

ARTICLE

Is λιβανωτός a censer/brazier in Revelation 8.3, 5? How in the lexicon is this possible?

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Abstract

Λιβανωτός is a rare word in the *Biblia graeca* and means ‘frankincense’. It appears once in the canonical Septuagint in 1 Chron 9.29 as part of a list of ingredients which were under the care of the Levites: flour, wine, olive oil, incense and spices. In the Apocrypha, it appears in 3 Macc 5.2 as a drug, together with unmixed wine, for maddening or running elephants wild. Then it is used only in Rev 8.3, 5 in constructions which made lexicographers unanimously define λιβανωτός as a container (censer or brazier). However, when one examines the usage of this noun in Greek writing at large, he or she observes, not without surprise, that λιβανωτός exhibits impressively stable semantics. Virtually everywhere in the history of Greek, the term is a spice (frankincense). Why then should Rev 8.3, 5 be an exception? The study probes into the claim that λιβανωτός means ‘censer’ in the Johannine Apocalypse, shows how well the regular meaning of incense fits in the scene John witnesses, and draws important implications for the understanding of the text and the lexicographical task.

Keywords: frankincense; *libanōtos*; Rev 8.3–5; lexicography; semantics; NT Greek

1. Introduction

The Apocalypse of John is known for its linguistic peculiarities. The present study tackles one instance in which NT lexicographers have unwittingly ascribed a meaning to λιβανωτός (a noun John employs in Rev 8.3, 5) virtually absent from Greek. In the introductory scene to the seven trumpets, an angel comes to the fore. He stands at the altar while holding a λιβανωτόν χρυσοῦν. The noun is extremely rare in the *biblia graeca*. In the NT, it is used exclusively in Rev 8.3, 5. In the Septuagint, there is only one use with the sense of frankincense in 1 Chron 9.29.¹ In the apocrypha, it only appears in 3 Macc 5.2, where it is used with the same meaning. This sense comes from the incense tree (λίβανος) from which frankincense was extracted. Sometimes λίβανος invades the semantics of λιβανωτός, as it simply means the fragrant gum² (cf. Rev 18.13, where λίβανος is

¹ What is called ‘incense’ refers to a powder made of several species of *Boswellia*, a plant of South-Eastern Arabian origin and from Somaliland. The English term ‘frankincense’ comes from an Old French term, and it distinguishes in translation from ‘incense’ just for the sake of signalling different Hebrew/Greek terms. In fact, it is substantially the same kind of product, although made of different plants. W. T. Thiselton-Dyer, ‘Origin of Incense’, *Nature*, 85(2155) (1911) 507–8. doi:10.1038/085507d0.

² A work from the first century (60s–70s) covering semantic differences between synonyms explains that λίβανος μὲν γὰρ κοινῶς καὶ τὸ δένδρον καὶ τὸ θυμιώμενον, λιβανωτός δὲ μόνον τὸ θυμιώμενον (‘λίβανος usually means both the fruit/tree and that which is burned, whereas λιβανωτός means only that which is burned’):

part of a list of perfumes alongside myrrh).³ The noun λίβανος⁴ is amply used in LXX for incense alongside θυμίαμα.⁵ The difference between the two will be tackled later. What drove scholars to identify λιβανωτός with a censer in Rev 8.3, 5? The short answer is contextual considerations, as follows.

First, the adjectival modifier χρυσοῦς seems to suggest that λιβανωτός is of metal constitution. Second, it was noticed that John used θυμίαμα in the same context (cf. Rev 5.8; 8.3–4; 18.13), another common term for incense. Why should he use two terms for the same reality? Third, in 8.5 we are told that the angel fills the λιβανωτός with fire from the altar.⁶ This would suggest that λιβανωτός is a container. Despite these keen observations, one should ask whether they are enough to establish a new sense of the word, one that differs from the diachronically verified meaning of λιβανωτός as ‘frankincense’. Indeed, as will be shown below, the history of the Greek language, from Ancient to modern Greek, shows an impressively fixed meaning. Therefore, this study probes into the claim that λιβανωτός means ‘censer’ only in Revelation 8.3, 5, against the established backdrop.

2. The semantic range of λιβανωτός

After going over about 1,000 occurrences of the term in Greek writings, I was surprised to see an incredibly stable meaning. At its core, λιβανωτός is a spice. Two Greek lexicographers, living one millennium apart, explain it as the fruit of λίβανος (incense plant) which was burned to fumes.⁷ The only variation I found was regarding the context of its use. Frankincense was used in worship, cosmetics, and medicine. The data below counts as evidence.

Philo (20 BCE–50 CE) describes λιβανωτός as filling the nostrils⁸ and that it was one of the raw ingredients – the transparent resin (διαφανῆ λιβανωτόν) – from which incense (θυμίαμα) was made.⁹ Describing the temple services, Josephus (37–100 CE) mentions two golden bowls λιβανωτοῦ γεμόντων (‘filled with frankincense’).¹⁰ Diogenes Laertius (180–240 CE) describes the Greek philosopher Menedemus (345–261 BCE) as being nervous

Ammonius, *De adfinium vocabulorum differentia* (= *Περὶ ὁμοίων καὶ διαφορῶν λέξεων*) 301.1–3. In *Ammonii qui dicitur liber de adfinium vocabulorum differentia* (ed. K. Nickau; Leipzig: Teubner, 1966). This distinction is confirmed in the second century in Phrynichus, *Eclogae* 157.1–4: see *Die Ekloge des Phrynichos* (ed. E. Fischer; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1974) 60–109. A Byzantine lexicon of the 10th century distinguishes between λιβανωτός and λίβανος thus: the former is ὁ καρπὸς τοῦ λιβάνου, λίβανος δὲ αὐτὸ τὸ φυτόν (‘the fruit of the λίβανος, whereas the λίβανος is the very plant’). Suda, *Lexicon* 486.1. In *Suidae lexicon* (4 vols; ed. A. Adler; Leipzig: Teubner; *Lexicographi Graeci* 1.1–1.4, 1.1:1928 (1971); 1.2:1931 (1967); 1.3:1933 (1967); 1.4:1935 (1971)).

³ G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (vol. 4; Murrickville: Southwood Press, 1997) 130.

⁴ E.g., Ex 30.34; Lev 2.1–2, Num 5.15; Jos 11.17; Jud. 3.3; 9.15; 1 Kgs 2.46; 2 Kgs 14.9; 1 Es 4.48; 5.53; Ezra 3.7; Neem 13.5, 9; Psa 28.5–6; Song 3.6, 9; Sir 24.13, 15; Hos 14.6–8; Nah 1.4; Hab 2.17; Zech 10.10; Isa 2.13; Jer 6.20; 17.26; 18.14; Bar 1.10; Ezek 17.3; 27.5; etc.

⁵ E.g. Gen 37.25; 43.11; Ex 30.1, 7–9; Lev 4.7, 18; Num 4.16; Deut 33.10; 1 Sam 2.28–9; 3.14; 1 Chron 6.34; 28.18; 2 Chron 2.3; Tob 6.17; 8.2; 1 Macc 4.49; 2 Macc 2.5; 10.3; Psa 65.15; 140.2; Prov 27.9; Sir 45.16; 49.1; Mal 1.11; Isa 1.13; 39.2; Jer 17.26; 51.21; Ezek 8.11; 16.18; Dan 3.38; etc.

⁶ Theodore Zahn contends that λιβανωτός means ‘Rauchfaß’ (censer), a result which derives from the attribute χρυσοῦν, from the verbs λαμβάνειν (εἰληφεν) and γεμίζειν (ἐγγέμισεν) (v. 5), and from the fact that λιβανωτός comes next to θυμίαματα. Theodor Zahn, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (vol. 2; Leipzig: Erlangen, 1926) 383.

⁷ Ammonius, *De adfinium vocabulorum differentia* (= *Περὶ ὁμοίων καὶ διαφορῶν λέξεων*) 301.1–3. Suda, *Lexicon* 486.1.

⁸ Philo, *De ebrietate* 87. ‘The Works of Philo: Greek Text with Morphology’ (ed. Peder Borgen, Kåre Fuglseth, and Rold Skarsten; Bellingham: Logos Bible Software, 2005), electronic ed. (Verbum 9).

⁹ Philo, *Her* 197. Cf. *Her* 226; *De somniis* 2.74; *Spec* 1.175, 275, 3.56. Philo, *Philo*, The Loeb Classical Library 3 (trans. F. H. Colson, G. H. Whitaker and J. W. Earp; London: William Heinemann, 1929–1962).

¹⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.256. In *Flavii Iosephi opera* (vols. 1–4; ed. B. Niese; Berlin: Weidmann, 1:1887; 2:1885; 3:1892; 4:1890, 1955).

in public, so much so that τὸν λιβανωτὸν τιθεὶς διήμαρτε τοῦ θυμιατηρίου¹¹ ('when offering the frankincense, he would actually miss the censer¹²'). The burning of λιβανωτός was common¹³ in Greek worship and also in the Roman empire. Dio Cassius tells us how Nerva went up to the Capitol and offered frankincense (λιβανωτόν).¹⁴ Gus Van Beek¹⁵ tells us that incense was predominantly used in religious rituals, public or private, in most of the nations in antiquity. Plenty of censers have been found in many archaeological sites in Palestine, Mesopotamia, Assyria, Egypt, and the Greco-Roman Empire.

Among Greeks and Romans, incense was also used as perfume and medicine for treating various illnesses. Herodotus (484–425 BCE) includes λιβανωτός alongside σμύρνα among θύωματα (spices)¹⁶ and the first two with κασία among θυμιάματα.¹⁷ In *MPoly* 15.2, λιβανωτός is a condiment, an ἀρώμα. Origen (184–253 CE) speaks about the incense that the magi brought to baby Jesus, but he does not prefer the term λίβανος, used by Matthew (2.11) but λιβανωτός.¹⁸ Clement of Alexandria (150–215 CE) sets λιβανωτός in a list of fragrant substances.¹⁹ In the context of Sulla's burial in Rome, Plutarch says that women brought πλῆθος ἀρωμάτων (a great number of spices) which included λιβανωτός πολυτελής (costly incense) and κιννάμωμον (cinnamon).²⁰ The same author counts λιβανωτός with κασία (cassia) among spices (ἀρώματα).²¹ A Greek rhetorician of the second century by the name of Julius Pollux, in an Attic thesaurus, lists λιβανωτός together with garlic and onion also among spices (ἀρώματα).²²

Galen (129–210 CE), a Greek physician in the Roman Empire, is one of the medical authors (like Dioscorides Pedanius, Paulus, Aëtius, Oribasius, Alexander, etc.) that make the most use of the term λιβανωτός. In fact, the great majority of the occurrences in TLG are medical. The noun appears in many medical prescriptions. As an example, for curing a wounded eye, Galen recommends τὸ διὰ τοῦ λιβανωτοῦ κολλύριον ('the salve

¹¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum* 2.131.6. In *Diogenis Laertii vitae philosophorum* (2 vols; ed. H. S. Long; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964 (1966)).

¹² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (ed. R. D. Hicks; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) 263.

¹³ Lucianus, *De sacrificiis* 2.16; 12.4. In *Lucian* (vol. 3; ed. A. M. Harmon; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921 (1969)) 154–70. Lucianus, *Prometheus* 19.3. In *Lucian* (vol. 2; ed. A. M. Harmon; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915 (1960)).

¹⁴ Cassius Dio, *Historiae Romanae (versio 1 in volumine 3)* 68.3.4.5. In *Cassii Dionis Cocceiani historiarum Romanarum quae supersunt* (vol. 3; ed. U. P. Boissevain; Berlin: Weidmann, 1901 (1955)).

¹⁵ Gus W. Van Beek, 'Frankincense and Myrrh', *The Biblical Archaeologist* 23, no. 3 (1960) 70–95 (esp. 82–83). Accessed 21 December 2020. doi:10.2307/3209285.

¹⁶ Herodotus, *Historiae* 2.40.11. In *Hérodote, Histoires* (9 vols.; ed. Ph.-E. Legrand; Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1932–1968).

¹⁷ Herodotus, *Historiae* 2.86.19. The same is true for Galenus, *De instrumento odoratus* 3.9.2. In *Galenus de instrumento odoratus* (ed. J. Kollesch; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964).

¹⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.80 (PG 11.772).

¹⁹ Clem. Al., *Stromata* 8.9; cf. 4.32 (PG 11.600).

²⁰ Plutarchus, *Sulla* 38.2.2–7. In *Plutarch's lives* (vol. 4; ed. B. Perrin; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968 (1916)).

²¹ Plutarchus, *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* 179.9 (in *Plutarchi moralia*, vol. 2.1; ed. W. Nachstädt; Leipzig: Teubner, 1935 (1971));

De Pythiae oraculis 397.5 (in *Plutarchi moralia*, vol. 3; ed. W. Sieveking; Leipzig: Teubner, 1929 (1972)); *Quaestiones convivales* 623.10 (*Plutarchi moralia*, vol. 4; ed. C. Hubert; Leipzig: Teubner, 1938 (1971)); cf. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 2.1.73.16 (in *Athenaei dipnosophistarum epitome*, vols. 2.1–2.2; ed. S. P. Peppink; Leiden: Brill, 1937 (1939)); Dionysius Halicarnassensis, *Antiquitates Romanae* 7.72.13.4 (in *Dionysii Halicarnasei antiquitatum Romanarum quae supersunt*, 4 vols; ed. K. Jacoby; Leipzig: Teubner, 1967).

²² Julius Pollux, *Onomasticon* 9.47.8. In *Pollucis onomasticon* (2 vols; ed. E. Bethe; Leipzig: Teubner, 9.1:1900; 9.2:1931 (1967)).

made of frankincense').²³ Frankincense has been used from antiquity to this day in treating rheumatism, muscle stress, inflammations, wounds, and infections, to name a few.²⁴

The same is generally true in the papyri, where λιβανωτός is a sweet herb used in commerce, embalment, and worship.²⁵ In classical inscriptions, too, λιβανωτός is the content of the censer (θυμιατήριον λιβανωτοῦ²⁶), not the censer itself. It is a perfumed aroma used in various cultic settings in Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and Egypt.²⁷

Along with this long-standing meaning, I found an isolated and late use of λιβανωτός which stands out. An anonymous Byzantine lexicographer from mid-12th century Constantinople wrote that some Athenians explained a small cup (κύλιξ/κυλικνίδες) by synonyms such as πυξίς (box), others by λιβανωτός, still others by ἄγγειον κεραμεία²⁸ (ceramic vessel).²⁹ About a century later, Pseudo-Zonaras, a comprehensive Byzantine lexicon, written in Constantinople between 1204 and 1253, defines κυλίχνη (small cups), among others, by τρυβλία (pots) and by φιάλαι (bowls). Then the lexicographer states that κυλικνίδες (a cognate of κυλίχνη) παρὰ Ἀθηναίοις αἱ πυξίδες, ἢ οἱ λιβανωτοὶ, ἢ ἄγγεῖα κεράμεια.³⁰ ('for Athenians means wooden-boxes or οἱ λιβανωτοὶ, or pottery vessel'). It is quite obvious that behind these definitions there is only one source which I find to single-handedly refer to λιβανωτός as a container. Yet, it is a fact that no such (dictionary) usage appears in an extant real context before that time. It is also curious that this gloss perpetuated in some 19th-century Modern Greek lexicons³¹ but did not survive thereafter. The current authorities for Modern Greek lexica (*LNEG* and *LKN*)³² define λιβανωτός as ἡ ρητινοῖδης/ρητινώδης αρωματική ουσία (λιβάνι)³³ (the resinous aromatic substance [frankincense]). Given these facts and that within a range of a millennium and a half around Revelation λιβανωτός means only frankincense, the

²³ Galenus, *De methodo medendi libri* xiv 10.356.9–10. In *Claudii Galeni opera omnia* (vol. 10; ed. C. G. Kühn; Leipzig: Knobloch, 1825 (1965)). For other healing properties of λιβανωτός see Galenus, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus libri* xi 12.60.1–17. In *Claudii Galeni opera omnia* (vols. 11–12; ed. C. G. Kühn; Leipzig: Knobloch, 1826 (1965)).

²⁴ Kerry Hughes, *The Incense Bible: Plant Scents That Transcend World Culture, Medicine, and Spirituality* (London: Routledge, 2007) 121–2.

²⁵ E.g., BGU vol. 2, 362.10.13; 362.12.18. PSI, Vol 6, 628.r.4. OMich, Vol 1, 3.6. POxy, Vol 1, 118.v.20. POxy, Vol 17, 2144.29.

²⁶ Peloponnesos, SEG 1–41 [excl. Olympia] document 11.449, 3. Cf. Peloponnesos, SEG 1–41 [excl. Olympia] document 22.282, A, 13. Varia [Sacred Laws], Lois sacr. des cités gr. Supp. [LSS] document 25, fr A, 13.

²⁷ Varia [Sacred Laws], Lois sacr. de l'Asie Mineure [LSAM] document 37, 11. Italy, Occident, Iscr. gr. d'Italia. Napoli I document 82, 16. Egypt, Paneion d'el-Kanaïs document 72, 9. Ionia, Priene document 210.11, 17. Ionia, Ephesos document 5, 5. Mysia and Troas [Munich], Kaikos document 819, 29. Asia Minor [general], Pergamon 8, 1–3 document 1.246, 12. Attica, Suppl. Epigr. Gr. 1–41 [SEG] document 25.168, 27. Etc.

²⁸ Sic! The two words are in gender disagreement.

²⁹ *Etymologicum Magnum* 544.40. In *Etymologicum magnum* (ed. T. Gaisford; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1848 (1967)).

³⁰ Pseudo-Zonaras, *Lexicon (kappa)*, 1267.7. In *Iohannis Zonarae lexicon ex tribus codicibus manuscriptis* (2 vols; ed. J. A. H. Tittmann; Leipzig: Crusius, 1808 (1967)).

³¹ Nikolaos Kontopoulos, *A Lexicon of Modern Greek-English and English-Modern Greek. Volume One: Modern Greek-English* (London: Trübner, 1868) 241. I. Lowndes, *A Modern Greek and English Lexicon* (London: Balck, Young, and Young, 1837) 382.

³² Peter Mackridge, 'Review of "Λεξικό της νέας ελληνικής γλώσσας" by G. Babiniotis', *Journal of Greek Linguistics* 2, 1 (2002) 254–9, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1075/jgl.2.11mac>.

³³ G. Babiniotis, *Λεξικό της νέας ελληνικής γλώσσας* (Athens: Kentro, 2002) 1009. The definition in the second source is almost identical. For *Λεξικό της κοινής νεοελληνικής* (Thessaloniki: Aristoteleio Panepistimio Thessalonikis, Institutouto Neollinikon Spoudon [Idryma Manoli Triandafyllidi], 1998) see https://www.greek-language.gr/greekLang/modern_greek/tools/lexica/triantafyllides/search.html?lq=%CE%9B%CE%B9%CE%B2%CE%B1%CE%BD%CF%89%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%82&dq= (accessed on 2 September 2022).

peculiar and isolated development of the gloss ‘censer’ must not be read back in the Johannine Apocalypse.

3. Λιβανωτός as altar, brazier, or censer

There are three ways in which John’s use of λιβανωτός in a sentence, in which it seems to play a role other than that of frankincense, has been justified. First, Oecumenius suggests that the term refers to the golden altar (θυσιαστήριον).³⁴ But I see no reason why the writer would set a very clear phrase (τὸ θυσιαστήριον τὸ χρυσοῦν) and a word with such an obviously different meaning in a relation of synonymity. Second, Wilhelm Bousset admits that the common usage of λιβανωτός is ‘Weihrauch’ (incense), not ‘Räucherbüchse’ (incense box), a popular explanation of his time, but then he adds that in the context (e.g., Rev 8.5) the term cannot refer to anything other than a ‘Kohlenpfanne’ (brazier).³⁵ Scholars in this category call the λιβανωτός a ‘poêle à charbons’³⁶ (charcoal pan) or a ‘Räucherpfanne’³⁷ (incense-pan). This identification is based on the two verbs λαμβάνειν and γεμίσειν, primarily on the second. But as we shall see in the following section, the two verbs do not confine the identification of the λιβανωτός to a pan-like object. Although similar in terms of configuration, the third option is more widespread that the λιβανωτός is a censer.³⁸

4. What if it is frankincense? Golden: material or colour?

If λιβανωτός means ‘frankincense’ in Rev 8.3, 5, then several clarifications are in place. The strongest reason for which λιβανωτός is interpreted as ‘censer’ in 8.3 is that the noun is modified by the adjective ‘golden’.³⁹ However, this constraint does not seem strong enough. Why would the noun be decoded from the angle of the adjective and not vice versa? And if we allow the adjective to be informed by the established meaning of the noun, then ‘golden’ would no longer refer to the material constitution since the noun is not a container. To begin with, the adjective χρυσοῦς need not refer only to the inner composition of the precious metal called ‘gold’. Χρυσοῦς can also refer to the outward appearance, to colours such as yellow or amber. Homer (800–701 BCE) writes about

³⁴ Λιβανωτὸν μὲν φησι τὸ θυσιαστήριον, ὡς δεκτικὸν λιβάνου. Oecumenius, *Commentarius in Apocalypsin* 104.11–12. In *The Complete Commentary of Oecumenius on the Apocalypse* (ed. H. C. Hoskier; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1928) 29–260. ‘He calls the altar a censer as being receptive of incense.’ Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, *The Fathers of the Church* 112 (trans. John N. Suggit; Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006) 83.

³⁵ Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1906) 293.

³⁶ Alfred Loisy, *L’Apocalypse de Jean* (Paris: Émile Nourry, 1923) 172.

³⁷ Gerhard Maier, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes: Kapitel 1–11*, *Historisch Theologische Auslegung*, *Neues Testament* (Witten: Stiftung Christliche Medien, 2009) 381.

³⁸ KJV, ASV, ESV, NAS, NIV etc. ‘in Rauchfass gemeint ist’. Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, *Kritisch Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament* 16 (ed. Friedrich Dürstler; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1859) 302.

³⁹ Stephen Smalley argues: ‘Because in the present context John describes the censer (λιβανωτός, *libanōtos*) as “golden”, he must be referring to a ladle-shaped container, rather than the substance it holds.’ Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 2005) 215. See also Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 174. Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1919) 553. *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 2nd ed., *Classic Commentaries on the Greek New Testament* (ed. Henry Barclay Swete; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906) 106.

golden manes of horses (ἔθειραι χρυσαῖ)⁴⁰ and about golden clouds (χρύσειοι νέφοι),⁴¹ obviously in the sense of being included in the yellow colour spectrum. Athenaeus of Naucratis, a grammarian of the 2nd and 3rd century CE, depicts the yolks of eggs as ‘the gold of eggs’ (τῶν ᾠῶν τὰ χρυσᾶ).⁴² Being contemporary with Revelation, Hermas has χρυσοῦς alongside three other colours (‘And the beast had on its head four colours; black, then fire and blood colour, then gold [χρυσοῦν], then white’;⁴³ *Vision* 4.1.10; cf. 4.3.3). If this applies to Rev 8.3, the practical reason why λιβανωτός has been described as ‘golden’ might have to do with the fact that, although a white resin, the gum became ‘yellow at breakage-points’⁴⁴. As Kerry Hughes conspicuously states: ‘Frankincense is a dried resin that is *gold* in colour.’⁴⁵ Although this exact adjectival usage does not appear elsewhere in Revelation, there are similar examples. In Rev 6.4 and 12.3, the colour of the second horse and of the dragon is πυρρός (fiery red) a cognate of πῦρ (fire). In 9.17, the three colours of the riders’ breastplates are πυρίνους καὶ ὑακινθίνους καὶ θειώδεις (fiery, hyacinth-like, and sulphur-like). In all these examples, colours are depicted by association with various elements. The bottom line is that, in Rev 8.3, the attribute ‘golden’ may refer to the colour of frankincense gum, presumably newly broken in small pieces. If the colour is in view, which I think it is, then λιβανωτός is pictured as a raw, granulated, sweet-smelling spice. Portrayed thus, the frankincense acquires a new theological tenor: it brings recentness to the altar setting, perhaps in the sense that God is going to take novel action through the coming trumpets.

5. The meaning of θυμίαμα and its relationship with λιβανωτός

Rev 8.3 delineates the angel-priest as coming to the altar and being given much θυμίαματα, while already having a measure of λιβανωτός in his hand. If λιβανωτός is frankincense, then is θυμίαμα only another kind of spice or something more? As important as this question is, so is the observation that the noun appears in the plural, and it must primarily be searched for and understood as such. In the plural, θυμίαματα refers to spices (תבואה, Gen 37.25) including λίβανος (Jer 17.26; Rev 18.13), to perfumes (תבואה, Prov 27.9; Tob 6.17; 8.2), to fragrant sacrifices (ἀῖμα θυμιαμάτων μου, Ex 34.25 [תבואה]); cf. ἀῖμα θυσιασμάτων μου, 23.18 [תבואה]; ὁσμήν εὐωδίας θυσιασμάτων, 29.18 [תבואה]), and to fats of sacrifices (θυμιαματος καὶ κριῶν [תבואה], Psalms 66.15; LXX 65.15). The association of θυμίαμα with sacrifices of animal origin (cf. Jub 32.4; 50.10) goes through the semantics of the Hebrew תבואה, the most usual of its Semitic equivalents. According to *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, תבואה conveys, alongside incense, ‘any offering burned on the altar’⁴⁷ (cf. 1 Sam 2.28; Psalms 66.15; Isaiah 1.13; 11Q5 Col. xviii:9).⁴⁸ In fact, ‘There is nothing

⁴⁰ Homer, *Iliad* 8.42; 13.24. In *Homeri Ilias* (vols. 2–3; ed. T. W. Allen; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931).

⁴¹ Homer, *Iliad* 13.523.

⁴² Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 9.376d. In *Athenaei Naucraticae deipnosophistarum libri xv* (3 vols.; ed. G. Kaibel; Leipzig: Teubner, 1966 (1965)).

⁴³ Joseph Barber Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan, 1891) 419.

⁴⁴ Λιβανωτός is the regular Greek equivalent of the Hebrew לבנה, which was described in these terms. William Lee Holladay and Ludwig Köhler, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1971) 173.

⁴⁵ Hughes, *The Incense Bible*, 120. Italics mine.

⁴⁶ The LXX rendition of the Hebrew construct is not literal but uses a hendiadys.

⁴⁷ David Stec, ‘תבואה’, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (ed. David J. A. Clines; 8 vols.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–2011) 7.246.

⁴⁸ As fats of the victim for example. Wilhelm Gesenius and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Bellingham: Logos Bible Software, 2003) 731. Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 882.

to suggest that *qtr* is limited to the offering of the aromatic portions.⁴⁹ Θυμίαμα also appears in the expression τὸ θυσιαστήριον τῶν θυμιαμάτων, lit. ‘the altar of spices’ (Lev 4.18; 1 Chron 6.34; 28.18; 2 Chron 26.16, 19; 1 Macc 4.49). In the singular, θυμίαμα usually means incense, a translation of the Hebrew תְּבִיבָה or of one of its cognates (e.g., Ex 30.1, 7–9, 27, 35, 37; Lev 16:12–13; Num 16.7, 17–18, 35, 40; Jer 51.21; Mal 1.11 etc.), but not always. Sometimes, it means spice (תְּבִיבָה, Gen 43.11; מִשְׁחָה, Ex 35.28; 38.25) or perfume (מִשְׁחָה, Isa 39.2). The fact that both terms appear in the same context is also important. Inside the canon, we do not find λιβανωτός and θυμίαμα together, but we find the latter in the singular and joined by λίβανος, a cognate of the former. For example, in Ex 30.34–35 λίβανος appears as an ingredient of the temple θυμίαμα.

Josephus speaks of θυμιαμάτων τε πλῆθος (multitude of spices) that the Israelites brought when materials for the tent building were collected.⁵⁰ He calls κάλαμος a type of θυμίαμα,⁵¹ the latter being, in the context of Numbers 7, a general term for all kinds of spices (θυμιαμάτα).⁵² On the occasion of Korah’s revolt, the ones contesting Moses were called to come with their censers full of incense (θυμίαμα).⁵³ Josephus recalls that Solomon made 20,000 golden censers, to be filled with incense (θυμίαμα).⁵⁴ He specifies that on the golden altar during Solomon’s times 13 types of incense (τρισκαίδεκα θυμιαμάτων)⁵⁵ were burned and that Vespasian’s Rome was like a temple filled with odours (θυμιαμάτων ἀνάπλεως).⁵⁶ As it appears, θυμίαμα is primarily mentioned in worship contexts.

The relation between λιβανωτός and θυμίαμα can thus be circumscribed to the following possibilities. First, λιβανωτός is an ingredient of θυμίαμα, and both denote basically the same thing – incense used in the ministry of the angel-priest. Second, λιβανωτός is frankincense, whereas θυμίαμα is more than just incense. The latter refers to fragrant, that is, pleasant-smelling sacrifices. The Mosaic expression ‘the blood of sacrifices [gr. θυμιαμάτων]’ (Ex 34.25) connects Rev 8.3 with 6.9–10, the latter of which pictures the prayer of the martyred (lit. ‘slaughtered’, ἐσφαγμένοι, 6.9) people of God for judgment and revenge upon the inhabitants of the earth who shed their blood (αἷμα, 6:10). As it appears, the delayed answer to the martyrs’ prayer for vindication (6.11) is finally delivered through seven trumpets, as they hit the inhabitants of the earth (8.5b, 11, 13; 9.4, 18; 11.18). For reasons such as these, the semantic difference between λιβανωτός and θυμίαμα makes more sense than when they both refer to incense. If the former is frankincense and the latter points to bloody offerings, they better fit in the context as the scene unites the idea of perfuming with that of sacrifices.

6. Filling the λιβανωτός with coals from the altar

Another reason why λιβανωτός is viewed as a container derives from the action of taking and filling it with fiery fragments from the altar (ἐκ τοῦ πυρὸς τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου, Rev 8.5b), which may suggest it is a sort of a fire pan.⁵⁷ If it is not a container, it seems

⁴⁹ Ronald E. Clements, ‘קטר’, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fabry; trans. David E. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 12.

⁵⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.103.

⁵¹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.197.

⁵² Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.220; cf. 8.101; 15.61.

⁵³ Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.32.

⁵⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities* 8.92.

⁵⁵ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 5.218.

⁵⁶ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 7.71.

⁵⁷ R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St John*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920) 230.

hard to understand how the λιβανωτός is filled with hot ingredients, yet it is not impossible. The use of the verb 'to fill' (γεμίζειν) would usually require a container but not always. It can generally express the entering of one element into the space of another 'to the extent of its capacity',⁵⁸ hence to occupy, penetrate or load.⁵⁹ For example, a house is occupied (lit. filled) (γεμισθῆ μου ὁ οἶκος, Luke 14:23) with guests; a sponge is soaked (lit. filled) with wine (γεμίσας σπόγγον ὄξους, Mark 15:36); a cargo is loaded (γεμίζεσθαι τοὺς ... πλέοντας, Demosthenes, *Adversus Leptinem* 31.8); a heart becomes 'filled with desire' (γεμισθεὶς ἡμέρου, Philo, *De opificio mundi* 71.4); a country is 'imbued with innumerable iniquities' (ἀδικημάτων μυρίων ὅσων γεμισθεῖσα, Philo, *De Abrahamo* 133.4); an altar is 'filled with unblemished sacrifices' (γεμίσας τῶν ὁλοκλήρων ἱερείων, Josephus, *Ant.* 8.118.2); thunders 'fill the air with noise' (βροντὴν οὐρανὸς καὶ τὸν ἀέρα γεμίζει βόμβος, Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe et Clitophon* 3.2.2.4); herbs are 'laden with dew' (δρόσου γεμισθεῖσα, Valerius Babrius, *Mythiambi Aesopici* 2.128.7); 'a wound is covered' (γέμισον τὸ τραῦμα, Hippocratica, *Hippiatrica Parisina* 258.2). The next example is even more interesting. A 4th century CE recipe required the kernels of seeds 'to fill with olive oil' (γεμίσει ἐλαίῳ, Oribasius, *Synopsis ad Eustathium filium* 3.207.1.3). The same is true for the cognate γέμειν, which expresses the result of the filling (γεμίζειν). Thus, camels are loaded with (lit. full of) various spices (αἱ κάμηλοι αὐτῶν ἔγμον θυμιαμάτων καὶ ῥητίνης καὶ σακκῆς, Gen 37.25); heavenly living creatures are covered with (lit. full of) eyes (τέσσαρα ζῶα γέμοντα ὀφθαλμῶν, Rev 4.6); the scarlet beast is covered with (lit. full of) blasphemous names (θηρίον κόκκινον, γέμον[τα] ὀνόματα βλασφημίας, Rev 17.3); tables are filled with food (τὰς τραπέζας ... γεμούσας, Plutarch, *Numa* 15.3.1).⁶⁰ In all these examples, it is not a container proper that is filled with content, although this usage is found in John, in which case he specifies the object which is being filled (cf. Rev 5.8; 15.7; 17.4; 21.9). But what is filled with fire in Rev 8.5 does not seem to be a container but rather an element.

There are many examples outside the Bible, ranging from classical times to late antiquity,⁶¹ documenting that it was customary in Greek to describe, whether in a physical or a metaphorical sense, an element becoming 'full of fire' in the sense that it became covered with or inflamed by fire. In that sense, the λιβανωτός does not need to be a receptacle in order to be filled with fire. It is simply inflamed, set ablaze or covered by burning coals from the altar. In light of this possibility, in Rev 8.5, it is plausible that something fiery taken from the altar penetrates or inflames the λιβανωτός. At most, by metonymy, one can admit that the hand (or an implied container in the hand), which was holding the frankincense, is filled with burning fragments from the altar (cf. Lev 2.2; 5.12; 9.17; 16.12, 32; Num 7.14, 19, etc.). This would be similar to the instance in which 'filling the/with

⁵⁸ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 191.

⁵⁹ Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed with a revised Supplement (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 342.

⁶⁰ In *Plutarch's lives* (vol. 1; ed. B. Perrin; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914 (1967)) 306–82.

⁶¹ Outside the Bible, the collocation 'to fill / be full of fire' (γεμίζειν / γέμειν πυρός) is not only used with receptacles, but many times without, and in the sense of blazing, inflaming, or covering with fire. The ancient Greek tragedian, Carcinus, relates in the first half of the 4th century BCE how the crags of Mount Etna in Sicily 'were overflowing with [lit. full of] fire' (πυρὸς γέμουσαν ρεύμασιν, Carcinus Junior, *Fragmenta* 5.7). Close to the turn of the 1st century CE, Plutarch has Pisis describing how the copper, in contact with molten copper, becomes 'all ablaze and full of fire' (συνδιακακαυμένῳ καὶ γέμοντι πυρός, Plutarchus, *Amatorius* (748e–771e) 752.D.8). Sometime between the 2nd and the 3rd century CE, *Acta Joannis* 84.4–5 calls an unrepentant sinner 'a blazing [lit. full of fire] fruitless tree' (δένδρον ἄκαρπον πυρὸς γέμον). Libanius's 11th *Oration*, written in 360 CE, describes animal thighs on Zeus's altar, wrapped in fire (τὰ μηρία γέμοντα πυρός, Libanius, *Orationes* 11.86.3–4). Chrysostom writes to Chromatius, bishop of Aquileia (155M), in the spring of 406 CE, of the latter's 'love full of fire' (πυρὸς γέμουσαν ἀγάπην, Joannes Chrysostomus, *Epistulae* 18–242.52.703.5).

water' (γεμιζούση ... ὕδωρ, Pausanias, *Graeciae descriptio* 3.13.3.4) could be omitting the recipient or calling the recipient by its content.

A word is necessary about what exactly penetrates the λιβανωτός. The syntactic formula suggests that it is not filled with proper fire, although many translations take it so (e.g., KJV, ESV, ASV, NAS, NIV). The collocation γεμίξειν + ἐκ requires a direct object, a Genitive of content, and a source (to fill something with content taken from a source). For example, ἐγέμισαν δώδεκα κοφίνους κλασμάτων ἐκ τῶν πέντε ἄρτων ('they filled twelve baskets with leftovers from the five loaves', John 6.13), and ἐγεμίσθη ὁ ναὸς καπνοῦ ἐκ τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ ('the temple was filled with the smoke from the glory of God', Rev 15.8). In Rev 8.5, the Genitive of source is omitted because it can be drawn from the context. It is a *constructio praegnans*. The angel fills or mixes the λιβανωτός with something taken from the fire, probably with burning fragrant embers of θυμίαμα (cf. NAB). The latter would symbolically transfer the 'blood of the martyrs' to combine with frankincense.

7. Redefining the temple inventory and its meaning in Rev 8.2–6: Is there a censer after all?

In the scene of Rev 8.2–6, there is no clear mention of an incense container or a brazier. However, this does not necessarily mean that there is none, but that the content is more important and, therefore it receives emphasis. The smoke ascends from the 'hand of the angel' (v. 4). This expression may be metonymic, and it could have been facilitated by a Hebrew interference, as one term for 'incense container' in Hebrew is יָד (Num 7.14, 20, 26, 32, 38, 44, 50, 56, etc.), which literally means 'hand, palm', and was manufactured in the form of a palm. Many ancient incense burners were shaped in the form of a shallow bowl supported by a hand.⁶² But the hand itself, too, was used in manipulating incense, whether burned or not. Thus, Ezek 10.2 depicts how the man clothed in linen is told: πληῖσον τὰς δράκας σου ἀνθράκων πυρός ('fill your hands with coals of fire'). Likewise, in the Testament of Levi, we read that on the occasion of his investiture as a priest by the seven angels, the seventh angel filled his hands with incense (θυμιάματος) (T. Levi 8.10). Unburned incense was barehandedly operated at the temple in Jerusalem (Lev 16.12; cf. 2.1, 15; 10.1; 24.7, etc.) and outside Israel. For example, Plutarch has Alexander the Great taking incense (θυμίαμα) with both hands and throwing it upon the altar.⁶³

8. The theological-liturgical role of θυμίαμα

Menaḥem Haran⁶⁴ elaborates on the use of incense in the Israelite ritual of the OT and identifies three uses. First, spices are a supplement to sacrifice, which made the latter 'a pleasing odour'. Second, spices are burned in a censer virtually always within the temple precincts, but not on the golden altar, which accommodated a different mixture of spices. This offering was more spontaneous rather than being a part of the regular ritual. Third, spices are burned on the golden altar. These are of special composition and for inner use only. During the First Temple, the inner incense was exclusively handled by the high priest, a limitation which dissipated during the Second Temple and was no longer recognized in the Talmud. The inner incense was burned in a censer only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (cf. Lev 16.12–13) and not on the altar. The inner incense was inextricably connected to

⁶² Kjeld Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel* (Supplements of Vetus Testamentum XXXVIII; Leiden: Brill, 1986) 38–40.

⁶³ Plutarchus, *Alexander* 25.7.3. In *Plutarchi vitae parallelae* (vol. 2.2; 2nd ed.; ed. K. Ziegler; Leipzig: Teubner, 1968).

⁶⁴ Menaḥem Haran, 'The Uses of Incense in the Ancient Israelite Ritual', *Vetus Testamentum* 10 (1960) 113–29.

the other components of the daily ritual. From this very succinct summary, one can see that John's description is reminiscent of the OT ritual. The prophet sees the angel administering inner incense (θυμίαμα) inside the heavenly sanctuary, and outer (frank)incense (λιβανός/λιβανωτός) plus embers of inner incense outside on the earth. The angelic ministry reflects the daily services at the sanctuary, but also the service on the Day of Atonement.⁶⁵

The scene in our passage occurs in the context of the golden altar. An angel-priest⁶⁶ coming to the altar has fresh grains of frankincense (λιβανωτός χρυσοῦς). He is then given many embers of θυμιάματα to mix with the prayers of all saints (cf. 5.8). Whether the dative phrase τοῖς προσευχοῖς (Rev 8.4) is a *dativus commodi*/dative of interest (in favour of the prayers),⁶⁷ 'sociative instrumental' (together with the prayers),⁶⁸ or temporal (simultaneously with the prayers),⁶⁹ the general meaning is that incense seems to be added to the prayers. The content of the prayers is not revealed, but we can guess their character. Most likely, these petitions are imprecations⁷⁰ of all persecuted Christians⁷¹ whereby the cosmic end 'with the punishing affliction of the impious and lawless'⁷² is invoked. David Aune⁷³ accurately points out that the judgments are ushered in by God's answer to the prayers of His people, first the living who are in supplication in 8.4, but also the dead under the altar, whose blood asks for vindication in 6.9–10. From this correlation, we may infer that the saints pray for God's intervention on their behalf and against their enemies.⁷⁴ The mixture of incense and spices combined with the prayers is what matters. Since λιβανωτός is already frankincense, the meaning of θυμιάματα, as argued earlier, might better reflect fragrant sacrifices (not only incense). The verb John prefers to use when referring to slaughter/sacrifice in Revelation is σφάζειν / σφάττειν (the more common post-classical form). He sees Jesus as having been slaughtered (ἐσφαγμένον, 5.6, 9, 12; 13.8), as well as the martyrs (6.9) or the victims of the apocalyptic Babylon (18.24). As the Torah required, animals were not supposed to be slain outside the temple area. During the time of the First Temple, even the animals meant for private use were supposed to be presented to the priest and transformed into peace offerings (זִבְחֵי שְׁלָמִים) before consumption (Lev 17.3–5). Before Rev 8, the slaughtered Lamb is long in the presence of God (cf. 5.6–12). Therefore, the scene at the golden altar seems to address the problem of the martyred saints. Their blood

⁶⁵ For some scholars, Rev 8:3–5 recalls the Day of Atonement ritual being linked to Exod 30.8–10 and Lev 16.12–13. In the second text, there is a clear indication of the high priest combining incense with coals of fire from the altar. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 1111.

⁶⁶ For some Christ. E.g., Tyconius, *Exposition of the Apocalypse* (The Fathers of the Church 134; ed. David C. Robinson; trans. Francis X. Gumerlock; Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017) 90.

⁶⁷ Max Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici 114; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1963) 20. Gerard Mussies, *The Morphology of the Koine Greek as Used in the Apocalypse of St. John: A Study in Bilingualism* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 27; Leiden: Brill, 1971) 99.

⁶⁸ James Hope Moulton, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* by James Hope Moulton, Wilbert Francis Howard, and Nigel Turner, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1998 (2006)) 75.

⁶⁹ C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of the New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959 (1998)) 43.

⁷⁰ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) 345.

⁷¹ Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse* (vol. 2; New York: Allen, Morrill and Wardwell, 1845) 182.

⁷² Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (The Fathers of the Church 123; ed. David G. Hunter; trans. Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou; Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011) 112.

⁷³ David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16* (Word Biblical Commentary 52B; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002) 515. See also pp 512–13.

⁷⁴ See also George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 124. Paige Patterson, *Revelation* (The New American Commentary 39; ed. E. Ray Clendenen; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2012) 209.

(αἷμα) has been abusively and unlawfully shed on earth (i.e., symbolically outside the sacred area) and cries out for vengeance (6.9–10; cf. Gen 4.10), but now the blood of their sacrifices (cf. יִקָּרֶב/αἷμα θυμιάματων μου, Ex 34.25) is being presented before God as a pleasant-smelling offering. In symbolic language, the death of the Gospel victims is presented as well received by God. The vindication of their blood begins with the acceptance of their deaths.⁷⁵ Deeply ingrained in the symbolism used, it is inferred that the martyrs are accepted because of Christ's death since He is τὸ ἄρνιον τὸ ἐσφαγμένον *par excellence* (Rev 5.12; cf. 5.6, 9; 13.8).⁷⁶ The Lamb's sacrifice gives purpose to the death of the martyrs, the latter of which is more like a thanksgiving.⁷⁷ In this sense, the offering of θυμιάματα πολλά is a partial answer to the prayers of the saints. The full answer comes in 8.5.

9. When λιβανωτός and fiery θυμίαμα hit the earth

The angel-priest takes the grains of frankincense, impregnates them with embers of spices from the fire on the altar and throws this mixture on the earth. It is 'on earth' because the request of the martyrs to God regards the inhabitants of the earth who oppose God's people (Rev 6.9–10). But what does the mixture of sweet-scented fragrance and sacrifice signify? Because λιβανωτός is rare, but is virtually identical to λίβανος, in order to grasp the meaning of the former, we need to identify the main gist of the latter. In the LXX, when administered by the priests, λίβανος signifies remembrance (Lev 2.2, 16; 6.15; cf. 24.7; Isa 66.3). From this perspective, reference to λιβανωτός is meant to be read as a calling upon God to remember the prayers of His harassed saints. Two formal observations pertaining to Paul Heger are important here, as they reflect the proceedings in Rev 8.3–5. First, all frankincense, even the one placed by the shewbread inside the Temple's first apartment, was only burned on the outer altar.⁷⁸ Also, as Heger rightly observes, there is no evidence, either inside or outside the canon, that frankincense was ever the basis of an independent offering; it was rather brought in association with the meal offerings.⁷⁹ That is the reason why the angel does not burn λιβανωτός inside the temple but throws it in combination with embers of θυμιάματα on the earth (v. 5).

The second ingredient is coals of θυμίαμα. Since θυμιάματα recall the sacrifices of God's people, which were already received or accepted in 8.4, their use in v. 5 infers that the persecuting inhabitants of the earth are going to receive the same treatment they manifested toward the saints. The gist of the action connotes retribution. Ezek 10.2 reveals how the man clothed in linen is told to take burning coals from between the cherubim and cast them over Jerusalem, an act which conveys judgment. Philo tells us, in his allegorical framework, that the fragrant ingredients of θυμίαμα in Ex 30.34 reflect the four elements of the earth. In this vein, λιβανωτός (in Exodus λίβανος) corresponds to fire (πῦρ).⁸⁰ Building on this, Philo considers that θυμίαμα, being made of all

⁷⁵ Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 457.

⁷⁶ As Johann Bengel puts it, 'The prayers of the saints are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.' Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament* (vol. 5; ed. M. Ernest Bengel and J. C. F. Steudel; trans. William Fletcher; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1866) 237. See also Bede, 'The Exposition of the Apocalypse', in *Latin Commentaries on Revelation* (ed. William C. Weinrich, Thomas C. Oden, and Gerald L. Bray; trans. William C. Weinrich; Ancient Christian Texts; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011) 137.

⁷⁷ Philo sees θυμίαμα as symbolizing thanksgiving (εὐχαριστία). Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 1 171, 276.

⁷⁸ Babylonian Talmud, *Zebahim* 58 a/b. Josephus, *Ant.* III, 10.7. Paul Heger, *The Development of Incense Cult in Israel* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 245; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 88–89.

⁷⁹ Heger, *The Development of Incense Cult in Israel*, 170.

⁸⁰ Philo, *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit* 197.

four elements, symbolizes the world (ὁ κόσμος).⁸¹ If one follows these correspondences in Revelation, although the Philonic background may not be straightforwardly linked to John, he or she realizes that fire comes over the whole world in a punitive manner.

The symbolic action of the angel at the altar results in four consequences: thunders, voices, lightning, and earthquake (Rev 8.5b). These results are ‘premonitory of a great visitation’,⁸² not only in Israel but also among the Greco-Roman population, which ‘regarded earthquakes, along with sudden appearances of lightning and thunder, among the signs of divine disfavour and portents of coming disasters (Cicero, *Nat. d.* 2.5.14; Ovid, *Metam.* 15.798).’⁸³ Inside Revelation, the strikes of the four components are particularly significant. The first three of them characterize the throne of God (4.5), which intimates that these phenomena carry out a command from the divine throne. In 8.5b the earthquake adds up, but in the days of the seventh trumpet (equivalent to that of the seven bowls of wrath), the four judgments are even more augmented by an unprecedented earthquake (16.18) and a great hailstorm (11.19; cf. 16.21), all of which denote the divine wrath in full measure at the end of time; retribution in progression is highlighted here.⁸⁴ Aune and Beale saw the double direction of the symbolic actions in 8.5. On the one hand, they anticipate the divine judgments in 8.7–9.21, that is, the first six trumpets, but also separately, the blast of the final trumpet in 11.15–18.⁸⁵

The main difference between the scourges of the first six trumpets (reflected in 8.5b) and the ones at the end of the seventh trumpet (11.19; cf. 16.18–21) is determined by whether priestly intercession is accessible or not. The intercessory smoke of fragrant incense in 8.3–4 stands in contrast to the smoke of God’s glory and power, which results in the inability of anyone to enter the divine heavenly temple in 15.8. Hence, the outpouring of divine wrath during the last seven plagues is well encapsulated in the superlative expression ‘the wrath of His fury’ (ὁ θυμὸς τῆς ὀργῆς αὐτοῦ, 16.19; 19.15).⁸⁶ This leads to the conclusion that the judgments of the first six trumpets occur while intercession is available, whereas the last one falls beyond its reach (cf. 10.7). While λιβανωτός mixed with embers of θυμιάματα are thrown ‘on the earth’ (8.5b), the judgments from God’s throne fall still under the auspices of priestly intercession, which means they are reduced in intensity and extension.⁸⁷ At the same time, this action ominously anticipates the outpouring of God’s definitive wrath εἰς τὴν γῆν (16.1–2) during the last trumpet/seven last plagues.⁸⁸

Before the last eschatological phase, the priestly incense ministry makes the difference between life and death. The four elements (thunders, voices, lightning, and earthquake, Rev 8.5) recall the OT narrative of Korah’s rebellion in Num 16. The verbal, thematic and structural parallels between Num 16 and Rev 8.2–5, as proleptic of the final wrath, are quite overt. The divine judgment against the rebellious consists of the following four stages: (1) the chief-leaders are swallowed by the earth (Num 16.32–3); (2) before

⁸¹ Philo, *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit* 199.

⁸² Swete, *The Apocalypse of John*, 107.

⁸³ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Yale Bible 38A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) 433.

⁸⁴ See also Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993) 202–4.

⁸⁵ Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 511. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* 472.

⁸⁶ Apoc Abr 30:8 lists 10 eschatological woes, after the fashion of the exodus plagues. The tenth consists of ‘thunder, voices, and destroying earthquakes’. James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (vol. 1; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 704.

⁸⁷ The dual function of the fire has been observed by some commentators. ‘Remarquons la double action du même ange intercesseur: le même feu sert à dégager le parfum des prières des saints, et à vouer la terre au châtement. [...] L’action symbolique préliminaire doit à la fois rassurer les communautés fidèles et terrifier les ennemis de Dieu et des chrétiens.’ Ernest Bernard Allo, *Saint Jean. L’Apocalypse* (Études Bibliques, 2nd ed.; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1921) 104.

⁸⁸ Loisy, *L’Apocalypse de Jean*, 173.

they disappear under the debris, they cry out in desperation (Num 16.34); (3) the divine wrath strikes the 250 leaders by fire (Num 16.35); (4) the cloud of divine presence covers the tabernacle and the glory of God manifests (Num 16.42)⁸⁹ through a plague against the people at large (Num 16.47–8). The last point anticipates the complete manifestation of the divine glory, of such nature that no intercession is possible (Rev 15.8). In the OT narrative, as during the first six trumpets, priestly intervention is still possible (Num 16.47–8; cf. Sir 45.16; Wis 18.21).⁹⁰ At the same time, the scene in Rev 8.2–5 anticipates the last incense-free retribution.⁹¹ The hurling of the coals contrasts the access of God's mercy by way of incense.⁹² However, if as argued here λιβανωτός is not a brazier, but frankincense proper, which is mixed with embers of sweet-smelling sacrifice, then God's wrath is confined to His yet-available mercy while anticipating the full visitation during the last trumpet.

Conclusion

The bottom line of this study is that the noun λιβανωτός never means censer or brazier anywhere in Greek writings before the mid-12th century CE, a meaning which, for that matter, does not survive in Modern Greek. The contextual constraints in Rev 8.3, 5 are not strong enough to suspect an early specimen of λιβανωτός as censer. On the contrary, the passage can be read quite naturally in its normal terms, with λιβανωτός meaning frankincense. I am not saying there is no censer or brazier in the scene, in fact, there are reasons to perceive it behind the words. Nevertheless, because it is not mentioned per se, it follows that the content is more important than the container for understanding the vision. If the exegetes do not recognize this, they miss some important tenors of the passage.

Such is the case with λιβανωτός and the other words around it in Rev 8.3–5. The methodology scholars employed was to redefine it according to the presumed meaning of its syntactic chain components and, thus, contradict the firm, consolidated semantics of λιβανωτός. The approach should rather set out from the established semantics of the noun and try to make sense of the words in the co-text. This is what the present study has attempted, and the approach seems to have paid off. The adjective χρυσοῦς, the verb γεμίζειν, as well as the nouns θυμίαμα and λιβανωτός make more sense if the last term refers to frankincense. Thus, freshly broken λιβανωτός is combined with the sacrifices of God's people that have been received by God. The mixture thus obtained is hurled onto the earth. This results in a series of judgments against the inhabitants of the earth which show that God remembers the prayers of His people. On the one hand, these punishments are reduced in intensity and extension, but, on the other hand, they portend the last trumpet during which no propitiatory intervention is provided.

Competing interest. The author declares none.

⁸⁹ This was more than the regular cloud (Ex 9.16; 40.38). George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (New York: C. Scribner, 1903) 212. R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers* (The New American Commentary 3B; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001) 271.

⁹⁰ The daily 'incense burning was propitiatory'. Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, 73, cf. 87. Cf. 'Das die Weihrauchgabe der Versöhnung Gottes gilt wird weder in der Apokalypse noch in den liturgischen Weihrauchgebeten gesagt.' Klaus Berger, *Die Apokalypse des Johannes: Kommentar* (2 vols; Freiburg: Herder, 2017) 1.649.

⁹¹ Similarly, William Henry Simcox, *The Revelation of S. John the Divine with Notes and Introduction* (The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1894) 56. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, 553.

⁹² J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Anchor Yale Bible 38; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 135–6.

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