

Exodus 38: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Exodus chapter 38 The altar of the altar bases, the hooks of the pillars and their fillets were of silver, and for the front to the east, fifty cubits. The hangings for one side of the gate were fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and three bases, and so for the other side. On both sides of the gate of the court were hangings of fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and their three bases. All the hangings around the court were of fine twined linen, and the bases for the pillars were of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets were of silver. The overlaying of their capitals was also of silver, and all the pillars of the court were filleted with silver. And the screen for the gate of the court was embroidered with needlework in blue and purple and scarlet yarns with fine twined linen.

It was twenty cubits long and five cubits high in its breadth, corresponding to the hangings of the court. And their pillars were four in number, their four bases were of bronze, their hooks of silver, silver, and the overlaying of their capitals and their fillets of silver. And all the pegs for the tabernacle and for the court all around were of bronze. These are the records of the tabernacle, the tabernacle of the testimony, as they were recorded at the commandment of Moses, the responsibility of the Levites under the direction of Ithamar, the son of Aaron the priest.

Bezalel, the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, made all that the Lord commanded Moses. And with him was Aholiab, the son of Ahissamach, of the tribe of Dan, an engraver and designer and embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet yarns with fine twined linen. All the gold that was used for the work in all the construction of the sanctuary, the gold from the offering, was twenty-nine talents and seven hundred and thirty shekels by the shekel of the sanctuary. The silver from those of the congregation who were recorded was a hundred talents and one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five shekels by the shekel of the sanctuary. A beaker a head, that is half a shekel by the shekel of the sanctuary, for everyone who was listed in the records, from twenty years old and upward, for six hundred and three thousand five hundred and fifty men. The hundred talents of silver were for casting the bases of the sanctuary and the bases of the veil. A hundred bases for the hundred talents, a talent a base. And of the one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five shekels, he made hooks for the pillars and overlaid their capitals and made fillets for them. The bronze that was offered was seventy talents and two thousand four hundred shekels. With it he made the bases for the entrance of the tent of meeting, the bronze altar and the bronze grating for it and all the utensils of the altar, the bases around the court and the bases of the gate of the court, all the pegs of the tabernacle and all the pegs around the court. We've had the instructions for the tabernacle itself and then the furniture within the tabernacle and now we see the courtyard and its furniture in chapter 38.

It begins with the altar of burnt offering. Now food was offered to God in a number of different ways, by presenting it before him, perhaps by pouring out a drink offering before him on the altar, or by sacrifices consumed with fire on the bronze altar. Fire sacrifice was common within the ancient world and God is operating within a symbolic medium that would have been very familiar to the Israelites.

The sacrifices upon the altar were means by which worshippers could offer themselves and their works to the Lord and draw near to him. The courtyard can be divided into two squares of equal size and commentators often suggest that the bronze altar is in the centre of one of these squares and the Ark of the Covenant is at the centre of the other. The altar itself is of bronze, it's of lesser holiness than the furniture within the tabernacle, which is of gold, while still being a holy item in many respects.

[5 : 28] It's part of the path into God's presence, it's a boundary between heaven and earth, and the fire on the altar first came directly from God himself in Leviticus chapter 9 verse 24, where God burnt up the sacrifices with fire coming down from heaven. The horns of the altar are probably not a connection with a bull.

That is an attractive association, but it doesn't seem to actually be the case. Refuge from vengeance can be sought at the altar. We see this in chapter 21 verse 14, where the willful murderer can be taken from the altar where he has sought sanctuary.

In 1 Kings chapter 1 verses 50 to 53 and 2 verses 28 to 34, we have stories in which people try to grasp the horns of the altar to find refuge, Adonijah, and then later on in the story of Joab. The horns probably represent divine judgement in some way. Grasping onto the horns of the altar might be a way of appealing to God's judgement over man's. Altars could be desecrated by having their horns removed, as we see in Amos chapter 3 verse 14, that on the day I punish Israel for his transgression, I will punish the altars at Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground.

I have suggested previously that the altar has some association with the high priest, and that the high priest has the horns of his body purified, his right thumb, his right big toe, his right ear, and his genitals by circumcision, and these are consecrated also in much the same way as the altar. Like the altar offers sanctuary, the high priest is also connected with sanctuary.

In Numbers chapter 35 verses 25 to 28, we read, And the congregation shall rescue the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge, to which he has fled, and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest, who was anointed with the holy oil.

[7 : 29] But if the manslayer shall at any time go beyond the boundaries of his city of refuge to which he fled, and the avenger of blood finds him outside the boundaries of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood.

For he must remain in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest. But after the death of the high priest, the manslayer may return to the land of his possession. The connection of the altar then with sanctuary, and the connection of the high priest and the Levitical cities with refuge probably suggests some connection between those two things.

The altar is also like a mountain, representing different parts of Israel, which is also connected with the golden altar of incense inside the tabernacle. Note the way that Israel was ordered around Mount Sinai in chapters 19 and 24.

In Leviticus chapters 4 and 5 we see that blood was placed in different places depending upon the person who had sinned. So the base of the bronze altar seems to represent the lower earth.

But if the priest sins, there is blood placed upon the horns of the golden altar of incense inside the tabernacle. But if it's a leader of the people that sins, then it's placed upon the horns of the bronze altar.

[8 : 46] And if it's a sin of a poor person, it's placed against the side of the bronze altar and at the base. So there is symbolism connected with where the blood is applied and the person who has sinned.

The basin is described next. While it's mentioned in chapter 30 earlier, in the second seven-day sequence that we identified, now it's classed along with the bronze altar and the courtyard, which show that these things belong together.

They all are elements of the third day. They're bronze and over time they would turn green, which perhaps connects with the covering of vegetation upon the earth, which God establishes at the second stage of the third day.

Note that the bronze altar represents the land and the bronze laver can be seen to represent the sea. You should also observe that the basin is connected with women. We've seen elsewhere in scripture that women are often connected with wells and springs and sources of water.

In Numbers 5 we see that the woman suspected of adultery was made to drink some holy water, presumably from the laver. It's the only time that we see someone drinking water from the laver, to my knowledge.

[9 : 57] And it seems likely that some gendered significance is involved, that this water is associated with the water of women. And it's for this reason that this particular item of furniture is singled out as being formed from a donation of a particular group of people.

All the other things were formed from the general contributions, but this in particular is formed from a very particular group of individuals and what they have given. Within the worship of the tabernacle more generally, we see a number of ways in which gendered symbolism is included.

Not least in the stipulation of the sex of sacrifices. Men and women aren't interchangeable within this system, but each have particular symbolic import associated with them.

In particular then, the laver is made with the serving women's mirrors. The serving women are elsewhere mentioned in 1 Samuel 2 verse 22. While the priests and the appointed Levites were exclusively male, there seemed to have been some women who assisted, presumably with female offerers, or in some of the sorts of tasks ascribed to the serving men in places such as Numbers chapter 4 verse 23 and following.

The basin is used for washing things to be brought near to God, whether persons or sacrifices. It isn't given the same attention as the other elements within the courtyard, the courtyard itself or the bronze altar, but yet it is something that's anointed with the anointing oil.

[11 : 25] In chapter 30 verse 28. As elevated water, we might also think of the bronze laver, holy water, as water from above. It's connected with the water of the firmament, the waters above, in contrast to the waters below, which would be the areas outside of the courtyard.

The court itself divides the realm of the tabernacle precincts from the wider world, its holy space, albeit of a lesser sanctity, from the interior of the tabernacle.

This chapter records all of the materials used for the tabernacle. It's a reminder of the census back in Exodus chapter 30. There are 100 talents and 1,775 shekels, as the amount that corresponds to half a shekel for each of 603,550 persons.

And the persons counted seem to have been the males over 20 capable of going to war, as we see in Numbers chapter 1 to 2, where that same number of persons are mentioned again.

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