

AN EXPOSITION:
THE TABERNACLE –
HOW WE ARE TO APPROACH THE THRONE OF GOD

by

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INTRODUCTION

Since God created man in the Garden of Eden, he has desired to commune with His creation. The relationship was fractured when humanity decided to rebel against God by partaking in the forbidden fruit. The LORD no longer walked in the midst of the garden, and man could not come face to face with God as he did in Eden. Ever since that moment, God has been working to restore the relationship and have His abode with man again. The first initiative of God to reestablish His presence on earth was through the construction of the Tabernacle in the wilderness.

Once the LORD delivered the Israelites from Egypt and they crossed the Red Sea, He sought to make them into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.¹ Moses was directed to the top of Mount Sinai, where he received the Law for the nation. It is also during his time on the mountain with God that he is shown the *pattern* of the Tabernacle and all of its furnishings, according to Exodus 25:9 and Hebrews 8:5. The passage from Hebrews also reveals that what Moses was to construct with physical materials was just a *shadow* or a *representative* of the true sanctuary that exists in Heaven. The earthly Tabernacle was to serve as the physical location for God to begin to reestablish His presence on the earth. What Moses officiated on earth directly affected what took place in Heaven, confirming the words of Jesus/Yeshua and His will for our lives and for the things of earth to come into alignment with the things of Heaven.²

The instructions given to Moses come primarily from Exodus 25:10-28:43 and specify the Tabernacle's contents, configuration, and priestly garments. Great detail is provided regarding the types of materials and designs Moses was to construct. The LORD also supernaturally gifted men with the talent and skill needed for the fine artistry required to form the precious metals and weave the intricate patterns of the fabrics. All the people gave freely of what was needed for the construction, so much that there was an abundance of materials when everything was complete. Once everything was built precisely to the LORD's specifications, we read in Exodus 40:34-38 that the Glory of the LORD filled the temple, signifying the preparations were to His approval, allowing Him to dwell among His people once more.

¹ Exodus 19:6.

² Matthew 6:10.

TABERNACLE LAYOUT AND CONTENTS

As was previously stated, great detail was given to Moses regarding the Tabernacle's specifications, which ultimately were patterned from the Heavenly Tabernacle. The entire Tabernacle was comprised of three main areas: the Outer Court (containing the Brazen Altar and Laver), the Holy Place (containing the Lampstand, Table of Shewbread, and Altar of Incense), and the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy Place (containing the Ark of the Covenant). The three areas increase in holiness as one progresses from the Outer Court to the Holy of Holies. The boundaries of the Outer Court were marked by a perimeter of fabric, poles, and staked poles. The Holy Place and the Most Holy Place were housed in a tent made of four layers of materials (badger skin, ram skin, goat's hair, and linen). Only one opening existed to pass from one area into the next. The function and significance of each element of the Tabernacle within the Old Covenant system of sacrifice and worship will now be explained in detail.

BRAZEN ALTAR

Service to the LORD began at the Brazen Altar. This was the place where animal sacrifices were slaughtered and burned. According to Leviticus 17:11, the LORD required blood to be shed for the atonement of souls. Anytime a blood sacrifice had to be made, it was to occur at the Brazen Altar. Sacrifices were made for the sins of individuals and the nation, with the Day of Atonement as an example. Additionally, sacrifices were made each morning and evening,³ and one of the priestly duties was to maintain the fire night and day, never allowing it to go out.⁴

LAVER

The second element found within the Outer Court was the Laver. This bowl-like structure was made of polished brass, where the priests would wash themselves before entering the Holy Place. Washing was performed to remove spiritual defilement. No other priestly service could be conducted if the washing did not occur. The priests were instructed by God to wash their hands

³ Exodus 29:38-46.

⁴ Leviticus 6:12.

and feet in the Laver, and not doing so would cost them their lives.⁵ Some examples of ceremonial washing that the Torah prescribes are cleansing people who have touched a dead body⁶ and cleansing clothing or items needed for priestly service.⁷

As the priest moved from the Outer Court to the Holy Place, he would find three items: the Lampstand, Table of Shewbread, and the Altar of Incense.

LAMPSTAND

The specifications of the Lampstand are given in Exodus 25:31-40. The Lampstand was made of one piece of solid gold, containing six branches (three protruding from each side) and one branch in the center, resembling almond blossoms. As priestly service was conducted within the Holy Place, the Lampstand was the primary source of light within the Tabernacle (the altar of incense would have provided some light). Recall that the entire Holy Place was covered by four layers of material, which would have created a completely dark room. The only light source within the Holy Place would have been the golden Lampstand. Leviticus 24:2 instructs the priests to use pure oil from pressed olives to fuel the fire. Like the Altar, the fire of the Lampstand was to be maintained daily and allowed to burn continually.

TABLE OF SHEWBREAD

Directly across from the Lampstand would have been the Table of Shewbread. The table was made of acacia wood and overlaid with pure gold. Every Sabbath, the Levites were to bake twelve cakes (representing the twelve tribes) made of fine flour and place them on the table in two rows of six. The bread was to be eaten by the priests within the Holy Place.⁸ The command of God in Exodus 25:30 is for the bread to be set before Him constantly.

⁵ Exodus 30:20-21.

⁶ Numbers 19:18-19.

⁷ Leviticus 11:32.

⁸ Leviticus 24:5-9.

ALTAR OF INCENSE

The final item found within the Holy Place was the Altar of Incense. It was also made of acacia wood and overlaid with pure gold. Of the three items, this was the one closest to the veil separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. As the priest would minister to the LORD, he would do so at the place of the Altar of Incense, standing between God and the people whom he came to represent. Approaching the Altar of Incense was the goal of the priest: to come before the presence of God and intercede for the people.

The Golden Censer served the same purpose, just on a smaller scale. Being able to carry the Golden Censer allowed the priest to be mobile when performing intercessory work, as when Aaron had to quickly stop a plague that was brought on by the Israelite's sin in Numbers 16:46-50. Standing at the Altar of Incense was the closest a person could come to the LORD, with the exception of actually entering the Holy of Holies, which only occurred once a year (during the Day of Atonement). Following the same pattern as the Brazen Altar and Lampstand, the Altar of Incense was to burn continually.

INNER VEIL AND MOST HOLY PLACE

The veil served as a separation between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. Moses received the instruction in Exodus 26:31-33 to make the veil. It was to be made of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, woven of fine linen. Artisans were to weave the images of cherubim upon the veil. Remember that after the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, and guarding the entrance of the LORD's dwelling place were cherubim. Recall from the beginning of this paper that God was working to reestablish His dwelling place on earth, and the veil represented the final barrier (which was guarded by angelic presence) to his sanctuary. The priest understood that the veil was the only separation between the temporal and the eternal. Behind the veil was the presence of the unapproachable and infinite God of the universe.

The Most Holy Place contained the Ark of the Covenant, the Holiest item within the Tabernacle. It is the first item described by God to be built for the Tabernacle in Exodus 25. Like the furniture in the Holy Place, it was constructed of acacia wood and overlaid with pure gold. On the top portion were two golden cherubim, which were placed at opposite ends of the Ark.

The cherubim faced each other as their extended wings covered the Ark. There were two main parts of the Ark: the Ark itself and the Mercy Seat. The Ark was a box designed to carry the tablets containing the Ten Commandments, which God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Mercy Seat represents the throne of God, the seat of His presence on earth. King Hezekiah describes God as the one who dwells (or is seated) between the cherubim.⁹ Again, the physical things of the earth are meant to represent what is actually occurring in Heaven. It was from this place that God tells Moses in Exodus 25:22, "And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I give you in commandment to the children of Israel."

THE SPIRITUAL FULFILLMENT OF THE TABERNACLE'S PURPOSE

In Matthew 5:17, Yeshua plainly says He came not to destroy the Law and Prophets but to fulfill (complete or truly reveal). Paul describes the Old Testament practices as a *shadow* to which Yeshua is the substance (or the image which produces the shadow).¹⁰ Therefore, being able to spiritually discern Christ's purpose and role as our sacrifice and High Priest will assist in revealing the mystery behind the true meaning of the Tabernacle's function and purpose. The individual components of the Tabernacle have been identified and explained in the previous section. The spiritual significance (or fulfillment by Christ) will now be investigated.

LAYOUT

John 10:1-3 says, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." A few verses later, Yeshua identifies Himself as the door.¹¹ It is here that Yeshua prescribes the order to enter into the *sheepfold*: the Shepherd (Yeshua) first enters as the Doorkeeper (God) opens, the Shepherd then calls, and the sheep (people) follow the Shepherd's voice. For anyone to enter into communion with God, it must be

⁹ Isaiah 37:16.

¹⁰ Colossians 2:17.

¹¹ John 10:7.

in response to the voice and direction of Yeshua, who has made the way for us. He has led and provided direction for His sheep by perfectly and obediently walking the path we, too, are to follow. And not only is He the Shepherd, but He is also the Door, enabling Him to close or separate thieves/robbers (those who do not want to obey Him) from the presence of God. He is the Way, Truth, and Life, and no man can come to the Father but through Him.¹² As the Tabernacle had one entrance, so does salvation.

BRAZEN ALTAR

In order to enter into the Tabernacle, the first requirement was a blood sacrifice. The blood sacrifice/burnt offering is the first type of sacrifice listed in the Book of Leviticus. Blood is needed to cover us to make us presentable before God. Leviticus 17:11 and Hebrews 9:22 state that sins are atoned for by blood alone. Since the LORD is perfect and Holy, we must be transformed into perfection and holiness to come into His presence. During the Old Testament times, this transformation was not permanent. Forgiveness required repeated sacrifices because the animal sacrifices could not produce permanent atonement. Hebrews 9:12 states, "Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place *once for all*, having obtained eternal redemption." John the Baptist identified Yeshua as the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world,¹³ and this is also how Yeshua is depicted in Heaven.¹⁴ The blood of Yeshua has fulfilled the necessary requirement of perfect blood being offered for the sins of anyone willing to confess and repent of their sins. Paul describes this *burnt offering* as a "sweet-smelling aroma" to the LORD in Ephesians 5:2. Anyone can receive the benefits of His sacrifice and enter through the door that He has provided for us, through His blood alone.

LAVER

The Laver was a place of washing, which took place after the blood was offered. The priests would wash themselves as they performed their duties within the Tabernacle. Things that are unholy cause defilement, and during the Old Testament times (for the sake of service in the

¹² John 14:6.

¹³ John 1:29.

¹⁴ Revelation 5:6, 12.

Tabernacle), much emphasis was placed on external factors that would bring defilement upon the priest (certain animals, touching a dead body, etc.). Defilement required washing. The fulfillment of this practice is twofold: physical (baptism) and spiritual (what Paul refers to as the washing of regeneration in Titus 3:5). Baptism is one way Tabernacle's system of priestly duties was made complete. Once a person receives the salvation Yeshua offers, we are commanded by Yeshua to be baptized. Though baptism does not save us, like the order of worship in the Tabernacle, it is a required step in the pathway to God's presence (obedience is essential). In a more spiritual sense, washing occurs in our hearts through the Word of God by the Spirit of God. Ephesians 5:26 explains how Christ cleanses us (His Church) through "the washing of water by the Word." Paul also says in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 that sanctification (Holiness to God) is by the Spirit and Truth. Washing (physical and spiritual) allows us to proceed one step closer towards the presence of the LORD into the Holy Place.

THE HOLY PLACE

Somehow, the Tabernacle's structure of skin and wood was permitted to contain the priceless eternal presence of God, as well as earthly treasures like gold. From the outside, it looked like nothing more than an ordinary tent. It would be easy to see the Tabernacle from afar without paying it much attention due to its ordinary appearance. Similarly, Yeshua, the *Tabernacle of God*, looked like an ordinary man to most people, as Isaiah 53:2-3 states, "For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness, and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Moreover, we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him." Despite His ordinary appearance, Yeshua was the abode of the most precious prize in the universe, the Spirit of the Living God. This most precious gift is available to anyone willing to look past the seemingly "plain" Man of Yeshua and behold what His Tabernacle contained.

THE LAMPSTAND

The Lampstand was the primary source of light within the Holy Place. It was made of pure, hammered gold and required pure oil to burn. The Gospel of John identifies Yeshua as The Light in numerous places.¹⁵ He is the same Light that separated the darkness in Genesis 1, and as John's Gospel states, the darkness (physical and spiritual) cannot overcome the Light of God. Revelation 3:18 reveals Yeshua as the only source of *true gold*, refined by fire. No riches of this world can compare. He was perfectly *hammered* by the Master Craftsman (the LORD) through the trials He faced during His time on earth, tested in every way as we are, yet without sin.¹⁶ Yeshua was the spotless vessel containing the pure oil of the Holy Spirit, which fueled the zealous fire within Him. As His followers, He now calls us to be that light and shine in the darkness.¹⁷ This is all the more reason we are to pursue holiness: in order for us to also be clean vessels to contain the Holy Spirit of God.

TABLE OF SHEWBREAD

This table contained the bread, which was presented as an offering to the LORD and provided food for the priests. It alludes to the pure bread (manna) God provided for Israel while they were in the wilderness. It is also reminiscent of the past covenant meals between God and His people (with Abraham in Genesis 8:18 and Moses Exodus 24.9-11). Communing with the LORD through dining is one of the closest experiences a child of God can experience, symbolizing agreement and unity. *Shewbread* is translated as the *bread of presence* or the *bread of face*. Being able to partake in this meal brings us closer into the presence of God. Yeshua explains in John 6 that He is the Bread which came from Heaven,¹⁸ states He is the Bread of Life,¹⁹ and no one can experience eternal life (which is defined by John as knowing God in John 17:3) or come face to face with Him, unless we partake in Yeshua.²⁰ Though the Bible does not clearly state the shewbread was unleavened, it more than likely was based on the typology of leaven and sin, as

¹⁵ John 1:4, 5, 7, 8:12, 9:5, 12:35-36.

¹⁶ Hebrews 4:15.

¹⁷ Matthew 5:14-16.

¹⁸ John 6:41.

¹⁹ John 6:48.

²⁰ John 6:53.

Yeshua illustrated at the Last Supper. He identified Himself as the unleavened Passover bread broken for us.²¹ As the priests acknowledged the provision of God and partook in the shewbread, followers of Yeshua are to do the same until He returns.²²

ALTAR OF INCENSE

The Altar of Incense stood as the last item outside of the Most Holy Place. At this altar (and the golden censer), the priest would burn incense and make intercession for the people. Revelation 8:3-4 provides a picture of how prayers on earth are brought before God's presence: "Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given so much incense that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne. And, the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand." As the prayers of earth ascend into the heavens, the angels of the LORD would present them to Him with heavenly incense. Just as the Altar of Incense would burn continually, the Holy Spirit's fire within Christians should cause them to pray without ceasing.²³ It must be reemphasized that in order for prayer to reach the throne of the LORD, the person praying must acknowledge and adhere to the path Christ has provided; through His sacrifice and blood. Prayer offered any other way can be likened to the strange fire offered by Nadab and Abihu.²⁴

INNER VEIL AND THE MOST HOLY PLACE

The Most Holy Place was the small room dedicated to the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit on earth, separated only by a curtain. The High Priest was privileged to visit this place just once a year on the Day of Atonement. Upon the mercy seat, blood was poured for Israel. Matthew 27:51 reports that the veil in the temple concealing the Most Holy Place was torn from top to bottom the moment Yeshua died on the cross. The death of Yeshua allowed God's presence to no longer be confined in the temple. The writer of Hebrews beautifully explains the mystery of how Yeshua's sacrifice has allowed us into the presence of God, "Therefore, brethren,

²¹ 1 Corinthians 11:24.

²² 1 Corinthians 11:26.

²³ 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

²⁴ Leviticus 10:1-7.

having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Yeshua, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh."²⁵ What allows us the closest access to God is through the sacrifice of Yeshua the Messiah. Mentioning Hebrews 9:12 once more, the writer says, "Jesus with His own blood, He *entered the Most Holy Place* once for all, having obtained eternal redemption."

During the days of Moses, God's presence was contained within the Most Holy Place. After the Resurrection and the birth of the Church in Acts 2, the Spirit of God abides within every Christian. For this reason, Paul pleads with the Corinthians to seek holiness, "do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who *is* in you?"²⁶ The temple of our hearts contains the same elements as the heart of the Holy of Holies: the tablets of Law (written on our hearts), the manna (bread of life/Yeshua), and the rod of Aaron (representing the Holy Spirit's authority/power behind the miracles). Because the Spirit resides in us, we can victoriously walk out the Christian life and be the light Yeshua has commanded us to shine. The light we shine is Christ's because the same Spirit that rose Him from the dead now remarkably lives within us.²⁷

CONCLUSION

Though the priesthood was restricted to the house of Levi under the Old Covenant, God told Moses that His desire was for His people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation in Exodus 19:6. After the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ, the Apostle Peter addresses the Church with almost identical verbiage as God on Mount Sinai: as a royal priesthood and a holy nation.²⁸ Yeshua came to be the dwelling place of God's Spirit on earth for a season to redeem humanity from the cause of Adam's transgression back in Eden. Astonishingly, the veil that once separated the presence of the unapproachable God of the universe from the temporal world was torn forever by the death and Resurrection of Yeshua. If it seems impossible that the Man Yeshua can be the dwelling place of the Spirit of God, how much more incredible is it that the LORD permits His Spirit to live in the plain and ordinary tabernacle of our flesh? Understanding the function of the earthly Tabernacle dramatically aids us in comprehending the all-encompassing

²⁵ Hebrews 10:19-20.

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

²⁷ Romans 8:11.

²⁸ 1 Peter 2:9.

sacrifice of Yeshua and how His blood has once and for all atoned for our sins in the heavenly Tabernacle.