

Exodus 31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Exodus chapter 31 And I have given to all able men ability that they may make all that I have commanded you, the tent of meeting, and the ark of the testimony, and the mercy seat that is on it, and all the furnishings of the tent, the table and its utensils, and the pure lampstand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand, and the finely worked garments, the holy garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons, for their service as priests, and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense for the holy place, according to all that I have commanded you, they shall do.

And the Lord said to Moses, You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.

You shall keep the Sabbath because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done.

But the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations as a covenant forever.

It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel, that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed. And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

[2 : 0 8] Exodus chapter 31 involves the appointment of artisans to build the tabernacle, followed by the appointment of the Sabbath as the covenant sign. This might alert us to a way to read this alongside the previous chapter.

In Genesis chapter 1 to chapter 2 verse 3, there are seven days of the original creation. However, in the rest of Genesis 2, we have a second creation pattern playing out, which follows a similar pattern on a smaller scale.

And here I think we have something similar. This is something that James Jordan has observed. Mapping it onto the seven days of the tabernacle's creation might also help here. So in the tabernacle's creation, we have seven days.

First day, the golden items at the heart of the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, the table of the presence, and the lampstand. The second day is the tabernacle itself, this firmament, the division between these new heavens, the heavens where God will dwell among his people and the rest of the realm outside.

The third day is the bronze altar and the courtyard, the land that's taken up from the sea. The fourth day is the oil for the lamps. The oil that keeps the light burning inside the tabernacle.

[3 : 1 9] The fifth day concerns the garments for the priests, which enable them to operate within the heaven realm. They correspond with the tabernacle, as the fifth day corresponds with the second day in the original creation.

The sixth is the consecration of the priests, a new humanity being set up for a particular purpose. And then the seventh day is the completion of the installation of the priests and the establishment of the daily pattern of worship.

Now, there seems to be some interesting parallel between this and chapters 30 and 31. And here's a suggested order. So first off, we have the golden altar of incense.

This is another golden item at the heart of the tabernacle, corresponding with the events created on the first day of the original tabernacle creation. So then it was the golden Ark of the Covenant, table of the presence and the lampstand.

And now there is the golden altar of incense. Next in the order is the census tax. Now, this might seem strange. I mean, how might the census tax fit into this pattern?

[4 : 20] Well, I think it makes more sense when we go to chapter 38, verses 25 to 28, where we see that the census tax was used in the construction of the things that are involved on the second day of the tabernacle's construction.

On the third day, the next thing in the sequence is the bronze laver, the bronze basin. And this corresponds quite naturally with the bronze altar and courtyard. It's land and sea.

The bronze altar corresponds to the land and the bronze laver corresponds to the sea. The fourth is anointing oil for the priests. And this corresponds with the fourth of the previous one, which is oil for the lamps.

Oil for the priests, oil for the lamps. The fifth is, in the original one, it's garments for the priests. And now it's incense. Now, this might seem a weaker connection, but perhaps it's associated with the clouds that fill the realm of the heavens, that the garments of the high priest equip them to operate within.

The sixth day is the consecration of the priests. And the sixth day in the next sequence is the calling and setting apart of the artisans. And so there is a correspondence between two sets of humanity set apart.

[5 : 34] One group involved with serving in the house and the other group involved with making the house. And then finally, we have the appointment of the Sabbath here as the concluding part of this entire section from chapters 25 to 31.

In chapter 32, the narrative resumes. Now, this is interesting and there's a curious pattern to be observed, but can it tell us anything? Does it actually help?

I think it can help us. And one of the things that it does help us to see is, first of all, the completeness and the ordering of these things. These are not just random elements. There is a logic to them and we can understand them better by associating them with each other.

So the basin and the altar are connected together. They're connected together by being made of bronze in both cases, but they're also connected by the fact that they belong to the third day.

They're connected to land and sea then. And on the first day, we can see the connection between the altar of incense, the golden altar of incense, and the other items created on the first day, the things that are light at the very heart of the tabernacle.

[6 : 41] And then we can see things like the connection between the oil for the lamps and the way that that corresponds with the anointing oil for the priests. Maybe we're supposed to see that the priests themselves are supposed to be a sort of human lampstand, corresponding to the physical lampstand.

This chapter concerns the artisans appointed to construct the tabernacle. So Bezalel, the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. This is presumably the grandson of Hur, the Judahite, who led the people alongside Aaron, the one who held up the arms of Moses along with Aaron.

He's one of the leaders of the people. He's a sort of princely character. He's not a king, but he seems to be a lead civil ruler. And his grandson is the one that's helping to build this.

This might help us to understand the importance of the king or the ruler as the one who tends to build or be responsible for building the temple. The Messiah is the one who, as the great Davidic king, will lead the construction of the temple.

Solomon, as that great king in the Davidic dynasty, is the one who builds the temple. And this task of the king is here born by a descendant, a direct descendant of Hur, who is the lead Judahite.

[7 : 57] Bezalel is filled with the spirit of God, similar to the way Joseph is described in Genesis chapter 41 verse 38. And maybe we should also see this as reminiscent of God's breathing into man the breath of life in the original creation.

He's someone who's equipped to build according to God's pattern. If we go back to the original creation, God creates with no man being there to see. He declares what he has done and reveals it to man.

And then he also performs an act of creation in the second chapter of Genesis, which is witnessed by Adam. And Adam is presumably to take that pattern and learn it and exercise it himself.

By contrast, both with God doing something without man being present and God doing something in front of man for man to see and learn from, here we have God giving a plan and patterns for the tabernacle and then equipping man to build according to that plan and pattern.

Here, Bezalel is someone who's a new Adam, someone who's raised up to a higher level than the original Adam, as a co-creator or someone who creates under God.

[9 : 05] He is given a helper, a holy ab, someone who serves alongside him and equips him and helps him in his particular task. Now, a holy ab might remind us of the way that Eve is given to Adam in Genesis chapter 2.

And it seems to me that that is something we're supposed to see as a connection. From the appointment and establishment of the artisans, we move into a discussion of God's Sabbaths.

God's Sabbaths are a sign throughout the generations of Israel that they have been sanctified and redeemed. In being delivered from Egypt, they were set apart for the Lord as his own.

And there is a death penalty for profaning the Sabbath. And they're also cut off from the people. There's two aspects here. So there's the profanation of the Sabbath, which relates to an offence and trespass against God.

And then there's being cut off from the people. This is a violation of the people. And within the Sabbath, we can see both of those dimensions. The Sabbath is oriented Godward. It's something that we remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

[10 : 05] It's something that belongs to God. It should be kept holy. But it's also something that involves right treatment of neighbour, that you do not make your neighbour work on that day.

And that twofold aspect is reflected in the punishment here, both death in punishment for a religious crime, but also being cut off from the people in the fact of having wronged your neighbour.

Violation against God and neighbour, then, are both seen in the violation of the Sabbath. The fact that all of this material is summed up and concluded with the Sabbath commandment is something that maybe should get us to go back to the earlier commandments and think about why that is so important.

First of all, the Sabbath is the end of the creation sequence, so it's a very natural place to end in that respect. But also, even within the Ten Commandments themselves, where it's not the final commandment, it would seem to have a particular importance there.

It is the central commandment, along with honouring your father and mother, that is expressed in a positive form. All the other commandments are, do not, yet remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, is a positive command, an expression of how things ought to be.

[11 : 19] Taking rest yourself, giving rest to your neighbour, and remembering God's great works in creation and redemption, that is at the very heart of what it means to live as the people of God.

And in the Book of the Covenant, in Exodus chapter 21 to 23, we see a similar thing. It begins with the theme of Sabbath, and it ends with the theme of Sabbath. God has brought his people into rest.

He has delivered them from slavery, from this non-stop work. And now he wants them to give their neighbours rest. He wants them to keep this cycle of Sabbaths and feasts as a memorial to his work, in creation and in the redemption.

The bringing together of redemption and creation, the bringing together of the agricultural feasts, which concern creation, and then the great redemptive historical feasts, which concern God's work in history, these hold these two elements together.

We should probably note the many similarities that there are here between the description of the Sabbath and the description of circumcision as the sign of the covenant in Genesis 17. Circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, and the Sabbath is the sign of the Mosaic covenant.

[12 : 29] Relates also to the sign of the Noahic covenant, the covenant with Noah, which is the rainbow. In Genesis chapter 17 verses 9 to 14, we read, And God said to Abraham, As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.

This is my covenant, which you shall keep between me and you and your offspring after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised.

So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant.

The similarities between this and the sign of the Sabbath should be noted. The Sabbath is a sign of Israel's release and the continued practice of the Sabbath and the Sabbaths more generally, the different feasts that arise from the fundamental feast of the Sabbath, is a way of declaring themselves to be a liberated and a liberating people.

[13 : 49] A people who continue the pattern of what God established in creation and a people who have been, as they have been redeemed by this creator God, established as a liberating people who extend that pattern to others so that their servants, so that their animals, so that their land also enters into rest.

A question to consider. Bezalel is given a number of different gifts and abilities and talents by the Spirit in order to equip him for the building of the tabernacle. How might this understanding of the gifts of the Spirit help us to understand the gifts of the Spirit within the New Testament?