

Jesus: The True Tabernacle

“The only building ever constructed upon this earth which was perfect from its very beginning and outset in every detail, and never again needed attention, alteration, was the tabernacle in the wilderness ... Every single detail was designed by Almighty God, every part had a prophetic, redemptive and typical significance.” (M. R. DeHaan, quoted by Philip Graham Ryken in his commentary on Exodus, Crossway Books, page 813).

The worship of the Hebrew patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob consisted of pitching their tents, building their altars and calling on the name of the Lord (Genesis 12:8; 26:25; 33:19,20).

When God redeemed Israel from Egypt, he pitched his tent (Tabernacle) among them, they built an altar and called on his name. When Israel came into the land God had promised them and began to live in permanent dwellings, God also began to live in a house of stone, the Temple.

Detailed instructions for the construction of the tabernacle in the wilderness were given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and an elaborate system of rituals and sacrifices was also ordained with a professional priesthood to attend to the worship of God.

The Tabernacle was the house of God. It was the meeting place of heaven and earth. In Exodus 40, as the Tabernacle was raised and dedicated, the glory of God descended and entered the Holy of Holies.

The Tabernacle proper (the tent) was situated in a courtyard. It was 30 cubits long (45 feet), ten cubits wide (15 feet) and ten cubits high. Inside, the tent was divided into two sections: the Holy Place, where the priests went daily to perform their duties, and the Most Holy Place (Holy of Holies). The two sections were divided by a thick curtain and the High Priest alone was allowed to go beyond that curtain or veil once a year on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16).

Seven pieces of furniture paved the way from the gate of the outer court of the Tabernacle to the Holy of Holies: the bronze altar of sacrifice; the bronze bath or laver; the golden table containing the “bread of the Presence”; the seven-branched lampstand, or Menorah; the gold altar of incense; the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat of God.

This furniture was laid out in the form of a cross. The twelve tribes camped round the Tabernacle in the shape of a cross. When the blood of the Passover lamb was daubed on the doorposts and lintels of the Israelite homes in Egypt, the one who painted the blood did so by making the sign of the cross. The cross has always been way to God and the means of redemption for God’s people.

Exodus 40:33-35 says: “And [Moses] reared up the court round about *the tabernacle* and ... finished the work. Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and *the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.*”

In John 1:14, John tells us, “The Word was made flesh, and *dwelt* [literally, “tabernacled”] among us, (and we beheld his *glory*, the *glory* as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”

John chose his words carefully. “The Word became flesh and *tabernacled*” among his people. John intended to show us in his Gospel that the tabernacle was a foreshadowing of Jesus, the Word of God, and that Jesus is in fact the true tabernacle in whom the glory of God shines. In his Gospel, John reveals the glory of the Word by showing how every piece of furniture in the Tabernacle corresponded to a glorious quality in Jesus.

First of all, John does something none of the other Gospel writers does. He presents to us Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”. By so doing, he takes us inside the gate of the true Tabernacle to:

1. The Altar of Sacrifice (Exodus 27:1-8; 38:1-7)

John 1:29: “Behold, *the Lamb* of God, who takes away the sin of the world. See also 1:36: Behold *the Lamb* of God!”

The lambs that atoned for sins were sacrificed on the bronze altar just inside the gate of the Tabernacle courtyard. By identifying Jesus as the sacrificial “Lamb of God”, John is taking us to that altar.

2. The Basin/Laver (Exodus 30:17-21; 38:8)

The second piece of furniture in the Tabernacle was the bronze laver, at which the priests bathed themselves daily before commencing their duties. The recurring motif in John chapters 2 to 5 is water. Water that is better because it is turned into wine; water that reaches the parts the water of the Tabernacle could ever do.

2:1-11: “...When the master of the feast tasted the *water that had now become wine* ... This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and *manifested his glory*.”

3:1-8: “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of *water* and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

4:1-30: “But whoever drinks of *the water* that I will give him will never be thirsty again. *The water* that I will give him will become in him a spring of *water* swelling up to eternal life.”

5:1-9: “Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate *a pool*, in Aramaic called Bethesda ... One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty eight years.”

3. The Table of “Shewbread” (Exodus 25:1-9; 37:10-16)

The theme of John 6 is the feeding of the multitude and Jesus’ declaration that he is the “bread of life”.

6:35: “I am *the bread* of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”

6:41: “I am *the bread* that came down from heaven.”

6:48: “I am *the bread* of life.”

6:51: “I am *the living bread* that came down from heaven.”

In the next chapter, John concludes his theme of Jesus the True Bread with what might seem to us to be a throwaway line but which would have had great significance to his first-century Jewish readers. Jesus the “bread of life” was born in Bethlehem which, in Hebrew, means “House of Bread”.

7:35: “When they heard these words, some of the people said, ‘This really is the Prophet’. Others said, ‘This is the Messiah.’ But some said, ‘Is the Messiah to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Messiah ... comes from *Bethlehem*?’”

4. The Menorah/Seven-branched Lampstand (Exodus 25:31-40; 37:17-24)

From chapter 9 of John's Gospel to the end of chapter 16, the dominant motif is light, a motif that corresponds to the Menorah in the ancient Tabernacle. Light is a symbol of truth and chapters 13-16 comprise the longest recorded discourse in the Gospels by Jesus, as he teaches his disciples.

9:5: "As long as I am in the world, I am *the light* of the world."

9:39: "For judgment I came into this world, *that those who do not see may see*, and those who see may become blind."

11:9,10: "If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees *the light* of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because *the light* is not in him."

11:43,44: "When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.' The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and *his face wrapped with a cloth*. Jesus said to them, '*Unbind him*, and let him go'."

12:35,36: "*The light* is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have *the light*, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have *the light*, believe in *the light*, that you may become sons of *light*."

12:44: "I have come into the world as *light*, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness."

15:26: "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of *truth*, who proceeds from the Father, *he will bear witness about me*."

16:12-14: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of *truth* comes, he will guide you into *all the truth*, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for *he will take what is mine and declare it to you*."

16:25: "I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but *will tell you plainly* about the Father."

5. The Altar of Incense (Exodus 30:1-10; 37:25-29)

A beautiful little gold altar stood before the curtain which sealed off the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place. Here, the High Priest prayed for the people wearing the breastplate with twelve precious stones attached to it so that he carried the people of Israel on his heart (Exodus 28:29). In his prayer in John 17, Jesus carried his people through all ages on his heart before God.

17:9: "*I am praying for them*. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours."

17:20: "I do not ask for these only, but also for *those who will believe in me* through their word."

6. The Ark of the Covenant & the Mercy Seat (Exodus 25:10-22; 37:1-9)

21:17: "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, '*I am ascending to my Father* and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

According to the Hebrews 9:11,12, “Messiah appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.”

Jesus’ revelation to Mary that he would ascend to God is John’s way of telling us what the writer to the Hebrews tells us. Jesus would ascend to heaven, where he would pray for his people and enable us to have a more intimate relationship with him than when he was on earth in the flesh. For that reason, Mary must not cling to the old fleshly relationship.

In his Gospel, John reveals the glory of Jesus as the fulfilment of all that the furniture of the Tabernacle symbolised. As the Lamb of God, Jesus is our atonement and the source of forgiveness; as the fulfilment of the laver, he provides inner cleansing and inner refreshment and satisfaction; as the “bread from heaven”, he feeds and sustains us in himself; as the “light of the world” he is the perfect light, by whom we find the father (14:6); as our high priest, he bears us on his heart and constantly intercedes for us in heaven; after his resurrection he physically ascended to the Holy of Holies in heaven where, as it were, he sprinkled his atoning blood. Whatever we need, Jesus is the answer. In him, heaven and earth meet. He is our perfect Tabernacle, whose glory we see in the pages of the Fourth Gospel.

The outline of a study given by Mike Moore, the General Secretary of Christian Witness to Israel, at the morning service on Sunday 6 February 2011.

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