

Studies in Exodus No. 32

Exodus 26:1-27:21

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Review

It has been some time since we were last in Exodus: more than a month ago, to be precise. So let's review our recent progress through the book and, in this way, place tonight's reading in its larger context. What is referred to in Exodus 24:7 as the *Book of the Covenant* began with the summary stipulations, what are called the *Ten Words* or *Ten Commandments* in 20:1-18. These were followed by a section of more specific stipulations, most of them given in the form of case laws: that is, "if such and such should happen, this is what should be done." The *Ten Commandments* and the case laws taken together provide an epitome or summary of the ethical obligations of the covenant that Yahweh made with Israel. That section of laws concluded with an exhortation in the form of blessings promised for obedience and curses threatened for disobedience. As with the stipulations themselves, such a concluding exhortation – with blessings and curses – is characteristic of the covenant documents both of the Bible and the ANE. We find that hortatory conclusion to the *Book of the Covenant* in 23:20-33. This book does not contain the entirety of the covenant; there are many more stipulations yet to be read in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, but the *Book of the Covenant* is a précis or summary of the covenant. The covenant itself is a transcript of God's will for the life of his people. It is preceded by and founded upon God's act of redemption by which he brought his people into relationship with himself and gave himself to them in salvation. In that sense, speaking properly, the covenant is not salvation, it is the result of salvation and defines our response to God's gracious salvation.

Then we were given a record of the covenant making ceremony itself in 24:1-11. We noted how that ceremony of covenant confirmation or renewal had features typical of covenant-making ceremonies of the ANE – the Lord employed that form in dealing with his people because it was accessible and meaningful to them and suited his purposes – and also noted that this ceremony of covenant-renewal (covenant renewal, of course, because this is by no means the beginning of God's covenant with Israel) *was worship and is called worship* in the chapter. We noted that the acts of this covenant renewal are, in fact, the characteristic acts of Israel's worship that had already and for a long time been staples of Israel's life and her relationship with God. Israel's worship was a worship of covenant renewal, a way of renewing time and time again, her covenant with the Lord and her relationship with Him in the covenant. We noted that the instruments of covenant renewal in Exodus 24:1-11 are the ordinary elements of biblical worship: especially the ministry of the Word and the sacred meal; and in the liturgy of biblical worship they always come in that order. I gave you the gist of Jack Collins' learned article on the peace offering – the offering we have in 24:5 (referred to there as a fellowship offering) – in which he argued that the peace offering is the truest antecedent of the Lord's Supper. This is a point the Lord himself demonstrates by citing Exodus 24:8 in the institution of the Lord's Supper in the Upper Room. As I said in summary, in our consideration of Exodus 24:1-11:

Taking all of this material together, we have a covenant renewal or ratification ceremony here, a ceremony that takes up the elements of the ordinary liturgy of worship in both the OT and the NT. It assumes the presence of God with his people and a dialogue between them; the reading and hearing of his Word, the promise of his people to believe and obey, and a meal that not only signifies and seals the covenant relationship, the family bond, the peace and fellowship between God and his people but is an occasion of enjoying that fellowship.

What we are given, therefore, in Exodus 24 is a theory of divine worship: a renewal of our covenant with God every Lord's Day composed – as all covenant renewal in the Bible is – of two central acts: the Word and the meal in that order. It is important to remind you of this as we proceed further into Exodus, because we have established and so need to remember that this seemingly arcane material on worship in Exodus is relevant to our own worship today. In its principles, even in its outward forms in a general way, this material is teaching that we must follow and liturgical instruction that we must obey here in the 21st century *after* Christ. Ours too is the worship of covenant renewal.

We made the point then that, in one sense, the Book of Exodus ended at 24:11. Apart from three chapters later in the book (32-34), the rest of the Book of Exodus really belongs with Leviticus.

Then, last time, we launched ourselves into what we admitted is widely thought to be “the boring part of the Bible.” In introducing it we pointed out that the tabernacle itself – the building, its furniture, and the acts performed within it – were symbolic and prophetic. There is more here than meets the eye. The tabernacle and its worship is the physical embodiment of truth about God and about our salvation. What is more, the tabernacle, as explicitly and emphatically emphasized in this material, was a tangible symbol *of the Lord's presence with his people*. We pointed out how important symbols were in Israel and how much of great importance they conveyed to the mind and heart. We use symbols today, sometimes very powerful symbols, but we are not as attuned to the symbolic as they were in the ancient world. We made the point that our worship today partakes and must partake of the symbolic in very much the same way as did Israel's in the tabernacle. Just as ours today is the worship of covenant renewal, so it is the worship of the tabernacle.

As I said last time:

When we pray that the Lord would lift us up into the sanctuary of the Most High; when we acknowledge that the Lord is enthroned on the praises of his people; when we confess that Judah has become God's sanctuary, we are saying also that our worship is representational. It is at the deep level of symbol that we convey this reality and experience. We kneel before the Lord as if we knew that he were sitting enthroned at the front of the church. The kneeling in a sanctuary is symbolic of the nature of our relationship to God. We obviously cannot see the Lord or point ourselves toward him, nor, for that matter did Moses or Israel see the Lord, though they saw visible representations of his glory. We cannot watch our sins being taken off our hearts and away from us. We cannot see the Lord receive our gifts. We believe that he is with us and that these things occur, *but then Israel had to believe those things too*. But, in fact,

we are before the Lord and *are* gathered in his presence. When we bow before him we *are* acknowledging that presence and his holiness and majesty. When we confess our sins we acknowledge that we cannot come into his presence except by virtue of the redemption that he supplied in his Son, Jesus Christ. When we hear his Word read and preached by one of his ministers, we acknowledge that it is not a man but the Lord himself who is speaking to us. And when we hear ourselves singing amidst the congregation great hymns of praise to God and have a sense of God's presence with us in that moment, we say with every right that we are anticipating the life of heaven. These things are real, as real as bricks and wood, even though they are still, even in the new epoch, conveyed to us symbolically and representationally in many ways.

We noted, however, that were we to ascend to the top of the mountain to speak with God directly we would expect more important information than instructions for a chest, a table, a lamp, and so on. Surely there are more important things than that! But, of course, there are no more important things in all the world than that we should know the presence of God in his church and should relate to God according to his holiness and his majesty. Will God remain with us and we with him? That is the question. Finally, it is the only question. All of the great questions of life reduce to questions about true worship and the true nature of our relationship to God.

These are the boring parts of the Bible only if you think it a small thing to draw near to God's throne, to find from him the forgiveness of your sins, to reaffirm your commitment to living according to his law, to find yourself already in heaven – at least in anticipation – and to look to him for light, direction, and guidance and for the provision of your daily bread. That is what the tabernacle was to God's people and what true worship is for us today. And in more ways than people realize *that* worship was very much what *our* worship is to be today. As the history of the Word of God and of the church of God since biblical times will demonstrate a thousand times, when the church goes wrong in the worship of Word and sacrament multitudes fall away from God and slip unknowing into hell. There is nothing boring about heaven or hell. Biblical worship is the way to heaven and a wall across the way to hell. That is why so much time and attention is given to it in the Bible.

So here is the context of all of the detailed instructions concerning the place, the means, and the manner of Israel's worship that we have begun examining and continue to exam this evening. Immediately upon Israel's response to the invitation to covenant relationship with Yahweh and the ceremony of the renewal of that covenant, come these instructions about how God's presence would be known to and his blessing received by his people. *All through the book so far we have been concerned with Yahweh's presence with his people to save and to bless; that is what this material is all about as well.*

Text Comment

26:1 It needs to be said at the outset that some of the details of the translation that follows are far from clear (as is the case with the details of the design of Solomon's temple in Kings and Chronicles). A number of the technical terms used to describe the structure are not used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The meaning of technical terms, in the nature of the case, is hard to preserve over time. Think of all the technical musical terms in the Psalm

titles that, still today, no one can translate with any confidence: *miktam*, *maskil*, *sheminith*, *selah*, and the like. In any case, the basic structure was not unlike that of a nomad or Bedouin home: an inner tent, corresponding to the women's section, an outer tent for the men, and an enclosure beyond that to hold the stock. The dimensions are, of course, much larger, as befits the Lord and the functions of this sanctuary. They would be doubled for Solomon's temple making a still much larger structure.

- v.14 This double layer of covering provided a waterproof barrier over the entire structure.
- v.15 So we have first a tent (*mishkan*) that is the sanctuary proper. It was constructed of the finest linen embroidered with images of cherubim (another illustration of the fact that the second commandment does not prohibit any and all representational art, even such art put to liturgical usage). The linen was draped over frames of acacia wood fitted in sockets of silver. Horizontal bars locked the frames securely and special care was taken at the corners to ensure tight coverage. *Then, in addition*, we have a tent (*ohel*) placed over the sanctuary proper to protect it.
- v.16 The "projections" are probably *tenons* that would be fit into mortises in a kind of tongue and groove construction. [Alter, 467]
- v.35 This curtain separated the sanctuary into two rooms, the Most Holy Place, where the ark was placed, an area that would always have been in total darkness, and the Holy Place where were placed the altar of incense, the table for the bread, and the lampstand.
- v.37 The three closed sides of the sanctuary were the north, east, and south; the west end had a curtain to close it.
- v.2 Horned altars were common in the ANE – another evidence of the Lord's accommodation to the forms common to that time and place, however different Israel's theology and the nature of her worship – the horn a common symbol of strength. Perhaps the idea was that the Lord was powerful and able to help those who came to him.
- v.3 These are the paraphernalia of sacrifice on this altar: utensils for catching the blood, for shoveling and removing the ashes and residual fat, for sprinkling blood, for turning the meat as it cooked, and for feeding the fire.
- v.5 This grating is another of the obscure details. It is not clear whether it was outside or inside the altar or what its purpose was. It is widely thought either to have been support for the ledge around the altar, the ledge the priests would have stood on as they offered sacrifice or the lower section of the altar walls designed to provide draught for the fire.
- v.8 The altar was made of acacia wood and was 7 ½ feet square and 4 ½ feet high. The altar was overlaid with bronze as it would have to have been to prevent the wood from charring. The reference in 20:24-25 of altars made of wood and stones may mean that the hollow center of this altar was filled with earth or stones.

- v.19 The courtyard around the sanctuary and its covering tent was 150 feet long and 75 feet wide. The tent itself would have stretched half-way across this courtyard, leaving half open and available for the altar and the activities of sacrifice. If you drew diagonals across the two squares that made up the courtyard, the ark would lie in the exact center of the one and the altar the exact center of the other. The laver – the large basin of water – lay half-way between the altar and the entrance to the sanctuary. The curtains that made the walls of the courtyard were 22 ½ feet high, so, while the top of the tent would be visible from the camp, what was happening in the courtyard was hidden from sight. There was only one entrance: at the west end. Remember, the temple would be built on this same east/west axis. That was typical of ANE sanctuaries.
- v.21 The lamp burned during the night, and was extinguished in the morning and relit in the evening. Caring for this lamp was one of the young Samuel’s responsibilities according to 1 Sam. 3. We are reminded with this other name, “the Tent of Meeting,” that this is the place where the Lord would meet with his people.

There are a great many themes here that could profitably be explored. The tabernacle and its worship was representational at many levels and in many ways. But I want to draw our attention to two key points this evening. The first I will only mention, the second elaborate a bit more.

The first is that there is a very clear emphasis in all of the details of the tabernacle’s construction on its portability. The way it was made afforded ease of movement. The entire structure could be taken down rather easily, moved by the Levites to another location, and then put up again. This is a clear emphasis in the details of its construction, whether we are talking about the sanctuary itself or the tent that went over it, or the altar – furnished with rings through which poles could be put by which the altar could be carried, as we read in 27:4-7 – or the hollow construction of the altar, that made it lighter to carry. The same is true of even the courtyard, large as it was. It could be taken down and moved quite easily. The tabernacle, with all that was in it, the *Tent of Meeting*, was the objective symbol of the Lord’s presence with his people. And it moved! It traveled with Israel as she moved from place to place in the wilderness. In the larger context of Exodus, this is obviously a point of capital importance. Will God’s presence be lost if his people move from Egypt into the wilderness, or move from Sinai further into the desert toward the Promised Land? No, his presence will go with them. Yahweh goes with his people on their pilgrimage. The portable nature of the tabernacle bears an eloquent witness to this most fundamental of all convictions of our faith:

“If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
 if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,
 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold
 me fast.”

There is hardly a fact more important or one more important to remember and keep in the front of one’s mind than this: that our God is *here*, that he is *with us*, *near to us*. That he is accessible and we can come to him, no matter where we are, no matter our circumstances. God’s presence goes with us wherever we go. When the Christian astronaut, James Irwin, on his way to his

moon landing, circled around the backside of the moon and was out of sight of and contact with the earth, Yahweh was *there*. He was no further away from God in that space capsule than he was kneeling by his bedside. Where we go our God goes with us. That is the eloquent testimony of the architecture of the tabernacle.

But there is this also, and in the second place: the architecture and appointments of the tabernacle emphasized the holiness and majesty of the divine presence. This is so over and over again in the design of this structure, making it obviously an important lesson of the architecture, all the more given the tabernacle's role as the symbol of the Lord's presence.

See how the concentric circles of diminishing or increasing holiness – depending, of course, on whether one is moving toward or away from the sanctuary itself – are created. [Haran in Durham, 379] The inner sanctuary is walled with fine linen on which is embroidered cherubim. Here the craftsmen are most required, the result most beautiful. The wall material for the tent over the sanctuary is less fine and less valuable – goat hair – or, in the case of the courtyard, for example, a combination of linen and yarn. For the hardware of the frame over which the curtains were draped, gold was used for the sanctuary itself, silver for the tent, and silver and bronze for the courtyard. Very obviously, the further from the symbols of God's presence *par excellence*, viz. the ark and its cover, the less precious the materials used in construction. The closer to the Presence, the finer the precious metal.

Or take the light for the Holy Place. Because that light, that lampstand, stood directly on the other side of the Most Holy Place, it must burn the purest oil. Olive oil was the most expensive oil in use in the ANE and beaten or pressed oil – that is, oil that was extracted by hand-pounding rather than pressed with a large stone – the finest of that. Such oil gave off a bright light and almost no smoke. Ordinarily the best olive oil would be used for cooking and the cloudy oil for lamps, but here the best is used for the illumination of the Lord's sanctuary.

There will be much more of this, for example, in the regulations concerning who might enter the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place, what the common people may see and touch, and so on. There is in all of this material an emphasis on the perfection of the whole, the perfect unity of this structure – as in 26:6 – but a whole in which there are clearly more and less sacred places. There is a direction toward and away from the most powerful symbols of Yahweh's presence. The Most Holy Place, dark all the time, with the ark and its cover, is hidden from everyone's view (save the High Priest on the Day of Atonement), but even the outer courtyard cannot be seen by the ordinary Israelite passing by the sanctuary while going about his daily business.

There was in this architecture a powerful statement being made about the holiness of God and about the difficulty of sinful men finding access to or enjoying nearness to the living God. And it is precisely this sense of the divine holiness, terrible and wonderful in its majesty and power, utterly consuming of human beings apart from their being covered by the grace of God and the righteousness of Christ, it is precisely this sense of the holiness of God, his being a consuming fire, his being a threat to the very existence of a sinful man or woman that is so completely being lost in our time – alas even in the church of God.

I read this the other day in the most recent number of *Touchstone* [Jan/Feb 2006, 3]:

“A front-page article in the *New York Times* last September featured an inside look at the daily workings of an abortion clinic in Little Rock. The piece communicated the calloused yet tortured consciences of the women involved. They don’t wish to be seen, or to make contact with others in the waiting room. Even more striking, though, are their religious commitments.

One Baptist college student, having her third abortion, is quoted in the article as saying: ‘My religion is against it. In a way I feel that I am doing wrong, but you can be forgiven. I blame myself. I feel I shouldn’t have sex at all.’

‘I’ve done this once and swore I wouldn’t do it again,’ said a woman named Regina. ‘Every woman has second thoughts, especially because I’m Catholic.’ Regina noted that she went to confession. ‘The priest didn’t hound me,’ she reported. ‘He said, “People make mistakes.”’

The facility’s operating room supervisor, Ebony, whom the article chillingly describes as rinsing ‘the blood off aborted tissues,’ could understand Regina’s story. Ebony, too, has had an abortion. ‘As a Baptist, she still considered abortion a sin, but so are a lot of things we all do,’ she said. The article closes with the Baptist’s words to the Catholic undergoing the abortion: ‘No problem sweetie. We’ve all been there.’”

I thought to myself that those paragraphs are an almost perfect description of the theological vision of modern Americans. They presume on God’s forgiveness because they have virtually no sense whatsoever of the holiness of God. There is, as the Bible says, “no fear of God before their eyes.” They do not believe that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God. They do not worry about offending God; they worry only about the complications of their lives.

Listen to this from David Wells:

“It is...[the] holiness of God...without which the cross of Christ is incomprehensible, that provides the light that exposes modernity’s darkness for what it is. For modernity has emptied life of serious moral purpose. Indeed, it empties people of the capacity to see the world in moral terms, and this, in turn, closes their access to reality, for reality is fundamentally moral. God’s holiness is fundamental to who he is and what he has done. And the key to it all has been the loss of God’s otherness, not least in his holiness, beneath the forms of modern piety. Evangelicals turned from focusing on God’s transcendence to focusing on his immanence – and then they took the further step of interpreting his immanence as friendliness to modernity.

The loss of the traditional vision of God as holy is now manifested everywhere in the evangelical world. It is the key to understanding why sin and grace have become such empty terms. What depth of meaning...can these terms have except in relation to the holiness of God? Divorced from the holiness of God, sin is merely self-defeating behavior or a breach in etiquette. Divorced from the holiness of God, grace is merely empty rhetoric, pious window dressing for the modern technique by which sinners work

out their own salvation. Divorced from the holiness of God, our Gospel become indistinguishable from any of a host of alternative self-help doctrines. Divorced from the holiness of God, our public morality is reduced to little more than an accumulation of trade-offs between competing private interests. Divorced from the holiness of God, our worship becomes mere entertainment. The holiness of God is the very cornerstone of Christian faith, for it is the foundation of reality. Sin is defiance of God's holiness. Knowing that God is holy is therefore the key to knowing life as it truly is, knowing Christ as he truly is, knowing why he came, and knowing how life will end.

It is this God, majestic and holy in his being, this God whose love knows no bounds because he holiness knows no limits, who has disappeared from the modern evangelical world." [*No Place for Truth*, 300]

Can anyone dispute the truth of that assessment? The world does not fear God in large part because even the church no longer fears him. But God *is* holy. He *is* a consuming fire. He *is* angry with the wicked every day. He *will* punish with everlasting destruction those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. Our worship must create in us a sense of that divine holiness – fundamental to any right understanding of reality – as the architecture of the tabernacle was so clearly intended to do. Israel knew the ark was there in the Most Holy Place of the sanctuary, but she never saw it. It was surrounded by darkness. She could not get as close even as the Holy Place. And she could not get near to these representations of God's presence at all apart from the offering of sacrifices – substitute death. Remember, these were symbols. Pious Israelites knew very well that God was everywhere; that he was not in any way confined to the ark. It was but a symbol. But it was a powerful, an eloquent symbol of a God of terrible holiness that no one has seen or can see!

That God is the Living God. He has not changed. He is the same God today. But our worship, so far removed from that of the tabernacle, does not convince us of this or remind us of this and so we have Baptists and Roman Catholics and, no doubt, Presbyterians, in abortuaries waiting rooms sure that God will forgive: he must because it would be entirely inconvenient for us if he did not! And the rest of the culture, within and without the church, thinks very much the same way. We have a pagan god, a god of the Canaanite high place, a god very much like ourselves. We do not have – too many of us do not have any longer – the God of the tabernacle.