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Preaching on the Account of the Tabernacle

By Ian Hart

Mr. Hart's article on how to interpret the account of the setting up of the tabernacle in a sober manner is one of the fruits resulting from a thesis which he submitted to the Queen's University, Belfast. Preachers who may find the account in Exodus a hard quarry for helpful exposition will discover some useful insights here.

The Tabernacle Accounts in Ex. 25-31 and 35-40 have been subjected to the most divergent interpretations down through the centuries.

Philo set the pattern for fanciful symbolic interpretation when he said the Tabernacle was a representation of the universe, e.g. the seven branches of the lampstand were the seven planets, and the four different kinds of material used were the four elements (earth, water, air, fire).

Origen set the pattern for christological interpretation. The bases of the pillars, for example, correspond to the foundation of the apostles and the prophets (Eph. 2:20), whereas the capital, or head, is Christ (1 Cor. 2:3). Origen's type of interpretation has many followers today, though they sometimes go to extremes which make Origen appear a model of restraint, e.g. 'the peg beneath the ground is a symbol of the death of Christ, while the part above the ground suggests the resurrection'.

Along a different line altogether the functional approach suggests, for example, that the only significance of the incense on the altar was to keep away the flies.

Is there no safer approach, one less dominated by prior assumptions?

It seems to me that if one carefully reads the text, in the light of evidence from the remainder of the Old Testament and from the Ancient Near East, then the historical and theological function of the Tabernacle will become quite clear. And this function will have an obvious relevance to the Christian Church, especially if the preacher explains how the New Testament kerygma fits in with that function, or modifies it.

I. GOD IS WITH YOU

The most obvious purpose of the Tabernacle was to assure Israel that their God was with them wherever they travelled. God's intention in redeeming them from Egypt had been: 'I will take you for my people, and I will be your God' (Ex. 6:7). His intention in making the covenant with them had been: 'You shall be my own possession among all peoples . . . and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (19:5f.). The building of the Tabernacle was to be the fulfilment; now at last 'I will dwell among the people of Israel, and will be their God. And they

shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them forth out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God' (29:45f.). God promised to be as really and intensely present with them in the Tabernacle as he had been at Sinai: just as he had met with them at Sinai through Moses, so now he would meet with them in the Tabernacle through the medium of priests (29:42f.); and as he had spoken commandments to them on Sinai, so now he would speak to them in commandment from above the mercy-seat (25:22). To confirm this promise that God would stay with them, 'the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle' (40:34) in the same manner as previously 'the cloud covered the mountain' and 'the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai' (24:15f.). That God's presence was the main purpose of the Tabernacle is plainly stated at the beginning of the first account: 'And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst' (25:8).

112 It followed, then, that the Tabernacle had to be the kind of structure that the Israelites would associate with a deity. The Torah certainly stated that the Tabernacle was to be God's dwelling-place, but the structure itself had to convey this information, if it was to be a visible token of God's presence. It is a simple fact that Israel's neighbours pictured the dwelling-place of their deities as a tent-like structure. And one of the Ugaritic poems describes the dwelling-place of Baal as containing a throne, footstool, lamp, chest of drawers, a table with all its utensils, and a bed. The bed and the chest of drawers implied a too crudely anthropomorphic view of God, and were omitted. But to inhabitants of the Ancient Near East, as the Israelites were, a tent-like structure with a throne, footstool, lamp, and table looked like the dwelling-place of a god, and God used such a structure to convey the idea of his presence. Any other design of building simply would not have given the desired impression.

In the new Christian dispensation God still graciously presences himself in the midst of his people, but in a different, and more wonderful, way. The necessity of a physical tabernacle has passed away, because God now dwells with his people in the hearts and bodies of the believing community, through the inhabiting of the Holy Spirit. The Church of Jesus Christ is 'a holy temple in the Lord', 'a dwelling place of God in the Spirit' (Eph. 2:21f.). The 'Lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age' of Mt. 28:20 is a still greater promise than the 'I will dwell among the people of Israel' of Ex. 29:45. The Holy Spirit 'dwells with you, and will be in you' (Jn. 14:17). Meeting with God and worshipping him is no longer tied to a particular sacred spot, as Jesus promised the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:21-24). We no longer need a visible reminder

of God's presence: 'God's Spirit joins himself to our spirits to declare that we are God's children' (Rom. 8:16, GNB).

II. GOD IS GLORIOUS IN MAJESTY

The Tabernacle also spoke to Israel of the glory of the God who dwelt in their midst.

The various metals, for example, are used in such a way as to give an increasing sense of majesty the nearer one gets to the immediate presence of God. The bases of the court pillars are made of bronze, those of the Tabernacle pillars of silver. The frames and bars of the Tabernacle, the ark and its poles are overlaid with gold; the mercy-seat and the cherubim are of pure gold. The clasps holding the outer coverings are bronze; those holding the inner curtains are gold. The reader will see many other examples of this careful grading in terms of proximity to God's presence.

The coverings of the Tabernacle are also graded in refinement, to contribute further to the impression of increasing sacredness: on the outside goatskins, then tanned rams' skins, then goats' hair curtains, and on the inside embroidered 'fine twined linen'.

The relative 'danger zones' also pointed to increasing majesty: all might come into the court; only priests into the Holy Place; and only the High Priest, and even he on only one day in the year, into the Holy of Holies.

The rich symmetry of the whole structure, seen especially in the numerical schematism based on the decimal system, was surely meant to remind the worshipper of the perfection and harmony of the divine character. For example, the dimensions of the Tabernacle were 30 x 10 x 10 cubits; there were 20 frames, 40 pedestals, and 5 bars on each (long) side; there were 100 pedestals in all; there were 100 loops and 50 clasps on the inner tabernacle, and the same on the outer tent.

A better symbolic interpretation of the significance of the High Priest's garments cannot be given than that insisted upon in Ex. 28:2,40: 'for glory and for beauty', reminding everyone who saw him of the glory of the God he served.

The colours of the hangings (blue, purple, and scarlet) together conveyed an impression of deity and royalty. Blue is associated with young Assyrian nobles in Ezek. 23:6. Purple garments were considered a sign of distinction, royalty, and wealth: Midianite kings wore it (Ju. 8:26), Daniel was rewarded with it (Dan. 5:7 etc.), and it still denoted wealth in Jesus' day (Lk. 16:19). Blue and purple together connote honour in Esth. 8:15. Scarlet was also highly prized, and was associated with well-being (2 Sam. 1:24; Prov. 31:21). The purple and scarlet dress of the

harlot Babylon (Rev. 17:4) symbolised imperial rank. That the Holy of Holies was completely surrounded on five sides by these colours was suggestive of the majesty of him who dwelt there.

All these elements of symbolism created an ever-increasing aura of majesty and awe, pointing to the most holy thing of all, the ark with the mercy-seat and cherubim. This central item in the furniture of the Tabernacle is described first, before all other less sacred things. The ark would have been understood by the Israelites as a symbol of God's footstool, because it contained the tablets of the law (25:21), and they were familiar with the practice of depositing the deeds of a covenant in the footstool of the idol that symbolised their deity. The ark was also constituted God's throne by the figures of the cherubim on it. Cherubim were well-known accompaniments of deity and royalty in the ancient Near East, and so would have symbolised these qualities to the Israelites. The fact that these two cherubim faced downwards towards the mercy-seat, reverently averting their gaze from God, is a further reminder of the sacredness of the one who presenced himself there.

114 The Old Testament had revealed so clearly the glory and majesty of the one God that the New Testament could simply assume that it was understood that God is like that. When we worship God, it should still be with 'reverence and awe' (Heb. 12:28). He is still 'the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God' (1 Tim. 1:17), 'the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of Lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see' (1 Tim. 6:15f.). But the new thing is that Jesus has taught us that we can come to him as children to a father, able and ready to help us. 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him' (Rom. 8:32).

III. GOD REQUIRES SACRIFICE

The lay-out and ritual of the Tabernacle bore witness to the need for sacrifice. Sacrifice was one condition which had to be met if a holy God was to dwell in the midst of a sinful people. Much of the Tabernacle furniture was of use only in connection with sacrifice: the altar of burnt-offering, the laver, the incense-altar, and the mercy-seat.

It is hard for the modern Western mind to understand why God should choose sacrifice as the way by which men's sins should be forgiven. In fact the final answer is surely beyond our sphere. But we can discern some elements in sacrifice which bring us a little way at least in understanding why it was acceptable to God.

First of all, when men offered sacrifices to God in ancient Israel, God

was pleased simply because of their obedience to his specific commands. He had given them a Tabernacle in which to sacrifice, he had told them to offer sacrifices for their sins, he had told them exactly (*cf.* the Book of Leviticus) how to offer the various sacrifices, and men would have pleased him by the mere fact of conscientiously obeying him.

A second element of acceptability in sacrifice was its costliness to the worshipper. By doing something which cost her a great deal Israel was paying tribute, or homage, to her God. This is why only the best animals were good enough, those without blemish (Ex. 29:1; Lev. 1:3 *et passim*); game animals and fish, both of which would have cost the worshipper nothing, were not acceptable; Malachi flays his contemporaries for offering animals which are blind, or lame, or sick, or stolen (Mal. 1:6ff.). The Tabernacle Account even emphasises the costliness of the oil and the incense. However, we can understand in general that God was pleased as he saw a poor Israelite, who rarely had the luxury of good food, bringing the best of his (often no doubt very small) flock, and the first-fruits of his harvest, as a sacrifice in obedience to God's command.

Again, there is surely the element of repentance in sacrifice. If I go to the Tabernacle to offer sacrifice to take away my sins, I obviously want to be rid of these sins, and want to be forgiven, and the thought of repentance is not far away. Furthermore, if I confess my sins while I place my hands on the head of the animal I am about to kill, the repentance is explicit, and since the confession was public, I am bound to rectify my wrong-doing. 'The prophetic insistence that repentance is not an end in itself but must lead to rectification of wrong-doing (Isa. 1:13-17; 58:6-12; Mic. 6:6-8) is only the articulation of a basic postulate of the sacrificial system' (J. Milgrom, *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, Article 'Atonement'). While the OT does not actually say that confession accompanied all sacrifices, the fact that it is stipulated for sin-offerings (Lev. 5:5) and for guilt-offerings (Nu. 5:7) makes it probable that it accompanied them all. If sacrifice encouraged confession, repentance and making amends, this would certainly have increased its acceptability to God.

A final element of acceptability in sacrifice is this: assuming a substitutionary aspect (which seems plain from the practice of laying hands on the animal's head, and from the 'ransom' associations of the *kpr* root), sacrifice witnesses to both God's mercy, in accepting a lesser penalty than the one the worshipper deserved, and his justice, in that sin is punished severely. The worshipper is grateful that God is willing to accept the death of an animal instead of his own death, and is reminded that God is full of compassion; but when he kills his animal he remembers that the consequence of sin is death, and he will not underestimate

the seriousness of sin. If sacrifice bore witness to these complementary truths, that is one more reason why God found it suitable.

As far as the Israelite worshipper was concerned, however, the main thing was that sacrifice worked; *i. e.* when he offered a sacrifice he knew that the relationship between him and God, spoiled by his sins, was restored. The sense of forgiveness and acceptance with God, and the resulting joy of the people when they brought their sacrifices is clear, especially in the Psalms: *e. g.* 43:4: 'I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy'; 84:2,10: 'My soul longs, yea faints for the courts of the Lord . . . For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.'

16 In the Christian dispensation, however, such sacrifices are no longer necessary. Jesus Christ 'appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Heb. 9:26). Jesus' sacrifice shared many of the features of the Old Testament sacrificial ritual, and these no doubt partly explain its efficacy: his death was a perfect example of obedience (Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8); it was infinitely costly to the Father to send his Son, and infinitely costly for Jesus to thus suffer on the Cross; his death was substitutionary, 'the righteous for the unrighteous' (1 Pet. 3:18); repentance (Lk. 13:3) and confession of sin (1 Jn. 1:9) are essential concomitants. But Jesus' death was immeasurably more efficacious than the Old Testament sacrifices: it is this Lamb alone who removes the sins of the whole world; he alone whose death is available for the whole world; he alone whose death achieved something of such potency that its effects stretch infinitely far both backwards and forwards in history. And it is so because Jesus' death was more than a sacrifice, more than even a perfect sacrifice: it was not the offering of a reluctant beast but of a voluntarily surrendered human person (Heb. 9:12-14); and it transcends sacerdotal categories, and brings us into the realm of personal dealings between God and man, in that God was in Christ, accepting and suffering himself, in the person of his only Son, the consequences of sin. Here God's justice and his love, already revealed in the Old Testament sacrificial ritual, find their ultimate expression.