

THE TABERNACLE

(Exodus 25-31, 35-40)

The heart of God's communication to Moses while he was atop Mt. Sinai concerned the construction of a worship center or sanctuary (25-31).¹ This tabernacle was to be a sacred space for Yahweh in which he would live among his chosen people (25:8). As with the Holy Mountain, which was demarcated between the space for the people, then the elders higher up, and then Moses himself at the summit, this earthly sanctuary would be arranged in concentric areas of holy space. The people could come no closer than the sacrificial altar. Priests were able to go within the outer room of the sanctuary, but only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place once a year on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). This tabernacle would become a sort of portable Mt. Sinai, replicating the areas of sacred space around the mountain itself. Yahweh's presence at the top of Sinai would be replicated in the inner room, the Holiest of Holies, where Yahweh would enter to dwell.

In the Book of Exodus, the details about the tabernacle come in two sections. In the first, Moses is at the summit of Mt. Sinai where he received extensive instructions for how this sanctuary was to be constructed, and this instruction occupies several chapters (25-31). Later, the actual construction is described, replicating most of the features in the initial account but with some additional details (35-40). Between these two sections lies the narrative of the apostasy and the golden calf along with Moses' intercession for the sins of the people. The sin of the golden calf called for intercession, repentance, forgiveness and restoration, and the tabernacle would become the enduring means for setting right those who had fallen short.



Model of the tabernacle in Timnah Park, Israel

While Moses was on the mountain, God showed him what seems to have been an architectural model for the tabernacle. God said to Moses, "Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you" (25:9). The Hebrew word **תְּבִנִּית** (taveni'm), according a number of scholars, suggests a model, and centuries later, the writer of the Book of Hebrews writes that this earthly sanctuary was a copy of something that Moses saw in the heavenlies (He. 8:5).

In any case, it is clear that on the mountain Moses was shown something that would be the exact

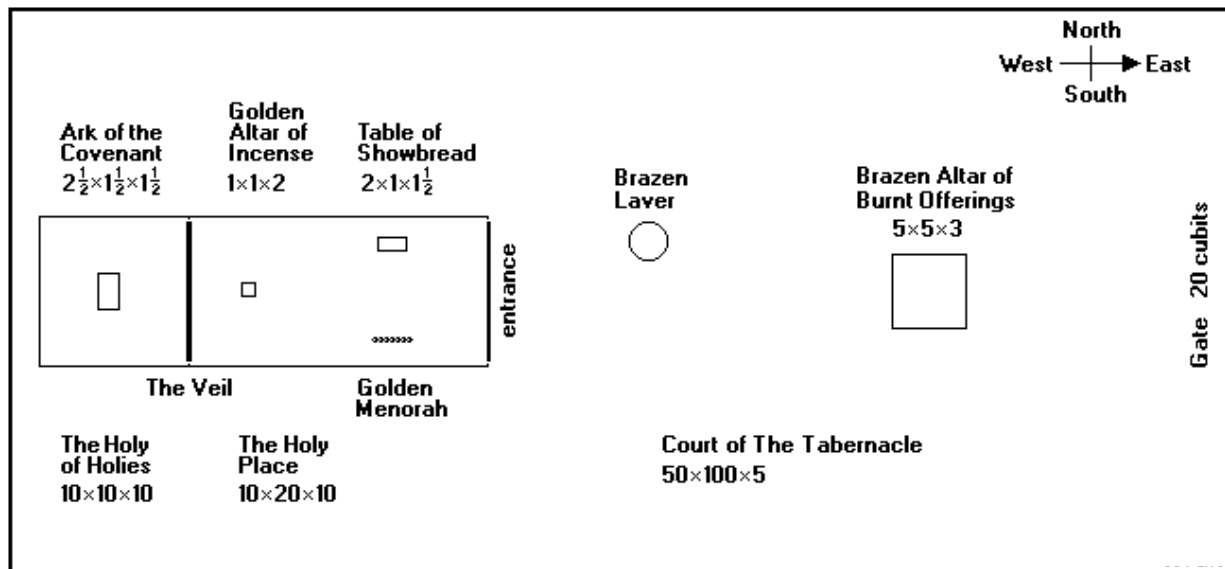
¹ Several Hebrew names are given to this worship center. As the **מִשְׁכָּן** (*mishkan*), it was the "dwelling" of God (Lv. 15:31, etc.). As the **אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד** (*ohel moed*), it was the "tent of meeting" (27:21, etc.). As the **מִקְדָּשׁ** (*miqdash*), it was the sanctuary (15:17, etc.).

TORAH SURVEY

pattern for the sanctuary that was to be built.

Details of Construction

This tabernacle was to have a courtyard, an altar for burnt offerings, a basin for washing, and a structure with two holy rooms. In the outer room, there were to be three pieces of furniture, a table for holy bread, a lampstand, and an incense altar. In the inner room, there was one piece of furniture only, the sacred ark of the covenant adorned with cherubim on the top. The two rooms were separated by a heavy curtain. Above the lid of the ark and between the cherubim, Yahweh's presence would be enthroned, and from there he would talk directly to Moses (25:22). Only consecrated high priests from Aaron's line had access to the inner room in the Tent of Meeting, and this only one day each year, Yom Kippur.



The preparations for construction began with free-will offerings from the Israelites, or as it is phrased, “You are to receive the offering for me from each man whose heart prompts him to give” (25:1-2). These contributions included precious metals, fine yarns and textiles, prepared leathers, oils and spices for incense, and precious stones (25:3-8).

Oversight for the construction of the tabernacle and its furnishings was assigned to two Israelites, Bezalel and Oholiab, both gifted with craftsmanship skills, but most importantly, infilled with the Holy Spirit (31:1-3; 35:30—36:2). They would direct the work of all the other craftsmen.

The single most important object was the **ark of the covenant**, which would be placed in the inner room of the tabernacle. The ark was a

chest of acacia wood covered with gold, a receptacle to house the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, Aaron's rod, and a pot of manna (25:10-22; 37:1-9; 40:20; cf. He. 9:4). The lid of this chest, called the “atonement cover” (traditionally “mercy-seat”), would be the base upon which

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Bezalel's infilling with the Holy Spirit is the earliest reference in the Bible to spiritual gifts. Such gifts would later be given to Joshua (Dt. 34:9), the judges, the prophets, the kings, and various others. In the New Testament, Paul will describe similar spiritual gifts for Christians (Ro. 12:6-8; 1 Co. 12:8-10, 28-30).; Ep. 4:7-13).



Model of the ark designed by Rabbi Moshe Levine

would rest two figures of cherubim facing each other with their wings overspreading the lid. Here, the presence of Yahweh would be enthroned in the midst of the Israelite nation (1 Sa. 4:4; 2 Sa. 6:2; Ps. 80:1; 99:1; Is. 37:16). Each year on Yom Kippur, the High Priest would enter the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the blood of atonement on the mercy-seat for the sins of the nation (Lv. 16). Later, the ark would also become an implement of war (Nu. 10:35-36) and would accompany the Israelite soldiers when they marched around Jericho (Jos. 6:6-7, 12-13). One important aspect of this ark was the location of its various aspects: within the chest was the law, above the cover was the enthroned Spirit of Yahweh, and between Yahweh and the law was the seat of mercy, a potent symbol that divine law is mediated through mercy. Yahweh is a lawgiver, but his mercy is even greater than his capacity for judgment (cf. Ps. 30:5).

A **table** also made of acacia wood and covered with gold was constructed to hold 12 loaves of bread representing

the 12 tribes. The table was situated on the north side of the outer room. The bread, called the “bread of the face” or “bread of the presence” (25:23-30; 37:10-16; cf. Lv. 25:5-9), was replaced each Sabbath, since the priests from Aaron’s family were to eat the holy bread at the end of each week within the confines of the sanctuary.

On the south side of the outer room was to be a golden **lampstand** or menorah with seven stems, each with wicks for lights (25:31-40; 37:17-24). Much later, we have a visual depiction of the 2nd Temple menorah in the Arch of Titus, since the Romans took it as a spoil of war when they destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. Presumably, the menorah from the 1st Temple looked similar. The seven wicks were fed by olive oil, and the lamps were to be lit each evening (27:20-21; cf. Lv. 24:1-3).

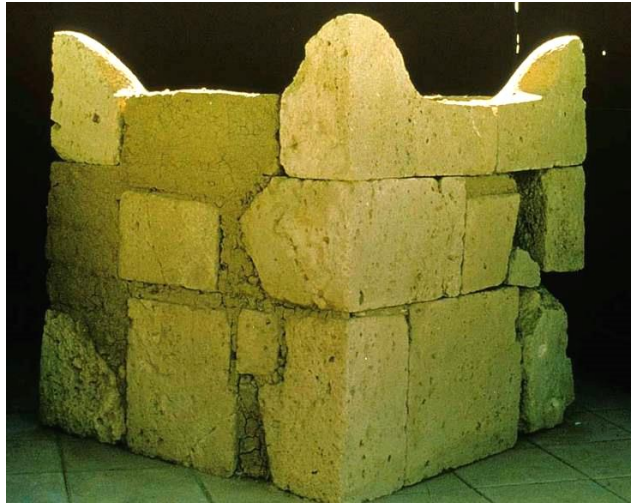
The other article in the outer room was an **incense altar** for burning incense each morning and evening (30:1-10; 37:25-29). The incense was prepared from a special recipe (30:34-38), and the recipe was not to be duplicated for private use.

The tabernacle itself contained a variety of materials, including wood, skins, fabrics, and precious stones (26:1-37; 35:4-29).² A curtain separated the Most Holy Place



The menorah from the 2nd Temple ended up in Rome after AD 70 as depicted in the Arch of Titus with Roman soldiers carrying it off.

² Various efforts have been made to replicate the tabernacle and its furnishings, but there are gaps in our knowledge,



The largest Israelite four-horned altar so far discovered is this one from Beersheba in southern Judah. While the altar from the tabernacle has never been discovered (and it was made of acacia wood rather than stone), the “horns” on this one give us some idea of how it may have looked.

from the Holy Place, and another curtain separated the interior of the tabernacle from the outside courtyard (27:9-19; 38:1-20). Within the courtyard would be two installations, the **altar** for burning sacrifices and the bronze wash basin or **laver** where the priests performed water ablutions for their hands and feet (30:17-21; 40:30-32).

The diminishing levels of holiness as one moves from the interior to the exterior is reflected in the classes of individuals who are permitted to officiate between these levels. The high priest alone can move between the Most Holy Place and the Holy Place. The large class of priests are permitted to move between the Holy Place and the Outer Court. The Israelites themselves are permitted to move between the Outer Court and the Encampment, but they can come no closer to the sanctuary than the altar.

The fact that the worship center was a tent emphasized its mobility. It was to travel with the Israelites when they left the holy mountain. This was the shrine where offerings were to be made and revelations from God occurred (25:22).

Priestly Vestments

Along with the instructions for constructing the tabernacle were corollary instructions for priestly accoutrements, which included a breast-piece, an ephod, a robe, a tunic, a turban, and a sash (28:1-43; 39:1-31). Each of these are elaborately described. A ceremony for ordination was also given (29)

Exodus concludes with the construction of the Tent of Meeting just as had been ordered. The Spirit-endowed craftsmen did their work (35:30-36:2), and they constructed the courtyard, altar, wash basin, sacred rooms, furniture, and priestly garments. At last, when the tabernacle was set up, the Ten Commandments were deposited in the ark (40:20), and the cloud of Yahweh's glory filled the sanctuary (40:34-35). The cloud over the tent became the guide for the Israelites in all their travels from that day forward (40:36-38).

CONCEPTS OF LITURGICAL WORSHIP

Christians differ widely in their use or disuse of ancient features of worship. Liturgical churches draw many elements from the tabernacle (and the later temple), such as, holy space, vestments, incense, the eucharistic altar, etc. Non-liturgical churches object to all these elements as unnecessary for Christians belonging to the new covenant.

not the least of which is that basic measurements are given in cubits. This measurement is less than precise by modern standards. The Egyptian cubit is about 21” (53 centimeters) and the Mesopotamian cubit about 18” (45 centimeters). The Hebrew word **אֵמָנָה** (cubit) is from the same root as the word for forearm, i.e., the distance between the elbow and the fingertips. A later reference to “the old standard” (2 Chr. 3:3) suggests that more than one reckoning was in use.