

Exodus 36: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 29 March 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Exodus chapter 36 Bezalel and Aholiab and every craftsman in whom the Lord has put skill and intelligence to know how to do any work in the construction of the sanctuary shall work in accordance with all that the Lord has commanded.

And Moses called Bezalel and Aholiab and every craftsman in whose mind the Lord had put skill, everyone whose heart stirred him to come to do the work. And they received from Moses all the contribution that the people of Israel had brought for doing the work of the sanctuary.

They still kept bringing him freewill offerings every morning so that all the craftsmen who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary came, each from the task that he was doing, and said to Moses, The people bring much more than enough for doing the work that the Lord has commanded us to do.

So Moses gave command and the word was proclaimed throughout the camp, Let no man or woman do anything more for the contribution for the sanctuary. So the people were restrained from bringing.

For the material they had was sufficient to do all the work and more. And all the craftsmen among the workmen made the tabernacle with ten curtains. They were made of fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet yarns, with cherubines skillfully worked.

[1 : 1 3] The length of each curtain was twenty-eight cubits, and the breadth of each curtain four cubits. All the curtains were the same size. He coupled five curtains to one another, and the other five curtains he coupled to one another.

He made loops of blue on the edge of the outermost curtain of the first set. Likewise he made them on the edge of the outermost curtain of the second set. He made fifty loops on the one curtain, and he made fifty loops on the edge of the curtain that was in the second set.

The loops were opposite one another. And he made fifty clasps of gold, and coupled the curtains one to the other with clasps, so the tabernacle was a single hole. He also made curtains of goat's hair for a tent over the tabernacle.

He made eleven curtains. The length of each curtain was thirty cubits, and the breadth of each curtain four cubits. The eleven curtains were the same size. He coupled five curtains by themselves and six curtains by themselves, and he made fifty loops on the edge of the outermost curtain of the one set, and fifty loops on the edge of the other connecting curtain.

And he made fifty clasps of bronze to couple the tent together, that it might be a single hole. And he made for the tent a covering of tanned ram skins and goat skins. Then he made the upright frames for the tabernacle of acacia wood.

[2 : 3 3] Ten cubits was the length of a frame, and a cubit and a half the breadth of each frame. Each frame had two tenons for fitting together. He did this for all the frames of the tabernacle.

The frames for the tabernacle he made thus. Twenty frames for the south side. And he made forty bases of silver under the twenty frames. Two bases under one frame for its two tenons.

And two bases under the next frame for its two tenons. For the second side of the tabernacle, on the north side, he made twenty frames. And there forty bases of silver.

Two bases under one frame, and two bases under the next frame. For the rear of the tabernacle westward, he made six frames. He made two frames for corners of the tabernacle in the rear.

And they were separate beneath, but joined at the top, at the first ring. He made two of them this way for the two corners. There were eight frames with their bases of silver. Sixteen bases.

[3 : 29] Under every frame, two bases. He made bars of acacia wood. Five for the frames of the one side of the tabernacle. And five bars for the frames of the other side of the tabernacle. And five bars for the frames of the tabernacle at the rear westward.

And he made the middle bar to run from end to end halfway up the frames. And he overlaid the frames with gold. And made their rings of gold for holders of the bars.

And overlaid the bars with gold. He made the veil of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. With cherubim skillfully worked into it, he made it.

And for it he made four pillars of acacia. And overlaid them with gold. Their hooks were of gold. And he cast for them four bases of silver. He also made a screen for the entrance of the tent.

Of blue and purple and scarlet yarns. And fine twined linen. Embroidered with needlework. And its five pillars were their hooks. He overlaid their capitals. And their fillets were of gold.

[4 : 29] But their five bases were of bronze. Exodus chapter 36 continues the description of the construction of the tabernacle and its contents. A description begun in chapter 35.

And the description here is almost verbatim repetition of the relevant sections in chapters 25 to 30. These chapters should be seen as the obedient answer to the earlier chapters.

And this is particularly important in light of the intervening events concerning the golden calf. It also follows literary conventions that we find elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern literature of the period.

But the most important point is that they are following God's instructions to the letter. It underlines the movement from pattern to image. The way in which they're taking God's pattern and bringing it into practice.

It also has the effect of stressing just how important the tabernacle is. By giving it so much space within the text. Chapters 25 to 31 and 35 to 40 are almost entirely devoted to the tabernacle.

[5 : 30] In a book that considers such great events as the giving of the law at Sinai, the plagues upon Egypt and the exodus from Egypt and the institution of the Passover, other things like that, it seems strange that so much space is given to the tabernacle.

And the fact that it is should be an indication of just how important this particular thing is. This could also be considered in relationship to things such as the genealogies of 1 Chronicles, or the descriptions of the territories of the various tribes in the land of Joshua.

By giving so much space to boring details, to details that just rehearse things that we've maybe read elsewhere as well, their importance is driven home to us. We are, as the reader, being challenged to think and meditate upon these details.

To consider, even if the details are not particularly illuminating, that they are details of something immensely important and central. The amount of column inches, as Jonathan Sachs puts it, given to the building of the tabernacle within the Book of Exodus, is a curious feature of the book that should raise many important questions.

Why does a book about the deliverance and foundation of a nation give so much attention to the building of a sacred tent? And Sachs suggests that a people formed of newly liberated distinct tribes, surrounded by a large mixed multitude, would be in danger of division, as they do not yet have a clear unity.

[6 : 54] They are always in danger of being reduced to an undifferentiated mob, as we see in the Golden Calf event. And the unification of the people in the Sinai event, and in the construction of the tabernacle it arises from and perpetuates the meaning of that event, is a crucial part of the movement of the people from slaves to a new unified nation.

It's a symbolic way of founding the continued life of Israel upon the event of Sinai. Furthermore, the tabernacle is the divine palace at the heart of the people, around which the people are gathered under the rule of the Lord.

And this is a crucial part of the nation building. It's also a victory building pattern. The Lord has vanquished his enemies, he's delivered his people, he's established a new political order, and now he secures his unrivaled kingship, and then builds his palace in the midst of the people.

One interesting detail that's worth noting is the return to the language of the tabernacle, or dwelling place, from the language of the tent of meeting. Tent of meeting language is used for days 4 to 6 in the earlier creation pattern that we see in chapters 25 to 31.

And tabernacle is used for days 1 to 3. The distinction suggests two different aspects of the tabernacle, two different ways of seeing it. The tabernacle is primarily the dwelling place of the Lord, but it's secondarily the meeting place, where Israel met with the Lord.

[8 : 18] And tent of meeting language, for instance, is typical language in the book of Leviticus, where the focus is upon interaction between God and his people. But in this chapter, it's tabernacle, and God's dwelling there that is prominent.

God is the source of skill in people's minds, and willingness in their hearts. And God is the master of men's hearts, whether the heart of Pharaoh, or the hearts of Israel at this point, as they willingly give to the construction of the tabernacle, and express the skill of the mind that God has given to them.

The story of the Exodus begins with labourers being starved of materials that they need for the construction of bricks, for building houses for Pharaoh. And now we have a superfluity of materials for building the house of the Lord.

The materials themselves probably largely came from the spoiling of the Egyptians, and from trade with the Midianites and other peoples in the wilderness. And we should also bear in mind that the Israelites had been involved in construction work as slaves in Egypt, one of the most materially and technologically advanced societies of their day.

So they probably had a lot of expertise to bring to this particular project. We don't know exactly how everything was constructed though, because many of the details that we have are insufficient.

[9 : 33] Many of the popular images that people have of the tabernacle may be quite badly wrong, and it may have been more like a typical tent in its structure. We are given a verbal description of some details, but many of the details seem to have been given through a vision to Moses.

So Moses saw the things on the mountain. He saw a pattern. He saw an archetype in terms of which the tabernacle should be constructed. We see this expressed in the book of Hebrews, for instance.

The two principal persons involved in the construction of the tabernacle are Bezalel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, and Aholiab. Bezalel's name means the shadow of God, and he's the son of Uri, which means the Lord is light, or my light, or fiery, or light of the Lord.

And maybe we should see in this themes of light and shadow, darkness and light. These are the themes that come at the very beginning of the creation story. God creates light, and he creates day and night.

The tabernacle is the protecting shadow of God in which Israel can take refuge. For instance, in Psalm 91 verse 1, he who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

[10 : 46] Aholiab means Father's tent, and both names reveal something about the meaning of the tabernacle. The tent is the tent of the Father of Israel, and Israel is God's firstborn son.

It's also the protecting shadow of the light-giving God in which Israel can take refuge. Bezalel and Aholiab are not architects. Moses is the one who receives and reveals the plans from the Lord, and Bezalel and Aholiab are the helpers, or as it were, the sons given to him to perform the building work, with Aholiab as the assistant to Bezalel.

So we have the source of the plans, which is God, the prophet who reveals the plans, Moses, the master builder, Bezalel, and the helper of the master builder, Aholiab, and then the others who assist them.

God gives the plans of the temple, in a similar way, to David. David is the prophet who reveals the plans to Solomon. Solomon is the one who oversees the building of the temple, and Hiram is the one who works under Solomon's direction.

In the new covenant, we see a similar pattern. God the Father is the one who establishes the new temple and gives the plans, as it were. The Son is the one who reveals the plans. The Spirit is the one who orchestrates the building work, and people like Paul and others are the ones who work under the Spirit's direction, as gifted master builders.

[12 : 09] It is not an accident that Paul's profession was that of a tent maker. And the metaphor of building a building for the establishment and the growth of the church is something that we find throughout the Pauline epistles and elsewhere in the New Testament.

This is a new tent that's being built. It's following the same sort of pattern that we see within the Old Testament. Hearing the details of the construction of the structure again, we should consider the gradations of holiness that we've already seen.

As you go further up and further in, you move in gradations of holiness from bronze to silver to gold. And such gradations of holiness give a sense of the gradual approach to God's glorious presence at the very heart.

A question to consider. The use of cherubim imagery in the tent is an arresting detail, especially when we consider the resistance to imagery more generally in the presence of God.

Why do you think cherubim imagery is so prominent within the tabernacle? And what connotations and scriptural associations might help us to understand its purpose?