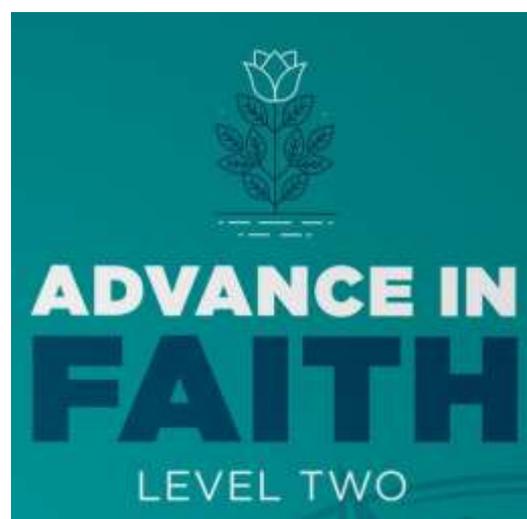
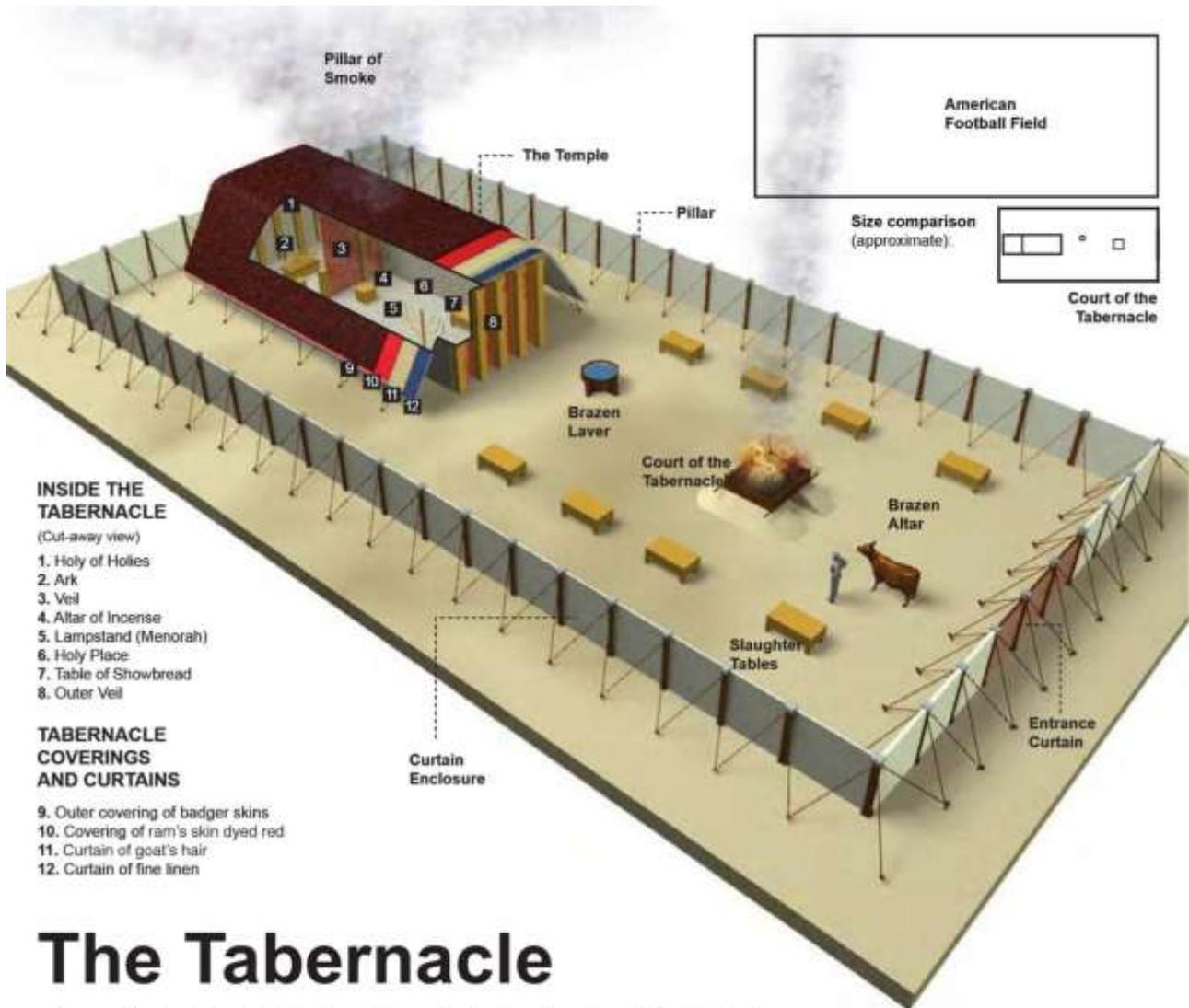


Book of Exodus

Week 5 — God's house

(Exodus 26–31)





The Tabernacle

This portable temple was built in the wilderness by the Israelites circa 1450 BC after they were freed from Egyptian slavery. The tabernacle was the first temple dedicated to God and the first resting place of the ark of the covenant. It served as a place of worship and sacrifices during the Israelites' 40 years in the desert while conquering the land of Canaan.

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Illustration: *Faithlife Study Bible Infographics* edited by Shiloh Hubbard et al (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2012)
Video: <https://soundfaith.com/logos-media/732163-6787142-->

Introduction

The rest of Exodus (chapters 26 – 40) is all about the tabernacle. So what do you do with these chapters?

Some Christians are preoccupied with typology. They try to match every detail of the tabernacle to something related to Jesus.

Others give up on Exodus as dry and irrelevant, especially when they realize it's all repeated:

- Blueprints: God specifies it (Exodus 26 – 30),
- Construction: Israel builds it (Exodus 35 – 40).

We're going to approach this section with this question:

What's the same, and what's different?

What from Israel's worship is the same as the other nations around them, and what was unique to them?

The reason that question is important is that God was not dealing with an ideal people. He was dealing with the descendants of Abraham who originally came from the land of Babel. He was dealing with the descendants of Jacob who had lived among the Canaanites. He was dealing with Hebrews who had been slaves in Egypt. Like all of us, they brought all sorts of cultural baggage with them.

Like us, they had assumptions about how they should worship God, and God accommodated their expectations. When Israel does the same thing the surrounding nations did, it may be cultural rather than God-ordained. When Israel does something different to the surrounding nations, the uniqueness is significant.

What was the tabernacle? (Exodus 26)

The tabernacle was not "church for Israelites." It was not a big tent where Israelites crowded in to sing songs and hear sermons. It was a little tent: 4.5 m wide and 13.5 m long. It would fit into half of the foyer here at Riverview (excluding the café area).

The people did not "attend the tabernacle" the way we attend church. Only priests were allowed inside. It wasn't a tent for the people; it was **a tent for God among his people.**

The interior was set apart ("holy") for God's presence. At the far end was a private room completely reserved ("most holy") for God alone. In the Holy Place, priests waited on Israel's king. But no one entered the Most Holy Place: it was a private chamber for the king alone.

The Most Holy Place was a cube: 10 cubits (4.5 metres) wide, long and high. The only furniture in this room was the ark: God's throne/footstool, containing the document testifying to the covenant, with the atonement cover, flanked by two symbolic guards (cherubs).

An internal curtain (veil) separated the king's inner chamber from the rest of the house (26:33). Before this dividing curtain were two symbols of the king's presence: the bread table, & lampstand (26:35).

Surrounding the king's tent was a courtyard that separated it from the outside world. The courtyard was 45 metres long and 22.5 metres wide. The entrance faced east, with a bronze altar in the courtyard.

In summary, the tabernacle layout consisted of a series of increasingly specialized (holy) spaces: the outer world, the courtyard, the Holy Place, and the Most Holy Place.

What's the same, and what's different?

At Ras Shamra on the Syrian coast north of Israel, archaeologists uncovered ancient Ugarit, a major Canaanite centre. The temple to Baal dates from the second millennium BC, so probably before the exodus. It has essentially the same floor plan as the tabernacle:

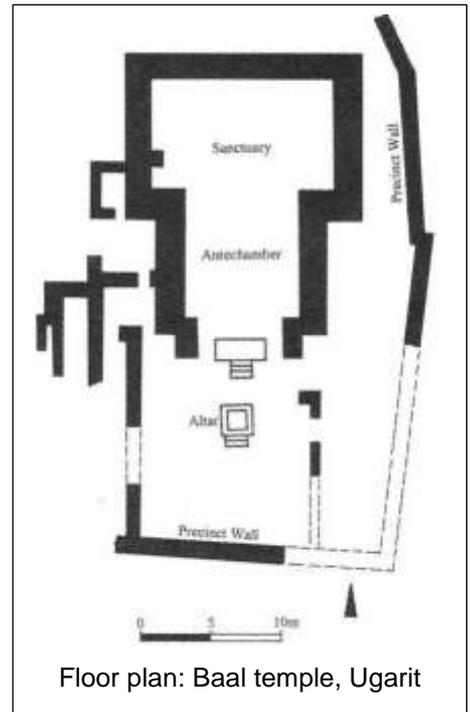
The temple building was surrounded by a walled enclosure, creating a sacred precinct within which the base of a stepped stone altar was found. The sanctuary proper comprised an outer room, and also an inner sanctum within which was a structure made of large blocks of stone that may have been an altar or platform. It is likely that an image of the god was placed here. This tripartite pattern of inner room, outer room and courtyard often is a feature of Semitic sanctuaries.¹

Ancient Egyptians used a similar layout for military tents:

The tabernacle was modelled for polemical purposes, at least in part, on mobile Egyptian military tent camps that consisted of almost exactly the same three-part structure with the same measurements and that was oriented eastward (courtyard, inner reception area and the innermost chamber, where an image of the divine Pharaoh was flanked by two winged creatures!) There is even evidence that the Egyptian military tent was surrounded by troops divided into four units similar to the four distinct units of Israel's tribes that camped around the tabernacle (Num. 2). Just as the divine Pharaoh led his army into battle, so likewise did Yahweh, though he was the true god dwelling in his tabernacle in contrast to Pharaoh's idolatrous tent.²

So what was different?

- a) Israel had only **one God**, the one who created everything and everyone (all nations).
- b) Israel's one God was **invisible**. The living God could not be represented by a man-made (graven) image.
- c) Israel's one invisible God was also their only **king**. The tabernacle was therefore a palace as much as a temple.
- d) Israel's one invisible sovereign God occupied the space over the ark (his throne), between the cherubim (his guards).



Floor plan: Baal temple, Ugarit

¹ A. H. W. Curtis, "Canaanite Gods and Religion," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* edited by Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 133. Image source: <http://www.worldhistory.biz/ancient-history/59695-the-religious-center-on-the-acropolis.html> accessed 23 Jan 2018.

² G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 64.

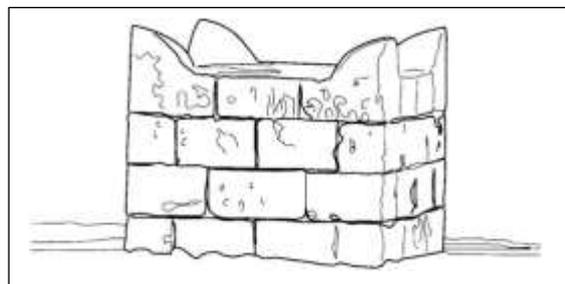
Why sacrifices? (Exodus 27)

In the courtyard of the tabernacle was an altar for sacrificing animals. Many Christians and Jewish people today find the slaughtering of animals repulsive. Why did Israel do this?

Again we need to ask, *What's the same and what's different?*

Sacrifices did not originate with Moses and the Sinai covenant. Long before this, other nations were sacrificing to their gods. God did not initiate the idea of sacrifice: it's how people worshipped in the ancient world.

The Canaanites had altars with horned protrusions at each corner.³ Presumably this prevented animals falling off as they burned. Israel's tabernacle altar had a similar shape, but it was made of wood covered with bronze, as it had to be portable.⁴



Read Exodus carefully and you'll see that YHWH did not originally ask for sacrifices. Moses and the people assumed that this was how they should offer worship to God.

In 24:5-8, Moses enacted the covenant with burnt offerings (*'ō-lāh*) and fellowship offerings (*zē-bāh*), sprinkling blood on the altar. There is no instruction from YHWH. Moses collects the blood of the sacrificed animals and splashes it on the altar and on the people. The people expected these purification rites. In their minds, the covenant could not be established without this blood.

As the Torah unfolds, God does regulate their sacrifices, but his laws are more focused on *who* they worship than *how* they worship. God accommodates himself to the way worship is offered. For some today, that's liturgical. For others it's spontaneous. For ancient people it involved throwing the blood of slaughtered animals over them in a way that is repulsive to us.

Worship is always expressed in ways that reflect the culture, but that doesn't mean God requires or condones those cultural expressions. As he later explained to them, "I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens" (Psalm 50:9).

Our culture focuses on personal guilt, so Christians sometimes imagine an individual Israelite struggling with a guilty conscience and feeling they must sacrifice another cow. That may have happened on rare occasions, but it's not how the sacrifices worked.

The sacrifices were primarily **gifts to God**, gifts celebrating Israel's relationship with YHWH as his covenant people.

³ L. D. Hawk, "Altars," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 34.

⁴ Image from Paul R. House and Eric Mitchell, *Old Testament Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2007), 65.

At festival times (such as Passover), everyone was to bring God a gift:

Exodus 23:14-15 (NIV)

¹⁴ Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me. ...

¹⁵ No one is to appear before me empty-handed.

For Israel, the sacrifices, then, were **food gifts** for God—celebrating and maintaining their special relationship with him:

29:18 (NIV) Then burn the entire ram on the altar.

It is a burnt offering to the LORD, a pleasing aroma,

a food offering presented to the LORD.

There were actually quite a number of food offerings for God, e.g.:

- **burnt offering:** the animal was placed on the stone altar and burnt, so the aroma rose into the heavens as a gift to God. The priests offered God this meal at the start and end of every day (breakfast and dinner).
- **fellowship (peace) offering:** the animal was offered as a food gift to God. The priests then shared the meal with God, on behalf of the people, a symbolic expression of Israel's fellowship with God.
- **sin (guilt) offering:** even this was not primarily about personal sin or guilt. It was a purification offering, cleansing from uncleanness (such as a bodily discharge in Lev 15:13-15).
- **other offerings:** not all food offerings were blood sacrifices. They also offered cereals such as bread (flour meal), and wave offerings (waving a sheaf before God).

In summary, the tabernacle was a tent where Israel enacted their unique relationship as the unique people of the unique God:

- He was in heaven. They were his representatives on earth.
- He was their king, the sovereign of their nation; they were his people, the nation under his law and instruction.

The tabernacle was all about that relationship between the king and his people:

25:22 There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.

Servants & furnishings for God's house (Exodus 28–31)

Since the tabernacle was both a temple (for Israel's God) and a palace (for Israel's king), the priests are also **royal servants** set apart to serve their sovereign in his house. They prepare his meals and enjoy his provision, for and on behalf of his people.

The priests are therefore invested with special garments that signal the "dignity and honour" of their privileged position as mediators of the great king (28:2 NIV). Each piece of the high priest's raiment also emphasises his role as intermediary—representing the people to God.

The Priestly Garments

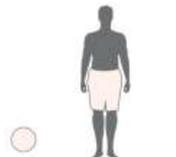
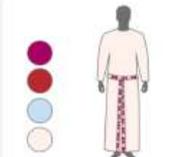
On Mount Sinai, Moses is instructed by God to gather his brother Aaron and Aaron's sons to be priests in the Holy Temple, built in 957 BC. To fulfill their duties, sacred garments are to be made at the highest standards of craftsmanship. In the generations of priests that follow, painstaking attention is paid to ensure every piece is woven and tailor-made to fit each priest.

MATERIALS

All pieces are made out of one or more of the following:

- Gold
- Linen
- Wool, in three colors

HIGH PRIEST'S ORDER OF DAILY DRESS

 <p>1. Pants The priests can take their street clothes off only after they had put on the pants.</p>	 <p>2. Tunic The sleeves are made separately and are the only pieces sewn, not woven.</p>	 <p>3. Belt This combination of materials is only allowed for the priests' garments.</p>	 <p>4. Robe The hem is adorned with hollow wool "pomegranates" and gold bells.</p>
 <p>5. Ephod Made of all five materials, it is considered the most important garment.</p>	 <p>6. Breastplate It is set with 12 stones whose colors match the flags of the tribes of Israel.</p>	 <p>7. Turban A blue wool cap with gold bands may have been placed over the linen turban.</p>	 <p>8. Crown The thin plate of gold engraved with the raised words "Holy to the Lord."</p>

A CLOSER LOOK

Putting on the turban consisted of taking a strip of linen approximately 24 feet long and winding it around the head.

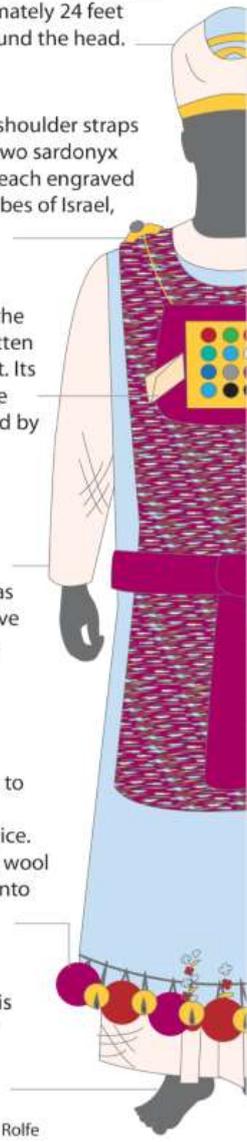
Settings of gold on the shoulder straps of the ephod are fit for two sardonyx "remembrance" stones, each engraved with six names of the tribes of Israel, in order of their birth.

The Urim V'Tummim is the divine name of God written on a piece of parchment. Its presence allowed for the divine guidance received by the illumination of the letters on the stones.

The tunic is woven in a checkered knit pattern as opposed to a cross-weave pattern. The sleeves are woven separately, and then sewn on.

The bells made it easier to follow the priests' movements during service. There are as many as 72 wool pomegranates woven onto the hem of the robe.

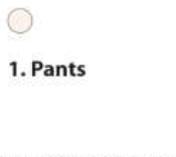
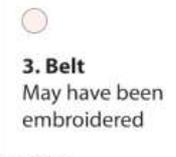
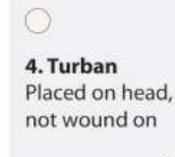
The floor of the Temple is holy, and consequently the priests are to keep their feet bare.



HIGH PRIEST ON DAY OF ATONEMENT

 <p>1. Pants</p>	 <p>2. Tunic One for morning, one for evening</p>	 <p>3. Belt No wool embroidery</p>	 <p>4. Turban No blue cap with gold bands</p>
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ORDINARY PRIESTS' DAILY DRESS

 <p>1. Pants</p>	 <p>2. Tunic</p>	 <p>3. Belt May have been embroidered</p>	 <p>4. Turban Placed on head, not wound on</p>
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SOURCES: Temple Institute; Carl Schultz of Houghton College

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Exodus 28: Vestments of the royal servants

Ephod (28:6-14): This was “a sleeveless vest, which fitted close to the body and may have extended somewhat below the hips.”⁵ On the shoulders of this garment rested a pair of onyx stoned engraved with the names of the twelve sons of Israel. That was their priestly role before God, “a remembrance for the sons of Israel” (28:12).

Breastpiece (28:15-30): On his chest, the high priest wore a multi-coloured embroidered fabric pouch, about 22 cm square, bound to the ephod with twisted gold chains.⁶ It was decorated with twelve gemstones, engraved with the names of the twelve tribes. These stones reminded everyone that the high priest represented them when he stood before their sovereign, and “reminded YHWH” of his special relationship with the people whom he called his “treasured possession” (28:29, compare 19:5).

Urim and Thummin (28:30): The pocket of the breastpiece held these items that could be used to ask their sovereign for a decision. The breastpiece is therefore called *the breastpiece of judgement* (28:15, 29-30), since it was about decision making. We don't know what they looked like. The only person recorded as using them was King Saul when God had stopped directing him (1 Sam 14:41-45).

Robe (28:31-35): The high priest's base garment (worn under the ephod)⁷ was a blue poncho-style robe with a central hole for his head. Its outer hem was decorated with alternating fabric pomegranates and golden bells that functioned as weights to hold the garment in place. The bells announced the high priest's approach to YHWH's holy presence, since approaching a ruler unannounced would be disrespectful and potentially suspect (“so he does not die”).

Headpiece (28:36-38): The high priest's turban was fastened in place with a pure gold ornamental emblem shaped like a flower and engraved with words that identified his role. He was *Holy to YHWH*. In the Biblical narrative, the word *holy* (*qō-dēš*) has not applied to any person (except YHWH himself in 15:11) until the Sinai covenant formed the Hebrews into a *holy nation* (19:5). From that point this nation was devoted to representing their sovereign among the nations who also belong under his governance. The high priest embodies this role on behalf of the nation: he is a devoted representation of divine sovereign among the people who are his holy nation. This emblem is later called a *holy crown* (29:6 ESV, KJV). The same word (*nē-zēr*) is used for a kings' crowns (2 Sam 1:10; 2 Kings 11:12; 2 Chron 23:11;



⁵ R. K. Harrison, “Ephod” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Eerdmans, 1979–1988), Volume 2, 117.

⁶ R. K. Harrison, “Breastpiece of the High Priest” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume 1, 544.

⁷ Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 668.

Psa 89:39; 132:18; Prov 27:24; Zech 9:16). This crown on the high priest's head reminds the people that he is the devoted servant of King YHWH, so the bearer of the heavenly sovereign's regal authority.

With that authority comes responsibility that at first glance seems cryptic. Exodus 28:38 tells us that "Aaron shall **bear the guilt of the holy things**" Our modern Western minds struggle to understand how holy things could have guilt. The "holy things" are offerings being devoted to YHWH, such as sacrifices. If what was being offered was unclean or unacceptable to YHWH for any reason, offering of this sacrifice would incur guilt. In the ancient world, a servant who offered his sovereign an unacceptable gift had made things much worse: his position was now very precarious! (Compare Leviticus 10:1-3.) But in the cultic system established here on Sinai, the faulting worshipper is not blamed: amazingly, he is "accepted before YHWH" while the guilt is laid on the head of the high priest. The high priest is responsible for any such guilt, because he is expected to know better.

Priest's raiment (28:39-43): All the priests (including the high priest) were to have linen tunics and turbans and an embroidered sash. These splendid vestments arrayed them with the "dignity and honour" suited to servants of YHWH (28:40) and symbolised the authority invested in them. The Hebrew idiom for ordained (28:41) is literally *to fill the hand*, so to impart responsibility. YHWH himself was described as majestic in holiness as he stretched out his hand to liberate his people (15:11-12). The priestly servants who represent him exclusively are arrayed in splendour as he fills their hands. They will lead the people in recognising *the splendour of holiness* (Psa 29:2; 96:9).

Under their robes they were also supplied with linen underwear so as not to accidentally expose their private parts as they approached the altar. That would bring shame on them in their culture, undermining the dignity of the responsibility they carried. If a servant was shamed before the people, he brought shame on his master, and one who shamed his master could be in danger of his life (28:43).

Exodus 29: Installation of the royal servants

The ordination process took a week (29:35), and followed these steps:

- a) cleansing the priests by washing them (29:4)
- b) dressing them in the distinctive garments that represented their mediatory role (29:5)
- c) crowning the high priest as the human representation of YHWH's divine rule (29:6)
- d) anointing them with the special-purpose spiced olive oil (25:6; 30:22-33) that identified things as devoted to YHWH (29:7)

- e) presenting the team (high priest and priests) in their full regalia to the people (29:8-9)
- f) sacrificing a bull as a sin offering, to purify the priests and altar (29:10-14)
- g) burning a ram as a food offering, so its aroma rises for their sovereign (29:15-18)
- h) sacrificing a second ram to induct the priests into their role: they and their robes are blood-splattered and they raise up parts of the lamb repeatedly (a wave motion) as a food offering to YHWH (29:22-25)
- i) assigning portions of the second lamb to the priests who now join YHWH in eating this dedicated feast on behalf of his people (20:26-34).

Their task is to maintain this relationship between the heavenly sovereign and his subjects. The word *atonement* is for purifying everything: priests, altar, and people (29:33, 36-37; 30:10, 15-16).

The whole point of this tabernacle is as the place where their sovereign lives among them. This translation emphasizes the point by using “ruler” for God:

Exodus 29:45-46

⁴⁵ I will dwell among the descendants of Israel, to be a ruler to them. ⁴⁶ And they will know that I am YHWH their ruler who led them out from the domain of Egypt to dwell among them—I YHWH their ruler.

Other details (Exodus 30 – 31)

Exodus 30: Incense altar, census tax, laver, oil, incense

The incense altar stood right before the king's presence, immediately before the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the throne room.

Incense was offered on this altar each morning and evening (30:7).

The incense altar had a special role on the Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), the one occasion when the high priest entered the throne room (30:10, compare Leviticus 16).

30:34-38 gives the recipe for the incense.

Each male redeemed from Egypt was required to “pay YHWH a ransom for his life” (30:12). They're no longer slaves in Egypt, but paying this one-off tax signifies that they belong to YHWH. “The atonement money ... makes atonement for your lives” (30:16).

A bronze wash basin (laver) sat in the courtyard, between the altar and the entry to the sanctuary. The sovereign's royal servants (priests) were to wash hands and feet before entering his house (30:21).

Exodus 31: Craftsmen, Sabbath

The kingdom of God is a partnership between the heavenly sovereign and his people on earth. God has invited his people to build him a house to show they want him living among them. But the building is not something they do alone: **they build in partnership with God:**

Exodus 31:1–11 (NIV)

¹ Then the LORD said to Moses, ² “See, I have chosen **Bezalel** son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, ³ and I have **filled him with the Spirit of God**, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—⁴ to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, ⁵ to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts. ⁶ Moreover, I have appointed **Oholiab** son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given ability to all the skilled workers to make everything I have commanded you: ⁷ the tent of meeting, the ark of the covenant law with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent—⁸ the table and its articles, the pure gold lampstand and all its accessories, the altar of incense, ⁹ the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, the basin with its stand—¹⁰ and also the woven garments, both the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments for his sons when they serve as priests, ¹¹ and the anointing oil and fragrant incense for the Holy Place. They are to make them just as I commanded you.”

Moses would not have understood “the spirit of God” to be the third person of the trinity, so the United Bible Societies advise against using upper case for “spirit.”⁸ Nevertheless, it’s interesting that the first gifting by God’s spirit in Scripture is artistic. Not all human creativity originates from God (compare Genesis 4:21-22), but artistry can be a gift from God.

These guys were probably so enthusiastic to apply themselves to this project that Moses had to remind them that God didn’t want them working seven days a week (31:12- 18). Resting on the Sabbath was a **sign** of Israel submitting to YHWH’s authority (31:12, 17).

⁸ Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 738.

Conclusion

The tent of meeting had a single purpose: it is the place where YHWH was present to rule and direct his nation. The role of his royal servants was to mediate the divine presence to the people and to present the people and their needs to the sovereign. The priestly role is therefore summed up as atonement, i.e. the maintenance of this astounding relationship between YHWH and his subjects.

Memory verse

Exodus 25:22 (NIV)

There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law,
I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.

Take home exercise

Read Ephesians 2:11-21. Compare this text to the purpose of the tabernacle in Exodus.

Paul is amazed and thrilled that the Jewish Messiah has incorporated non-Jews (gentiles) into God's covenant people (verses 11-12). The Messiah's death was the means of making peace (reconciliation, atonement), ended the hostility between God and humans, and forming us into a new humanity in him (verses 14-16). The Messiah made peace between God and humanity, both those who were near (Jews) and those far off (gentiles), giving us access to the divine presence (tabernacle language) through the one Spirit (verses 17-18).

Consequently, Jews and gentiles are fellow citizens in the holy people, family members in God's household (verse 19). That house is built on the foundation of the New Testament apostles directly commissioned by the Messiah and the Old Testament prophets who declared that this is what God would always do. Messiah Jesus is the crucial person on whom this whole house-of-God is established (verse 20).

We are now seeing God build his house among humanity. It consists of the people who recognize his kingship, people who are being fitted together to form a holy temple suitable for YHWH's divine presence (verse 21). His Spirit is building us (humanity) into what we were designed to be: the dwelling place of our heavenly sovereign among his people (verse 22).

How does this vision shape your understanding of what the church is and what it is called to do? Jot down your thoughts.

In preparation for next week, read Exodus 33 – 40.