

Exodus 38:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he made the altar of burnt offering of shittim wood: five cubits was the length thereof, and five cubits the breadth thereof; it was foursquare; and three cubits the height thereof.

Analysis

The bronze altar (מִזְבֵּחַ הָעֹלָה, mizbach ha-olah, 'altar of the burnt offering') of shittim wood overlaid with bronze represents judgment—bronze symbolizes divine judgment throughout Scripture (Numbers 21:9, Revelation 1:15). At five cubits square and three cubits high (approximately 7.5' × 7.5' × 4.5'), this altar dwarfs interior furnishings, teaching that dealing with sin must be massive and public. The foursquare design (רָבֹּעַ, ravu'a) symbolizes universality—Christ's sacrifice sufficient for all humanity, all directions, all peoples. This altar is where blood met fire, prefiguring Christ who endured both bleeding and burning of divine wrath.

Historical Context

The bronze altar stood in the tabernacle courtyard, immediately inside the entrance—the first object worshipers encountered. Its size and bronze construction allowed withstanding continuous fire for burnt offerings. Unlike the golden interior furnishings, this altar's bronze reflected its function: bearing judgment for sin.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. What does the bronze altar's size (larger than interior furnishings) teach about the magnitude of dealing with sin?
2. How does the foursquare design illustrate the universal sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice for all peoples?

Interlinear Text

וַיַּעַשׂ	אֶת	מִזְבֵּחַ	הָעֹלָה	עֲצֵי	שִׁטִּים	וְחֵמֶשׁ
And he made	H853	the altar	of burnt offering	wood	of shittim	five
H6213		H4196	H5930	H6086	H7848	H2568
אֲמַת	אָרְכּוֹ	וְחֵמֶשׁ	אֲמַת	רָחְבוֹ	וְעַתָּה	
cubits	was the length	five	cubits	the breadth	thereof it was foursquare	
H520	H753	H2568	H520	H7341	H7251	
וְשָׁלֹשׁ	אֲמַת	קִמְתּוֹ:				
and three	cubits	the height				
H7969	H520	H6967				

Additional Cross-References

Revelation 21:16 (Parallel theme): And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal.

Hebrews 13:10 (Sacrifice): We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.

Exodus 40:29 (Sacrifice): And he put the altar of burnt offering by the door of the tabernacle of the tent of the congregation, and offered upon it the burnt offering and the meat offering; as the LORD commanded Moses.

Exodus 40:6 (Sacrifice): And thou shalt set the altar of the burnt offering before the door of the tabernacle of the tent of the congregation.

2 Chronicles 4:1 (Creation): Moreover he made an altar of brass, twenty cubits the length thereof, and twenty cubits the breadth thereof, and ten cubits the height thereof.

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