

Taverns and the tabernacle

The word 'tabernacle' has often puzzled me, so I have checked my Latin dictionary and, sure enough, like so many words in the English language, and particularly in the English Bible, it comes from a Latin word. The Latin word is *tabernaculum*, meaning a tent. A similar word is *taberna*, which means 'cottage', 'shop', 'inn'. We will deal with the latter first. In Acts 28:15 a stopping place on the Apostle Paul's journey to Rome was named Τρεῖς Ταβερναί, Three Taverns. Actually this was a Latin name transliterated into the Greek. So this place thirty-two miles south of Rome probably had three cottages, shops or inns (not public houses or beer parlours as we know them!) where travellers could rest.

Now onto the tabernacle. There are six Hebrew words translated 'tabernacle' in the Old Testament and four variations of the Greek word σκηνη (*skēnē*), which means 'a covered or sheltered place', in the New Testament. The Hebrew word used for the tabernacle in the wilderness is mainly *ohel*. It simply means 'a tent', and is the usual word in the Old Testament for tent. The other word for the tabernacle is *mishkan*, which means a 'dwelling place'. Gesenius in his Hebrew Lexicon explains the distinction between *ohel* and *mishkan*: *ohel* "is the outer covering of the tent, of twelve curtains of goat's hair, placed above the dwelling-place", whereas *mishkan* refers to "ten interior curtains which rested on the boards". From this we can see that the translators have lost an important distinction between a 'tent', and a 'dwelling place' where the Divine Presence dwelt with Israel, by translating both *ohel* and *mishkan* by the Latin word 'tabernacle'.

Peter Cox