



# The Law given through Moses\*

## 17. The sanctuary

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**T**HE ISRAELITES coming out of Egypt have sometimes been described as a band of recently liberated slaves. In measure this is true, for there had been a period of harsh tyranny, and this experience, so suddenly ending, probably accounts for much of their weakness.

The word 'slavery', however, might be misleading. They had lived for several generations in that part of Egypt best suited for their mode of life. Their cattle and their crops had escaped the destruction that had fallen on the rest of the land. Even in the worst days of the oppression they apparently still had valuable possessions in the land of Goshen, and there were elders who retained at least a measure of moral influence.

Evidently the Egyptians, by giving them facilities for their calling, had contrived to keep them as herdsmen, without weapons such as could render them an immediate menace. They were forced to supply labour for the making of bricks, a daily quota being demanded. It was like a severe tax, but in work instead of money. It was the first recorded instance of the 'direction of labour'.

WHEN the people came out of Egypt, it was with their cattle and other possessions. Evidently at the last the Egyptians were so anxious to be rid of them that they let them have ornaments and goods such as were plentiful in the land. So we read "they spoiled the Egyptians" (Ex. 12:36). They came out into the wilderness with oxen and wagons and a plentiful supply of all that was needed for the sanctuary and for the ritual presently to be established.

Perhaps some readers will think of wood as an exception. Precious metals, especially gold, can be beaten very thin so that a little will go a long way in overlaying material. It is obvious,

however, that a large quantity of wood was needed for the boards and pillars used in the construction of the tabernacle.

It will be remembered that for most of this work shittim wood was specified. This is a kind of acacia and in the RV it is called by this name. It grows freely in the desert, even in the driest of places. It is said that the wood is hard, without knots and very beautiful. It is interesting to note that in the Septuagint the Hebrew word *shittah* is not transferred to the Greek text but is translated as 'incorruptible'. This gives some idea of the quality of the wood. We may readily believe that a tree, or thorn, growing in the desert would be hard, and resistant to all forms of decay.

There are several varieties of this thorn, so that writers reporting what they have seen may not always agree in their descriptions. Probably, as with so many other products of nature, the size and the quality might vary considerably in the course of the centuries. Gardeners are just beginning to realise that the luxuriant growth of vegetation often depends upon trace elements in the soil. The presence or absence of even the slightest amount of a needed mineral will make all the difference in size and quality. In course of time the supply of such a mineral may be exhausted, and then plants which at one time flourished will hardly grow at all. Three thousand years might make a great difference in this matter.

We cannot say whether there are still such supplies of shittim wood in the desert as to invite the possibility of making such boards as were used in the construction of the tabernacle, but it is well attested that shittim wood is still plentiful in the neighbourhood of Sinai. This fur-

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nishes another little point of harmony of which a student will take note.

After the giving of the moral law, the first command to Moses was that the people should be called upon to bring an offering of such things as were needed for the sanctuary to be established. They were to bring brass, gold, silver and various precious stones. These would be from the ornaments and jewels given by the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus. They were also to bring cloth of varying quality and colour, and, more than anything else, fine linen such as Egypt produced in such quantity. With these offerings, and with the white thorn, or shittim wood, growing in the district, all the material for the sanctuary was ready.

MOSES was in the mount for forty days receiving instruction as to the work to be effected. It seems that, in addition to the verbal description which he recorded, he was shown a pattern to assist understanding and to linger in the memory. He was given a very special charge to be exact in the work: "look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount" (Ex. 25:40). This pattern shown in the mount is mentioned again in two further places (26:30; Num. 8:4).

Beginning with Exodus 25, there is a continuous instruction with the repetition of the words, "Thou shalt make". The details regarding the sanctuary and the service to be established fill six chapters. Then, after the disgraceful incident of the golden calf, and after the rewriting of the Ten Commandments, the details are all presented again in the description of how the work was accomplished. First there was the reiterated instruction, "Thou shalt make", with the warning that all the work should be according to the revealed pattern; then the corresponding description of details with repetition of the words, "He made", and the final statement that all the work was done according to that which the Lord commanded Moses. There is something arresting and significant in the elaborate details and the exact repetition.

Has the reader ever heard of anything in the experience of any other nation to suggest the slightest possibility of a comparison to this? It may be urged that ceremony and ritual would give power to the priests and that many people like such display. But the Mosaic ritual imposed such a burden on both priest and people that they were unable to bear it.

We often hear of strange customs and ritualistic observances which have grown up with a people, probably with roots in a remote antiquity and with accretions during the course of history. The Mosaic ritual, however, was presented in full in those books which have been treasured by the Jews. When was it ordered and when was it practised? Do unbelievers think that it was after the Babylonian captivity that all these instructions were written for some unknown reason, imposed on the nation by unknown means and never fully put into practice?

If we accept the history of the Jews as presented in their own books, we should conclude that the sanctuary was preserved and the full ritual observed during the forty years in the wilderness, but in very large measure neglected after this. We need not be surprised at such a result, for the history of Christendom furnishes illustrations of similar failure. Surely no unbiased student would deny that the primitive form of baptism was by the immersion of adult believers in water, "not only a bath but a plunge, a complete submersion in deep water", as Dean Stanley put it. Even this little act of obedience, so easy as compared with the Mosaic ritual, has been changed to bring it more into harmony with the "taste, feelings and convenience" of Western nations. Why be surprised that the Jews in such large measure neglected their law and chose rather to follow human traditions?

WE note that the instructions given were faithfully observed by Moses. All the parts of the sanctuary and the utensils were made, and the tabernacle was erected. And now, instead of following the details as they were presented, let us claim the privilege of students and in imagination visit the sanctuary as it stood in the wilderness. Let us take note of all its more obvious features, from the outer court to the holy of holies. Then, after forming some idea of the effect the ritual might have on the Jews of that day, we may raise the question as to hidden meanings.

We see in the wilderness the white walls of an oblong court one hundred cubits long and fifty cubits wide. The walls are not of stone or wood but of fine white linen, five cubits high. It is difficult to express the measurements in modern terms, for the exact length of the cubit is not quite certain. There were at least two different cubits used in Israel, and this may account for the varying ideas of expositors. If we assume

that the better-known cubit—about eighteen inches—was used in the measurement of the sanctuary, the outer court would be 150 feet long and seventy-five feet wide.

The linen walls were high enough to prevent anyone from looking over them. What of their stability, with such a surface of linen sheet exposed to the wind? There may not have been much wind in the wilderness, but even a slight breeze would make a tremendous pull on walls of such length and height. The linen was supported on pillars set in sockets of brass which could be let into the ground. These brazen foundations would need to be heavy for such a purpose.

Here we have a hint as to the weight which would have to be conveyed in the four wagons assigned to the sons of Merari. The appointments of the outer court were in their charge. There were sixty pillars, twenty for each side of the court and ten at each end. The linen curtains were attached to the pillars by hooks and fillets of silver.

AS we pass round the outer court, we find that at one end of the oblong the arrangements are different, for here is the entrance. There is a central gateway of twenty cubits, with four pillars for the hanging which serves instead of a door. This hanging is not of pure linen like the walls but has a pattern of blue, purple and scarlet introduced into the fabric with needlework.

We pass through the entrance, and within the linen-girded court we see the tabernacle. This is an oblong tent, well covered and protected. There were boards of shittim wood ten cubits in length, standing upright and set in sockets of silver. The boards are held together by staves, passing through rings and thus giving stability. Each board is a cubit and a half in breadth, and so must have been made from a number of stems of the hard, white thorn. Twenty such boards on each side make the tabernacle thirty cubits in length.

To this measurement the curtains agree, for the first covering is of ten curtains of blue, purple, scarlet and fine linen, each curtain four cubits in breadth. These are coupled together and passed over the boards, the forty cubits of the combined curtains reaching from the ground at the back to the top of the front. Obviously the

figures agree, for the thirty cubits of length plus ten of height equals the combined width of the ten curtains. Over these is another covering of eleven curtains made of goats' hair. The extra curtain is folded in a peculiar way into which we may have to enquire later. Over the goats' hair curtain is a covering of rams' skins dyed red and a further covering of badgers' skins.

Then we observe that at the entrance is a veil of similar material to that of the outer court, a needlework pattern of blue, purple, scarlet and fine linen, but instead of being on four pillars it is strangely hung on five.

WE pass into the sanctuary. Here there is little light of day with the thick covering of skins above, but there is light from the seven bowls of the lamp which burns continually. We note the table with bread on it, and at the far end of the compartment we see the golden altar of incense. Our attention is caught by the veil against which this altar of incense is placed. This veil is of the familiar colours we have noted at both the entrance to the court and the entrance of the tabernacle, but it is much more beautiful, not wrought with needlework but cunningly woven. It is supported on four pillars overlaid with gold. It is the entrance to the holy of holies.

We know that the tables of testimony are there within the ark, and the mercy seat with the cherubim above. No man must part this veil or enter to inspect these sacred emblems. Even the high priest must only enter on one day in the year, and to venture there at any other time is to invite death. We may well refrain from entering, even in imagination.

We turn back into the court and take note of the altar of burnt offering and the laver at which the priests wash. But a change has taken place. Imagination has brought a multitude of human beings to life. Priests and Levites are busy making preparation for something important. Outside the court there are great crowds in orderly assembly as if waiting for a great event. It cannot be a feast day, for there is no sign of food anywhere in the camp; neither are there any indications of festivity, for all the people are silent and solemn. Truly the Jewish celebrations are often spoken of as 'solemn feasts', but this is surely a 'solemn fast'. It is the tenth day of the seventh month.

Is Zephaniah 1:7,8 the origin of the Master's parable of Matthew 22:1-14? Note "prepared" (Mt. 22:4), "bid" (v. 3) and "strange apparel" (vv. 11,12).—*T.B.*