

grating

מִכְבֵּר

1. Statistics

Torah: 6. Nebiim: 0. Ketubim: 0. Total: 6.

Attested in Exod. 27:4; 35:16; 38:4-5, 30; 39:39.

2a. Literal Use

Within the TeNaKh, מִכְבֵּר only figures in the second half of the book of Exodus, in the description of the altar of the tabernacle (מִשְׁכָּן 'dwelling place', Exod. 25:9; 26:1, etc): once (27:4) in the building instruction, the other five times in the building report itself (Exod. 35-40). In Exod. 27:1-8 the instruction is given to Moses to build the (א, ט: an) altar (מִזְבֵּחַ) of acacia wood (עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים), square (רְבֹעֵ) , five by five cubits, with a height of three cubits (about 2.50 x 2.50 x 1.50 meters), as a hollow chest (נְבוּיָה, v. 8), with horns (קַרְנוֹתַי) on its four corners and overlaid with bronze. The summing up of the utensils required (v. 3) is followed in v. 4 by the order to make for the altar a מִכְבֵּר, further defined as 'a network of bronze' (מַעֲשֵׂה רֶשֶׁת נְחֹשֶׁת → רֶשֶׁת), with four bronze rings (טַבַּעֲתֵי נְחֹשֶׁת → טַבַּעֲתַי) at its four corners, through which on both sides the poles (בַּדִּים → בַּד) should be put for carrying the altar (vv. 6-7). As to the fastening of the מִכְבֵּר it is said in v. 5, that it should be 'placed' (וְנָתַתָּהּ אֵתָהּ – does the feminine suffix point to רֶשֶׁת?) under the ledge (כַּרְכַּב) of the altar from below (מִלְמַטָּה). The net shall extend (upwards?) to halfway the altar, v. 5b. Although it is not stated explicitly, it may be assumed that it was hooked on the altar so that the altar could be carried by the poles through the rings fastened to the מִכְבֵּר. Such portable altars are attested in ancient Egypt.

Thus the מִכְבֵּר together with the rings and poles, forms the carrying system for the (portable) altar itself. Possibly the grating had the shape of a basket, if we assume that it continued under the bottom of the altar, although this is not clearly indicated in the text. The meaning of כַּרְכַּב is not certain, but it is usually conceived as a rim or ledge (Fr.: corniche, Germ.: Sims).

In v. 4b (and again in v. 5b) possibly הַמִּכְבֵּר should be read instead of הָרֶשֶׁת in agreement with the parallel Exod. 38:5 (לְמִכְבֵּר הַנְּחֹשֶׁת), and with ט and ש (see Section 5 below).

The מִקְבָּר is mentioned again in Exod. 35:16 in the list of items for which a ‘contribution’ (or: ‘offering’, תְּרוּמָה, Exod.35:5) was asked, ‘the altar of the burnt offering, with its accompanying מִקְבָּר of bronze (וְאֶת־מִקְבַּר הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ), its poles, and all its utensils’. In Exod. 38:4-5 מִקְבָּר is found in the building account of the altar, which is a repetition of 27:4-5 (in the order 4a-5-4b); in 38:5 לְמִקְבַּר הַנְּחֹשֶׁת is read, instead of עַל־הַרְשֵׁת מִ in 27:4b, as the object on which the four bronze rings were fastened (see above).

The last two occurrences of מִקְבָּר are in lists similar to that of 35:16, always using exactly the same expression, ‘and its accompanying bronze מִקְבָּר’. In Exod. 38:30, in the list of items made of bronze, it is preceded by ‘(and) the altar of bronze’ (i.e. its covering) and followed by ‘and all the utensils of the altar’; and in 39:39, in the final presentation to Moses of the tabernacle and all its parts, the preceding part is exactly the same as in 38:30, ‘the altar of bronze’, whereas it is followed, as in 35:16, by ‘its poles and all its utensils’.

The somewhat vague descriptions of the altar in the Priestly Code are presumably based on memories of the altar in the Solomonic temple. Although a bronze altar is mentioned in 1 Kgs 8:64 as being too small for king Solomon to bring his consecration offerings on, it is significantly absent in the building account of the temple (1 Kgs. 6 and 7:13-51); only a small altar, overlaid with gold, is mentioned as belonging to the inner sanctuary (1 Kgs 6:20.22, cf. 7:48). The reason for this could be that already David built an altar to the Lord on Araunah’s threshing floor (2 Sam. 24:25, cf. vv. 18, 21). Perhaps the altar which Solomon built, mentioned in 1 Kgs. 9:25 (cf. 2 Chron. 8:12-13), was in fact David’s altar refurbished by his son (so e.g. Gehman & Montgomery 1951, 211; Gray 1977, 253-4). Alternatively its omission from 1 Kgs 7 might be explained as a simple scribal error (so Cogan and Freedman in Cogan 2001, 289).

According to Chronicles Solomon made his burnt offerings on the high place of Gibeon upon ‘the bronze altar that Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, had made’ (2 Chron. 1:5); in the Chronicler’s version of the building of the temple both an altar of bronze, about fifty times as big as that of the tabernacle, and the

golden altar are briefly mentioned (2 Chron. 4:1,19). Moreover, king Ahaz ordered the building of a new altar, modelled after an altar he had seen in Damascus; the bronze altar was moved to the north side of his new altar ‘for me to inquire by’ (2 Kgs. 16:10-16). Finally, in Ezekiel’s vision of the new temple, a description of an altar has been inserted (Ezek. 43:13-17). In none of these passages a מִקְבֵּר is mentioned.

2b. Figurative Use

Not attested.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

4. Cognates

מִקְבֵּר is evidently a *miqtal*-form of \sqrt{kbr} . This root can have various meanings in the Semitic languages (cf. Leslau, *CDG*, 274; *HAHAT*, 526h) but the two basic meanings are ‘to be many’ (Syriac) and ‘to braid, plait’, also ‘to sieve’. Nouns of the *miqtal*-type often designate utensils (cf. *GKC*, § 85h; *BL* 490zε). Since מִקְבֵּר seems to be more or less comparable to רֶשֶׁת ‘net’, only cognates that come close to this semantic field are cited below.

EGYPTIAN: A somewhat exotic proposal was presented by Görg 1985: ‘Could it be possible to see within מִקְבֵּר the combination of two Egyptian elements, the noun *mk* ... “covering” and the Egyptian connection *bj3 rw-d* “bronze”?’ (61).

UGARITIC: *kbrt* ‘sieve’ (Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, *DULAT*, 428; Tropper, *KWU*, 55).

BIBLICAL HEBREW: קְבִיר ‘mosquito net’; קְבֵרָה ‘sieve’. The meaning of מִקְבֵּר in 2 Kgs 8:15 is uncertain, but is mostly described as ‘coarsely-woven cover over a well head’ (cf. מִקְסָךְ in 2 Sam. 17:19).

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: קְבֵרָה ‘Sieb, eig. Flechtwerk von Weiden’ (Levy, *WTM*, Bd. 2, 289); מִקְבֵּר ‘Geflecht, Flechtwerk von Weiden’ (Levy, *WTM*, Bd. 3, 110).

ETHIOPIC: Geez *kabaro* and *karabo* ‘woven basket’ (Leslau, *CDG*, 274, 290).

5. Ancient Versions

Ⓞ and other Greek versions: In Exod. 27:4 the Old Greek has ἐσ-χάρα (→ פא) – *LSJ*, 699a: I. 1. ‘hearth, fireplace’; 2. ‘pan of coals, brazier’; II. ‘sacrificial hearth’; III. ‘fire-stick’; IV. 1. ‘platform, stand, basis’; 2. ‘grating’; *GELS-L*, 182b: ‘grate, grating’ (Exod. 27:4) and ‘hearth, fire-place’ (Prov. 26:21); *La Bible d’Alexandrie* (2, 275), however, translates with ‘foyer’ (hearth) also in Exod. 27:4 (bis). In Exod. 27:4b, 5a.b Ⓞ also reads ἐσχάρα for מן רִשְׁתָּהּ (vv. 4b, 5b) and כִּרְכָב (5a; with αὐτούς [scil. δακτυλίου, v. 4] for מן רִשְׁתָּהּ, cf. *La Bible d’Alexandrie, ibid.*). In the parallel Exod. 38:4-5 (= Ⓞ 38:24), however, מִכְבֵּר is rendered both times with παράθεμα – *LSJ*, 1309b: ‘appendage’ (*hapax leg.*, it seems); *GELS-L*, 352a: ‘sth put alongside sth, an appendage’; *GELS-M*, 527: ‘appendage’; *La Bible d’Alexandrie*, 2, 368: ‘garniture’ <garniture de foyer = ‘fire-irons’?>; Houtman 2000, 443 ‘a kind of trestle’. Here כִּרְכָב is rendered πυρείον (*LSJ*, 1556a/b: [plur.] ‘fire-sticks’; ‘earthen pan’ [Exod. 27:3]; *GELS-L*, 412b: ‘censer’; *GELS-M*, 608b: ‘censer’; *La Bible d’Alexandrie*, 2, 368: ‘brasero’ <brazier>. In Exod. 38:30a (= Ⓞ 39:10) מִכְבֵּר is rendered with παράθεμα. In the much shortened Greek rendering of Exod. 35:16 (= Ⓞ 35:17) מִכְבֵּר is left untranslated, whereas Exod. 39:39 is entirely lacking in Ⓞ (in Ⓞ the text of Exod. 36–40 is much shorter than in מן and its order is different, cf. *BHS ad Exod.* 36:8; Swete 1902, 234-36).

Ⓜ^T: Leaves the word untranslated (Tal, *DSA*, 378).

Ⓢ: Ⓢ^O everywhere סרדא – Jastrow, 1023a: 1. ‘network, grate’; 2. ‘web with wide meshes, sail, hanging’; Dalman, *ANHT*, 300b: 1. ‘Drahtgeflecht, Drahtsieb’; 2. ‘Gitter’ (Exod. 38:4). In Exod. 27:4 || Exod. 38:4 Ⓢ^N translates מִכְבֵּר by קנקל, a loan from Greek κικλίσ ‘lattice, latticed gate’. The other Palestinian Targums have the same rendering.

Ⓢ: Exod. 27:4, 38:4.30, 39:39 *qarqel* – Payne Smith, *TS*, 3760: *craticula*; Payne Smith (Margoliouth), *CSD*, 521^b: ‘a grating’; according to Sokoloff, *SLB*, 1416 ‘grated cover’, < Latin *cracli*, a vulgar form of *clatri*, *clathri* which in turn was borrowed from Greek κλειθρα / κληθρα ‘bars, fences’ (cf. *LSJ*, 957). In Exod. 27:4b, 5b Ⓢ also uses *qarqel* for מן רִשְׁתָּהּ, cf. *ad* Ⓞ.

Exod. 35:16; 38:5 *bases* – Payne Smith, *TS*, 552: ‘basis’; *bases d^e madbeha* ‘craticula altaris’; Brockelmann, *LS*, 81: ‘basis’; Payne Smith (Margoliouth), *CSD*, 49a: ‘base, shaft, stem’.

ט: Exod. 27:4, 35:16, 38:4.30 *craticula* ‘fine hurdle-work, small giridion’, derived from *cratis* ‘wicker-work, hurdle’ (*LD*, 478). In Exod. 27:5b ט also has *craticula* for מַרְשֵׁת, cf. *ad* ט and ט; in 27:4b it reads *per cuius* (= *retis*?). Exod. 38:5 and 39:39 *retiaculum* ‘a little net, net-work, lattice-work’ (*LD*, 1586).

6. Judaic Sources

In 11Q19, III.15 the altar in the new temple is mentioned and the מִכְבֵּר is described as being positioned ‘on top of it’ (וְהַמִּכְבֵּר עָלָיו) as against מַלְמֵטָה of מ in Exod. 27:5). This is important evidence showing that at that time the מִכְבֵּר was seen as a structure *on* the altar.

7. Illustrations

In *The New Bible Dictionary* (J.D. Douglas *et al.* [eds], London 1962), 1118 (Fig. 176) a reconstruction is given of the altar described in ‘Lv’ <*sic*> 27:1-8, inclusive of the מִכְבֵּר. According to Kitchen 1960 there exist Egyptian examples of portable shrines (cf. *The New Bible Dictionary*, 1234, and 1231, Fig. 202 [Heterheres]). <de Liagre> Böhl 1028, 171, points to the portable altars which the Assyrian kings took with them on their campaigns; according to Fensham 1970, 195, pictures of these exist.

Although portable altars are attested in Antiquity, no clear parallel of the מִכְבֵּר has been encountered on any of them. However, an Aramaic stela from Zincirli shows a high administrator Katamuwa during a (posthumous) sacrificial meal. In one hand he has a cup of wine and in the other a leg of lamb which is also mentioned in the inscription. The crisscross pattern on the leg of lamb unmistakably indicates that it was roasted on a grating (Fig. 1 on the next page).



Fig. 1: Stele depicting Katamuwa feasting
(after Struble & Rimmer Herrmann 2009, 19, Fig. 4).

8. Archaeological Remarks

Houtman 2000, 447, mentions altars of similar size excavated in Beersheba and Arad. Nowack 1992 experiments with wood and copper/bronze and their results. 9. [More will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

All evidence points to the meaning ‘grating’ (Gitterwerk; *craticula*) for מִכְבֵּר. Moreover, it is specified as a רְשֵׁתָה, a network. As the altar was already overlaid with bronze, this extra bronze protection seems somewhat superfluous. Some scholars see its function as keeping lay-people from contact with the holy altar (Baentsch 1903, 234 (*ad v.* 5)). The translation with ἐσχαρᾶ in 6 Exod. 27:4 could refer to an interpretation of מִכְבֵּר as ‘hearth’ (cf. *La Bible d’Alexandrie*, 2, 275). According to Houtman 27:4-5 6 deals with the making of the fire plate of the altar. The *craticula* of 6 is to be regarded as the grate or grill in the altar (Houtman 2000, vol. 3, 443-4).

It seems to me that its main purpose was to serve as a carrying instrument, possibly in the shape of a basket, in combination with the rings and the poles. Perhaps, when at standstill, it could be turned upside down over the ledge instead of under it, so that it could function as a cover on the hollow wooden structure, and serve as a grate: the offering could be brought on its surface – but this is pure speculation. For other possible interpretations, see Houtman 2000, vol. 3, 444-6.

10. Bibliography

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M.D.KOSTER