

Exodus 40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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So we can see noticeable similarities with the story of Noah at this point.

[6 : 11] But there are also contrasts. While the first day of the first month was the removal of the covering of Noah's Ark, the first day of the first month of the story of the Exodus is the establishment of the covering of the tabernacle.

While Noah's Ark was a temporary safe place of the tabernacle is the tabernacle is the tabernacle is the tabernacle, the tabernacle, like Noah's Ark, is the establishment of a divine order within a chaotic, fallen and sinful world, and it enables a holy God and sinful man to coexist.

The tabernacle is the  about the breakdown of creation in plagues and judgment upon sin and the final wiping away of enemies in the rush of water as the dawn came, the book of Exodus moves us to a point where there is a renewal of the creation, the cosmic and the social order. This is why the Sabbath is such an important symbol for the Mosaic Covenant. It's why the seven-day pattern appears on a number of occasions in these chapters. It's why, despite all of the great and exciting events recorded within it, the construction of a tent in the wilderness occupies about a third of the book of Exodus.

The establishment of the tabernacle is the seed of a new cosmic order. It's a sort of Eden, suited for a fallen and a sinful world. The tabernacle is also a sort of Sabbath tent, a sanctification of space, as the Sabbath was a sanctification of time. If the ark was how Noah escaped the sinful world destroyed in the flood, the tabernacle is how human beings will be able to escape the fate of places like Egypt and enjoy communion with their creator, acting as creators under him, as we see in these final chapters. It's the political constitution also of the delivered Israelites as a nation in fellowship with the Lord. All of the different parts of the tabernacle were created, but now Moses assembles all of these pieces together in a single structure. It's important to notice that while the people made the elements of the tabernacle and brought them to Moses in Exodus chapter 39 verse 32 to 43, the entire work of setting up the tabernacle is described as if it were personally performed by Moses himself in verses 16 to 32. Now it's highly unlikely that Moses did this himself, but he is seen as the one who's responsible for it. So the people do the tent and then he is the one that puts everything together. Moses and the people are united in the task, but they are placed over against each other in the narration of the construction, performing different parts. Moses' part is one in which he largely plays the role that God did in Genesis 2 verses 1 to 3. God finished his work and blessed and consecrated the Sabbath day, and Moses finished the work of the tabernacle and blessed the people and consecrated the tent. You should be able to hear some of the parallels if you listen carefully.

And Moses saw all the work and behold, they had done it as the Lord had commanded. So they had done it and Moses blessed them. Then you shall take the anointing oil and anoint the tabernacle and all in it and consecrate and all its furniture so that it may become holy. You shall also anoint the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils and consecrate the altar so that the altar may become most holy.

[10:01] So Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And then back in Genesis chapter 1 verse 31 to 2 verse 3, and God saw everything that he had made. And behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done. And he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation. We might see in this another suggestion that the tabernacle itself is comparable to the Sabbath day in some respects. If the Sabbath is the day where God rests from his labors, the tabernacle is the place where God will rest among his people. And the story ends with the theophanic cloud of God's presence coming upon the tabernacle and the glory of the Lord filling the tent. The story ends then with God taking up residence in the tent in the midst of his people, even after all of the crisis of chapters 32 to 34. The descent of the cloud is similar to the coming of God's glory upon Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 19.

Now the tabernacle is a movable Mount Sinai for them to travel with in their journeys. That meeting with God at that mountain is something that will now travel with them, will now be the terms in which they relate to God. The tabernacle is the place of God's special dwelling. Now God is present in all places, but he is present in a particular intentional and manifested way in the tabernacle. He's present to be near to and commune with his people. He's present to forgive and to be addressed in prayer. He's present to lead and to provide. He's present to judge and to bless. And the tabernacle symbolizes the higher heavens of God's particular dwelling and orders men according to the pattern of those higher heavens.

In such a way then, Israel is formed in the image of God as his firstborn son. The tabernacle, like the ark, is not a static construction, but something designed to be moved from place to place. And the story of the Exodus ends, not with Israel settling in a particular location, but with God's presence in their midst in their continued journeying. The Lord is traveling with his bride, gently leading her through the wilderness to the land that he has promised to her. The ark is still moving and has yet to come to rest on God's own mountain that he spoke of in Exodus chapter 15 verse 17.

The story of Exodus then begins with life in bondage within an unjust and oppressive society under Pharaoh. It moves to God's liberation of his people through plaguing the Egyptians with the powers of his creation and delivering them through the Passover and the Red Sea. And in the wilderness, we see a reversal of the themes of the plagues, as creation is wielded by its creator to give life and provision to his people in need. Where it had once caused destruction and death in the plagues, it now gives life and sustenance. In the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant, we see a reversal of Egypt in another way. God establishes a just society founded upon and perpetuating liberation from slavery. And the second phase of the book involves the instructions for the tabernacle, followed by the law of the Sabbath, followed by the incident with the golden calf, Moses' intercession for Israel and God's gracious response, followed by a return to the law of the Sabbath, and then the building of the tabernacle. It's a there and back again pattern again.

So the book is a highly structured one, with a theological and literary unity and purpose. It's all giving us a deeper understanding of what it means for God to be near his people, what it means to relate to the Holy God, how we relate to creation, who God is. All of these questions are being addressed within the book of Exodus. What does it mean to live in a just society?

[14 : 04] What does it mean to be free? All of these questions are within the book of Exodus. However, its concluding note is not with some theme of political theory, what it means to be free in an abstract way, but it's about God dwelling with his people, God coming near to his people, the God who created all things, travelling with his people through the wilderness. As the ark was a movable vessel, so the tabernacle is a movable vessel, travelling through the wilderness to the promised land.

It will one day land on that particular mountain, and God will establish his people there, and bless them in that land. But to this point, they are travelling as it were upon the sea, and they're moving towards that point where God will ultimately give them a rootedness in the land, and complete their liberation. And that seed of a new creation will take root and germinate into a new nation settled in a new land. A question to consider. Reading through the book of Exodus, it's very clear that the purpose of the events of the Exodus is, in large measure, perhaps primarily, a theological one. God is revealing who he is, and God is coming near to his people. Exodus is a revelation of God's relationship to Israel, and to the nations. It's a revelation of God's name. It's a revelation of God's presence. It's a revelation of God's glory, of his forgiveness, of his character. What are some of the ways in which you see the theme of God's self-revelation serving to hold the book of Exodus together?