

SESSION ELEVEN

THE TABERNACLE IN THE WILDERNESS

Exodus 25:1–40:38

I. INTRODUCTION

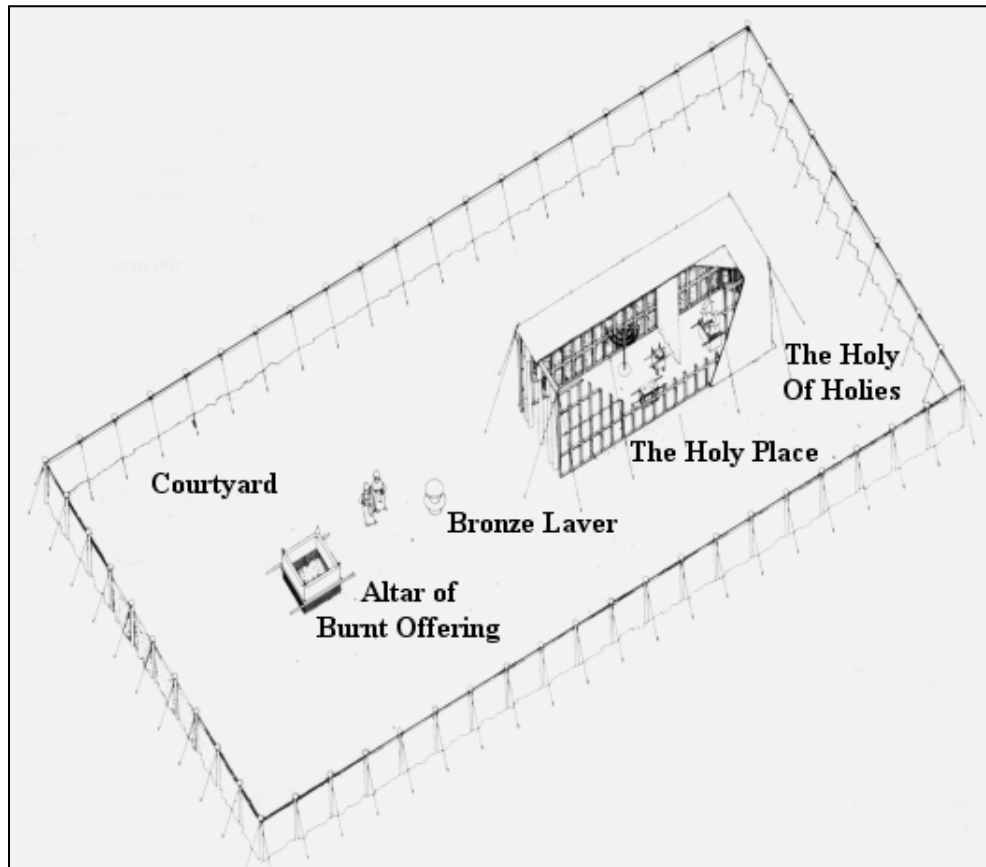
The focus of this final section in Exodus is upon the tabernacle which God instructed the people to build. Actually, this is a continuation of the covenant stipulations initiated in Ex 20. Whereas Ex 21:1–23:13 focuses upon the social life of the nation, Ex 25–40 focuses upon the cultus . . . the external expressions of the religious life of the nation. The structure of this section is quite simple. Ex 25–31 details the instructions for the tabernacle (including the priesthood), and Ex 35–40 details the actual construction of the tabernacle which culminates with the glory of the LORD filling the tabernacle. Sandwiched in between is Ex 32–34, an historical interlude involving the nation's abandonment of YHWH, which is followed by the covenant being graciously restored with Israel.

Plans for the Tabernacle	Historical Interlude	Building of the Tabernacle
Ch 25—31	Ch 32—34	Ch 35—40

II. NAMES OF THE TABERNACLE

- A. *mīkdāš* (25:8) - Translated "sanctuary," denoting a place which is sacred.
- B. *miškān* (25:9) - To "settle down, abide," suggesting a residing place for God among His people.
- C. *ʾōhel* (26:36) - Translated "tent," reflecting the structure itself.
- D. *ʾōhel mōʿēd* (29:42) - Translated "the tent of meeting," suggesting that God would meet with His people there.
- E. *miškān hāʿēuṭ* (38:21) - Translated "the tabernacle of the testimony," the two tablets with the commandments were known as the "testimony" and were housed in the Ark.

III. THE TABERNACLE PLAN



IV. PURPOSES OF THE TABERNACLE

The primary function of the tabernacle is reflected in Ex 25:8, "*and let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell (šākantî) among them.*" Thus, the tabernacle served as a dwelling place for God, not that God is simply localized, but that He can be among His people. This was reflected with the mercy seat of the ark in the Holy of Holies (cf. Num 7:89; 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2). This was the most intimate place of God's presence and in the Targums this special presence of God came to be known as "shekinah" (from שִׁכְנָה, *šākan* = "to dwell").

Another purpose of the tabernacle is reflected in 25:22, "*and there I will meet with you . . .*" Thus, the tabernacle was a meeting place between God and His people, with God's presence residing above the mercy seat.

Since the sanctuary provided a visible center for the worship of the one true God, this served as a reminder against idolatry. The tabernacle had no image or visible representation of YHWH.

V. THE FURNISHINGS

The ark was the focal point of the tabernacle, for it was the place of God's presence. As such, it was the only item in the innermost room, the Holy of Holies. The following discussion will begin with the outermost item (the altar of burnt offering) and work towards the Holy of Holies, in a sense depicting the approach to God.

A. Altar of Burnt Offering

Upon entering into the courtyard from the east side, the first item that the Israelite worshipper would see would be the bronze altar with its four horns at the corners that were used for binding the sacrifice. Upon this altar, sacrifices were made to YHWH. The sacrifices for the individual (Lev 1–6) were made upon it, as well as the sacrifices for the Day of Atonement and the daily sacrifices of the nation. Not only were animals slain upon the altar, but the fire of the altar was never to go out (Lev 6:13). Obviously, "sacrifice" was the predominant idea of the altar, and in particular substitutionary sacrifice. In coming to meet God, one must first come by way of the altar. One cannot have access to God without sacrifice. Seeing the innocent animal slaughtered and burned, the Israelite would be reminded that (1) sin required a high price, and (2) we cannot pay for that sin ourselves—there must be a substitute for our sins.



B. The Bronze Laver

In contrast to the altar at which all Israelites were permitted to come, the bronze laver was for the exclusive use of the priests as they ministered in the ritual of the tabernacle. The priest was not allowed into the Holy Place without undergoing ceremonial washing. This was a step beyond the sacrifice at the altar, for the laver was required to maintain fitness for spiritual ministry (the priest was not allowed into the tabernacle to minister without the washing). Believers today (all of whom

are believer-priests) are prepared for service to Christ by the Holy Spirit who sanctifies and cleanses us through the washing of water by the Word of God (cf. Eph 5:26). The laver looks at our daily need for cleansing from the defilement of sin. Communion and fellowship with God are maintained as daily sins are confessed to Him.

C. Tabernacle Proper

Once the priest had washed, he was allowed to go into the tabernacle (specifically, the Holy Place). The outer curtains of the tabernacle were all that could be seen by those who were not priests. Those on the outside only knew that the priest went in and represented them before God. But, as they saw the tabernacle, they were reminded that God was dwelling among men. The tabernacle is the symbol of God's dwelling with His people (Ex 25:8; 1 Kgs 8:27). The concept extended to the incarnation where it was fulfilled by Christ (cf. Col 1:19; 2:9). Interestingly, John 1:14 is properly translated "*and the Word became flesh, and 'tabernacled' among us, and we beheld His glory . . .*"¹ In Jesus, God was dwelling among men in an even more intimate way. Following the Day of Pentecost, He now resides in each believer.

Finally, a further dimension of the purpose of the tabernacle was to reflect a greater reality. There is a "heavenly tabernacle" of which the earthly one was but a mere shadow (cf. Heb 9:6-14).

D. The Golden Lampstand

As the priest cautiously and reverently entered the Holy Place, he would notice several things: the golden lampstand on his left, the table of shewbread on his right and the altar of incense directly in front of the veil which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. From the lampstand, a soft flickering light illuminated the room that was never to go out. The lampstand was a reminder to the redeemed people of their function . . . to be a light to the world, a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:5-6), i.e., mediators (cf. Zech 4). This function of being a light to those in darkness is ultimately fulfilled in Christ Himself who is the *Light of the World*. In turn, Christians are to be lights to the world. The oil for the lamp would signify the Holy Spirit who keeps the light going.



E. The Table of Shewbread

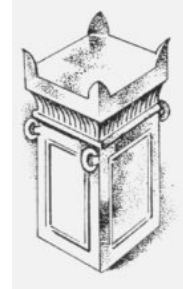
Opposite the lampstand was a table with twelve loaves of bread upon it, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. These loaves could be eaten by the priests on the Sabbath, but only in the Holy Place (Lev 24:5-9). In this regard, the shewbread spoke of God's sustenance of spiritual life through fellowship with Him. Once the appropriate sacrifice had been made at the altar, fellowship and communion with God was possible. When Christ spoke of Himself as the "bread of life," we are reminded that He is the true sustenance of spiritual life.



¹The word translated "dwelt" or "tabernacled" is the Greek word ἐσκήνωσεν (from the verb root σκηνοω; σκηνη = tent).

F. The Altar of Incense

Directly in front of the veil stood the altar of incense. On this altar, the priest would place burning coals that were carried by a censer from the bronze altar in the courtyard. On these coals, the priest sprinkled a specially prepared sweet incense, which resulted in a thick cloud of fragrant smoke filling the Tabernacle. The incense was a symbol of prayer (cf. Rev 5:8; 8:3-4) rising up before God, reminding the redeemed of their privilege and responsibility to worship. Of course, Christ is the finest example of this function in His intercessory ministry.



G. The Veil

Between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies hung a veil. The priests who served in the Holy Place were not allowed to pass through this veil. Only the high priest could pass through the veil and enter into the presence of God that resided above the mercy seat of the ark. Even then, the high priest could only do so once a year on the Day of Atonement. The veil is not designed to teach separation from God, i.e., to keep men out, for everything else was designed to teach the way of access to God. On the basis of Heb 9:8, the purpose of the veil was to indicate by the inaccessibility of the Holiest of all that the way to God must still be revealed. Under the old covenant, the way to God was not yet obvious. To believers today, however, the way is now plainly open and accessible according to Heb 10:19-22:

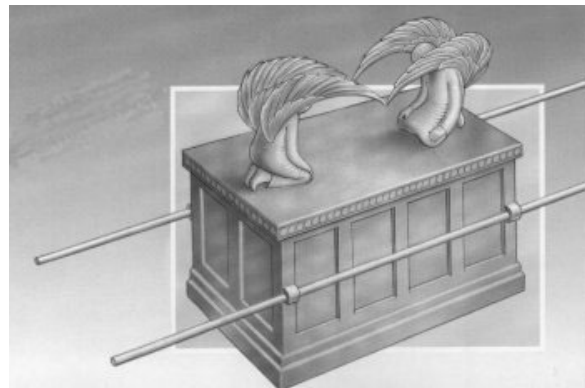


"Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near"

On the day that Jesus was crucified (Matt 27:51) the veil in the temple split, signifying that the way to God is now open to all who come through Jesus. We have access to God continually!

H. The Ark of the Covenant

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered through the veil into the Holy of Holies. Before him stood a chest-like item known as the ark. The ark had a lid made of gold called the mercy seat with two cherubim (angelic figures) connected, one at each end. The cherubim looked down at the mercy seat. On the mercy seat, the blood from the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement was placed. Inside the ark, three things were placed: a golden jar holding the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant (Heb 9:4).



Davis notes,

The word for mercy seat comes from a Hebrew root meaning 'to cover' and thus depicts an important aspect of divine mercy. Above the mercy seat dwelt the shekinah glory which was the symbol of God's presence.²

The Israelites called the mercy seat כַּפֹּרֶת, "kapporeth" (covering, propitiatory, place of forgiveness, or atonement), from the root *kipper* (to cover). With the tablets of the Law in the ark, the mercy seat signified that broken law must be covered by blood before God could have fellowship and dwell among His people. As the blood covered the mercy seat, the righteous and just demands of a holy God were satisfied (the basic idea of propitiation). With the mercy seat in view, Romans 3:24-25 expresses how the blood of Christ was anticipated by the blood that was poured out by the high priest: we are "*justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.*" It was at the mercy seat that God could meet with His people (Ex 25:22); this was possible on the basis of atonement. So, in some sense, the ark was a symbol of God's throne (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; and 1 Chron 13:6), representing the earthly seat of divine sovereignty. God's throne was approachable only with the provision of the mercy seat. The mercy seat in the OT and the cross in the NT have one thing in common: this is the place where God's wrath was satisfied by blood atonement.

In summing up, we could say that the bronze altar, the laver of bronze and the mercy seat provide the basis of fellowship. The altar of incense, shewbread, and candlestick taught responsibility and privilege. The tabernacle answers the question concerning the basis by which God was able to dwell among His people.

VI. THE HISTORICAL INTERLUDE (EXODUS 32–34)

These three chapters are significant in the relation of Israel with YHWH. Within only a short period of receiving the Law and agreeing to obey YHWH as His unique people who are to be mediators of blessing to the world, the people completely abandon YHWH and construct a golden calf as their god. The Lord's commentary is succinctly stated, "*They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them*" (32:8). The incident is an example of their unwillingness to follow theocratic authority. Even Aaron acts in insubordination. God's response is to allow His anger to burn against the people and destroy them (32:10). However, the intercession of Moses results in the sparing of the nation.

There is more to the sparing than intercession by a faithful servant, however. Moses' intercession is based on the Abrahamic Covenant (32:13-14) and the concern for God's glory. God agrees to spare them as Moses pleads according to the divine plan. The temporary punishment (32:25-29) is followed by the divine intention to reserve the full punishment for a future day (32:34).

The sparing of the nation to give them an opportunity to go into the land is met with another problem. YHWH is willing to let them go into the land, yet withhold His presence from their midst (33:3). So, Moses intercedes again for the nation, resulting in YHWH's promise to send His presence with them. As Moses realizes that He is a recipient of God's favor (33:17), He even boldly prays to see God's glory (33:18–34:8). The response indicates that God equates His goodness with His glory, finding pleasure in the perfection of His person. What God reveals to Moses is His character (in particular, His compassion and grace—

²John Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, 254.

attributes which have made possible the sparing of this disobedient nation). In response, Moses worships, the proper response to God's revelation (34:8).

In 34:10, we see that God is willing to renew the covenant with the nation, since they forsook Him in regard to the present one. The people know they have been spared because of the Abrahamic covenant, yet they know better than to presume upon God's grace. He can destroy one generation and raise up another to fulfill His promises. Obedience is prerequisite to the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises (34:11).

VII. THE CLIMAX OF EXODUS (40:34-38)

Following the lengthy section concerning the tabernacle in chapters 25–40, the book closes on the episode of the shekinah glory sweeping down to dwell in the Holy of Holies. This is the climax to the whole section on the tabernacle and sets the stage for Leviticus. The significance of Ex 40:34-38 is that the manifestation of the eternal God has now come to dwell in the midst of the people. Therefore, the people must know how to live with Him, and Leviticus will concern itself with the arrangement of life around His presence.