

The Altar in the Bible

Year of the Eucharist and St. Joseph 2021

I. No altars in Eden

That purpose of an altar is to offer sacrifices to God, and, therefore, to come into Communion with God, as the Bible says many time, “You shall be my people, and I will be your God.” – Jer 30:22

There is no mention of an altar in the garden of Eden, or of any sort of sacrifice. Adam and Eve are ejected from the Garden of Eden in chapter 3, and the first mention of a sacrifice being made is in the very next chapter, chapter 4, which is on Cain and Abel.

Before original sin, Adam and Eve lived in natural communion with God, but the original sin broke that relationship, represented by their hiding from God when they hear Him walking in the garden (Gn 3:8), and their expulsion from Eden (Gn 3:23-24). After original sin, the purpose of sacrifice is to help restore us to communion with God.

II. Altar’s in the Book of Genesis

Exodus 20:25 – altars must be made from stones not touched by human hands.

Noah’s Altar: Genesis 8:20-9:17

After the flood recedes and the Ark lands, Noah builds an altar and offers sacrifices to the Lord. The reason for the offering is to establish a covenant with God. A covenant forms a sacred family bond between God and creation through an oath and a sacrifice. God promises never again to destroy life with another flood, but He also removes the curse caused by original sin. Through this covenant, we are beginning to come back into communion with God.

Abraham’s Many Altars: Genesis 8:20; 12:7; 13:4; 13:18; 22:9

Isaac’s Altar: Genesis 26:25

Jacob’s Altars: Genesis 33:20; 35:1;

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob build stone altars throughout the holy land, the land that God promised to give to Abraham and his descendants. Some of these altars were built for covenants, some to give thanks to God, and some to mark a place where they encountered God. Why do we call this area the Holy Land? Perhaps because Abraham and his descendants have sanctified it by offering prayers and sacrifices in every corner of the land.

III. The Two Altars of the Temple

The Tent of Meeting in the desert and later Solomon’s Temple had two altars, The Altar of Burnt Offerings and The Altar of Incense. Let’s look at the text where God describes these altars to Moses.

The Altar of Sacrifice: Exodus 27:1-8

- made of acacia wood
- five by five cubits square by three cubits high
- horns on the four corners of the altar overlaid with bronze
- a bronze grate
- hollow, with poles on the side to carry it.

The Altar of Incense: Exodus 30:1-10

- made of acacia wood, with horns, overlaid with gold
- one by one cubits square and 2 cubits high
- with rings for poles to carry it
- a perpetual offering of incense

Types of Sacrifices Offered to the Lord:

- The Holocaust or Whole Burnt Offering is meant to glorify God. In it the entire animal is burned with none left over for the priest or the person offering. Lev. 1
- The Cereal Offering is an offering of grains, often baked into cakes. This is the offering of first fruits, for the first harvest from the crops, to give thanks to God. Lev. 2
- The Peace Offering is for a blessing that has been received. Lev. 3
- The Sin Offering and Trespass Offering are in repentance for a sin that has been committed. Lev. 4-7
- The Thanks Offering is related to the Peace Offering, is a voluntary offering because of gratitude to God. Lev. 7.

IV. The Altar Before the Throne of God

In the book of Leviticus St. John recounts his visions of the heavenly Temple, and there are several references to the altar in the Heavenly Temple.

Revelation 6:9 – under the altar are the souls of the martyrs.

Revelation 8:3 – upon the altar are the prayers of the saints, which refers to Christians, not just the souls already in heaven.

Revelation 9:13; 14:18; 16:7 – angels come from the altar or cry out from the altar.

On the altar of God, our prayers and sacrifices, our cries and our sufferings, are placed before God, and from the altar the Word of God and His messengers, the angels, come.

V. The Altar of the Cross

In an audience given in 2018, Pope Francis spoke of the Cross of Christ as “the first Christian altar,” saying, “When we draw close to the altar during Mass, our memory goes to the altar of the Cross where the first sacrifice was made,” and that the bread and wine “signify the spiritual offering of the Church gathered there for the Eucharist,” and in them is offered “the commitment of the faithful to make themselves, obedient to the divine word, a sacrifice pleasing to God the omnipotent Father for the good of all his holy Church.”

Next: The “Our Father” as a Guide to Prayer on August 19 at 6:30 PM.