

THE BIG JOURNEY

from Creation to New Creation



A full-scale replica of the Tabernacle, Timna Park, Israel.

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seven ► A Wedding in the Wilderness

Introduction and Questions

After their rescue from Egypt, God's people didn't go straight to the Promised Land. They travelled through the wilderness to Mount Sinai to meet with God. Here, God brought His people into covenant relationship with Himself.

This covenant was like a *marriage*. God became their Husband (see, for example Isaiah 54.5, Jeremiah 31.32). Remember what we learned in the very first session - the Bible story is at its heart a love story.

God promised that – if His people remained obedient to Him – they would be His treasured possession (Exodus 19.3-6). In turn, the Israelites committed themselves to serve Him and obey Him (Exodus 19.8). Exodus 20.1-23.33 are the 'marriage' vows themselves. These vows are supplemented and expanded by various other passages in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, which we collectively call 'the Law'. The word 'law' is rather an unfortunate translation. The Hebrew word is *torah*, meaning 'instruction' or 'guidance'.

After their marriage, a husband and wife live together. Accordingly, God made arrangements to live together with His Bride, Israel. He showed Moses the blueprint for a beautiful new home where He would live among His people. This home was a tent called the Tabernacle.

The Tabernacle – God's home among His people

God is holy. Remember how Mount Sinai quaked and smoked and burnt as God descended on it. And now He wanted to live in their very midst! How could He come to live among them in a world contaminated with sin? The Tabernacle was His solution. It was a spotlessly holy and exquisitely beautiful sanctuary in the midst of a fallen world. Sandra Richter explains, "*In the tabernacle the Presence [of God] lives on earth for the first time since Eden*".

The photograph at the top of this page shows a life-size replica of the Tabernacle and its courtyard in Israel. The diagram on the next page shows details of the construction and furniture of the Tabernacle tent itself. When all is complete, God moves into His new home: "*Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.*" (Exodus 40.34).

THE TABERNACLE TENT

The entire tent was 45 feet (13.7 m) long, 15 feet (4.6 m) wide, and 15 feet (4.6 m) high. It was a wooden skeletal structure, overlaid with gold, with no solid roof or front wall (Ex. 26:15–29). Five wooden bars (overlaid with gold) passed through rings attached to each frame (Ex. 26:26–30).

The Most Holy Place was a 15-foot (4.6-m) cube, containing only the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:10–22; 37:1–9). It was here that Yahweh would descend to meet with his people in a cloud theophany (divine appearance). The high priest could enter only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (see note on Heb. 9:7).

The framed structure was covered by four layers of cloth and skin (Ex. 26:1–14).

The table for the bread of the Presence (Ex. 25:23–30)

The Holy Place of the tabernacle tent was 30 feet (9.1 m) long, 15 feet (4.6 m) wide, and 15 feet (4.6 m) high.

The veil separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place was made from blue, purple, and scarlet dyed yarns woven with fine twined linen and embroidered with cherubim (Ex. 26:31–33). It hung on four golden pillars.

The altar of incense (Ex. 30:1–10; 37:25–29)

The golden lampstand (Ex. 25:31–40; 37:17–24)

The veil that formed the entrance to the tabernacle was similar to the veil separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, except that cherubim were not embroidered on it. It was suspended on five golden pillars (Ex. 26:36–37).

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And He didn't want to live in this tent alone. God often called His Tabernacle *"the tent of meeting"* (for example Exodus 27.21). He said to Moses: *"There I will meet you and speak to you; there also I will meet with the Israelites..."* (Exodus 29.42-43, NIV). God - as far as possible under that covenant - welcomed people into His home. Only selected representatives called priests could enter, and they had to be thoroughly prepared and offer the appropriate sacrifices. But these representatives *could* come. Once a year Aaron the High Priest could even enter the Most Holy Place, the very presence-chamber of God.

Around the Tabernacle were pitched the tents of Israel. The Tabernacle was in the centre of the camp; God dwelt right in the midst of His people Israel.

The Law – God's blueprint for life in His presence



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Part of a Torah scroll (scroll containing the first five books of the Old Testament) and pointer.

The foundation of God's Law is the Ten Commandments. They begin: *"I am the LORD your God, You shall have no other gods before me."* (Exodus 20.2-3). Here God goes to the root of sin – every sin ultimately disobeys this command.

As well as moral and social laws, the Law detailed the sacrificial system and priesthood, and specified how people should keep themselves pure. It set out instructions for the calendar of holy days and festivals, and prescribed the firstfruit offerings and tithes. It detailed the construction of the Tabernacle and its furnishings. And it spelled out how their king should rule, when the time came that they had a king to rule over them.

God didn't want slavish, grudging obedience to the Law. Israel was to obey God's Law with all their heart and soul (Deuteronomy 26.16). Tremendous blessing would overtake them if they obeyed.

As well as offering sacrifices, the priests were to keep the Tabernacle holy and clean. Men from the tribe of Levi helped the priests in their service. The priests were also to teach the Law and help the people understand it. They also acted as judges, and dealt with cases of skin disease, mildew and ritual impurity.

The sacrifices – the path to fellowship with God

To our modern eyes, the Old Testament sacrifices seem complicated and obscure. We enter a gory world of blood and butchery and burning carcasses that seems repugnant to us. But the sacrificial system enabled God to have fellowship with His people - as far as was possible under that covenant.



'Agnus Dei' ('Lamb of God') painted by Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664) (Museo del Prado, Madrid).

A wonderful depiction of a lamb ready to be sacrificed, and representing Jesus as the Lamb of God. The artist painted a number of versions; another has a Latin paraphrase of Acts 8.32 at the bottom: in the ESV this passage reads *"Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: 'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth.'"*

The 5 basic kinds of sacrifice are detailed in the first 7 chapters of Leviticus. These sacrifices picture how sin must be dealt with, and how fellowship with God and other people can be restored. The following chart summarises them.

| SACRIFICE | SIGNIFICANCE |
|---------------------|---|
| sin offering | the pollution caused by sin is dealt with |
| reparation offering | restitution is made for sinful acts |
| burnt offering | the worshipper offers himself wholly to God |
| cereal offering | the worshipper gives all that he possesses to God |
| fellowship offering | the worshipper, and everyone who eats with him, enjoys fellowship with God and each other |

The Day of Atonement is the pinnacle of the sacrificial system. It's described in Leviticus 16.1-34 and Numbers 29.7-11. The key sacrifice on this day was a pair of goats. These goats together constituted a purification offering for all the sins of the nation over the preceding year. The first goat was killed. The High Priest then confessed the sins of the entire nation over the other goat (called the

"scapegoat"). It was then led out eastward into the uninhabited wilderness and released. Through this sacrifice, God's home and His people were cleansed. God could continue to live among them for another year.

Tithes and offerings

The Law also prescribed gifts and offerings to be given to God. The firstborn males of the livestock, and the firstfruits of the agricultural produce were to be given to God. And the produce of the land was to be tithed.

The firstborn males were to be consecrated to God as a token of the whole nation's dedication to God. Soon after the Exodus, the tribe of Levi was consecrated to serve God instead.

Holy days and festivals

God not only set apart a holy place (the Tabernacle), and holy people (priests and Levites); He also set apart holy times - the Sabbath day, the Sabbath and Jubilee years, holy days and festivals. They're detailed in Leviticus 23.4-44, 25.1-22. They form three festal periods: early spring (Passover followed by the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread, during which the firstfruits of the cereal harvest was offered); late spring (the Feast of Pentecost, at which firstfruits in the form of two loaves were offered); and autumn (the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles).

Bible passages and questions

This session covers large portions of Exodus and Leviticus, as well as some other Bible passages. Passages particularly relevant to the questions below are as follows:

Exodus 19.1-8: *"a kingdom of priests"*

Exodus 20.1-17: the Ten Commandments

Exodus 24.1-11: the covenant ceremony

Exodus 25.1-22: *"let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst"; the Ark and the mercy seat; "There I will meet with you"*

Exodus 25.31-40: the lampstand (menorah)

Exodus 40.1-38: *"the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle"*

Leviticus 10.8,10-11: *"you are to teach the people"*

Leviticus 11.45: *"be holy; for I am holy"*

Leviticus 16.1-34: the Day of Atonement

Leviticus 17.10-12: *"the life of the flesh is in the blood"*

Numbers 18.1-7: guarding and serving

Deuteronomy 33.8,10; Ezekiel 44.15-16,23-24: summary of the priests' work

Hebrews 5.1-4, 9.1-10: a brief summary of the Old Testament priestly service

- ❓ What was the significance of the ceremony described in Exodus 24.3-11, involving blood throwing and the meal on Mount Sinai?
- ❓ What connections are there between the Tabernacle and the Garden of Eden, and what's the significance of these links?
- ❓ What were the purposes of the Law?
- ❓ Keeping the sabbath day was one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20.8-11). What was its significance? And why did Christians begin to set aside Sunday as a special day, rather than the sabbath?
- ❓ What is the significance of the scapegoat offered on the Day of Atonement?
- ❓ We, too, are a *"priesthood"* (1 Peter 2.5,9, see also Revelation 1.6, 5.10). How do we function as priests? (see also Romans 12.1-2, Hebrews 13.15-16, Philippians 4.18).