

TABERNACLE OF THE LORD

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

The tabernacle was designed as an external manifestation of the LORD'S covenant with Israel. It served as a meeting place between Him and His people. The very furnishings and arrangement of the tabernacle represented the moral and ethical teachings of the LORD. This was especially true of the ark of the covenant. It contained the tables of the law which stated the basis for His covenant with Israel. The LORD'S presence depended upon Israel's obedience to that law. The mercy seat rested upon the ark which contained the law, and made it clear that Israel's transgressions of the law could be atoned for through God's mercy. The design, materials, construction, and arrangement of the entire tabernacle were determined by the LORD to show many types of Himself and of His salvation.

Having completed His instructions concerning the tabernacle proper, the LORD showed Moses how to arrange the surrounding courtyard. The brazen altar was to be strategically located at its entrance. Its location served as a perpetual reminder to Israel that they could not approach or establish any type of fellowship with a holy God apart from the blood atonement. Standing in full view of the congregation, it also served as a vivid illustration of the wretchedness of sin and the high cost of its covering.

Heads of households had fulfilled the priestly function on behalf of their families until this time (Noah — Gen 8:20; Job — Job 1:5; Abraham — Gen 13:18; Isaac — Gen 26:25; Jacob — Gen 35:1, 46:1). Now the office of the priesthood was vested in the tribe of Levi with Aaron officially designated as its first head.

The priests functioned as mediators of the blood sacrifice. Added to the tabernacle facilities, they completed the mechanics necessary to restore Israelites back to fellowship with God. God intended that the nation of Israel as a whole would be a "kingdom of priests" bringing all nations to God. However, it was a practical necessity that a chosen few should represent Israel before God and visibly symbolize the purity and separateness God required of His covenant people.

I. The Arrangement of the Tabernacle

A. The Plan — Ex 25:8, 9; 29:45; Heb 8:5

The very organization and structure of the tabernacle was revealed by God, including the minute details as well as the major purpose.

B. The Outer Court — Ex 27:9-19; 38:9-20

There were two major sections to the tabernacle: the outer court and the tabernacle proper as delineated in the diagram (at the end of these Study Notes). Kings' palaces likewise consisted of an outer court (Est 6:4) and an inner court (Est 4:11). Two characteristics characterize the outer court of the tabernacle. First, it was functional in that it allowed room for the worshippers to gather for their sacrifices and then to eat. Second, it was symbolic in that the worshipper could approach God though he was never allowed into the tabernacle proper. The Holy Place is where the priests ministered and the Most Holy Place is where God dwelt. This arrangement symbolized God's immanence and transcendence (cp. N.T. truth, Heb 10:19ff).

1. The exterior perimeter

a. The pillars

(1) **The number** — most scholars understand the pillars to be counted once

each and thus having a total of sixty.

(2) The construction — each pillar was set in a socket of brass (bronze) for stability and strength. A capital overlaid with silver and silver bands called "fillets" ornamented the pillar (Ex 27:10, 11). Two hooks were secured into the pillar for guy ropes. Two pins (pegs) of brass were driven on either side of each pillar for anchoring purposes. The pillar itself was made of beautiful acacia wood.

(3) The dimensions — The tabernacle court was 100 cubits (approximately 150 feet) long and 50 cubits (approximately 75 feet) wide. There is some debate about the actual length of a cubit, but it was approximately 17.6 inches. The height of the pillars was 5 cubits (Ex 27:18) or approximately 7.5 feet.

b. The hangings (curtains) — "the "walls of the outer court" were formed by hanging fine twisted linen between the pillars.

c. The gate — Ex 27:16ff

(1) The dimension — The gate was 20 cubits (approximately 30 feet) wide. Notice that this gate faced eastward, perhaps to give a more beautiful view of the tabernacle in the early morning sun.

(2) The material — This hanging or curtain consisted of four beautifully colored materials: blue, purple, scarlet, and fine twisted linen (Ex 27:16).

d. The porters — Gatekeepers who were mainly responsible for guarding the entrance to the tabernacle, though they had other responsibilities (see 1 Chron 9:17-23; 2 Kgs 25:18; 2 Chron 31:14).

2. The furniture

a. The brazen altar — Ex 27:1-8; 38:1-7

(1) Terms for the altar

(a) Brazen altar — Ex 27:1 - or altar of bronze which indicates its appearance and construction.

(b) Altar of burnt offering — Ex 38:1; Lev 4:7, 10. This phrase spoke of the function of the altar.

(2) Description of the altar — It was framed of acacia wood forming a structure 5 cubits long, 5 cubits wide and 3 cubits high (Ex 27:1). It was covered with bronze because of its high melting point (1985° F.) and strength. There was a ledge in the middle of the altar and below it was a grating. Provisions (rings) were included for the purpose of transportation on the shoulders of the priests (Ex 38:5). This altar was complete with the necessary utensils (Ex 38:3).

(3) Significance of the altar

(a) As to its location — The altar was the most important item in the outer court. It was symbolic of the need for blood atonement before any approach and fellowship could be realized with God.

(b) As to its purpose — It was designed to be the place of slaughtering innocent animals which was to be a vivid reminder to Israel that sin was an ugly thing and that the price for atonement was high. The fire was never to go out at this altar (Lev 6:13).

(c) As to its appearance — The horns of the altar (extensions on the four corners) were sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice at the consecration of the priests (Ex 29:12), at the presentation of the sin offering (Lev 4:18-34), and on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:18). The most common explanation of the horns compares them to the horns of the animals and thus they were symbolic of power to approach God and to defend oneself. Hence, they became the place of asylum (1 Kgs 1:50, 51).

b. The laver — Ex 30:17-21; 38:8

The Scripture does not indicate the shape, size, ornamentation, or methods for transport. It was made of bronze which was provided from mirrors donated by the women who dedicated themselves to serve at the door of the tabernacle (Ex 38:8). The laver contained the water for the ceremonial cleansing for the hands and feet of the priests before they ministered in the presence of God. The guilt of the priest's sin had been cared for at the brazen altar, but this symbolized the necessity for the priest's acts and walks to be clean before he carried on reconciliation for the congregation (Ex 30:21). In New Testament thought, it would correspond to daily sanctification. It is appropriately placed between the brazen altar and the tabernacle proper.

C. The Tabernacle Proper — Ex 26:1-14; 36:8-19

1. Exterior appearance

a. Coverings for the tabernacle

(1) Goat's hair — The goat was considered a form of wealth and indicative of a man's status (Gen 30:32, 43; 1 Sam 25:2). Their hair was more coarse and thus less numerous, so that spun goat's hair was a luxurious item. It was a superior quality cloth, perhaps comparable to cashmere from the Kashmir goat today. This cloth was the first covering placed over the tabernacle proper, consisting of eleven curtains of goat's hair each thirty cubits long and four cubits wide (Ex 26:7-13; 36:14-18).

(2) Ram's skins dyed red — The ram was highly valued for its wool, meat, and hide (Gen 31:38; 2 Kgs 1:8). Their value can be seen in the use of sheep to pay tribute by Mesha, King of Moab (2 Kgs 3:4). The sheep known in Israel was the broad tailed sheep. Its tail weighed approximately 13 pounds and was considered a delicacy (W.B.E., Vol. I, p. 77). It is for this reason that God demanded this animal as a sacrifice (Ex 29:22-25). Their hides would form a covering for the tabernacle which was water-resistant. The red dye was probably an artificial dye which would give a colorful appearance to this second covering of the tabernacle.

(3) Badger's skins — a badger is extremely rare in Sinai, and etymology seems to favor translating this term as "seal" or "dolphin." The bottle-nosed dolphin is found in the eastern Mediterranean and the dugong is abundant in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. There are several reasons which indicate this was a Red Sea dugong rather than another animal. This animal's skin was thick and useful for sandals, and in its context seems to indicate luxury (Ezek 16:10). The skin of this marine animal would have been most suitable for the external covering of the tabernacle because of its toughness and water repellent characteristics (Num 4:25).

b. The frames and sockets — Ex 26:15-30; 36:20-34

(1) Its site — The size of the tabernacle proper is 30 cubits (45 feet) long, 10 cubits (15 feet) wide.

(2) Its division — The tabernacle was divided into two sections called the

Holy Place and the Most Holy Place (Ex 26:33). The Most Holy Place was a square of 10 cubits (15 feet X 15 feet).

(3) Its construction — The term "boards" has led some to believe the walls of the tabernacle were solid. However, it is more properly understood as a "frame of wood" indicating the walls were a framework construction, not solid walls. These frames were gold covered.

c. The pillars — Ex 26:37

These pillars are slightly different from the outer court pillars. There were five pillars overlaid with gold and given a bronze socket (base).

d. The entrance — Ex 26:36; 36:37, 38

The entrance to the tabernacle was through the outer veil which opened to the east. It was finely prepared linen consisting of blue, purple, scarlet, and white colors. This veil symbolized the necessity for the Old Testament saint to have a mediatorial priest to act in his behalf to God.

2. The Most Holy Place — This is also called the Holy of Holies. It was the square section of the sanctuary proper measuring 10 cubits (15 feet) square. This was the special dwelling place of God as represented by the Shekinah cloud over this area.

a. The pillars — Ex 26:31, 32; 36:35, 36

Four pillars overlaid with gold, containing hooks, and cast in four sockets of silver. There is no mention of ornamental silver on these pillars.

b. The veil — Ex 26:31, 32; 36:35, 36

This inner veil separated the holy place from the holy of holies. It was made of fine spun linen including colors of blue, purple and scarlet being richly decorated with figures of cherubim. Only the high priest was allowed to enter behind this veil on the Day of Atonement. For moving instructions, see Num 4:5.

II. The Priesthood

A. History of the Priesthood

In Pre-Mosaic times, the head of the family officiated as priest for his household (cf. Job 1:5) or, as in the case of the patriarchs, the tribal head acted as priest on behalf of his entire clan (Gen 12:7; 13:18; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1, 2). However, there is ample evidence that surrounding cultures had developed the idea of the official priestly class. Melchizedek was both king and priest of Salem (Gen 14:18). Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, was priest of Midian (Ex 2:16 - 3:1). Also in Egypt, the priesthood was a highly organized class long before Moses (Gen 47:22, 26). At Sinai, the LORD appointed Aaron and his family as priests in an official and perpetual office (Num 18:7). His choice of Aaron's family, much like the choice of Israel as His covenant people, was an act of pure grace apart from any personal merit (compare Num 18:7; Deut 6:6-8).

B. Qualifications for the Priesthood

1. **Moral purity** — Lev 21:1-15
2. **Physical perfection** — Lev 21:16-24
3. **Genealogical proof** — Ex 28:1; Num 18:7ff

Aaron and his sons were designated as the priests with the stipulation that any one of non-Aaronic descent would be put to death if he attempted to officiate in this capacity (Num 3:10). This qualification was regarded so seriously that in post-exilic days those who could not prove their genealogical connection were eliminated from the priesthood (Ezra 2:12).

C. Division of the Priesthood

1. High priest — This office, originally held by Aaron and later passed to his eldest surviving son, Eleazer, was the highest level of the priest-hood. It was the high priest alone who was allowed to represent the nation each year on the Day of Atonement in the Most Holy Place (Ex 28:29). This office epitomized the mediatorial function of the priesthood in general because of his exclusive access to the mercy seat. He was further distinguished as the highest court of appeals in the sense that he bore on his person the Urim and Thummim for determining God's judgments.

2. Priests — The sons of Aaron designated to the office of priest officiated at the altar directly on behalf of individual Israelites.

3. Levites — Since Aaron was a descendant of Levi all priests were Levites. However, all Levites were not priests. The entire tribe of Levi was given to Aaron in lieu of all the firstborn sons of the Israelites (Num 3:12, 13, 41, 45; 8:14-17; 18:15; Deut 15:19). Their service was the menial task of caring for and transporting the sanctuary (Num 3:25, 26, 31, 36, 37), but they were not permitted to function as priests (Num 4:18-20). These restrictions were evidently a source of irritation to several of the Levites who followed the leadership of Korah in rebelling against Moses and Aaron unsuccessfully (Num 16).

D. Garments of the Priesthood

The costly materials and exquisite workmanship of these garments distinguished the priestly office from the laity. Furthermore, they served to elevate the priesthood in the minds of the people giving them respectability worthy of their very sacred symbolic and practical function in the tabernacle.

1. Ephod — This was an ornamental vest worn over the robe of the priest. In the Old Testament the ephod was almost exclusively a priestly garment; however, David did wear one while celebrating the return of the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:14). Although ordinary priests wore them (2 Sam 22:18), the ephod of the high priest was especially ornate and was embellished by two onyx stones bearing the names of the twelve tribes.

2. Breastplate — The word for breastplate does not imply a military armament but rather an ornament. The breastplate was the principle ornament of the high priest's ephod and distinguished him from all other priests. It was to be approximately eighteen inches square with twelve precious gems mounted on it in gold settings. These were to be inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel thereby identifying the high priest as the official representative of that nation before God.

3. Urim and Thummim — These words mean "lights" and "perfections" respectively. Scripture does not elucidate their physical appearance but there has been considerable conjecture based on their function. The breastplate was constructed on two layers of fabric probably forming a pouch (28:16). The Urim and Thummim were placed in this pouch (28:30) giving the impression that they were identical stones, tablets containing letters of the alphabet, or some similar appliances used as lots.

They were to be used in determining God's will basically by an affirmative or negative answer (Num 27:21; 1 Sam 14:41; 28:6; Ezra 2:63; etc). It was this function of the Urim and Thummim which gave the breastplate the expanded description "breastplate of judgment" (Ex 28:15, 29, 30).

4. Robe of the ephod — The significant features of this full-length robe worn under the ephod were the bells and pomegranates attached alternately to its hem. While any function of the pomegranates beyond ornamentation is uncertain, the bells served an obvious purpose. The sound of the bells assured the congregation that the high priest was ministering on their behalf. To hear the sound of the bells as the high priest left the tabernacle brought much rejoicing since it indicated that God had received their offering for atonement.

5. Mitre — This was not a solid gold crown, but a white linen headdress worn by the high priest. To this headdress was attached a plate of pure gold bearing the expression "Holiness to the Lord." This inscription was the very essence of Israel's worship, the demand of the covenant, and the purpose of Israel's national election. It was simultaneously an expression of God's character and His terms for accepting Israel.

