

7 (Inc)sensing Revelation

Incense, Senses, and the Agency of Incense Utensils in the Apocalypse of John

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7.1 Sensing the Apocalypse

The series of visions, which unfold in the Apocalypse of John, present the readers'/hearers' imagination with a panoply of sensory stimuli. Yet if one considers only explicit narrative comments, the focus is on the senses of sight, and to a more limited extent, hearing. The author includes remarks on the taste of the little scroll (Rev 10:9–10), but smell and touch are not explicitly commented on. Olfaction, however, albeit implicitly, is central to the manifestation of the divine glory. What is more, in spite of the significance of cultic imagery in Revelation, incense is apparently the only type of offering taking place in the heavenly Temple. The sacrificial understanding of Jesus's death may possibly account for the absence of blood sacrifice in the celestial setting.¹ Still, the conviction that incense is a sort of sacrifice *par excellence* suited for Paradise, or indeed for heaven, is well attested in ancient Jewish literature. It is already implied in the *Book of Jubilees*, where upon leaving the Garden of Eden, Adam is said to “burn incense as a pleasing fragrance” (Jub. 3:27).²

The significance of incense in the book of Revelation may not be obvious to those who only associate it with olfaction, given that the author does not explicitly comment on this aspect. That sight and hearing, but also kinaesthesia, are likewise central to God's own sensorium is implied in the reference to idols in Rev 9:20. The last part of this verse alludes to the characterisation of idols in Deut 4:28, Ps 115:4–7 (LXX 113:12–15) and Ps 135 (LXX 134:15–17). Yet as opposed to Deuteronomy 4 and Psalm 115, the author of Revelation omits the reference to the ability to smell, of which idols are devoid.

In the book of Revelation, however, I suggest, incense *imaginaire* plays an important role in how the author envisages the punishment inflicted on those who are condemned. The author of Revelation utilises a selection of meanings ascribed to incense and incense utensils in the sacred writings of his own religious tradition, while also presupposing the audience's familiarity with the widespread use of incense in the cities of Asia, to construct an elaborate warning against practices he considers to be idolatrous and contrast them with appropriate cultic attitude and behaviour. What is more, using the same utensils to offer prayers to God and to inflict punishment—more specifically

the golden censer, *libanōtos khrysous* (8:3–4 and 8:5), and the golden bowls, *phialai khryasai* (5:8 and 15:7; 16:1–17; 21:9)—enhances the status of these material items which become actors in the drama enacted in the Johannine series of visions. Paying close attention to the materiality of the vessels (the golden bowls in particular), on the one hand, and the set of associations that they evoke, on the other, raises questions concerning the way in which commentators typically envision the scene of worship of the Lamb in Chapter 5.

In what follows, I first examine the scenes in the book of Revelation involving incense and incense vessels, paying special attention to the golden bowls. Next, I briefly comment on the use of incense in the ancient world, focusing mainly on Ephesos, and then turning to the meanings associated with incense in the Hebrew Bible. Finally, I consider the significance of incense vessels in the Apocalypse of John in relation to animate features ascribed to the altar, and the promise for humans that they may become pillars in the Temple of God. Assigning animate features to material items, on the one hand, and promising believers a transformation into pillars, on the other, makes the absence of the Temple in 21:22 less surprising. However, the fuzzy boundaries between material items and other actors in the spectacle envisaged by John are also part of the “unstable epistemology” identified by Steven Friesen (2018) in the scene of worship in Revelation 4–5. What is more, unleashing their disruptive power, I suggest, can support us in the task of recognising “the wild potential of Revelation and the negotiations that occur in the course of domestication and destabilization” (Friesen 2017, 104).

7.2 Incense and Incense Utensils in the Book of Revelation

Incense is mentioned for the first time in Revelation 5, in the heavenly throne scene: when the Lamb takes the scroll from the “one seated on the Throne” (5:8), the four “living creatures” (*zōa*) and 24 elders are all reported to fall before the Lamb, each “holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense (*phialas khrysās gemousas thymiamatōn*), which are the prayers of the holy ones (*hai eisin hai proseuchai tōn hagiōn*).”³ The association between incense and prayers is well attested in ancient literary and epigraphic sources, although in the Hebrew Bible, which is often referred to in this context, it remains mostly implicit.⁴ The specific text from Israel’s scriptures which commentators almost universally invoke, Ps 141:2 (LXX Ps 140), is exceptional in making this connection so explicit: “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.” This, however, is rather misleading, for while in the Psalm prayers represent incense, in Rev 5:8 *incense* seems to *represent prayers*.⁵ The *content* of the prayers is not specified,⁶ focusing the reader’s attention on the affective dimension evoked by the bowls filled with aromatic substances rather than any specific propositional statements. But incense is not the only material element which enables communication with the divine. The bowls which are filled with it play an integral part in this process. Commentators are well

aware that the relative pronoun *hai* (“which”) is feminine, not neuter, and thus grammatically, it is not the incense (*thymiamata*) but the bowls (*phialai*) that appear to be the antecedent of the pronoun. This grammatical point is usually dismissed, with the explanation provided that the feminine form is due to the attraction to the similarly feminine plural of *proseuchai*, “prayers.” Steven Friesen, in his examination of the scene of worship in Revelation 4–5, notes that while most of the objects included in the description of the vision of God come “from the realm of mortal experience,” they are recontextualised “in an unpredictable supernatural setting,” suggesting to the audience that “the objects are not what they seem to be, indeed, that visible appearances are not reliable” (Friesen 2018, 16). He then connects the “subversive visuality” with the nature of “the indescribable deity.” As a result of the latter, “an unstable epistemology ripples out into all objects and events” (Friesen 2018, 17). Friesen lists the “Golden bowls that are prayers of the saints” among the objects which “challenge a referential epistemology” in this context. In a footnote, he further comments, “This image in 5:8 probably likens the incense in the bowls to prayers, but the infelicitous grammar of the sentence technically equates the bowls to prayers” (Friesen 2018, 16, n. 36). While it might be true that identifying bowls with incense is not intended, Friesen is right to include the golden bowls in his list. Regardless of the intention, the effect, I contend, is consistent with the role that (imagined) material objects play in the text, and the fuzzy boundaries between the different types of actors in the narrative.

While Aune (1997, 358) correctly notes that in Rev 5:8 the bowls are used to “contain incense,” some other interpreters envisage in this verse a cloud of incense which ascends and moves towards the Lamb and the throne when incense is being burnt. The following quote from Torleif Elgvin exemplifies this well: “Revelation 5:8 and 8:3f describe the prayers of the holy ones (viz. the believers on earth) as incense rising before God’s heavenly throne, conveyed through the censers of heavenly beings” (Elgvin 2009, 261). While Rev 8:3–4 indeed explicitly refers to the “smoke” and the “censer,” Rev 5:8 does not. Here incense is contained in golden bowls, and it is doubtful whether indeed incense could be *burnt* in these.

A *phialē* in Greek epigraphic and literary sources typically denotes a shallow bowl without a foot or handle, but with a mound/a central concavity, for better handling. The mound is called an *omphalos* or *mesomphalos*. *Phialai* can be made of bronze, silver, or gold,⁷ but also of clay, glass, or even marble. Milette Gaifman notes, “neither current terminology nor ancient language is always consistent. In modern scholarship, the term ‘*phiale*’ is used on occasion for a handle-less bowl without the middle mound, and in some rare cases a bowl with handles is labelled a *phiale*” (Gaifman 2018, 452). There is even more confusion with regard to what is commonly considered to be the Latin equivalent of *phialē*, namely, *patera*. Yet in Greek, Gaifman stresses, “overwhelming evidence suggests a general correlation between the ancient term and this particular object” (Gaifman 2018, 453). *Phialai* are regularly listed among cultic utensils also in Greek worship, often as votive offerings brought

to the sanctuary by worshippers. They are most commonly associated with libations, although use for ritual purifications is also attested. Since libations and incense offerings often preceded animal sacrifices, iconographic sources depicting sacrificial processions may include both *phialai* and censers (*thymiatēria*).⁸

Phialai can occasionally be used for drinking, which as a rule begins with a libation. There is only limited evidence that *phialai* could contain unguents.⁹ They are not *typically* used for incense, as opposed to what some commentators claim, although Flavius Josephus, in his description of the tabernacle built by Moses, does mention “two golden bowls filled with frankincense” (*phialai duo khryseai libanou plēreis*), apparently placed above the loaves on the table of presence (*A.J.* 3.143). The Septuagint does not refer to *phialai* in connection with frankincense, but golden, or at other times silver or bronze *phialai* are listed among the utensils associated with the tabernacle, and later the Jerusalem Temple, cult. *Phialē* as a rule is a Greek rendering of the Hebrew word *mizraq*, apart from the Song of Songs, where a different phrase (*arugat ha-bosem*), is twice (5:13 and 6:2) rendered as *phialai tou arōmatos*. While in this case, the *arōma* does not refer to incense, it is nonetheless the only place in the Old Greek version of the Jewish scriptures where a *phialē* is associated with an aromatic substance.

A curious feature of the iconography of a *phialē*, attested throughout Greek and Roman antiquity, is the depiction of gods and goddesses performing a libation with a *phialē*—curious if we think of libations as part of worship. In the Hellenistic period when kings, and later in the Roman period, Roman emperors, are portrayed on the obverse of a coin, the reverse often includes a deity (or several), also frequently presented with a *phialē*.¹⁰ In the pottery from the classical period images of deities holding both a *phialē* and a *thymiatērion* are well attested.¹¹ In cultic practice there is thus a clear distinction between vessels used for libations and censers to burn incense, although incense could also be directly sprinkled on an altar. For storage and transportation, incense boxes would typically be used.

While all the above can account for the visual associations that the mention of *phialai* in Rev 5:8 would have evoked, including imperial cult and, certainly in Ephesos, the Artemisian mysteries, one must not underestimate the tactile dimension. In her insightful study on *phialē* as an embodied object, Gaifman observes: “When used, whether for libations or drinking, it [*phialē*] becomes part of its handler’s body: it is embodied in the sense of being integrated in the body” (Gaifman 2018, 456). This is because of the *phialē*’s distinctive feature, the *omphalos*, necessitating a firm and tight grip of the bowl. To quote Gaifman (2018, 446–447) again,

Once I had picked up the vessel and held it securely in my palm, it felt surprisingly light and was easy to angle in various directions in a fluid motion ... Upon inserting my fingers inside the mound, I became aware of finger-shaped impressions in the clay, which the professional ceramicist

proposed were the impressions of the potter's fingers. I could use these as guides for placing my own fingers and thereby comfortably secure my grip. No foot, spout or handle directed my movement of the *phialē*; only my arm and wrist. Clasped by its internal hollow, the bowl became analogous to a glove or prosthesis.

With this in mind, it is difficult to imagine how one could hold tightly a golden *phialē* with burning coal as Rev 5:8 is often envisaged. When not paying attention to the material qualities of the vessel, interpreters tend to overlook the fact that offering incense in a golden *phialē* may simply not be feasible. Furthermore, we note that in Rev 5:8 the elders fall before the Lamb, each holding a harp and a golden bowl filled with incense, requiring a high level of balance and skill in order not to spill incense. Here Gaifman's remark on how easy it was to angle the *phialē* "in various directions in a fluid motion" may be of relevance, yet Gaifman's *phialē* was empty. If incense was not being burnt, it presumably still exuded scent, albeit not as strong as it would have otherwise. There is also no smoke in Rev 5:8 which invariably accompanies the burning of incense, providing some visibility to the otherwise invisible aroma.

Margaret Kenna in her study on "Why Does Incense Smell Religious?" has suggested that "incense, or any other fragrant smoke, is both a medium of inter-connectedness with the transcendent world and a symbol of it" (Kenna 2005, 15). This may well account for the instances where incense is burnt and associated with prayer. Yet in Rev 5:8, it is not smoke, but the worshipper's tight grip on the *phialē*, thus a tactile experience, and via *phialē*, also fragrant incense which has not yet undergone transformation, that provides that connection. The Greek word *omphalos* means "navel," but also, "umbilical cord," a term, as Gaifman remarks, "consonant with the mound's function in attaching the bowl to the body" (Gaifman 2018, 455). Paradoxically, thus, the readers/hearers, whose sense of security in everyday experience is likely to be challenged by the subversive visuality as identified by Friesen, are at the same time reminded of the role of other senses in worshipping the "indescribable deity": kinaesthesia as they follow the acrobatic movements of the elders, as well as haptics and olfaction, as they imagine their tight grip of the *phialē* and the invisible aroma of incense, with for now only a hint at the connection to the deity, to be fully consummated only when incense is burnt.

Incense is only reported to be burning in the scene of worship in Rev 8:1–4. The scene begins after the seventh seal has been opened. The offerings depicted here take place in complete silence (cf. v. 1), there are thus no songs accompanying this part of worship, probably reflecting the precarious nature of incense offering, to which I will return below. Only later do the seven angels blow their trumpets (cf. v. 6).¹² In v. 3 an angel with a golden censer (*ekhōn libanōton khrysoun*) is reported to stand at the altar (*epi tou thysiastēriou*), where he is given a great quantity of incense (*thymiamata polla*) in order to offer it on behalf of, or simultaneously with,¹³ the "prayers of all the holy ones" (*tais*

proseuchais tōn hagiōn pantōn). In the subsequent verse, the smoke of incense (*ho kapnos tōn thymiamatōn*), again *tais proseuchais tōn hagiōn*, is said to ascend before God from the angel's hand. The smoke ascending before God is reminiscent of Is 6:4, where the smoke is said to fill the entire throne room. If by prayers we are to understand the cries of the souls from under the altar (cf. Rev 6:9–10), their content will have been specified by now. Presumably the reference to “all the holy ones” includes the multitude of those “robed in white,” standing before the throne and before the Lamb (Rev 7:9), so it is not limited to those “under the altar.” Thus, incense again conveys more than verbal communication.

The angel's offering takes place at the altar, but it is performed in a censer, implying additional movement. There is apparently only one altar in the heavenly Temple as envisaged in Revelation.¹⁴ It is golden and it is situated in the vicinity of God's throne, imitating the location of the golden incense altar in the Jerusalem Temple. The censer in Rev 8:3 is not referred to as a *thymiatērion* or *pyreion*, the typical designations for vessels used for burning incense in the Septuagint. The term used in Revelation 8 is *libanōtos*, which in the LXX and in other Greek literature, as well as in inscriptions, usually refers to frankincense. In the inscriptions from Asia Minor, the typical term for a censer (or incense box) is *libanōtis*, and much less frequently, *libanōtris*. However, even in this regard, there does seem to be some confusion between the substance and the container in the sources.

In v. 5 it becomes clear why the angel needed a separate incense utensil: the angel fills it with fire (or perhaps incense coals?) from the altar (*ek tou pyros tou thysiasteriou*) and throws it upon the earth, leading to a series of atmospheric phenomena symbolising the outset of the divine judgement. The use of the same censer to entreat God and then to condemn the earth, evoking a set of threatening sensory phenomena, is not accidental. In this way, the precarious nature of incense offerings comes to the fore.

Before I turn to the meanings associated with incense, let me comment briefly on yet another reference to incense in the book of Revelation. The merchants' cargo, which serves as an introduction to their lament over the fall of Babylon in Chapter 18, includes a significant number of aromatic items, such as scented wood, cinnamon, amomum, various spices/incense (*thymiamata*), perfume/ointment (*myron*),¹⁵ and frankincense (*libanos*). This “extensive polysyndetic list of luxury trade goods” (Aune 1998b, 998) is partly based on Ezekiel (27:7–25). Not all of the specific aromatic items appear in Ezekiel's list. While the goods not listed in Ezekiel may indeed “reflect the actual products of trade at John's time” (Beale 1999, 909), the reference to *thymiamata* and *libanos* in Rev 18:13 evokes the scene of incense offering earlier in Revelation 8. While incense is not listed among the trade goods in Ezekiel 27, *thymiamata* (Greek rendering of the Hebrew *qetoret*) appears earlier in three different passages. In 8:11 the prophet recounts his vision of seventy elders, each with his own censer (*miqteret/thymiatērion*) from which the “smoke” or “fragrance”¹⁶ of incense (*qetoret/thymiamata*) is ascending. The

transgression involved in this act refers both to the object of worship, specified in 8:10, and apparently to the actors performing it. In the two other passages where Ezekiel mentions incense, 16:18 and 23:41, it is named alongside the holy oil and it relates to what is presented as the abuse of these two items in the worship of idols. The fact that the incense offering *made to idols* is denounced, but at the same time incense and oil are further characterised with the possessive pronoun “my” (“*my oil*,” *shamnilto elaion mou*, and “*my incense*,” *qetaretilto thymiamama mou*) underscores the suitability of incense offering for the God of Israel. The author of the book of Revelation appears to have had a similar perspective on incense, but by including it in his economic critique of Rome in Chapter 18, he adds a reminder of the importance of incense and other aromatic goods as valuable commodities. How the cultic use of incense and profit that could be made from its sale are related is well illustrated by an inscription from Ephesos (*IEph* 4102), which could be as early as the third century BCE. It mentions how the *neopoiiai* and *kouretes* “operate together ... in some kind of a notary capacity related to the sale of incense” (Rogers 2013, 84), needed both for the everyday operation of the temple of Artemis, and in presumably even larger quantities for the celebration of Artemisian mysteries.

7.3 Incense in Asia, in the Jewish Scriptures, and the Golden Bowls in the book of Revelation

There is no doubt that John’s audience, regardless of which part of the Roman Empire we envisage them to be, would be familiar with the manifold use of incense in their everyday lives. Incense is well attested in various ancient settings, although it is not always clear which substance (or combination of substances) is meant when a generic term *thymiamata* is used (Mehl 2022, 34). While in the past scholars assumed that the term *libanos*, usually translated as frankincense, pertained specifically to the oleo-gum-resin obtained by incising the trunk and branches of various species of the genus *Boswellia*, more recently analysis has shown that traces of *Pistacia* are far more often found (Dodinet 2017). In practice, *thymiamata* and *libanos* are sometimes used interchangeably (Mehl 2022, 37). The burning of aromatic substances is also attested in domestic settings, although in this context, too, burning incense may have been part of worship. In Ephesos in the so-called Terrace Houses, a number of *thymiatēria*, devoted largely to Dionysos or Sarapis, have been found, mainly at the entrances to the houses and in their main rooms. Commenting on their distribution, Norbert Zimmermann (2020, 221) notes, “One can imagine that when guests passed the entrance of these rooms, everyone brought an offering to the deity.” These *thymiatēria* belong to the last period of the Terrace Houses’ use (from the mid-third century onward), but epigraphic sources document incense in Ephesos in earlier periods. We have already mentioned the inscription referring to the sale of incense. From the Roman period, a group of so-called *kourētes* inscriptions

from the Prytaneion, beginning in the reign of Tiberius and ending before the middle of the third century, offer valuable insights into the ritual functions of the *kourētes*, and thus also into the celebration of the Artemisian mysteries. Most of the inscriptions (almost fifty) mention a specialised censer attendant (*epi thymiatrou*), but about half of these only give the name of the person responsible for offering incense in a particular year, without providing additional information. In a number of second-century CE inscriptions, the censer official is characterised as *hieros* (“holy”), suggesting perhaps a heightened significance of the incense offerings. Only in four cases do we read about *Tryphōn akrobatēs epi thymiatrou* (*IEph* 1022, 1023, 1024, 1025). As much as I am attracted to the idea that “this attendant was concerned with incense offerings that were combined with a cultic dance during sacrifices for Artemis” (Rogers 2013, 148; similarly Kalinowski 2021, 108), I do not think we have sufficient evidence to corroborate this. This is not to say that no sacred dances or acrobatic elements were included in the cult of Artemis; there are a couple of other inscriptions listing “acrobats” associated with Artemis which could possibly point to that. However, whether there was a connection with incense is less likely, other than perhaps when Tryphon the acrobat was in charge of the censer.

That incense as such constituted an integral part of the mysteries, however, is further confirmed in the so-called “Ancestral law” (*IEph* 10), possibly dated to the late second century CE (Rogers 2013, 208). Found in front of the Great Theatre of Ephesos, it at the outset states that the prytanis is to “light a fire on all the altars and burn incense/frankincense and sacred aromatic herbs (*ton libanon kai ta hieratika arōmata*).”¹⁷ Interestingly, the text appears to distinguish between *libanos* and other types of aromatic offerings.

The examples from Ephesos are instructive, but we also have evidence of incense offerings from other cities listed in John’s Apocalypse. The inscribed altar from Pergamon, discussed by Steven Friesen (2001, 107–108), is of particular interest in view of its clear connection with imperial cult (*IPerge* 2.374). It is dedicated “To Emperor Caesar Trajan Hadrian Olympios, Saviour and Founder” by “the Hymnodes of god Augustus and goddess Rome.” On another side, the text among others specifies that the *eukosmos* (the one “responsible for general oversight” as Friesen [(2001), 110] suggests) is to provide for the mysteries “a round cake, incense/frankincense (*libanon*), and lamps for Augustus.”¹⁸ What is more, if one of the members of the group were to die, the *eukosmos* was also expected to provide 15 denarii for incense (*eis libanon*), and the slaves of the undertaker were to receive 12 denarii from the common funds for incense (*eis libanon*). While the use of incense in funerary rites may have been of Roman origin (cf. n. 31 in Friesen 2001), such usage (including the detail concerning undertakers!) sheds additional light on the contexts in which the members of John’s assemblies may have encountered incense, providing also further insight into its monetary value.

Taking into account the prominence of incense in Greek and Roman cult, including emperor worship, that John should still consider it a type of

sacrifice most fitting for the heavenly Temple is not self-evident. This is, however, consistent with how incense functions in the Hebrew Bible, where a distinction between a proper way to offer it, on the one hand, and those considered unacceptable, on the other, is rather sharply made. The Apocalypse first presents the readers/hearers with images of appropriate cultic behaviour and attitude, including proper use of cultic items, and only then warns them of the dangers awaiting those who refuse and practice idolatry instead. As Friesen (2001, 147) observes, in Revelation 13–19 “The worship of the emperors ... is the defining activity that separates those who are condemned from those who belong to God.” In this context, not incense as such, but what it evokes, transferred to the golden bowls, I suggest, plays a role in how the author of Revelation envisages the punishment.

We now turn to a brief consideration of incense in the Hebrew Bible. There are no explicit comments concerning its function either in the biblical prescription on how to prepare the holy incense (Exod 30:34–38), or in the passages where the “incense of aromatic spices” (*qetoret sammin*) is listed along with other offerings as a part of the regular sacrificial service.¹⁹ The Pentateuch offers us glimpses of other meanings associated with incense, which, however, are never systematised.²⁰ As mentioned above, the explicit association of prayer with incense seems to have gained prominence only in a later period. Incense, at least as envisaged in Israel’s authoritative writings, served to praise and honour God, and it operated as a means of atonement. It plays a particularly prominent role in the rites associated with the Day of Atonement as prescribed in Leviticus 16. While in the Hebrew Bible, it played an ambiguous role of revealing and concealing in the context of theophany (as in Leviticus 16), in later Second Temple writings an even closer connection between incense and the divine revelation is attested. Josephus, in *A.J.* 13.282, shows that in the first-century incense celebration was considered, as Paul Heger (1997, 187) puts it, “the catalyst for divine revelation, the stage of prophecy.” The function of incense as such a “catalyst” is also well illustrated in the story of Zechariah in Luke 1:8–20.

While extremely holy, incense offerings represented a precarious type of offering. This extreme holiness of incense is underscored in how it renders holy all the vessels with which it has contact, the acceptance or refutation of a given incense offering notwithstanding (cf. Numb 17:3). As for the hazards in dealing with incense, the story of Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu in Lev 10:1–2, is a particularly vivid illustration.²¹ Incense offerings were closely linked with priestly identity, and thus especially fit for cultic ordeals in cases when priestly status was disputed. This was related to the role that incense played in manifesting and executing the divine will and the divine judgement. The account of the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in Numbers 16–17 exemplifies this well. Even as incense could signify or conceal the divine presence, it also had apotropaic power, and it could be both life-giving and death-dealing. In Numbers 17, the incense offered by Aaron literally divides those who are dying from those who are still alive. It is also the extreme holiness of incense, which resulted in its handling being considered

inappropriate unless practised by specifically designated persons, that accounts for the way in which Ezekiel mentions it in connection with idolatry (see above).

As the visions in the book of Revelation unfold, it is the death-dealing associations that prevail. Yet, in Rev 8:5 it is not incense as such, *but the censer containing fire*, or more likely, coals from the altar, that the angel uses to announce divine judgement. The golden bowls which we first encountered in Rev 5:8 return in Chapters 15 and 16 of Revelation, but now containing the divine wrath.²² Whether the seven golden bowls handed by one of the living creatures to the seven angels in 15:7 are literally the same bowls as those which the elders are said to be holding in Rev 5:8 is not entirely clear. But by emphasising that these are *golden phialai*, and that they are filled with the wrath of God (*hepta phialas khrysas gemousas thymou tou theou*), the text appears to allude to the characterisation of the bowls in Rev 5:8 as *phialas khrysas gemousas thymiamatōn*, including the alliteration in *thymou tou theou* and *thymiamatōn*.

The use of the bowls is thus analogous to the use of the angelic censer in Chapter 8: a holy incense vessel becomes an agent of divine judgement. According to Rev 15:6, the angels are robed in pure bright linen, alluding to the vestment which the high priest wore on the day of atonement. In Rev 15:8, the verse that follows immediately the first mention of the golden bowls “filled with the wrath of God,” it is reported that “the Temple was filled with smoke (*kapnos*) from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the Temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were ended.” Constituting yet another allusion to Leviticus 16, the reference to “the smoke from the glory of God” further reinforces the association between the bowls and incense. Interpreters generally agreed that “Exodus plagues are both a literary and theological model for the bowls” (Beale 1999, 201). The Exodus plagues account, however, does not exhaust the multiplicity of associations that the bowls evoke. Resseguie (1998, 101) comments, “In the bowl plagues, John makes the connection explicit between heavenly worship, the prayers of the saints (5:8; 8:3–5), and the earthly plagues that are poured from the bowls. The one (prayers offered in bowls) influences the other (plagues poured out in bowls).” Having first applied to them the untypical function of incense containers in 5:8, and referring to them as being “the prayers of the holy ones,” beginning with Chapter 15, John ascribes to them the destructive power elsewhere associated with incense. The significance of the golden *phialai* is further drawn attention to when in Rev 17:1 and then again in 21:9, an angel is identified as “one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls.”

7.4 Inanimate Objects, Worship, and the Temple in the Book of Revelation

Using the same utensils for prayers offered to God and to inflict punishment on God’s behalf places them at centre stage as agents in human-divine communication, and presents us with an intriguing transfer of meaning, when

some of the biblical functions of incense, connected with judgement and destruction, are transferred to the cultic utensils in which incense was earlier kept or offered. A similar transfer of meaning was not unique to the author of the book of Revelation. We encounter a somewhat analogous phenomenon in Philo of Alexandria, for whom the altar of incense and incense offerings in certain contexts become virtually synonymous, so that what applies to incense, may by the same token be said about the altar. In *Who is the Heir of Divine Things* (Her. 226), the altar of incense (*to thymiatērion*²³) is presented as expressing gratitude (*eukharistian anagetai*) for the bestowal of the elements. As he continues to explain this, it becomes clear that for Philo the thanksgiving offered by the altar pertains to the event of incense being offered on it, encompassing thus incense itself as well.

Philo thus appears to ascribe intentionality and consciousness to the altar, incense, the vapour rising above the altar, and fire. In the book of Revelation, the agency of the golden bowls can be understood in Bruno Latour's (2005, 71) sense of modifying "a state of affairs by making a difference" but, at least not explicitly, by having intentionality and consciousness. However, the author of the book of Revelation attributes these qualities to the altar in the heavenly Temple, too, by giving it the ability to speak: "And I heard the altar say" (Rev 16:7; cf. 9:13–14). What is more, it is possible that a voice is ascribed to the throne as well (cf. Rev 6:6; 19:5; 21:3), although in this case, the text is more ambiguous. Assigning the ability to speak to material objects in a heavenly cultic setting is not unique to the Apocalypse of John. Dale Allison (1986, 411–412) draws attention to a parallel in the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, where parts of the Temple building are also envisaged as involved in giving praise to God: "With these let all the foundations of the holly of holies praise, the uplifting pillars of the supremely exalted abode, and all the corners of its structure" (4Q403 1 I, 41).²⁴ Not in a heavenly tabernacle, but in a post-resurrection setting, we may also note the talking—and walking!—cross in the Gospel of Peter 10:39–42.

In a world where the altar (and possibly the throne) has a voice, it should not surprise us that cultic vessels are given an important role to play. There are other parallels which have been noticed between the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* and the heavenly worship in Revelation, including the importance of number seven,²⁵ as well as the fact that the *Songs* envisage angelic liturgy which includes olfactory effects, too.²⁶ Yet in relation to cultic utensils and olfaction, even more intriguing is a reference to six bowls "to smell" (*lmrh*) in 11Q18 18.1, which is a part of yet another composition attested among the Dead Sea Scrolls, *New Jerusalem*. The bowls "to smell" in *New Jerusalem* appear to be intended for liquids, but as the book of Revelation shows, the function of bowls would not need to be limited to just one substance. The document's interest in odours is further confirmed in 11Q18 22.5, which mentions an "altar for a smell."

While a few scholars think that the description of the Temple in *New Jerusalem* might refer to the heavenly Jerusalem or the celestial Temple, the

majority regard it as a blueprint for the messianic era. In John's Apocalypse, as we have seen, the heavenly Temple is similarly envisaged as filled with olfactory stimuli. As opposed to the DSS document, however, John's new Jerusalem, as depicted by John in Revelation 21–22, seems to be devoid of scents, with an almost exclusive focus on visual phenomena. And yet, it is noteworthy that John is carried there by “one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues” (Rev 21:9), one of the few elements of continuity in what is presented as entirely new. This vision of “the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev 21:10) is remarkable for the absence of the Temple (cf. 21:22). Recurring references to the heavenly Temple earlier in the text scarcely indicate that the writer was opposed to the idea of the Temple as such. The seer's explicit denial of its presence and his wonder at this fact (“I saw no Temple in the city” in 21:22), attesting his acquaintance with other visions of new Jerusalem, in which the Temple constituted the central feature, is sometimes interpreted as an expression of anti-Temple polemic. Robert Gundry (1987, 264) has argued that not only, as stated explicitly in Rev 21:22, the idea of the Temple is applied to God and the Lamb, but indeed the entire city, the new Jerusalem, rather than merely a dwelling place for the holy ones, *is* the holy ones. The promise to make the one who conquers “a pillar in the Temple of my God” (Rev 3:12) supports this reading, also because it leaves some ambiguity as to whether this pertains to the present Temple (heavenly or earthly?), or the eschatological future in new Jerusalem, devoid of the traditional Temple. The latter is most likely, but if so, the use of Temple imagery in this promise blurs the boundary between animate and inanimate objects, preparing the reader/hearer for the role of cultic utensils later in the narrative, while at the same time constituting another point of continuity between the present and the future. If the faithful are to become pillars, it is less surprising that bowls filled with incense *are* their prayers. If the golden bowls, just like incense, can both be agents of worship and supplication and of utter destruction, just as incense and incense vessels can be life-giving or death-dealing, they must be handled with care—not unlike the book of Revelation. But perhaps they, too, can support the readers in challenging the book.

7.5 Conclusion

The motif of incense and incense *imaginaire* in the book of Revelation can be better appreciated if we consider the multiplicity of meanings ascribed to incense in ancient Jewish literature, but also if we take seriously the materiality of cultic items associated with it and sensory experiences accompanying their handling. Incense and material objects utilised to contain, handle, and burn incense potentially involve the entire sensorium, including haptics and kinaesthesia, and thus are not limited to olfaction. But in John's Apocalypse their potential extends further than that, especially when considered alongside other Temple appurtenances.

In her essay “Why Can’t the Heavenly Miss Jerusalem Just Shut Up?,” Jorunn Økland (2009, 104) points out how the bride/new Jerusalem through mimicry “can simultaneously deal with male discourse in order to uncover its mechanisms, and at the same time re-utilize the marks these mechanisms leave on her to create space for the other woman to come.” She earlier notes that in Revelation, “speech belongs to males alone”; the bride, “the only female left,” is only able to utter one word in the last chapter of the book (Økland 2009, 101–102). Økland’s Irigarayan reading of the bride in Revelation is inspiring and refreshing, but the voice ascribed to the (inanimate and grammatically neuter) altar earlier in the text is a reminder that speech throughout Revelation is not the exclusive domain of males (nor is it limited to human and heavenly figures). In the aforementioned exploration of “viewing the divine” in Revelation 4–5, Steven Friesen remarks how the subversive visuality which he has identified is enhanced by the multiple levels of ritual. What is more, the ritual (earthly) invocation of the heavenly ritual collapses the distinction between worship taking place in local assemblies in Asia and that envisaged in heaven, enhancing “the authority of the author, of his visions, and of those who sided with him” (Friesen 2018, 17). Both this and the promise of becoming an integral part of the Temple which is “Lord God Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21:22) would presumably both further enhance the authority of the Johannine perspective and bring the members of local Christ worshipper assemblies siding with John closer to one another in their search for security and reassurance. And yet, the “fantasy imagery, the paradoxical use of language, and the manipulation of ritual” which generated this “subversive visuality,” in undermining standard perception, continue to threaten the audience’s sense of security. Subsequent attempts to domesticate Revelation’s wildness may have at times succeeded in subduing it temporarily, but not in taming it; it still lurks, ready to unleash its disruptive potential.

It is a joy and honour to be able to offer this essay as a token of appreciation for Steven Friesen’s wide-ranging and stimulating scholarship, including his tireless efforts to unleash the Apocalypse’s “creative power at work in the systemic critique” which can lead “to more human flourishing” (Friesen 2017, 103). *Εὐχαριστίαν ἀνάγω, καὶ εἰς πολλὰ ἔτη, Στέφανε!*

Notes

- 1 There is a long tradition of interpreting the image of the slaughtered lamb as sacrificial. This is understandable in view of how John introduces the Lamb in 5:5–6, as Friesen (2001, 190) notes, “by juxtaposing messianic and sacrificial allusions; the conqueror is the one who was slain.” While I am not convinced that there are sufficient indications in the text to interpret the image as sacrificial, regardless of how it is understood, there clearly is no need for animal sacrifice in the heavenly Temple.
- 2 The English translation of Jub. 3:27 is taken from VanderKam 1989.
- 3 English translation of biblical passages is mostly taken from NRSVue, albeit with slight modifications. Here “holy ones” instead of “saints.”

- 4 The connection between incense and prayer became more prominent only in later writings, such as Judith and the book of Wisdom.
- 5 It is not clear to me what Aune (1997, 358) means when he states that in Rev 5:8, “incense is clearly understood *metaphorically*.”
- 6 Interpreters often connect the reference to the prayers in 5:8 with the cries of the souls under the altar in 6:10. However, even if this is correct, from a narrative perspective in 5:8 there is no indication that the content of the prayers will be subsequently specified, drawing attention exclusively to the material items and their relationship to the environment.
- 7 For a particularly beautiful example, see the golden *phialē* currently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/255122>.
- 8 See Block VIII from the East frieze of the Parthenon, which depicts five young women, the first of whom is carrying a tall *thymiaterion*, the next two jugs, and the last two, *phialai*. For the image, see https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1816-0610-24.
- 9 LSJ refers to a sixth/early fifth-century poet Xenophanes of Colophon, who mentions a sweet-smelling ointment in a *phialē: euōdes myron en phialēi*.
- 10 See a silver coin (didrachm) with the laureate head of Titus on the obverse, and Zeus Salaminios holding phiale and resting on short sceptre, on the reverse, minted in Cyprus (76–77), now in the British Museum (no. 1877, 0406.1), available at https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1877-0406-1.
- 11 See two images of Nike, both associated with the Berlin painter: on a neck amphora, now in Louvre (<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010270086>), and on an oinochoe, currently in the British Museum (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1859-0301-6). Note also a depiction of Aphrodite holding two *phialai*, and surrounded by two *thymiateria*, on a lekythos held at the Ashmolean: <https://images.ashmolean.org/asset/10929/>.
- 12 The silence in 8:1 has troubled commentators, leading to a variety of explanations, but as Wick (1998) argues, it is best accounted for by the hypothesis of Israel Knohl to the effect that priestly sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple was in fact accompanied by complete silence. Cf. Sir 50:16, where the trumpets are likewise sounded only once all the offerings have been accomplished.
- 13 The dative phrase (*tais proseuchais tōn hagiōn pantōn*) is somewhat ambiguous. It is not entirely clear what precisely the nature of the association between incense and the prayers is. *Tais proseuchais* could either be a temporal dative (“simultaneous with the prayers”), a dative of respect (“with reference to the prayers?”), of advantage (“on behalf of the prayers” or “as a complement to the prayers”), or of association (“with the prayers”). See Aune (1998a, 512) including relevant bibliographical references.
- 14 I do not see enough evidence to distinguish between two altars in the heavenly setting, *contra* Aune (1998a, 511). Besides 8:3, 5, a *thysiatērion* in heaven is mentioned in Rev 6:9; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7—the term only refers to the altar in the earthly Temple in 11:1.
- 15 I am puzzled as to why a number of English Bible translations, including NRSVue, as well as commentators, without any explanation render μύρον as “myrrh.”
- 16 ῥῆψ is a hapax legomenon; “smell” according to HALOT 2:906, where various purported Semitic cognates, the meaning of which ranges from “(giving off) perfume/scent” to “smoke,” are mentioned. The LXX has ἀτμίς.
- 17 For the English translation of the Ancestral Law, see Rogers (2013, 208). Rogers renders λιβάνος as “incense” but “frankincense” would be another possible rendering, especially if the subsequent mention of “sacred aromatic herbs” is intended to distinguish them from λιβάνος.

- 18 The English translation of the inscription (slightly modified) from Friesen 2001, 108.
- 19 Aside from Exodus, the daily incense offering as a standard practice is mentioned several times in 2 Chronicles (2 Chr 2:3; 13:11; 29:7).
- 20 None of the few monographs devoted to incense cult in ancient Judaism gives a full account of the variety of meanings associated with it, as they tend to focus on historical and/or archaeological issues related to the development of the cult. See Heger 1997; Löhr 1927; Nielsen 1986; Zwickel 1990.
- 21 See also 2 Chr 26:16–21.
- 22 Cf. 15:7; 16:1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17; 17:1; 21:9.
- 23 The word *thymiatērion* in the LXX typically denotes a censer; the altar of incense is referred to as (*to*) *thysiatērion* (*tou*) *thymiamatos* (or *tōn thymiamatōn*). But Philo's text leaves no doubt that it is the altar that he has in mind, and the way in which he employs the term is in line with first-century usage. Attridge (1989, 234) notes that Symmachus and Theodotion also have *thymiatērion* for the altar of incense in Exod 30:1. For a similar use of *thymiatērion* in reference to the altar, see Heb 9:4.
- 24 English translation quoted from Eshel et al. 1998, 272.
- 25 Cf. Newsom's (1985, 49) comment: "The entire composition seems at times to be a rhapsody on the sacred number seven, so that one may simply have in the Shirot a fluctuation between a vision of heaven as one and seven holy sanctuaries."
- 26 The angelic sacrificial cult is depicted only in column 9 of 11Q17, identified as belonging to the last song of the cycle. Due to the fragmentary nature of the passage, it is not possible to reconstruct the details of the angelic worship, but two references to fragrance are attested in vv. 4–5. The first one denotes the aroma of the offerings of the holy ones and the second, of their libations. Incidentally, libations are not included in the worship envisaged in the book of Revelation, in spite of the prominence of the golden bowls. Warren (2018) suggests that this is deliberate, and that libation imagery is employed in Revelation to point to wrong religious practice, and more specifically, to condemn the use of wine in eucharistic practice.

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