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# The Tabernacle: A Lesson in the Particularity of the Purposes of God

Luke Tallon

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As a child, I was fascinated by the tabernacle. Perhaps it was because I grew up camping and backpacking, but the story of God's own tent at the center of the Israelite encampment, along with the little flannelgraph tabernacle and priests, captured my imagination—the scale models simply sealed the deal! After the flannelgraph was put away, however, the tabernacle not only disappeared from sight, but was rarely (if ever) mentioned in classes or sermons. This corporate neglect implicitly teaches that the tabernacle was a marginal movement in the symphony of the Old Testament witness.

This widely held Christian assumption has been shared by a broad swath of historical-critical scholarship. Thus, both in the church and the academy, those who study Exodus often treat the sections on the tabernacle (instructions [25.1—31.11], construction [35.4—40.33] and descent of the glory of the Lord [40.34—38]) as subsidiary to the deliverance from servitude in Egypt, the giving of the law at Sinai or both. The tabernacle sections—lengthy though they may be—are anticlimatic. In what follows I propose that the tabernacle actually marks the climax of Exodus and God's recapitulation of creation and address several of the implications of this for Christian theology and practice.

## **The Tabernacle as Symbolic or Functional?**

The most immediately remarkable, and perhaps off-putting, feature of the tabernacle sections in Exodus is the detail. Interpreters have tended to move in one of two directions when approaching these details. One stream of interpretation has focused on the possible symbolism contained in the numbers, colors and materials. Josephus characterizes this stream when he explains the meaning of the candelabra in the tabernacle. "It terminated in seven heads, in one row, all standing parallel to one another; and these branches carried seven lamps, one by one, in imitation of the number of planets."<sup>1</sup> While the symbolism in this case might seem fairly straightforward, the text itself does not make this astrological connection. In fact the text makes very little symbolism explicit, with the result that the symbolic meanings of the tabernacle components proposed by interpreters have been as varied as the interpreters themselves.

The other stream of interpretation has focused on identifying the functions of the tabernacle paraphernalia. While attention to function provides a salutary pressure against the extremes of symbolic interpretation, it too can be taken to an extreme that reveals the necessity of symbolic interpretation. For example, Johannes Clericus, an eighteenth-century theologian, totally rejected the symbolic approach and explained everything by its function. To him, the altar of incense was simply intended to keep the flies away from the sacrifices and white was chosen for the priestly garments as it was most easily washed—these things have no symbolic meanings.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Brevard Childs observes that the difficulty of interpreting the tabernacle "did not arise in finding a possible meaning to a symbol, but in choosing between a large group of alternative suggestions and in

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1. Josephus, *Antiquities*, III.6.7.

2. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 538–39.

distinguishing between those elements in the tabernacle which were not to be understood symbolically.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as Terrence Fretheim notes, the tabernacle passages themselves give rise to these two extremes as they provide a plethora of details without providing guidelines for determining the symbolism.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Tabernacle as Climax of Exodus**

These passages, however, are set within the broader narrative of the Pentateuch. If we consider the story leading up to these tabernacle passages, even if some of the details remain opaque, it becomes clear that Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber were on solid ground when they declared the tabernacle to be “the climax of [Exodus], which is also perhaps the high point of the whole five books together.”<sup>5</sup> Why choose the tabernacle as the climax rather than the giving of the law on Sinai or the deliverance of the Israelites from servitude in Egypt? In the first instance, the text places the Decalogue and the tabernacle in closest proximity. The Lord instructs Moses to place the “testimony” in the ark that rests in the holiest place in the tabernacle. This “testimony” is earlier identified as the two tablets containing the law Moses receives on Sinai (31.18; 32.15). Any attempt to interpret the tabernacle and the liturgical practices of Israel as incidental to the Law of Moses runs counter to the explicit witness of the text itself. Indeed, the Lord tells Moses, “There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites” (25.22). This understanding of the house of God as the proper location of God’s law (indicating that cultic activity provides its proper context) is not unique to Exodus. Other important examples include the discovery and reading of the law in the temple during Josiah’s reign (2 Kgs 23–24) and the vision in Isaiah 2.1–5 and Micah 4.1–5 of the law going forth into all the world from the temple. The rituals of Israel may certainly become empty and counterproductive if divorced from the law, but this in no way implies that the law becomes better or more fruitful if dislocated from its cultic context in the tabernacle or temple.

Second, the people of Israel are delivered from bondage in Egypt and given the law, not merely so that they would have the right ideas about God and ethics, but so that they could worship the Lord (*’avad*, cf. 3.12; 4.23; etc.). Now, the songs of Moses and Miriam clearly are preludes to the worship that is the appropriate response to this deliverance, but the Lord purposes more than praise. The exodus brings the Israelites (and the rest of the “mixed crowd” of 12.38) out of coerced servitude in the household of Pharaoh (20.2) into freely willed servitude in the household of the Lord (19.8; 23.19). The Israelites, then, are analogous to the freed servant in Exodus 21.5–6 who chooses to become a servant for life. The physical dwelling place of God’s glory in the midst of the house of Israel functions as the site of physical service (*’avad*) to God. Through the tabernacle and its attendant rituals, Israel both is and comes to be the servant of the Lord. In this way, the tabernacle functions negatively as a safeguard against Israel’s ethics being *reduced* to social ethics. God’s purposes are not exhausted with love of neighbor, though this does not appear to have been much of a temptation for Israel. Positively, the physicality and particularity of the tabernacle demands that Israel’s service (*’avad*) also be embodied and concrete.

### **The Tabernacle as a Recapitulation of Creation**

Just as the tabernacle is integral to the *telos* of the exodus and covenant at Sinai, so too is the tabernacle integral to the *telos* of creation. There are numerous reasons to connect the tabernacle to God’s work of creation. First, there are several instances in the Old Testament where creation is explicitly described as the creation of a dwelling place for God. Take, for instance, Psalm 104.2 or Isaiah 66.1. The tabernacle sections

3. Childs, *Exodus*, 538.

4. Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 263.

5. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 62. W. Ross Blackburn directed me to this quote in *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2012), 122, n. 1.

also appear to echo the vocabulary and phrasing of the creation account in Genesis 1. The verb “to make” (*’asah*) plays a prominent role in both Genesis 1 and the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus 35–40. At the level of phrasing, Joseph Blenkinsopp notes that there are broader parallels between these two passages:<sup>6</sup>

- 1) “And Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had done it” (Exod 39.43) parallels “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1.31);
- 2) “Thus all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was finished” (Exod 39.32) parallels “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished” (Gen 2.1);
- 3) “So Moses finished the work” (Exod 40.33) parallels “God finished his work which he had done” (Gen 2.2); and
- 4) “So Moses blessed them” (Exod 39.43) parallels “So God blessed the seventh day” (Gen 2.3).

Furthermore, just as the tabernacle has three zones (the courtyard inside the fabric fence, the main area of the tent, and the holiest place) with three classes of inhabitants or functionaries (people, priests, and high priest), so too Genesis 1 depicts creation as having three zones (day 1, light; day 2, air/water; and day 3, verdant land) and three classes of inhabitants (day 4, lights; day 5, birds/fish; and day 6, land animals).<sup>7</sup>

Of equal significance are the resonances between the sanctuary and Genesis 2–3 noted by Gordon Wenham.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the entrances of Israel’s sanctuaries were on the east (cf. Exodus 27.13; 38.13 and Ezekiel 8.16; 42.15) and there were cherubim at these entrances (cf. Exodus 26.1, 31 and 1 Kings 6–8), just as the entrance to the garden of Eden was on the east and came to be guarded by cherubim (cf. Genesis 3.24). When God expels Adam and Eve from the garden, the cherubim and a flaming sword prevent Adam and Eve from returning to the garden and eating of the tree of life, which ultimately leads to the death promised by God (Gen 3.22–24). Conversely, the laws in Leviticus that regulate the cultic practices in the tabernacle are given to Israel so that the promised land will not vomit her out (20.22), so that she will be able to satisfy herself on food from the land and live securely (25.26) and so that she will live (18.5). The frequent mention in Israel’s priestly literature of being cut off from Israel or being put to death is the mirror image of this concern for life, security and abundance in the land.

Another resonance is between Genesis 2–3 and the concluding promise of Leviticus. Leviticus, the preeminent cultic text of the Old Testament and the *center* of the Pentateuch, concludes with the promise of a blessing, “If you walk (*halakh*) in my statutes and keep (*shamar*) my commandments so as to carry them out.... I will place my dwelling (*mishkan*) in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. And I will walk (*halakh*) among you, and will be your God and you shall be my people” (Lev 26.3, 11–12). As the Lord God is said to walk (*halakh*) in the garden (Gen 3.8), this promise in Leviticus appears to offer a renewal of the original divine-human relationship in the garden of Eden through the tabernacle and its rituals. In fact, when the Lord is describing his time with the Israelites between leaving Egypt and David’s placement of the ark in Jerusalem, God says that he has been “walking about” (*halakh*) among all Israel in a tent and a tabernacle (*mishkan*, 2 Sam 7.6–7).

The final resonance to which I will direct attention at present is Adam’s task in the garden, where the Lord God put him “to cultivate (*’avad*) and to keep (*shamar*) it” (Genesis 2.15). Not only does the word *’abad* describe “divine service” or “worship” in Exodus but the words also occur together several times in Numbers

6. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 218.

7. This reading also lines up with Mary Douglas’s description of Israel’s tripartite social imaginary—unclean/clean/holy; nations/Israel/priests; outside the camp/camp/tabernacle—in *Leviticus as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Extended explanations of the connection between the divine sanctuary and creation are found in John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2009), 72–92; and William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33–78.

8. What follows is indebted to, but not merely a reproduction of Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story” in *I Studied Inscriptions Before the Flood”: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11*, eds. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 399–404.

referring to the Levite's duty to "serve" (*'avad*) and "watch" (*shamar*) the tabernacle (cf. Numbers 3.7–8; 8.26 and 18.5–6). Given these resonances, one can view the construction of the tabernacle as the recapitulation of creation, that is, God's reordering of creation to its original *telos* or goal (cf. Rev 7.15; and 21.3). Even though this recapitulation did not bring humanity to its goal immediately, it serves as a sub-eschatological manifestation of God's concrete purposes for his people (and through them for all of creation). Note, however, that in both the creation accounts and the tabernacle material God's *universal* purposes for creation do not result in *generic* divine action or a call to anything but *particular* human action.

### The Tabernacle and the Particular Purposes of God

The story of the tabernacle challenges our understanding of God and the way that God accomplishes his purposes by emphasizing particularity—especially historical-physical particularity. This emphasis also helps explain some of the neglect of the tabernacle in the modern West. For instance, readers might find the details especially exasperating because they believe that the most important things about scripture are the *ideas* it contains. If the particulars of the tabernacle instructions and its subsequent construction are understood to be nothing more than the wrapper for the idea that the eternal God wills to dwell among mortals, then it is no surprise that they are viewed as tedious and ultimately unnecessary.<sup>9</sup> This is not, however, a distinctively modern or Christian way of approaching the text.

There is a long tradition of minimizing the importance of the cultic material, represented by Moses Maimonides, an influential Jewish interpreter from the twelfth century. Maimonides taught that the tabernacle and the sacrifices were simply God's concessions to the cultural location of the Israelites. The *cultus* as a whole was a sort of husk carrying new ideas about God and this husk became unnecessary once Israel embraced the right ideas about God.<sup>10</sup> Maimonides's privileging of idea over practice and the universal over the particular is worthy of special attention because it was echoed by the German history of religion school of thought that profoundly shaped historical criticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>11</sup> On this account, writes Walter Brueggemann, "the 'religion of Israel' and the articulation of the God of Israel were understood in 'evolutionary' categories that moved characteristically from primitive to sophisticated, from polytheism to monotheism and from cultic procedures to ethical insistences."<sup>12</sup> Yet, how does one identify the primitive and the advanced? Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Mary Douglas both argue that this all too easily becomes a process of confirming modern biases, especially the Western bias against ritual.<sup>13</sup> On this account, it is not the ritual and cultic dimension of the Old Testament that has lasting importance, but the "ethical monotheism"—the claim that there is only one God and that this idea about God entails certain ideas about ethics, such as those expressed in the Decalogue.

Yet, the account of the tabernacle pushes back against this assumption that the particulars of the text are like the rind of a fruit that can be discarded once one has gotten to the pulp, the meaning of the text. In this case, the particulars are bound up inextricably with the meaning. God does not have a generic desire to dwell with humanity in

9. See Scott Langston, *Exodus Through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden, MA: Oxford. Blackwell, 2006), for the history of interpretation, including the present, e.g., 229.

10. Cf. *The Guide for the Perplexed*, III.32. Those who claim that God's judgment against Israel's attempt to substitute cultic ritual for covenant faithfulness entails the abolition of cultic ritual often do not attend to the context of the proof texts (for example, citing "you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased," but neglecting to continue on to "rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar," in Psalm 51.16–19).

11. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz argues that even though historical-criticism emerged in part as a protest against the broad anthropological generalizations of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule, it reproduced the framework of evolutionary development into its text- and particularity-focused research, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 12.

12. Walter Brueggemann, "Old Testament Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, eds. J. W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (New York: OUP, 2006), 676.

13. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 240; and Mary Douglas, "Holy Joy: Rereading Leviticus—The Anthropologist and the Believer," *Conservative Judaism* 46 (Spring 1994), 6.



general, but wills to make his glory dwell *this* way in the midst of *this* motley people in *this* tabernacle. There is a parallel here to the eternal Word and only-begotten Son's tabernacling in human flesh (cf. John 1.1–14; 3.16–21). The Christian faith does not center upon the generic idea of incarnation, but on the claim that this first-century Jewish man, Jesus Christ, is God incarnate. Likewise, the claim that Christians become “sons in the Son” is not a generic claim about a relationship all humans have with God, but a claim about particular persons coming to share in the unique filial relationship of Jesus Christ to the Father through the concrete act of being baptized. Further, as Karl Barth frequently pointed out, the universality of Jesus Christ is found in his very particularity and nowhere else as he invites all particular persons (and not “humanity in general”) to participate in his sonship.<sup>14</sup>

Like the particulars of the tabernacle's ornamentation, the details of Jesus Christ's life can be difficult to understand at times. How are we to understand this union of God and human flesh in Jesus Christ? The church has been engaged in a millennia-long dialogue to answer that question. While I am quite sympathetic to the various conciliar and individual attempts to help clarify and answer this question, there is always a temptation to privilege the generic: nature in general, persons in general, being in general, etc. The details of the tabernacle pressure us to begin with God's particularity, even as they also open up a way of understanding Jesus Christ as tabernacle and temple—the one who fulfilled holy time, holy space and holy practice. While the newness of God's act in Jesus Christ may have precluded his disciples understanding him *before* his death and resurrection, it seems clear that the early church found his intelligibility afterwards by rehearing his words and rereading of the scriptures of Israel.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, the church needs a renewed typological interpretation. Even from the too cursory discussion of the tabernacle prior, light is shed on Jesus Christ as the place of abundant life, fellowship with God, the fulfillment of creation and the reign of God. In short, just because typological exegesis was frequently unrestrained in the past does not mean that it could not be a fruitful endeavor in the present.

Finally, this brief survey of the importance and meaning of the tabernacle reminds us of the importance of particular place and practice when it comes to the local church. In the second century, Celsus ridiculed Christianity for identifying a particular Jewish man with the God of all creation who then relied upon the proclamation of the poor, uneducated and weak to spread this good news. Celsus knew that if God wanted everyone to know something he would have planted the specific knowledge in every human being.<sup>16</sup> In the same way, our culture begins convinced of the absurdity of God sharing his life of communion through a ritual like baptism, little gatherings of Christians bounded by time and space and the practice of sharing bread and wine. Yet, just as the tabernacle was the place where Israel met God and was shaped into his holy priesthood, so too are these the particular places and actions wherein God now meets his people and forms them into priests—even sons! The tabernacle reminds us that God accomplishes his universal purposes by gathering particular people together in particular places and having them participate in particular practices.<sup>17</sup> In short, the tabernacle reminds us that God works in particular, we might even say, peculiar ways.

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14. E.g., Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, ed. and trans. G.W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 167.

15. In the words of Joseph Ratzinger, “Only because its intelligibility was prepared beforehand could the resurrection of Jesus gain any historical significance at all. Mere facts without words, without meaning, fall into nothingness as fully as do mere words to which no reality corresponds,” *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1988), 113.

16. Cf. Origen, *Contra Celsus*.

17. Cf. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, vol. 1 of Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).