ON THE FUNCTION OF THE HOLY INCENSE (EXODUS XXX 34-8) AND THE SACRED ANOINTING OIL (EXODUS XXX 22-33)\(^1\)

by

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1. Odours, exhalations and vapours and their reception by man

For the understanding of the function of the holy incense and the sacred anointing oil it is necessary to have a clear idea of the Israelite conception of odours, exhalations and vapours, and emanations in general. And so it is appropriate to start with some more general remarks on the subject.

Man in the Western world lives in a culture in which all kinds of odours, such as the stench of dead bodies, of faeces and sweat, are banished. Of the organs of sense, the olfactory organ is less important to him than the eyes and the ears.\(^2\) The Old Testament as the main source for our knowledge of the Israelite way of life, however, comes from a cultural environment in which the sense of smell was highly esteemed.\(^3\) It contributed to the ability of man to orientate himself, to find his way in a world where life and death are struggling permanently. Where stench rises, he diagnoses the presence of disease, decay, rotting processes and death (Ex. vii 18,

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\(^2\) See the interesting study of A. Corbin, *Le masme et la jonquille. L'odorat et l'imaginaire social, 18e-19e siècles* (Paris, 1982)

\(^3\) Not only by men, but also by the gods. In Deut iv 28, Ps cxv 5-6 the sense of smell is mentioned together with the eyes and the ears in connection with the polemics against idols. The sense of smell evidently was considered to be an important organ for gods. In this connection it is worth mentioning that according to an anthropomorphic Old Testament conception YHWH takes pleasure in inhaling the soothing odour (*rêah hannîhoah*) of offerings (Gen viii 21, Ex xxix 18, etc., cf 1 Sam xxvi 19 and also Lev xxvi 31, Amos v 21.) Cf M C A Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugartic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Munster, 1990), pp 99, 105, 142, 419
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21, viii 10, xvi 20, 24; Isa. xix 6, xxxiv 3, 1 2; Joel ii 20; Amos iv 10; Ps. xxxviii 6; Eccles. x 1). Where sweet-smelling odours spread, life is flourishing and health and vitality are manifest (see e.g. Hos. xiv 7; S. of S. iv 11). 4

Every man has a personal odour. By it he is classified and known by others (cf. Gen. xxvii 27). The odour is an emanation. By it a man manifests himself with regard to his fellow-men. By it he may be identified by others. From it conclusions can be drawn about his social position and his well-being (see e.g. Jer. xlviii 11; Hos. xiv 7; Ps. xlv 9; S. of S. vii 9; Esther ii 12). 5 The emanation pervades also man's clothing (Gen. xxvii 27; S. of S. iv 11). For that reason washing or taking off clothes is an element of ritual purification (see e.g. Ex. xix 10; Zech. iii 3-4), 6 for the uncleanness of the body has permeated a man's clothing.

As appears from various data in the OT, impurity is transmitted from one person to another by contact and also from a person to a thing (see e.g. Lev. xv), or from a thing to a person (see e.g. Lev. xiv 36, 46-7). By touching the body or the clothes of a person also life-giving power can be transmitted, if the contact involves a man of God (see e.g. 1 Kings xvii 21 ff.; 2 Kings iv 33 ff.). 7 By investiture with the robes of office transmission of divine charisma can be conferred on someone (see e.g. Num. xx 26, 28; 2 Kings ii 13-4). 8

However, direct contact is not necessary for transmission. For example, it is possible to transmit impurity to another person by means of spittle, by spitting on him (Lev. xv 8). But if the spittle

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5 Cf. also the metaphorical use of בַּי 'ה, "to make stink", in Gen. xxxiv 30; Ex. vi 21, etc.


8 For further details see the observations on Ex. xxviii in my commentary on the book of Exodus in the series Commentaar op het Oude Testament, Part III (forthcoming).
comes from a person who is imbued with divine power, healing can be effected (Mark vii 32 ff., viii 23 ff.; John ix 6).  

Not only concrete, tangible emanations can fulfil the function of means of transmission. Also the eyes can be the carriers of good or bad powers. Casting a glance can bring about impurity (Num. iv 20; 1 Sam. vi 19; cf. Mark vii 22 [an evil eye]), but also healing (Acts iii 4; cf. xiv 9). A healing power is ascribed even to the shadow of a man of God (Acts v 15; cf. e.g. Ps. xci 1, cxxi 5; S. of S. ii 3; Lam. iv 20; Luke i 35, ix 34).  

The ability of transmission was also attributed to the breath. By means of the divine breath life-giving power can be transmitted (Gen. ii 7; Ezek. xxxvii 9; Ps. xxxiii 6b; Job xxxiii 4; John xx 22), but it can be also the source of disaster and decay (Hag. i 9). Obviously, the power of transmission also was ascribed to human breath. The stinking breath of the diseased Job made even his nearest relations shrink (Job xix 17). It is likely that they were afraid of infection. The sweet-smelling fragrance of the breath of the beloved, on the contrary, attracts the lover and awakes in him the desire to kiss her mouth (S. of S. vii 9; cf. S. of S. v 13). Between breath and its carrier there is a firm bond. The breath is an extension of the personality. If one is ill, one exhales one’s disease. If one is perfectly healthy and attractive, one creates an aura of well-being around oneself. 

In the light of the remarks made above about man and his emanations, it is plausible that for an Israelite odours were not only
either pleasant or unpleasant, but also carriers of either life or death. He held the following view: when stench spreads abroad, impurity takes possession of the atmosphere. See, for instance, Ex. vii 18, 21, viii 10: as a consequence of the first and the second plagues not only did the waters and the land of Egypt become decayed and contaminated; the effect was much worse: the whole atmosphere was unclean; man was strangled wholly by impurity. According to an ancient oriental view, man permanently runs the risk of becoming infected by "bad air". So, for instance, a person who has entered a "leprous" house. Its atmosphere is poisoned. The exhalation of the "diseased" spots pervades his clothes. Consequently, they become unclean. Purification is necessary (Lev. xiv 46-7). Protection against the danger of bad air is possible by purifying the atmosphere with sweet-smelling, pure odours as an antidote (cf. Num. xvii 11 ff.).

The atmosphere can be poisoned also by human odours. In this connection attention must be drawn to the odours which arise with seminal emission and menstruation and to odours of the body which stimulate sexuality, and to sweaty smells. Such fragrances fill the deity with repugnance. They must be kept from him. In this connection it is worth mentioning that within the context of ritual purification clothing probably must be washed, not in the first place because it was dirty, but especially on account of the odour which had pervaded it and was spread about by it. By washing the clothes (Ex. xix 10) the odours which brought about sexual excitement (cf. Ex. xix 15) were eliminated. Vestments for cultic use had to be

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13 Cf. 2 Cor. ii 14 ff. (see also 2 Cor. i 21: Paul owes his fragrance to his anointing) and 1 Enoch xxv 6 (the fragrance of the tree of life pervades the bones of the righteous; so they have a long life on earth). For parallels to 2 Cor. ii 14 ff. see in particular R. Bultmann, Der zweite Brief an die Korinther (Göttingen, 1976), pp. 69 ff.; V.P. Furnish, II Corinthians (Garden City, New York, 1985), pp. 187 ff.

14 For the qualities of aromatics see E. Cothenet, "Parfums", DBS 6 (1960), cols 1291-331; P.A.H. de Boer, "An aspect of sacrifice", SVT 23 (1972), pp. 27-47 (on "God's Fragrance", pp. 37-47); C. Houtman, Exodus I (Kampen, 1986), pp. 162 ff.; K. Nielsen, Incense in Ancient Israel, SVT 38 (Leiden, 1986), pp. 89 ff. Perhaps protection could be effected also by wearing a nose-ring as an amulet (see e.g. Gen. xxiv 22, 30, 47; Ex. xxxii 2, 3). For smoke of the burning of some organs of a fish as an antidote against a dangerous demon see Tob. vi 7, 8, 16-7, vii 2. For the purifying and averting power of smoke and perfume see e.g. Böcher (n. 9), pp. 193 ff.

15 See e.g. K. van der Toorn, Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia (Assen and Maastricht, 1985), pp. 31-2.
made of cloth which prevented sweating as far as possible (cf. Ezek. xlv 18 and see n. 8). Such odours transmit impurity and hinder the meeting and contact with the deity who is enveloped by holiness. Without purification of man the contact between God and man will result in a collision of impure and pure atmosphere. Therefore, it is necessary to keep the rules of holiness permanently in order to prevent the entire atmosphere becoming full of impurity so that in the end impurity would enter even the sanctuary. If that happens the universe is imbued by impurity. Then the world falls into the hands of death (Lev. xv 31). Then there is no place for YHWH to dwell (cf. Ezek. x 18 ff.).

2. The holy incense

After the more general remarks on odours and their reception, it is possible to discuss the function of the holy incense adequately. Its preparation is prescribed in Ex. xxx 34-8. According to YHWH's instructions it may be used only in his cult. Incense of the prescribed composition is reserved by YHWH for himself. He forbids man to use his incense as a luxury (Ex. xxx 37-8).

The composition of the incense determines its fragrance. By claiming the exclusive right to the blend of the holy incense, YHWH reserves its special fragrance for himself. So the odour becomes an expression of his personality. By burning incense-offerings twice a day (Ex. xxx 7-8) the fragrance of YHWH's private incense fills the sanctuary. It determines its atmosphere and characterizes the sanctuary as YHWH's private domain.

The use of YHWH's incense by man is excluded emphatically (Ex. xxx 37-8). The border-lines between the holy and the profane, between the realm of God and the realm of man (cf. Hos. xi 9), may not be obliterated. Offering to YHWH incense of a composition which deviates from the mixture prescribed by YHWH is also forbidden (Ex. xxx 9). It will be an encroachment on YHWH's personal state in life. As remarked above (sub 1), there is a firm bond between fragrance and personality. If a fragrance foreign to YHWH spreads about in the sanctuary, it loses its exclusiveness as YHWH's private domain. The presence of illicit incense is like an expropriation of the sanctuary (cf. Ezek. viii 11) and must be prevented (cf. Lev. x).

Further, the exclusive incense is in harmony with the royal char-
acter of YHWH’s dwelling. As incense was burnt in the houses of the well-to-do to create a pleasant atmosphere, and as the purity of the aromatics and the exquisite character of the fragrance indicated the status of their residents, so the incense of the sanctuary also was a symbol of status. It is entirely pure. It has an exclusive and exquisite fragrance. It is unique. Its qualities are entirely in harmony with YHWH’s status as the Holy One, the only, unique and incomparable God (cf. Ex. xv 11; Ps. lxxxvi 8, lxxxix, 7 etc.).

Without interruption the incense has to be burnt twice a day (Ex. xxx 7-8). Permanently—interruption is a great evil (cf. 2 Chron. xxix 11)—the atmosphere of the sanctuary has to be kept pleasant and pure. Continuously the incense must perform its air-cleaning function lest unpleasant exhalations or even stench, the manifestations of decay and death, seize the opportunity to penetrate and to take possession of the room which belongs to YHWH, the God of light and life. In YHWH’s domain there is room only for the most exquisite fragrances, the manifestations of vitality, purity and cleaness.

Offering incense to YHWH without interruption is one of the conditions on which YHWH will be present at the sanctuary. For taking up his residence in the sanctuary, it is necessary that he feels himself at home there in every respect. Dwelling in the sanctuary must be a great pleasure to him.

The altar on which to burn incense has to be put in the Holy Place before the Veil in front of the Ark in the Holy of Holies (Ex. xxx 6, 36, xl 5). So the following effect is produced: the spreading of the fragrance of incense forms an atmospheric curtain which protects the place of YHWH’s revelation (Ex. xxv 22, xxx 6; Lev. xvi

16 See the literature in n. 14. Spices were also used for the care of the dead (2 Chron. xvi 14; Mark xvi 1; Luke xxiii 56, xxiv 1). Does the end of 2 Chron. xvi 14 refer to the burning of the spices (cf. Jer. xxxiv 5; 2 Chron. xxi 19)? Was it done in honour of the dead? Cf. J. Wellhausen, Reste arabischen Heidentums (Berlin and Leipzig, 1927), pp. 177-8; S. Krauss, Talmudische Archäologie I (Leipzig, 1910), p. 237.

17 The threatening stench which must be kept at a distance has been thought to be the stench resulting from the slaughtering of the sacrificial animals in the holy place. See with C.C.W.F. Bähr, Symbolik des Mosaischen Cultus I (Heidelberg, 1874), pp. 552-3; N. Leibowitz, Studies in Shemot (Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 506-7.

against possible pad exhalations and fumes, which are so pungent that they manage to penetrate in the Holy Places. The protective fragrant curtain prevents their entering the Holy of Holies. There the atmosphere must be unconditionally and permanently entirely pure. To enter, the high priest must be entirely clean (Lev. xvi 3-4). His cleanness, however, is not sufficient. He has to be enveloped in a protecting and screening cloud of incense (Lev. xvi 13), to prevent a collision between holiness and unholliness in case, unfortunately, any impurity still adheres to him at his meeting with YHWH.

To protect the atmosphere of the sanctuary against decay, the altar on which incense is burnt must be cleaned every year (Ex. xxx 10; Lev. xvi 18-9). Obviously, it is supposed that the air outside the sanctuary is full of bad exhalations and impure vapours, which may be so strong that they manage to enter the sanctuary and to precipitate on the altar. The defilement is particularly dangerous for the horns of the altar, the point of contact with the Holy One. Its covering has to be prevented. Further, the incense runs the risk of being infected. When incense is burnt on the altar, bad air can mix with the fragrance of the incense and make it impure. So it will displease YHWH and eventually may be the cause of his departure from the sanctuary. By cleaning the altar this disaster must be prevented (cf. also Ex. xxix 36-7).

YHWH desires to inhale (Deut. xxxiii 10) only pure fragrance. This anthropomorphic concept is the basis of the idea that the time of the incense-offering is the best time for prayer (cf. Luke i 10-11). The words of the prayer mingle as it were with the rising fragrant smoke (cf. Ps. cxli 1-2; Rev. v 8, viii 3-4). God inhales it, enjoys it and so in an excellent mood he absorbs as it were at the same time the words of the prayer. So the prayer stands a good chance of meeting a favourable response.

3. The sacred anointing oil

Similar remarks can be made on the sacred anointing oil (Ex. xxx 22-33). Its preparation and use is prescribed in Ex. xxx 23-5, 31-3). Anointing oil of the prescribed composition is reserved by YHWH.

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for use in his cult. Emphatically, he forbids its use as a cosmetic. Also sprinkling it on unqualified persons is not permitted by him (Ex. xxx 32-3). The fragrance, which is spread abroad by the anointing oil, is determined by its composition. By claiming the exclusive right to the composition of the sacred anointing oil, YHWH reserves its special fragrance for himself. By anointing “his” fragrance is transmitted to his dwelling and its inventory (Ex. xxx 26-9) and to the priests, devoted to his service (Ex. xxx 30). So YHWH’s fragrance becomes attached to his house and his attendants. So they are marked by his personality. Their exclusive belonging to YHWH is expressed for an organ of sense in a perceptible way. Because YHWH’s aroma envelopes them, by nose they can be known as YHWH’s representatives. Persons who do not possess YHWH’s fragrance cannot be his servants (cf. Num. xvii 5). When they fulfil priestly duties, they encroach on YHWH’s holiness. It will be fatal for them (Num. xvi; 2 Chron. xxvi 16 ff.).

Because YHWH’s aroma has imbued his dwelling and its inventory the sanctuary is perceptible as YHWH’s private domain. To use the sacred anointing oil for another purpose than dedication to YHWH is forbidden. It would be an encroachment on YHWH’s uniqueness and his exclusive claim to the sanctuary and its priests, a blotting out of the border-lines between the sacred and the profane, between God and man (cf. Hos. xi 9).

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20 According to rabbinic interpretation the incense-offering is the most pleasant offering before the Lord. For the unqualified, however, it holds a deadly poison. See L. Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews III (Philadelphia, 1911), pp. 293, 305-6.