel because of their disobedience (Isa 9:8–10:11 [MT 9:7–10]; Mic 1).

New Testament Theophanies

An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream regarding Jesus' birth (Matt 1:18–25). God is also present at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:9–11). One of the most significant episodes is when Jesus appears on a mountain with a cloud and brightness, known as His transfiguration (Mark 9:1–8). It is here where Moses and Elijah appear, both remembered as "men of Sinai" with this episode recalling both Moses' theophanic experiences (e.g., Exod 24), as well as Elijah's (1 Kgs 19:8–18; France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 348, 351–53)

In the book of Acts, theophanic language is used for Jesus' ascension, where He—in a post-resurrection appearance—is taken up in a cloud in front of His disciples (Acts 1:6–11). Stephen recalls the theophanies of Abraham (7:2ff) and Moses (7:30ff) before experiencing his own vision of the risen Christ and God's glory (7:55–56). Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road also shares much of the same language common in other theophanies, by describing light and a heavenly voice (Acts 9:1–7; 26:12–18).

In the Pauline letters, Paul refers to the Sinai theophany in order to highlight believers' newfound freedom through the Spirit. Whereas Moses had to wear a veil—to essentially hide God's glory from the Israelites—that veil can now be removed in Christ, transforming believers from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:7–18; compare Exod 33:18ff). In Philippians and the so-called Christ Hymn (Phil 2:5–11), Paul describes the cross as a theophany in his incarnation and crucifixion (Phil 2:6–8; Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology*, 34). Elsewhere, Paul implies a theophany when he refers to Christ as God's image, His incarnation as a revelation of God (2 Cor 4:4; compare John 1:1–18; Heb 1:3).

The book of Revelation demonstrates perhaps the most outward affinities with what is found in the Old Testament regarding theophanies. In a prophetic vision, John witnesses God seated on His throne (4:2; 20:11), appearing like a precious stone (4:3; compare Ezek 1:26) and attended to by other heavenly beings (4:6–11; compare Isa 6:2; Ezek 1:15–18). Moreover, storm theophanies appear with frequency in John's vision (8:5; 11:13; compare Exod 19:16–19). Perhaps the most significant theophany in Revelation comes at the conclusion of the seventh trumpet, where God's sanctuary is opened to reveal the ark of the covenant—a symbol of God's manifestation—where the two tablets of the Decalogue were housed (11:19; compare 2 Sam 6:2; Pss 80:1; 99:1).

Selected Resources for Further Study

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MATTHEW D. MONTONINI²

B.

Seraphim different than Cherubim

Seraphim is plural, Seraph singular.

Only referenced in Isaiah, twice. [Fiery serpents are referenced in other places, but not with wings...]

SERAPHIM. (Heb. perhaps śārāp, "burning, fiery"). The meaning of the word seraph is extremely doubtful; the only word that resembles it in the current Hebrew is śārap, "to burn," whence the idea of brilliancy has been extracted; but it is objected that the Heb. term never bears this secondary sense. Gesenius connects it with an Arab. term shrafa signifying "high" or "exalted"; and this may be regarded as the generally received etymology.

² Matthew D. Montonini, "[Theophany](#)," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).



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Nature. An order of celestial beings, whom Isaiah beheld in vision standing above Jehovah as He sat upon His throne (Isa. 6:2, 6). They are described as each of them having three pairs of wings; with one they covered their faces (a token of humility), with the second they covered their feet (a token of respect), while with the third they flew. They seem to have borne a general resemblance to the human figure, for they are represented as having face, voice, feet, and hands (v. 2).

Occupation. The seraphim that Isaiah saw hovered above on both sides of Him that sat upon the throne, forming two opposite choirs and presenting antiphonal worship. Their occupation was twofold—to celebrate the praises of Jehovah’s holiness and power (v. 3) and to act as the medium of communication between heaven and earth (v. 6). They are beings expressive of the divine holiness and demand that the saint shall be cleansed before serving (Isa. 6:6–8). From their antiphonal chant (“one called out to another”) we may conceive them to have been ranged in opposite rows on each side of the throne. See Cherubim.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (1965), 1:234–53.

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CHERUBIM (כְּרֻבִים, *keruvim*).

C.

ALTAR (מִזְבֵּחַ, *mizbeach*; θυσιαστήριον, *thysiaστήριον*). The place where sacrifices were offered to a deity or deities. Altars were often made of stone, brick, earth, wood, or metal.

Biblical Relevance

The sacrificial system of the ancient Near Eastern people was an important part of interacting with the gods. Sacrifices were burned on an altar that often stood in a courtyard outside the temple. The temple was regarded as the house of the god and was the center of religious life. The Israelites’ cultic observances involved sacrificial rites. The official sacrifices were performed by priests, and the altar was the focal point of the sacrificial rite. In the New Testament, Jesus is described as the great High Priest who offered the final sacrifice for humankind (Heb 7:27–28).

Development

The altar was an important religious structure—many have been discovered across the world. In the Old Testament, altars are frequently mentioned. The specifications for the altar of the tabernacle are described in the book of Exodus, while Leviticus and Numbers describe the way sacrifices were to be offered upon the altar. Graeco-Roman religions also offered sacrifices to the gods.

Ancient Near East

Sacrifices in the ancient Near East were offered in order to earn the favor of the gods. Altars were often constructed out of large or small unhewn stones or mud bricks. Most altars were



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rectangular, and many were constructed with horns on each corner, possibly meant for restraining the animal. Oval shaped altars have also been found, though they were less common. Many large altars were built on top of a raised platform with stairs leading to the place of sacrifice.

The king was responsible for the construction and protection of religious altars. Ornate altars were plated with bronze or gold, or contained artistic carvings. The altar was often decorated with or placed near an image of the deity meant to receive the sacrifice. Altars in the ancient Near East could also be independent of an official site of worship.

Old Testament

The earliest altars mentioned in the Old Testament are associated with the patriarchs. Noah (Gen 8:20), Abraham (Gen 12:7–8; 13:4, 18; 22:9), Isaac (Gen 26:26), and Jacob (Gen 33:20; 35:1–7) all constructed sacrificial altars. These altars were built in connection with a promise or instruction from God, and were likely used for worship or commemoration. Moses also built an altar after Israel's victory over Amalek at Rephidim (Exod 17:8–16) and another at the foot of Mount Sinai (Exod 24:4–6); he was instructed at Sinai to build the altar out of earth or uncut stones (Exod 20:24–26). Joshua (Josh 8:30), Saul (1 Sam 14:35), and David (2 Sam 24:25) also built altars to Yahweh.

Numerous instructions concerning the altar to Yahweh are found in Exodus, Numbers, and Leviticus. There were two altars associated with the tabernacle. The first altar was made of acacia wood and plated with bronze (Exod 27:1–8). It stood 4.5 feet tall and was 7.5 feet long and 7.5 feet wide. This bronze altar had a horn on each corner, and the utensils used with it were also made of bronze. The horns of the altar were sometimes coated with the blood of the sacrifice as a part of the cultic ritual (e.g., Exod 29:12). This altar was made to be portable and was placed outside of the tabernacle when in use. It had poles that could be attached to the sides for easy portability, which supported the Israelites' nomadic lifestyle.

The second altar, also built of acacia wood, was used for offering incense. It too was meant to be portable, and was much smaller than the bronze altar (Exod 30:1–21), standing at 3 feet in height and 1.5 feet in length and width. The incense altar also had horns on its corners and was overlaid with gold. It stood inside the tabernacle on the outer side of the veil, covering the place where the ark was housed. Apart from these metal plated altars, many other altars were constructed from stone (Gen 31:46; Exod 20:25; 1 Kgs 18:30–35), or mud (Exod 20:24–25).

The offering of sacrifices was a sacred rite that was performed according to careful instructions. Since altars were used to offer sacrifices to God, they were considered holy and used carefully (Exod 30:10; 40:10; Lev 4:1–5:13; 16:1–34). The priests wore specific garments when approaching the altar in the holy place (Exod 28:43). Those who were sick or unclean were not permitted to approach the altar, for fear of defiling it (Lev 21:16–23).

Altars at the temple site were more ornate than ones made for the tabernacle. The altar inside the sanctuary of Solomon's temple (likely used for incense) was overlaid with gold (1 Kgs 6:20–22; 7:48). There was also a bronze altar outside of the temple which was 30 feet in length and width, and stood 15 feet high (2 Chr 4:1). Though large in dimension, it was too small for



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the consecration ceremony of the temple; the courtyard itself was used instead (1 Kgs 8:62–64).

Jeroboam constructed an additional altar at Bethel and appointed non-Levite priests to offer sacrifices upon it (1 Kgs 12:31–32). King Ahaz also installed a new altar in the temple court. It was built according to the specifications of the altar in Damascus and was placed between the bronze altar and the temple (2 Kgs 16:10–15). Manasseh erected an altar to Baal and other deities in Jerusalem, just as Ahaz had done in Samaria (2 Kgs 21:3–5). Josiah tore down the altars of Manasseh and Jeroboam in his attempt to reform the worship practices of the Southern Kingdom (2 Kgs 23:12–16).

The temple was destroyed in 586 BC by the Babylonians, and treasures from both the temple and the king's palace were taken by King Nebuchadnezzar (2 Chr 36:18–19). Ezra rebuilt the temple and its altar at their original location after the return from Babylon, according to specifications from the Torah (Ezra 3:2–6). The temple was again desecrated, this time by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who looted the sanctuary and set up an altar to Zeus (1 Macc 1:21, 54). After the Maccabean revolt, the temple was purified and a new altar was built to replace the previous one that had been profaned (1 Macc 4:42–50).

Graeco-Roman

As in the ancient Near East, the animal was killed in the Graeco-Roman world before it was burned upon the altar. The Graeco-Roman altars were built outside of the deity's temple in an open area. They were often made of cut stone and built upon a raised platform. Many altars were round with ornate engravings of the deity or the sacrificial ritual around the side. The sacrifice was used to prepare a meal that was shared in communion with the gods.

New Testament

The New Testament only occasionally discusses the altar. In Matthew, Jesus mentions the bronze altar and the sacrificial customs of Israel (Matt 5:23–24; 23:18–20). Luke notes that the visit of the angel to Zacharias happened at the incense altar in the temple (Luke 1:11). Paul mentions both the customs of the Jews concerning feeding the priests burnt offerings (1 Cor 9:13; 10:18) and the pagan custom of selling leftover meat that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:4–13). In the book of Revelation, the souls of the martyrs cry out from beneath the altar (Rev 6:9). An angel also throws fire from the incense altar in heaven to earth during the seventh seal judgment (Rev 8:5; see also Rev 14:18), and another cries out from the horns of the altar to release the bound, fallen angels (Rev 9:13). John is also instructed to measure the altar (Rev 11:1).

In Hebrews, the author defends the supremacy of Christ and depicts Him as the perfect high priest. Christ's priesthood is according to the order of Melchizedek, and not of the Aaronic line (Heb 5:1–10). In Christ, the former law was set aside and a new covenant was made (Heb 7:11–22). The sacrifice He made was unlike the sacrifices of the priests, because He did not need to offer it for His own sins (Heb 7:23–27). Instead, He offered Himself as a sacrifice for all



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humanity (Heb 7:27–28). The author depicts a heavenly typology of the earthly tabernacle in which Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of the tabernacle’s significance (Heb 9:1–28).

Cultural Relevance

The altar played a central role in the cultic observances of the Israelites, other ancient Near Eastern people, the Greeks, and the Romans. Since the temple was one of the central social structures of the ancient city, the activities of the temple cult were important to everyday life.

Etymology

In Hebrew, the noun מִזְבֵּחַ (*mizbeach*) is used over 400 times in reference to the altar; it is derived from the verb זָבַח (*zevach*), meaning “to slaughter.” While the altar was the place where animal sacrifices were offered, the animal was not typically slaughtered on it. Though etymologically associated with slaughter, the altar was not always a place where animals were sacrificed (e.g., the incense altar).

In Greek, the noun θυσιαστήριον (*thysiaστήριον*) is used for the altar of God. It is derived from the verb θυσιάζω (*thysiazō*), meaning “to sacrifice.” In the Septuagint and the New Testament, pagan altars are consistently referred to with the noun βωμός (*bōmos*) rather than θυσιαστήριον (*thysiaστήριον*), which is the noun used for the altars of Israel’s God.

Selected Resources for Further Study

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³ A. Chadwick Thornhill, “Altar,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).