

IMMANUEL: GOD WITH US
Structure, Meaning, and History
of the Tabernacle

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Grand Rapids MI

April, 1964

Immanuel

Orientation

The subject of this paper is to be limited to the tabernacle and its significance. But the tabernacle is so closely connected with cultic practices as they are *prescribed* (Note that the prefix is “pre” rather than “de.”) in the Pentateuch that it becomes almost impossible to avoid discussing these rites in extensive detail as well. Time and space, however, coerce me to restrict myself to this delimited subject, regardless of the obvious disadvantages of the procedure. Furthermore, I am restricting the discussion to the tabernacle itself and exclude therefore the furniture as well for the same reason.

I regard it advisable to make a few remarks concerning the similarities of the tabernacle with the cultic constructions of other contemporary near-eastern peoples. It is a general impression among the non-theological Christians that Israel’s cultic institutions were something unique and hitherto unknown. Though I have not delved deeply into the subject, reputable writers agree that in fact these were not introduced *de novo*. There were apparently a great number of similarities between the institutions of Israel and those of her neighbors, but these are similarities restricted to the externals. The actual content, meaning, and reference of the cult of the Israelites was entirely different from their heathen counterparts. Oehler quotes K.J. Nitzsch on this matter:

The whole nature of the symbols and ceremonies of Moses is *different from those of the heathen*, although much in the outer forms in heathenism and the Old Testament seem to be quite similar. The heathen ceremonies effect material union with the Divinity *ex opera operato*, and so work magically. There is not a single usage in the institutions of Moses in which

communion with God is effected in a magical way through the sense, but all have a purely symbolical nature¹

Oehler and Nitzch both recognize an antithesis, even though it is somewhat obscured by the external similarities.

Not only were these institutions common throughout the Near East, Israel itself had already engaged in at least some of them. Vos is of the opinion that at least some of the rituals date from earlier times.² We know, of course, that offering had been practiced as far back as Cain and Abel. The novelty does not lie in the institution primarily, but in their reference, in their symbolism and typology. "The new thing is that now, in the time of Moses, a system of types is established so that the whole organism of the world of redemption as it were, finds a typical embodiment on earth."³ Even the fact that the tabernacle was facing the east, a fact I infer from Numbers 3:38, is in agreement with universal custom.⁴

Whatever borrowing from neighboring cultures took place, these borrowings do not in any way rob the cult of the Israelites of its unique significance.

Structural Details

Uniqueness and Meaning

I do not imagine there is anyone who reads the cultic passages in the Pentateuch who does not wonder about the significance of all the exact, detailed prescriptions for the plan of the tabernacle. Why should these have been put in Scripture? They seem quite irrelevant to us. Would it not have been better if they were not in the Bible?

On the basis of my presuppositions that Scripture is a product of human endeavor, guided by the Holy Spirit, I must believe that these details do serve a definite function, even if they are somewhat obscure and even though I would be hard put to account for every bit of detail. One does not have to engage in any extensive reading to discover that theologians differ much amongst themselves in this matter. There are those who urge restraint in finding symbolical

1 G.F. Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. G.E. Day (Clark's Theological Library; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 247.

2 G. Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), p. 159.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

4 A. Nordtzij, *De Boeken Der Kronieken* (2 vols.; *Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift*; Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., 1957, II, p. 74.

and typological value in every detail. O.T. Allis, for example, makes short work of it, especially in regards to the color scheme of the tabernacle. "The study of symbolics is interesting and instructive, but it is full of difficulty, and it is easy to lose one's way in it."⁵ He refuses to attach any meaning to them at all. Gispén agrees to some extent. Many measures taken were necessary for an efficient and purposeful tabernacle, he writes, but not every detail has symbolical meaning.⁶ The rule is, he says, to let Scripture speak for itself. If it provides us with a meaning, we are safe, but only then.⁷ Noordtzijs wishes to go beyond the Scriptures and apply the findings of extra-Biblical scientific findings. In connection with the red, he suggests that this is a suitable color, because it, for the Near Easterners, had the power to avert demonic powers. Red can thus serve to signify healing.⁸ It is true that in Scripture blood is attributed with cleansing power, but I do not think that Scripture allows the introduction of evil powers. Nowhere in Scripture do we read of such negative denotation in connection with blood, and, it seems to me, we do not require the additional significance. This is not to say that Noordtzijs' principle of allowing extra-Biblical material to determine Biblical meaning is illegitimate *per se*.

Von Rad suggests that

the various pieces of cultic material are to a large extent presented with such bare objectivity, and so much without any addition which gives theological significance, that the task of interpretation passes over unawares from the hands of the theologian to the Biblical archeologist.⁹

We have quietly slipped into the more basic problem of the purpose of Scripture, for we cannot accept or reject Von Rad's and Noordtzijs' method until we have come to a conclusion in regards to the problem of the completeness of Scripture. Scripture is selective. That is an established fact I will not take time to re-establish. Since there has been this selection, which implies conscious or unconscious omission of certain facts and notions, may we get them in through the back door? No doubt, some must have been considered irrelevant to the unfolding of redemption history. On the other hand, the Pentateuch was written under certain circumstances, many of which were simply taken for granted by the writers, while to us they are lost, until recovered by archeology. Dr. Woudstra always stressed that we must never forget

5 O.T. Allis, *God Spoke by Moses* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing House, 1951), p. 90.

6 W.H. Gispén, "Bijbelsche Archaeologie," *Bijbelsch Handboek, I* (Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., 1935), pp. 267-274.

7 W.H. Gispén, *Het Boek Exodus* (2nd rev. ed.; *Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift*; Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., 1951), pp. 12-13)

8 A. Noordtzijs, *Het Boek Numeri* (*Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift*; Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1957), pp. 58-59.

9 G. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (2 vols; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), I, pp. 232-233.

that we are confronted with an inscripturated word, not with the events themselves. It is beyond the scope of this short paper to solve the problem. In the meantime, I had better follow the advice of Gispén and restrict myself to the interpretation provided by Scripture itself.

There is little to be gained from reproducing the exact blueprint of the tabernacle. Instead, I shall discuss the significance of some of the specific details of color, material, and plan, in this order.

Colours

I can appreciate Allis' fear of speculation regarding the color scheme employed in the tabernacle, but this ought not to lead to outright rejection of all symbolism. Scripture itself attaches meaning to at least some of them. The main colors used in the sanctuary were blue, purple, scarlet, and white linen (Exodus 26:1). Noordtzijs calls them "cultic colors."¹⁰ This would seem, at first glance, to be an appropriate term, for the same colors are used in Solomon's temple (II Chronicles 3:14).

White is found throughout Scripture in various connections. In Isaiah 1:18 our sins are made white, that is forgiven. In Daniel 7:9, the "ancient of days" is shown wearing "raiment white as snow." There is a similar use of white in Matthew 17:2. While Jesus was on the Mount of Transfiguration, "his garments became white as light." The angel in Matthew 28 also wore a "raiment white as snow." In Revelation 1:14, we meet Christ once more with white hair and white head. In Revelation 6:2, we see the conqueror ride a white horse. In Revelation 7:9 the motif of Isaiah 1 is repeated. There is a great crowd gathered before the throne of God, all wearing white robes. Finally, in Revelation 19 we meet Christ once again on a white horse, followed by his army wearing white robes and riding on white horses. We read the phrase "white and pure." To sum up our findings then, we find that white signifies purity (Isaiah 1:18, Revelation 7:9, 19), holiness (Daniel 7:9; Matthew 17:2, 28:8; Revelation 1:14), and victory (Revelation 6:2; Revelation 19).¹¹

Blue does not seem to have any independent significance in Scripture. It occurs seldom and then in such unrelated settings that it is impossible to draw any symbolism, from it. Keil and

¹⁰ *Kronieken*, II, p. 80.

¹¹ Cf. Gispén, *Exodus*, p. 122.

Delitzsch suggest that blue refers to heavenly origin and character,¹² but they offer no basis for this assertion.

Purple appears quite frequently in Scripture, especially in reference to the tabernacle and the temple. Apart from this cultic use and apart from its associate colors, it invariably occurs in settings of splendor and beauty. Even the bridegroom in the Song of Solomon, charmed by his beloved, sings to her perfections and describes her hair as purple! But this only supports what was said previously regarding the prevailing use of the combination of colors. K. and D. characterize purple as symbolizing “royal glory,”¹³ as accurate a designation as any.

Scarlet, apart from the usual combination of colors, usually indicates wealth. A simple check in any concordance will bear this out. It is, of course, used in Isaiah 1:18, where it is opposed to white. Here scarlet refers to sin. Its being used alongside of white suggests the truth that divine love and anger belong together, according to Gispén.¹⁴ In view of the fact that scarlet is used in this sense only once in all of Scripture, I would hesitate to accept this suggestion, attractive though it sounds. I am inclined to think that Gispén violated his own hermeneutical principles in this matter.

The main thrust of the color scheme as a whole, then, is to convey majesty, glory and wealth. This is understandable when we realize that the tabernacle was the dwelling-place of Jehovah, the God who created heaven and earth. The tabernacle was only a tent, about the only possible construction practical under the given circumstances. Nevertheless, God did not want it to be a shabby tent. It had to portray something of His majesty, even under these circumstances.¹⁵

Materials

The glory and majesty of the divine presence was emphasized as well by the abundance of gold. It is important to notice that the use of gold was restricted to the sanctuary, while brass was used more extensively for the outer court. “In this way a sharp and important distinction was made between the court of the people and the sanctuary of the Lord.”¹⁶ The same distinction

12 C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, trans. J. Martin (2 vols.; *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*; Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), II, p. 185. From here on these authors will be referred to as K. and D.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Exodus*, p. 123.

15 *Cf.* Esther 1:6; Ezekiel 27:16; Revelation 18:16.

16 Allis, p. 89.

would seem to be conveyed by the gold and the silver. Silver, also, was a prominent metal in the court, but, say K. and D., this refers to moral purity rather than less glory and majesty.¹⁷ It is true that silver is occasionally used to symbolize purity (Psalm 12:6; Zechariah 13:9; Malachi 3:3), but if it were to convey purity it would be used in the holy and the holy of holies, and not in the court. It is God who is characterized by moral purity, not the people. I am of the opinion that the silver must be seen in contrast to gold: it has less splendor and less majesty about it.

As to the other materials, they appear to have been chosen primarily because of their availability. The acacia wood was native to the region of Sinai. Furthermore, it was light-weight and hard, both excellent qualities for this specific purpose. The coverings were made of goat skins which also were easily obtained.

The Layout

The plan of the tabernacle was significant, too, especially the shapes of the various sections. There were, of course, the court, the holy, and the most holy. The most holy was a perfect cube: 10 cubits by 10 cubits by 10 cubits. Solomon's temple also contained a holy of holies of the same proportions, though not the same measurements. In the visionary temple of Ezekiel we meet the same shape once again. Writes Allis, "It is natural to see in this the type of the New Jerusalem, of which the 'length and the breadth and the height of it are equal' (Revelation 21:16)."¹⁸ This conforms to the fact that the cult in the ancient world expressed the notion of perfection.¹⁹

The holy was not cubic, but rectangular and, for that matter, the entire structure was oblong. This again is in keeping with Solomon's temple. K. and D. make much of these forms. Not only does the cubic form of the most holy point towards the New Jerusalem, as Allis suggests, but

in the symbolism of antiquity, the square was a symbol of the universe or *cosmos*; and thus, too, in the symbolism of the Scriptures it is a type of the world as the scene of divine revelation, the sphere of the kingdom of God, for which the world from the very first had been intended by God, and to which ... it was to be one more renewed and glorified. Hence the seal of the

17 Pp. 184-185.

18 P. 88

19 Cf. S.G. De Graaf, *Verbondsgeschiedenis* (2 vols.; Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., 1952), I, p. 222 and S. Greijdanus, *De Openbaring des Heeren aan Johannes (Kommentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Amsterdam: H.A. Van Bottenburg, 1925)*, p. 425.

kingdom of God was impressed upon the sanctuary ... through the quadrangular form that was given to its separate rooms.²⁰

The oblong shape also is meaningful. It "... set forth the idea of the present incompleteness of the kingdom"²¹ It is for this reason that the cube and square is more prominent in Ezekiel's temple. Ezekiel's was a prophetic picture which telescoped the ages to reflect the "kingdom come." Here we have a square sanctuary, a square inner court, a square outer court, as well as a square city and square suburbs. "The idea is thus symbolically expressed that the temple and city, and in fact the whole holy ground, already approximate to the form of the most holy place."²² But I am running ahead of my schedule, perhaps unavoidably so.

Not only were the shapes of the various departments different, but this difference came out even more strikingly in their use. The people were restricted to the court. The priests were allowed to enter the sanctuary, but only the high priest could go into the most holy. Here we touch upon the "distant presence" of God among his people, a subject which leads us to the very purpose of the tabernacle and the cultic practices associated with it.

The Significance of the Tabernacle

The nature of the material to be discussed in the section following this section logically demands that it be inserted before a discussion of the significance of the tabernacle. Since, however, the significance determines the handling of the tabernacle, I choose to discuss the purpose of the institution at this point.

Von Ran asserts, within his documentary framework, that "P is utterly serious in wanting to show that the cult which entered history in the people of Israel is the goal of the origin and evolution of the world. Creation itself was designed to lead to this Israel."²³ This, I submit, is missing the point completely. The tabernacle, as I will attempt to show, was a temporary "emergency" measure introduced by God as the result of sin and the consequent need for reconciliation between God and man. Creation was definitely not designed to lead to sin! Vriezen suggests, to the contrary, that "if we want to gain a correct understanding of the Israelite cult, we must therefore see it against the background of the doctrine of holiness of

20 Pp. 183-184.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

23 Pp. 233-234.

God, of the sinfulness of man and of the covenant between this holy God and this sinful man.”²⁴ This I believe to be closer to the truth.

De Graaf reminds us that before sin came, God lived in the hearts of men. The entire earth was, in a sense, God’s tabernacle, i.e. his dwelling-place. Sin put an end to this, but God promised to return by way of Christ. It was this promise that the tabernacle embodied.²⁵ There was a redemption promised, a reconciliation by which man could once again approach God boldly and have communion with Him, but this had not materialized, even though God already saw His people as actually redeemed in Christ. God wanted to be near to His people and that in a concrete and visible way. What was required was some expression of what I have chosen to call the divine “distance presence.” God wanted to be with His people, but His holiness and righteousness required a distance from everything connected with sin. Hence we have the three compartments. The tabernacle as a whole expresses God’s indwelling, His proximity to His people. This is the first and primary thing: “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst,” said God to Moses (Exodus 25:8). We read this in this connection where the tabernacle is first mentioned. We read the same when it is finally erected: “the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34). This idea of dwelling is *the* point of departure for everything else we predicate about the tabernacle.²⁶ And it must be remembered that “to dwell” does not mean to room and to eat out, but, according to Vos, it means “intimate association.”²⁷ God wished to identify himself with His people in so far as His holiness allowed for it. This accounts for the accent on the divine presence.

As soon as one speaks of this presence, however, he must mention the distant aspect of this presence as well in order to avoid giving a false impression. It is almost as important as the presence. It was expressed mainly by the regulation that only priests could enter the actual sanctuary, and only the high priest the most holy. There was a barrier of sin between God and his people. Hence they could approach Him only directly by means of the mediatorial work of the priests. The curtain dividing the two sections of the sanctuary was very expressive of this barrier. “The coexistence of these two elements, that of trustful approach to God and that of reverence for the divine majesty, is characteristic of the Biblical religion throughout,” writes Vos.²⁸ On the same page, he continues that “the awe or fear inspired by the holiness of Jehovah is not first due to the sense of sin.” And again, “The sanctuary-character of the tabernacle is

24 Th.C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, trans. S. Neuijen (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), p. 284.

25 Pp. 221-222.

26 Gispén, *Exodus*, p. 13.

27 P. 165.

28 P. 167.

expressive of both elements in the idea." Even though sanctified, the people cannot enter the sanctuary, a situation which is not even changed by expiation. If Vos means to suggest that the tabernacle is required by sin not only, but also in virtue of God's holiness *per se*, then I disagree. I am of the firm conviction that it was sin and *only* sin that brought about the tabernacle, or, at least, the *distant* aspect of the divine presence. This disappeared with the death of Christ.

Thus the tabernacle may be said to show God's love in His presence and His holiness in His aloofness. It typified the work of Christ as mediator, the Church and the New Jerusalem. We know this because of the intervening *Heilsgeschichte*, but Vos cautions us not to

infer from our comparatively easy reading of the types that Israelites of old felt the same ease in interpreting them. It is unhistorical to carry back into the Old Testament mind our developed doctrinal consciousness of these matters. The failure to understand, however, does not detract from the objective significance these types had in the intent of God.²⁹

That the tabernacle has as its primary purpose to make the indwelling of God concrete is not a notion that has gone entirely unchallenged. Von Rad, for one, rejects it quite decisively. According to him, this *was* the main purpose of the temple. Referring to passages such as Numbers 11:16, 24-26 and 12:4, Von Rad asserts that

In these references we meet with a very striking idea of the relationship in which Jahweh stood to this Tent. The Tent is not in the least the place where Jahweh dwells on earth, as was the case later with, for instance, the Temple of Solomon; it is merely the point of meeting, the place of encounter between Jahweh and Moses.³⁰

He goes on to say that no regular sacrificial worship was offered before the tent. The people went to the tent only when they sought advice: it was the place of oracles. This is expressed especially in Exodus 29:42ff.

Jahweh there sums up the cultic significance of the Tabernacle which is to be erected in the words: "There will I appear, to speak to you, and there I will meet with the people of Israel." These words would be meaningless if Jahweh were thought of as dwelling in the Tent. But they do have meaning if the Tent is understood as the one and only place of meeting between Jahweh and Israel.³¹

Von Rad's objections do not hold. Even if he should want to isolate Exodus 29:42 from its immediate context by means of some documentary magic, he could still not avoid the fact that in the *very same* sentence and verse there is mention of a "continual burnt offering at the door

29 P. 164.

30 P. 236.

31 P. 239.

of the tent of meeting.” The immediately preceding context shows that this was an offering of lambs, and, unless I completely misunderstand the nature of such offerings, they were sacrificial in nature. Furthermore, in verses 45-46 there is a heavy emphasis on the idea of indwelling, which goes to show that the two are not mutually exclusive. I would think that the tent as meeting place would make more sense if it were also a dwelling-place. The fact that God has His dwelling here is the reason that Israel would come there to meet God and to seek advice. If God were not there, there would be no oracles either. Since these two elements are not mutually exclusive as Von Rad would have it, but instead are mutually supporting, they stand in the Old Testament side by side and interchangeably.

We have seen, so far, that colors, materials, and lay-out all served to create the unified impression of splendor, glory, and greatness. We have also noticed the distant presence in connection with the tabernacle. We will now see how this affected the subsequent handling of the tabernacle in its history.

History of the Tabernacle

Everything discussed so far found its expression in Israel’s handling of the tabernacle. In its construction nothing was left to the ingenuity of the builders, for it was all spelled out in detail by God Himself. The same holds true for its handling. When it was pitched, only the court was accessible to the people. When it was to be dismantled for transportation, the people could not help either, not even carry its parts. All these tasks were preserved for the Levites. According to Numbers 4, only Aaron and his sons were to take down the veil and cover the ark. This was to be covered with both goatskin and a cloth of blue. The same precautions were taken for the other pieces of furniture. The members of the Kohathites were to work under direction of Aaron and his sons, but they ought not to see the “holy things even for a moment, lest they die.” The sons of Gershon and Merari were likewise assigned to tabernacle duty, but their task consisted primarily of carrying the various parts. No initiative of any kind was allowed them: Aaron and his sons had to make specific assignments to the most minute details. A more terrifying way of impressing Israel with God’s holiness and of His distant presence would hardly be possible. If anyone outside of the Levites should come near or touch, he must be put to death!

The arrangement of the camp around the tabernacle also adds to the entire impression. Every tribe is assigned to a specific place relative to the tabernacle, but the Levites “shall encamp around the tabernacle of the testimony, that there be no wrath upon the congregation.” The tabernacle again is in the center and close to the people. Yet there are the Levites – between

the people and the tabernacle: the distant presence of Jehovah (Numbers 1:53). This was the arrangement both when encamped and when enroute.

After the Israelites settle in Canaan, the history of the tabernacle becomes increasingly obscure. I shall briefly trace its path.

In Joshua 18:1, we are told that the tabernacle was pitched at Shilo. Then we read in Judges 20:27 that it stands at Bethel, though Shilo seems to have been the more permanent residence.³² During the time of Samuel, there is some uncertainty as to its location. There are indications of Mizpah's being the central place of the cult (I Samuel 7:6; 10:17, 25). But there are also Gilgal (I Samuel 11:15; 15:33) and Bethel (I Samuel 10:3). Stek suggests that perhaps the tabernacle was moved from one place to another.³³ This would also seem to be the point of I Chronicles 23:26 – "and also the Levites shall no more have need to carry the tabernacle and all the vessels of it for the service thereof." From I Samuel 21 we glean the fact that the tabernacle was at one time at Nob as well. There is a reference to a tent in which the ark was placed, but this was not the tabernacle, for II Chronicles 1:34 tells us that that the tabernacle was at Gibeon and that this was not the same tent David built for the ark. Finally, I Kings 8:4 and II Chronicles 5:5 show us the tabernacle brought to the new temple. Whether or not it was preserved here is not clear. It may have been destroyed. At any rate, its function is now taken over by the temple, a more stationary and permanent structure. That the temple was meant as a continuation of the tabernacle's main functions is obvious from II Chronicles 2:4. That it was also meant to be a dwelling-place for Jehovah is the inescapable conclusion of its title "house for the name of Jehovah" or "house of God." The latter phrase becomes one of the most standard in the Old Testament.

Israel, at least its faithful, continued to regard the tabernacle and, later, its temple with great reverence as the house of God. To be near to the temple meant to be near to God; to be far away from it meant to be away from God. When God threatens to withdraw Himself or has withdrawn Himself, it is one of the greatest calamities that could happen. In Psalm 78:59ff, for example, such withdrawal heads a list of the gravest catastrophes. It is calamity comparable to foreign subjection and death. Jeremiah expresses similar sentiments in Lamentations 2. Deep sorrow, too, is expressed in Psalm 137 because of the distance between the exiles and Zion. In the light of the total atmosphere of the Old Testament, I understand this longing for Zion to not a mere longing to be in their homeland, but to be where the temple is or was, the house of God. This must not be understood as if Israel thought that God was restricted to His temple, for

32 J. Stek, "Introduction to the Old Testament," (unpublished class notes, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids), p. 23.

33 *Ibid.*

Israel knows full well that He dwells “in the uttermost parts” (Psalm 138:9). But it is the temple that is an embodiment of God’s presence and of His grace.

On the other hand, throughout the prophets there are numerous references to a tabernacle or temple which will be eternal, never to be destroyed or removed. All these are embedded in passages which express the greatest hope of Israel: complete restoration of the theocracy and the closest intercourse between God and Israel. Ezekiel 37:27-28 will suffice as an example: “My tabernacle shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And the nations shall know that I am Jehovah that sanctifieth Israel, when My sanctuary shall be in the midst of them forever.” And, according to Amos 9:11, “I will build it as in the days of old.” This reconstruction of the sanctuary, whether in terms of tabernacle or temple, is viewed as the highest fulfillment of Israel’s hopes, along with the coming of the Messiah, of course. It is in the prophets, too, that we meet the first indication of God dwelling in a place not made with hands, and this is viewed as progress (Isaiah 66:1ff).

New Testament Fulfillment of the Tabernacle Type

Immanuel: God with us. This was the truth of the tabernacle, but in typological form. The New Testament witnessed the blossoming of the type into reality. First of all, we find fulfillment in the incarnate Christ. We read, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Here, in Christ, who referred to himself as a temple (John 2:19), we have the essence of the tabernacle and of the temple: Immanuel, God with us. “This affirms the continuity between the Old Testament sanctuary and His glorified Person. In Him will be forever perpetuated all that the tabernacle and temple stood for.”³⁴ “He as the antitypical tabernacle is revelatory and sacramental in the highest degree.”³⁵ We shall return to Christ as the antitypical when we look at the book of Hebrews.

In the Church we find additional fulfillment. Says Vos: “What is true of the Christ is likewise true of the Church. Of that also the tabernacle was a type.”³⁶ He adds, “This could not be otherwise, for the Church is the body of the risen Christ.” The Church is called the “house of God” or “temple” on several occasions (Ephesians 2:21-22; I Timothy 3:15; Hebrews 3:6). These terms are applied even to individual Christians. “Or know ye not that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit ...?” (I Corinthians 6:19). The concept “in Christ” puts a most singular twist to the matter,

³⁴ Vos, p. 171.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

and it only serves to show how close the identification of Christ with the Church becomes. To use Old Testament terminology, it almost is in effect to say that Israel dwells in the tabernacle!

The book of Hebrews deals extensively with the tabernacle and thus is valuable for our understanding of all Old Testament typology. We find, first of all, the heavenly sanctuary referred to as the “true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man” (8:2). Similar notion is found in 9:11. We can be sure that the author does not mean to rob the Old Testament tabernacle of its significance by contrasting the builders. At the same time, it ought to be recognized that it was only a shadow of things to come, and what is a shadow when compared to the original? Calvin asks why the author speaks with such contempt regarding the Old Testament sacraments. He answers his own question: “This he does because he separates them from Christ ...”³⁷ I disagree. The author does not consider them apart from Christ, but he puts them in their proper light over against that which they typified. Much has happened between Moses and the writing of Hebrews. The intervening *Heilsgeschichte* has exposed the shadows for what they were: types of reality, not reality themselves. There is no contrast here between the true and the false, only between the type and the antitype.

The contrast between these two lies for one thing in the contrast between the permanent and the temporary. The Old Testament tabernacle was, as I have pointed out previously, a temporary emergency institution. It was to portray the need for a Savior, for reconciliation. As soon as this had come about, the tabernacle was discarded. Let it be said in passing that the tabernacle here is meant to cover the temple as well. The permanent change brought about by Christ made the cult quite unnecessary. Rome’s retention of some of its characteristics does violence to the radical nature of the task performed by Christ.

A further contrast lies in the fact that the cult is a matter of repetition, whereas Christ’s sacrifice was once for all. In chapter 9, we read that Christ entered only once, while the priests had to enter time and again.

Finally, the “distant presence” of God in the tabernacle is rejected in favor of His “near presence,” His availability to all who come to him through Christ. Previously entry was only for priests; now we all have “boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus” (10:19). The veil ripped at Christ’s death. The way is open to all without the need for human mediators.

No discussion of the tabernacle would be complete without taking into account at least summarily the Apocalypse of John, particularly chapters 21 and 22. Here the New Jerusalem is pictured. It is called the tabernacle of God, “and he shall dwell with them, and they shall be his people ...” (21:3). This is the same formula that we meet so frequently in the Old Testament. It

37 J. Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Trans. J. Owen (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), p. 200.

immediately serves to connect this passage with the tabernacle and the associated cult. This New Jerusalem, or “tabernacle of God,” is made out of much more precious material than the old tabernacle ever was. There is jasper, pure gold, sapphire, chalcedony, and many others. The new far outshines the old. As to dimensions, the city is a perfect cube, whereas the tabernacle was rectangular, except for the most holy. The most astonishing thing of all, however, is that now the New Jerusalem is *equated* with the tabernacle (21:3). There is no temple in the city (21:22). The fellowship of God with his people is so direct and immediate that institutions are now superfluous. The Church as mother of the believers no longer is necessary. “The whole earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” This is now finally coming into its own.

To say anything more will only diminish our wonder and amazement, for we hear “both the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And he that hears, let him say, Come. And he that is athirst, let him come: he that will, let him take the water of life freely” (22:17).

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