10. **The altar** (*Ezekiel 43:13-17*)

In keeping with both the tabernacle arrangement, and also that of Solomon’s temple, there was an altar in the inner court before the temple: “So he measured the court, an hundred cubits long, and an hundred cubits broad, foursquare; and the altar that was before the house”¹. This altar corresponds to the altar of burnt offering, and it is described in detail in Ezekiel 43:13-17. It comprised four different platforms, which became narrower towards the apex. On the top of the altar was a hearth, and there were four horns, one at each corner.

Working form the bottom to the top, the names of the four platforms are as follows:

1) The bottom².
2) The lower, or lesser settle³.
3) The greater settle⁴.
4) The altar⁵.

---

¹ Ezekiel 40:47  
² Ezekiel 43:13  
³ Ezekiel 43:14  
⁴ Ezekiel 43:14  
⁵ Ezekiel 43:15,16
The bottom

The original Hebrew\(^6\) conveys the sense of a “bosom”. Verse 14 tells us that this “bosom” is “upon the ground”. It was thus essentially the foundation of the altar. It may well have been sunk into the ground, so that its top was level with the ground.

Around the edge of the bottom was a rim, measuring one span.

The dimensions of the bottom were one cubit high and one cubit broad: “Even the bottom shall be a cubit, and the breadth a cubit”\(^7\). We take this to mean that the bottom was one cubit deep, and that it projected out a distance of one cubit with regards to the next part of the altar - the lesser settle.

The lesser settle

This was two cubits above the bottom. As with the bottom, the lesser settle was one cubit wider than the next level of the altar - the greater settle: “And from the bottom upon the ground even to the lower settle shall be two cubits, and the breadth one cubit”\(^8\).

The greater settle

This was four cubits above the lesser settle. It was likewise one cubit wider than the next and last level of the altar - known simply as “the altar”: “And from the lesser settle even to the greater settle shall be four cubits, and the breadth one cubit”\(^9\).

We know the size of the greater settle - it was “fourteen cubits long and fourteen broad in the four squares thereof”\(^10\). It was similar to the bottom of the altar, in that it had a rim round around its edge, which measured half a cubit.

---

\(^6\) Heb. יַעַף - *cheyq*. See Ruth 4:16; Psalm 35:13; Isaiah 40:11; Micah 7:5

\(^7\) Ezekiel 43:13

\(^8\) Ezekiel 43:14

\(^9\) Ezekiel 43:14

\(^10\) Ezekiel 43:17
The altar

This was four cubits above the greater settle. It was twelve cubits by twelve cubits\textsuperscript{11}. From each corner of the altar projected a horn. This corresponds to the altar of burnt offering under the Law of Moses: “And thou shalt make the horns of it upon the four corners thereof: his horns shall be of the same: and thou shalt overlay it with brass”\textsuperscript{12}. These horns were used to secure the sacrifices to the altar: “God is the LORD, which hath shewed us light: bind the sacrifice with cords, \textit{even unto the horns of the altar}”\textsuperscript{13}.

In the description of the altar, two different Hebrew words are used: “So the \textit{altar}\textsuperscript{14} shall be four cubits; and from the \textit{altar}\textsuperscript{15} and upward shall be four horns”\textsuperscript{16}. This top layer of the altar thus consisted of two individual sections - the \textit{harel} and the \textit{ari’eyl}. Since the four horns come from the four corners of the \textit{ari’eyl}, it follows that this must be the top of the altar - the grate upon which the sacrifices were placed.

These two Hebrew words have interesting meanings:

1) Harel

Literally this means \textit{‘hill of God’}, or \textit{‘mountain of God’}. This is an appropriate name for the altar - the centre of attention for worship in the sanctuary - bearing in mind the geographical position that the sanctuary will occupy in the Age to come: “And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the \textit{mountain of the LORD’S house} shall be established in \textit{the top of the mountains}, and shall be exalted \textit{above the hills}; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to \textit{the mountain of the LORD}, to the \textit{house} of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem”\textsuperscript{17}.

\textsuperscript{11} Ezekiel 43:15,16
\textsuperscript{12} Exodus 27:2
\textsuperscript{13} Psalm 118:27
\textsuperscript{14} Heb. הרעל - \textit{harel}.
\textsuperscript{15} Heb. עריאל - \textit{ari’eyl}.
\textsuperscript{16} Ezekiel 43:15
\textsuperscript{17} Isaiah 2:2,3
2) Ari’eyl

According to Gesenius, this word is derived from the root word *arah*, which means “to burn, or to inflame”. He therefore gives *ari’eyl* the meaning of “the hearth of God”.

The word is also found in Isaiah 29, again in the context of the offering of sacrifices: “Woe to Ariel, to Ariel, the city where David dwelt! add ye year to year; let them kill sacrifices. Yet I will distress Ariel, and there shall be heaviness and sorrow: and it shall be unto me as Ariel… Thou shalt be visited of the LORD of hosts with thunder, and with earthquake, and great noise, with storm and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire”\(^{18}\). The prophet’s message was that Jerusalem, the city of David, was to become like an altar hearth, and its inhabitants would be the sacrifice, because of their sins.

Isaiah continues to say that the time would come when the tables would be turned - that those nations who would be instrumental in bringing distress upon Jerusalem would themselves be consumed: “And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel, even all that fight against her and her munition, and that distress her, shall be as a dream of a night vision”\(^{19}\). The prophetic scriptures elsewhere compare this destruction of Israel’s enemies to the consuming of a sacrifice upon the altar: “And, thou son of man, thus saith the Lord GOD; Speak unto every feathered fowl, and to every beast of the field, Assemble yourselves, and come; gather yourselves on every side to my sacrifice that I do sacrifice for you, even a great sacrifice upon the mountains of Israel, that ye may eat flesh, and drink blood. Ye shall eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth, of rams, of lambs, and of goats, of bullocks, all of them fatlings of Bashan”\(^{20}\).

The stairs

If we accept for the moment that the “bottom” of the altar was sunk into the ground, as suggested, then the whole structure would be ten cubits high - approximately fifteen feet. Obviously there must be a way of reaching the altar hearth, in order to offer the sacrifices. Ezekiel tells us that access to the altar was from the east side: “And the settle shall be fourteen cubits long and fourteen broad in the four squares thereof; and the border about it shall be half a cubit;
and the bottom thereof shall be a cubit about; and his stairs\textsuperscript{21} shall look toward the east\textsuperscript{22}. The number and size of the steps are not given. Under the Law of Moses it was expressly forbidden to approach the altar by steps: “Neither shalt thou go up by steps (Heb. \textit{ma’alah}) unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon”\textsuperscript{23}. This departure from the Mosaic precept may be for practical reasons - the altar in Ezekiel’s temple is much higher than the altar of burnt offering in the tabernacle. But it is also an indication that the law of the Kingdom will have significant deliberate differences to the Law of Moses, to emphasize the fact that the Mosaic Law has been fulfilled in Christ\textsuperscript{24}.

\textbf{The altar}

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{altar_diagram.png}
\end{center}

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{21} Heb. \textit{נָעַל} - \textit{ma’alah}

\textsuperscript{22} Ezekiel 43:17

\textsuperscript{23} Exodus 20:26

\textsuperscript{24} “Steps to the altar were forbidden by the law of Moses, Exod. 20:26, wherefore, as the height of the altar of Solomon, and so of the second temple, required some way and method of ascent to the top of it, to do the business upon it; the Jews had what they call \textit{kibbesh}, a way made of earth thrown up, which rose gradually, and led to the top of it, and was about two-and-thirty cubits long, and sixteen broad; but here step or stairs are expressly mentioned, which shew that this refers to times when the Mosaic and ceremonial laws should be abolished”. \textit{Exposition of the Old Testament}, Volume 6, John Gill, page 235

99