

The Long and Winding Road The Temple – Part 1

John wrote the last written gospel in the New Testament. In his gospel he recounted when Jesus was in Jerusalem and threw the money changers out of the temple. Jesus sent them out proclaiming, “Do not make my Father’s house a house of trade!”

Jesus was in what history has called “the Second Temple.” The first Hebrew temple in Jerusalem was built by Solomon, the son of David.



That temple was destroyed during the Babylonian conquest of Judah, and almost a century later, when the Jews resettled Jerusalem, they gradually rebuilt the temple on the site where the first temple had sat, hence the term, “the second temple.”

The Second Temple had taken decades to finish, and it was the central place of Jewish worship, politics, banking, and faith. Jews from around the world paid annual taxes to the

temple to support it. It was where the faithful offered sacrifices. It held the courts where the priests would conduct the business of the Jewish rituals. It was the single-most central physical focus of the Jewish people.

After Jesus had upturned the tables of the money changers and had driven out the animal sellers, some Jews asked him what sign he could offer them to show his authority and right to do such things. Jesus' response was surprising to them.

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn. 2:19).

This stunned the Jews because it had taken decades for the nation to build the temple after it had been destroyed by the Babylonians. How were they to believe that Jesus would do it himself in three days?

John explains in the narrative that Jesus was not talking about the Second Temple of Jerusalem. Jesus was talking about his own body. Jesus was prophesying about his resurrection that would come three days after his death.

The idea of Jesus' body being the temple is a core teaching with roots deep in the Old Testament as well as being found in other New Testament passages.

The Old Testament Roots

The Tabernacle

Solomon's temple wasn't the first place of worship for the people of Israel. During their exodus from Egypt, God gave very clear and precise instructions about building a worship site that was made of tents and moving fences. Almost half of the book of Exodus is dedicated to instructions about constructing the tabernacle, its various parts, and specific stories that interlace with it. It was called the "tabernacle" (*mishkan* in Hebrew). The word is rooted in the idea of an "abode" or "dwelling."

The tabernacle's importance to Israel cannot be overstressed. It was the meeting place for God and his people. It was the place of sacrifice and service by the priests. It was considered the dwelling or palace of God on earth among his people. As God instructed Moses,

And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst (Ex. 25:8).

In the tabernacle, we see the paradoxical expressions: that God is holy (meaning "set apart") from all humanity, yet God was also in the midst of the Israelite people.

In setting out the construction of the tabernacle, God gave Moses very specific instructions. As the tabernacle was the tented palace for God the King, it was to be made to God's exacting specifications!

Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and all of its furniture, so you shall make it (Ex. 25:9).

With such exactness, and with pages of instructions to Moses on the construction, one might think that we could easily redraw the tabernacle and see it in its wonder today. Unfortunately, that is not true! While we can find drawings of the tabernacle (on page 186 in the ESV Study Bible for example¹), we must recognize that such drawings involve a great deal of interpretation. There are extensive instructions in Exodus, but those instructions are not complete. No doubt this is part of the significance that Moses make it as God *showed* him.

Then you shall erect the tabernacle according to the plan for it that you were shown on the mountain (Ex. 26:30).²

We join with Orthodox scholar Georges Barrois who wrote,

The technical terms of uncertain or unknown etymology in the Hebrew text and their renderings in the versions make nigh hopeless all attempts as figuring out what the tabernacle looked like; a large measure of skepticism regarding most of the reconstructions found in Biblical handbooks and encyclopedias is advisable.³

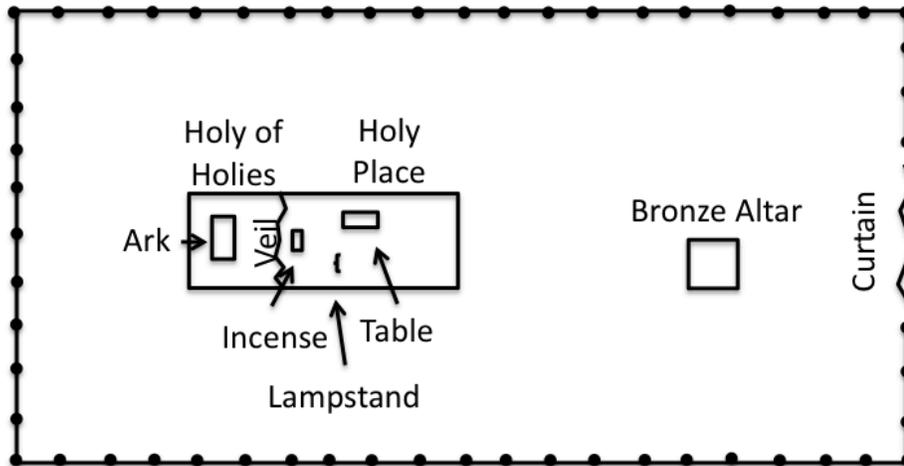
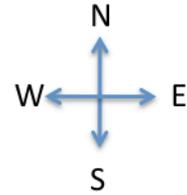
Still those drawings serve a good purpose of helping to orient us to the basic shapes, placements, and even relevant sizes of the constituent parts of the tabernacle. In other words, do not hesitate to look at them, just recognize them for what they are!

Scripture did not preserve us a drawing, it preserved certain instructions by God. Those instructions give us the data we need to better understand the message God delivers through the tabernacle. With that warning, we now produce a basic drawing of the Tabernacle!

¹ *ESV Study Bible*, (Crossways Bibles 2008).

² See also Ex. 25:9, 40; 27:8; Num. 8:4.

³ Barrois, Georges A., *Jesus Christ and the Temple*, (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1980) at 33. A related issue exists on some stark differences between the Hebrew text of Exodus passages on constructing the Tabernacle with the same passages in the Greek Septuagint. For a discussion of these issues, see, Gooding, D. W., *The Account of the Tabernacle*, (Cambridge 1959).



The Layout

The tabernacle itself was a tent that was constructed of poles, layered coverings, and curtains. The tent was not what you would buy today at a camping supply store. It had poles, but they were made of wood, rather than modern plastic. The coverings and curtains/walls were made from different materials (linen, tanned ram skins, and goats hair) (Ex. 26:7, 14, 31, 36). The tent was about 45 feet long and 15 feet high.⁴

The tent was constructed in a courtyard surrounded by a fence. The courtyard was about 150 feet long and 75 feet wide. It was also built to God's exacting instructions (Ex. 27:9-19; 38:9-17). In the confines of the courtyard, but not in the tabernacle/tent, was the bronze altar for the sacrifices of the people.

The Tabernacle/tent area was divided into two sections: the Holy Place and the Holiest Place (also called the "Holy of Holies" or the "Most Holy Place"). The Holy Place was the first 30 feet of the Tabernacle/tent and in it was the "Table of Presence," an "altar of incense," and a "golden lampstand."

⁴ We do not know the precise measurements because the Scripture uses the Hebrew term "cubit." The cubit was originally thought to be a measurement of the elbow to the fingertip. Of course, that varied from person to person, and some scholars think the cubit itself varied between two different sizes. The figures above, however, are fair approximations based on a cubit as roughly 1 ½ feet.

The Holiest Place was the back 15 feet of the tabernacle/tent. It was separated from the Holy Place by a curtain built and embroidered specially for that purpose. This Holiest Place held the Ark of the Covenant. We will consider each of these furnishings starting in the Holiest Place and working outward into the Holy Place and then the courtyard.

The Ark of the Covenant

Anyone who has seen the Indiana Jones movie has some idea of what the Ark of the Covenant may have looked like. Let us set aside the movie as we consider the genuine Ark and its role in the dwelling place of God.

The Ark was about 3 foot 9 inches long, 2 foot 3 inches high, and 2 foot 3 inches wide. It was made of acacia wood and overlaid inside and out with pure gold. Moses was instructed to place the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments inside the Ark. A seat was made to go on top of the ark. This seat served as God's throne. It was made of pure gold overlaying acacia wood. There were two cherubim on each side of the seat's saddle, perhaps like armrests. The seat's saddle seems to have been the wings of the cherubim spread forth over the top of the lid. The seat/lid itself was called a "mercy seat." Above this mercy seat, atop the cherubim wings, God would meet Moses.

There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you... (Ex. 25:22).

The ark itself was holy as God's throne.⁵ As 1 Samuel 4:4 notes, the "LORD of hosts...is enthroned on the cherubim." The ark was not to be touched by human hands, but had rings and poles for carrying and moving it. Even these poles were used under specific instructions.

The Table of Presence

Exodus 25:23^{ff} gives the instructions for the construction of the Table of Presence that was found in the holy area, just in front of the Holy of Holies. This table was about 3 feet long, 1 foot 6 inches wide, and 2 foot 3 inches high. It was also made of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold. The plates and dishes that went with it were pure gold as well.

This table received weekly twelve loaves of bread (as set out in Lev. 24:5-9). These loaves represented the twelve tribes of Israel. In the midst of the awe and beauty of the tabernacle and its altars, this table was a constant visual reminder that the people of God were continually before his presence.

⁵ Mackie points out, "The OT virtually equates the ark of the covenant, and especially its lid, the mercy seat, with the throne of God." Mackie, Scott D., *Eschatology and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Mohr Siebeck 2007) at 166. He cites the 4Q Targum of Leviticus as replacing the Hebrew word for "mercy seat" with "throne."

The Altar of Incense

God instructed that the Israelites make an altar of incense of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold. It was about 3 feet high and 1 foot 6 inches square in width. This altar stood in the Holy Place with incense burned before the presence of God and the Holiest Place. The High Priest was to burn special incense dedicated to God each morning and evening as he tended the lamps in the lampstand.

The Golden Lampstand

The Holy Place also held a golden lampstand. The lampstand was made with a central trunk and six “branches,” three out each side. The lampstand itself was a model of an almond tree in bloom. The cups were even made to look like almond blossoms.

The Tabernacle/Tent Curtains

The Tabernacle/tent had a front curtain as it was placed in the courtyard. This curtain served as the door or gate. It also blocked off the Holy Place from the general courtyard. God set out another curtain (also called a veil) to keep separate the Holiest Place from the Holy Place. The curtains that separated the Tabernacle/tent from the rest of the courtyard were embroidered with Cherubim.

The whole appearance and substance of the Tabernacle/Tent gives strong reminders of the Garden of Eden. The cherubim sat watch and guarded the entrance to the tabernacle (embroidered as they were on the curtain) much like the cherubim were set to guard the entrance to Eden, lest Adam and Eve sought to return and eat of the tree. The Cherubim guarded Eden from the East, as would these Cherubim when the tabernacle/tent was properly constructed facing east.⁶ Eden itself was a place noted for its location to Havilah, a source of gold (Gen. 2:11-12). Of course, all furnishings of the Holy Place and the Holiest Place were overlaid with gold. The two trees in Eden were the tree of life, which many scholars see echoed in the construction of the lampstand as a fruiting almond tree, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This tree of knowledge of good and evil many scholars see echoed in the Ten Commandments placed within the Ark.

Whether the tabernacle is seen as a step to restore Eden, or as a reminder of Eden, or simply as a place where God would again speak with man, God set out the fixtures with precision.

Other Furnishings and Accoutrements

God instructed the Israelites to construct a bronze altar for the general courtyard. This was the altar where most sacrifices were made. While the fixtures in the holy areas of the tabernacle/tent were made of gold, as the distance from the throne increased, and as the proximity to the common people increased, the value of the materials used in construction

⁶ The front of the Courtyard/Tabernacle/tent faced east according to Ex. 27:13.

moved from the rarer materials to the more common (gold closest to God, then silver and bronze).

God also instructed construction of a bronze basin for washing of the priests. There were other bronze tools constructed for use in the sacrifices.

The priests themselves were required to wear special clothes as they administered to the LORD. Notably among the instructions, the High Priest wore a pure gold plate on the forehead of his turban that read “Holy to the LORD” (Ex. 28:36).

The Pictures of Jesus and The True Throne of God

Even before John tells the story of Jesus explaining that in his body one finds the temple of God, we read of Jesus being the tabernacle. The first chapter of John explains that Jesus as the eternal Word of God entered into human form in Jesus. John wrote,

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory,
glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14).

The English doesn't readily indicate the reference to the tabernacle, but John's Greek does. John said that the Word became flesh and “ἐσκήνωσεν” among us. From σκηνώω, the verb translated “dwelt” is well-translated as “pitched its tent” or “tabernacle” among us. The Greek word for “tent” that is the basis of the verb John chose is the Greek word the Jews used in their Greek version of the Old Testament for the actual tabernacle built by Moses.

John is literally calling Jesus' incarnation as the tabernacling of God among people. In Jesus, we see the paradox of God being holy and separate from humanity, yet also God being in the midst of humanity.

John is not the only New Testament writer to speak of Jesus and the designs God gave to Moses for the tabernacle. The book of Hebrews goes into this idea extensively. In it, we get insight into God's design given to Moses and the truth that lay behind the model. Scott Mackie correctly noted,

The Heavenly Sanctuary dominates the symbolic landscape of Hebrews.⁷

A study of Hebrews readily shows reasons for God's instruction that the Tabernacle/tent be built *exactly* as shown. Over and over Hebrews builds upon the earthly Tabernacle to explain and show the intercessory work of Christ as sacrifice and priest. The earthly

⁷ Mackie at 155.

Tabernacle/tent also provides the image for understanding the Heavenly Sanctuary as the actual throne of God.

This is a reason why God was so specific in his instructions to Moses:

[Those serving in the Tabernacle/Temple] serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown to you on the mountain.” (Heb. 8:5).

Hebrews begins setting the tone for comparing the true throne of God with the tabernacle in the very first verse:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Heb. 1:1-2).

In Christ the Son, we see God not only speaking, but we also see God. Jesus is not only the radiance of God’s glory, but he is “the exact imprint of his nature” who having finished “making purification for sins” then “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3). In Tabernacle terms (and its Temple counterpart), Jesus is set out in these opening verses as sacrificial (“making purification”) either as priest and/or sacrifice. Jesus is also set out as being in the Most Holy Place where God is enthroned above the Ark. The exalted Christ now reigns enthroned with the Almighty at God’s right hand.

Hebrews quickly adds that Christ is, accordingly, “much superior to angels” (Heb. 1:4). This is a picture that Hebrews later expands, but again harkens to the Ark of the Covenant. The “glory” of the LORD, of which Christ is the radiance, descended and hovered above the mercy seat with the angelic cherubim spreading their wings out as a welcoming seat for the Almighty and now the Lord Jesus is at his right hand.⁸ As the Lord “sits enthroned upon the cherubim” (Ps. 99:1), so does Christ!

Hebrews goes on to explain that while the tabernacle was an earthly model of the LORD’s true throne room, the Levitical priests that serviced that earthly model were only types of priests compared to Christ. Christ administered his new covenant as High Priest in the true throne room. Hebrews 9:24 explains,

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

So Christ is,

⁸ Once the tabernacle was completed and set up, as the glory of the LORD descended, not even Moses was able to enter (Ex. 40:35).

a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:17);

as well as,

the high priest of our confession who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house (Heb. 3:1).

While Jesus was faithful as was Moses, Christ is "worthy of more glory than Moses" as is fitting for the builder/owner of the house rather than simply a servant of the house (Heb. 3:6).

Christ actually performed the true actions that were symbolized by the actions of the priests in the tabernacle (and subsequent temple) services. Christ did these in every way superior to the earthly forms that were under the Mosaic covenant.

Moses' covenant produced the tabernacle/tent that held the precious items of the lamp stand, and the table with the bread of the presence. These were holy items in a holy place (Heb. 9:2). Behind a second curtain was a Most Holy Place that had the ark with the tablets of covenant (the Ten Commandments), an urn with manna, Aaron's staff, the covering of the cherubim of glory above the mercy seat and immediately before the curtain separating the Most Holy Place was a golden altar of incense.⁹ But with all the holiness that was in these items and places, they were still representations, not the actual dwelling place of God. Christ served in the true presence of God and in this sense, Christ served in

...the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) (Heb. 9:11).

Because Christ served in a greater and more perfect tent, we no longer need the ritual sacrificial cleansing of the earthly Tabernacle/tent:

Thus it was necessary for the copy of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf (Ex. 9:23-24).

⁹ This was actually the edge of the curtain, but in the holy place rather than the most holy place. See the discussion on the language of Hebrews at Koester, Craig R., *The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature, and the New Testament*, The Catholic Bible Association of America 1989) at 175; Ellingworth, Paul, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Eerdmans 1993) at 425-427; Gheorghita, Radu, *The Role of the Septuagint in Hebrews: An Investigation of its Influence with Special Consideration to the Use of Hab 2:3-4 in Heb 10:37-38* (Mohr Siebeck 2003) at 88-89. Gheorgita did his work cited here at Tyndale House, the place spoken of in the introduction to this lesson.

Christ passed right through, not as a High Priest from Aaron's lineage, but a greater High Priest, one called by God for all time. Christ entered as a High Priest after the Order of Melchizedek. Christ did not pass through the image that was the earthly temple/tabernacle/tent. Christ passed through the actual heavens into the presence of God (Heb. 4:14).

Implications

What does this mean for the person in Christ? Hebrews teaches several impacts on the believer. First, we have peace with God. Christ went as a forerunner on our behalf to make true intercession. Hebrews 7:25 explains:

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

This intercession is full and complete. Christ entered into the real throne room, and upon finishing his work,

He sat down at the right hand of God (Heb. 10:12).

This gives the believer a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul (Heb. 6:19). We have confidence to enter the true holy places ourselves by the blood of Jesus, with the assurance of faith and a conscience made clean. This allows us:

1. To draw near to God,
2. To hold fast our confession of hope without wavering, and
3. To stir one another up to good works as we assemble together in worship (Heb. 10:19-25).

A second implication involves the new covenant established. Hebrews teaches that Christ exceeded the priest system in place through Moses, exceeded the sacrifices of that system, and served in the real sanctuary as opposed to the representative one given through Moses. In like manner, the covenant that Jesus brought forth exceeds and replaces the covenant of Moses.

Quoting Jeremiah 31:33 Hebrews explains,

This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds (Heb. 10:16).

Moses took the Israelites to the Promised Land, but the people were rebellious and, as God swore, never entered into his rest:

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, “They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.” As I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter my rest.” (Heb. 3:7-11).

This new covenant is a covenant of rest. This theme is repeated in Hebrews:

We who have believed enter that rest (Heb. 4:3).

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his (Heb. 4:8-10).

STILL TO COME

The temple of Solomon had additional profound implications for the incarnation and work of Jesus. Those will be examined in the continuation of this lesson.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*Exactly as I show you...so you shall make it.*” (Ex. 25:9).

God was very clear to Moses. He did not say, “Make it however you’d like it.” Nor did he say, “One way’s as good as another!” He was explicit in his instructions, “Exactly as I show you...” God had reasons far beyond what Moses knew or understood. God was at work in a much bigger drama that was unfolding over thousands of years. The great Moses worked in humble obedience to God. Why is that so hard for us? Why do we insist on forcing our own way, seeking the role in our life that rightfully belongs to God? And then we wonder why we never enter his rest, why we never have the peace that comes from full acceptance before him. “Exactly as I show you...so you shall make it.”

2. “*...we have confidence to enter the holy places.....*” (Heb. 10:19).

If you ever wanted to enter the holy place, you needed to be high priest. If you wanted to enter the Most Holy place, you needed to be the High Priest on the one day of the year that such was allowed. Yet in Christ, we have access to the holy places –plural. We have access not only to the Holy, but to the Holy of Holies—to the very throne room of Almighty God. We can enter with confidence that we belong, bought by the blood of the lamb that is sitting on the very throne of God at

his right hand. Approach him in prayer, approach him in praise, and approach him in need. The curtain is ripped and the access is yours!

3. *“Christ will come again to save.”* (Heb. 9:28).

Jesus finished his work and he sits at the right hand of God. But he will come again to take his children home. That promise is made and that promise will be kept. Let our lives reflect our voices as we say, “Amen, Come Lord Jesus!”