

EXODUS 25-31 & 35-40 A SPACE FOR DIVINE PRESENCE

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FORM & STRUCTURE

Exodus 25–31, together with Exodus 35–40, presents the instructions for building the tabernacle and then narrates their fulfillment. For the modern reader, twelve chapters devoted to architectural detail and cultic furnishings can feel tedious. The repetition—first the commands, then the execution—may seem redundant. Yet for the ancient priestly author, these instructions were of the highest importance. Part of this emphasis reflects the priestly editors' concern for proper worship. More fundamentally, however, the tabernacle occupies a central place in the Exodus narrative because it embodies the abiding presence of God with the people. Preparing the tabernacle is, in essence, preparing for the permanent dwelling of the LORD in Israel's midst. Creating a holy habitation for the God of all creation is the defining mission of Israel in every generation as it seeks to fulfill its calling as a priestly nation and a holy people.

To avoid unnecessary repetition, this study will treat Exodus 25–31 and 35–40 together, since the latter chapters simply enact what the former prescribe. Assuming the student has read or will read the biblical text, we will not linger over every physical detail, though a brief comment will be offered at the outset of the instructions. Before turning to the specifics, it is helpful to consider two foundational issues related to the tabernacle and sanctuary—one anthropological, concerning temples in the ancient Levant, and one theological, concerning the relationship between tabernacle and temple and the Old Testament's theology of creation.

Temples in the Ancient Levant

To understand the significance of the tabernacle and why its construction receives such careful attention, it is helpful to consider temple culture in the ancient Levant. Temples and sanctuaries

were common throughout the region. They were understood as the residences of the gods and as places where deities received sustenance through offerings and sacrifices. Their architecture was designed to create an environment that encouraged the deity to remain, ensuring blessing and protection for the community. These sacred spaces served as tangible reminders of the deity's character, power, holiness, and otherness. Israel's sanctuary fits within this broader cultural pattern: it is built to precise specifications so that the LORD might dwell with the people.

Sacred space also marked the intersection of the divine and human realms. Temples were constructed to allow worshippers to approach the deity appropriately, which required careful delineation of space—distinguishing the sacred from the profane. As Mircea Eliade explains *The Sacred and the Profane*,

“Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different.”¹

Temple architecture throughout the Levant reflected this principle through a progression from outer to inner courts, separated by walls or curtains. The deeper one moved into the sanctuary, the closer one came to the divine presence. Israel's sanctuary follows the same pattern.

Where Israel's sanctuary differs from its neighbors is in the fluidity and permanency of God's presence. In many cultures of the region, a deity was not confined to a single location but could inhabit multiple sanctuaries simultaneously. B. D. Sommer notes that Mesopotamians and Canaanites held to a “fluidity of divine selfhood,” allowing gods to be fully present in several places without division. While some early Israelite traditions reflect this idea, the priestly authors—especially in Deuteronomy—insist on a single authorized site for worship. By the monarchic period, the theology of one sanctuary becomes dominant.

This theological emphasis resonates strongly with the priestly writers of Exodus. They advocate for a single, carefully constructed tabernacle that cannot be replicated elsewhere. Yet Israel's worship remains mobile until the time of Solomon. The LORD's presence is never static; the LORD moves with the people wherever the LORD chooses, even into exile. For now, in the wilderness, the tabernacle described in Exodus 25–31 will be the dwelling place of the LORD as the LORD guides Israel toward the land of promise.

Tabernacle and Creation

Moreover, there is a profound connection between the tabernacle narrative in Exodus and the priestly creation account in Genesis 1. The sanctuary is portrayed as a microcosm of the universe, a space where divine holiness becomes manifest. The reader will notice the seven

¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, 1959, 1987), 26.

literary units of instruction and the six days over which those instructions are delivered—numbers intimately tied to the creation story. The sequence culminates in a command to keep the Sabbath (Exod 31:12–18), mirroring the divine rest of Genesis 2. This pattern is deliberate. The construction of the sanctuary reflects the ordering of creation itself, suggesting that all creation is God’s temple and that the tabernacle is its concentrated, symbolic center.

This theological link explains the exacting specifications for the tabernacle. If the sanctuary represents the divine dwelling within creation, it must mirror the order, beauty, and goodness of creation’s design. As Terrence Fretheim argues,

“This is one spot in the midst of the world of disorder where God’s creative, ordering work is completed according to the divine intention just as it was in the beginning.”²

The tabernacle becomes a localized embodiment of the cosmos as God intended it—ordered, harmonious, and filled with divine presence.

The priestly tradition in Leviticus further deepens this connection by drawing on the second creation account in Genesis 2. There, God “walks” among the first humans in Eden (Gen 3:8). Leviticus echoes this image when it promises that the LORD will “walk among” Israel and be their God. As Mark Scarlata observes,

“The chaos of the wilderness will become a new Eden, and the beginning of a new creation springs up as YHWH makes his home in the midst of his people.”³

In this way, the tabernacle is not merely a cultic structure but a theological statement: the wilderness is being transformed into sacred space, and Israel’s journey becomes the unfolding of a new creation with the LORD dwelling at its center.

THE TABERNACLE, ITS FURNISHINGS, & ITS PRIESTS (Exodus 25:1-30:38; 36:1-38:20)

The instructions for constructing the tabernacle begin in Exodus 25 with the LORD directing Moses to receive an offering “from all whose hearts prompt them to give” (Exod 25:2). This opening request highlights two foundational theological themes in Israel’s worship. First, worship is a communal act, and the dwelling place of the LORD will be built from the freely offered materials and labor of the entire people—not merely the wealthy or powerful. Though priests will minister within the sanctuary, all Israel is bound to the tabernacle through their gifts. Second, the LORD does not demand contributions but invites them. Participation in the

² Fretheim, *Exodus*, 1991, p. 271.

³ M Scarlata, *Abiding Presence*, 2018, p. 189.

tabernacle—participation in divine presence—is not coerced but welcomed as a joyful response to the LORD’s redeeming work.

The concern of the remaining chapters of Exodus is the establishment of a permanent place for the LORD’s presence, summarized in Exodus 25:8–9:

“And have them make me a sanctuary (*miqdash*), so that I may *dwell* among them. ⁹In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle (*mishkan*) and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.”

The Hebrew *miqdash* (“sanctuary”) denotes a space set apart for a holy purpose, while *mishkan* (“tabernacle”) refers specifically to the dwelling tent of the LORD. The latter derives from the root *šākan*, “to dwell,” which later gives rise to the rabbinic term *shekinah*, describing the glory of God’s indwelling presence.

The instructions that follow are precise and detailed. The description begins in Exodus 25:3–7 with a list of materials to be gathered. Precious metals—gold, silver, bronze—carry universal symbolism due to their value and are used in varying degrees depending on the sanctity of the space: gold in the Holy Place and Holy of Holies, bronze in the outer court. The fabrics (fine linen, Egyptian cotton, and leather) were highly prized, representing the best the people could offer. Blue, crimson, and purple dyes—colors associated with Egyptian royalty—add splendor befitting the divine presence. Acacia wood (*šittim*) is native to Egypt and the Sinai, a hardy desert tree suitable for durable construction. Oil, spices, incense, and precious stones were likewise valuable commodities in the ancient Levant.

Naturally, the question arises: where did the Israelites obtain such materials? The narrative recalls that Israel “despoiled the Egyptians” upon leaving slavery, which may account for the metals, gems, and fine fabrics. Although modern Sinai acacia trees are small and sparse, it is possible that larger and more abundant acacia existed in the ancient period. The incense, spices, and “pure beaten olive oil” (Exod 27:20) are more difficult to explain, as their production would have required resources not readily available in the wilderness. As Mark Scarlata notes, however,

“The exact historicity of the tabernacle building does not seem to be the main concern of the sacred authors. The emphasis is placed on the generosity of the Israelites and the magnificence and abundance of all that goes into the building of God’s holy abode.”⁴

⁴ M Scarlata, *Abiding Presence*, 191.

The narrative's historical challenges do not diminish the ancient character of the tabernacle's design. Its form closely resembles Egyptian shrines of the same period and is well attested in pre- and early-monarchic biblical literature.

To reiterate, the instructions for the tabernacle, its furnishings, and the priestly garments are highly detailed and at times tedious. From this point forward, I will leave the specifics of construction to the attentive reader and focus instead on the theological significance embedded in the architecture and design.

The Ark, Table, and Lampstand (Exodus 25:10-40; completed in 37:1-24)

Exodus 25:10–40, completed in Exodus 37:1–24, provides instructions for the three most sacred objects of the sanctuary: the ark, the table, and the lampstands. In the priestly tradition—of which this portion of Exodus is a part—the ark is the most holy object in Israel's worship. It contains the two tablets of the covenant given to Moses and is housed in the Holy of Holies, the innermost chamber of the tabernacle. It is used only once each year, on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest makes offerings for Israel's sins. Later narratives, such as Joshua and 1 Samuel, depict the ark accompanying Israel into battle as a visible sign of the LORD's presence.

The ark itself is a simple box of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold. Its lid is the *kapporet* (Exod 25:17), traditionally translated “mercy seat” due to later Greek and Latin renderings. The Hebrew root *kpr* means “to cover,” often with connotations of atonement. The *kapporet* functions both as the covering of the ark and as an altar. At each end stand two cherubim, making the entire structure resemble a throne for the LORD. Throughout the Old Testament, the LORD is depicted as enthroned above the cherubim (e.g., 2 Sam 6:2). Crafting these figures would have required exceptional skill, and it is reasonable to assume that Bezalel (Exod 37) drew on artistic traditions from Egypt and Mesopotamia, where similar composite creatures were common.

Moving outward from the Holy of Holies into the Inner Court, one encounters the table of the presence. Leviticus describes this table as the place where twelve loaves were arranged in two stacks (Lev 24:6) as a grain offering, replaced weekly as a sign of God's provision and abiding presence. Like the ark, the table is made of acacia wood overlaid with gold and fitted with rings and poles for transport.

Opposite the table stand the golden lampstands, fashioned to resemble “flowering almond blossoms” (Exod 25:33). Although the text does not assign explicit symbolism to them, their basic function is clear: they provide light within the dark interior of the tent. The symbolic resonance of divine light shining in darkness is unmistakable. These lampstands are the precursors to the menorah of later Jewish ritual and tradition.

Together, the ark, the table, and the lampstands form the heart of Israel's sacred space—objects of profound theological significance whose craftsmanship reflects both the beauty of holiness and the presence of the LORD dwelling among the people.

The tabernacle, the bronze altar, and the outer court (Exodus 26:1-27:21, completed in Exodus 36:8-38 & 38:1-20)

Exodus 26:1–30 describes the structure of the tabernacle as a whole. Its final form appears to reflect—at least in symbolic abstraction—the LORD enthroned in the heavens. Just as the ark served as a throne-symbol within the Holy of Holies, so the tabernacle itself functioned as a visible representation of God's heavenly throne for those who viewed it from the outside. The splendor of its design, the precision of its craftsmanship, and the abundance of precious materials all communicate the grandeur and glory (*shekinah*) of the LORD.

Exodus 26:31–37 then turns to the screens and veils that delineate the tabernacle's sacred spaces. The cherubim “skillfully worked” into the veil separating the inner court from the Holy of Holies (Exod 26:31) echo the cherubim stationed at the entrance of Eden (Gen 3:24). To pass through this veil is, symbolically, to reenter the garden of creation and to stand within the immediate presence of the LORD.

With Exodus 37:1, the description moves outward to the outer court. This space functions as a protective threshold where priests transition from the profane world into the sacred realm. The change in materials—from gold and fine fabrics to bronze and simpler textiles—reflects the gradation of holiness. Daily sacrifices were offered at the altar in this court, with priests mediating on behalf of the people, who were not permitted to enter even this outermost sacred zone. The altar and its accessories are practical in design, suited to the work of sacrifice and purification. The purpose of the horns on its four corners remains uncertain, though in later temple practice they became associated with asylum and redemption (1 Kgs 1). As a whole, the outer court is a liminal space, preparing the priests to encounter the fullness of divine holiness within the Holy of Holies.

Exodus 27:20–21 concludes this section with instructions for the lamp oil. The command for “pure beaten olive oil” is striking, since such oil would not have been readily available in the wilderness apart from what Israel carried out of Egypt. The continually burning lamp signifies the LORD's continual presence with the people—a perpetual light marking the nearness of the divine within the sanctuary.

The Priestly Garments (Exodus 28:1-43, completed in Exodus 39:1-43)

Exodus 28:1–43, completed in Exodus 39:1–43, turns from the architecture of the sanctuary to the garments worn by the priests who minister within it. As with the previous instructions,

rather than recounting each detail of construction, it is more helpful to consider the theological significance embedded in the design.

Like the tabernacle itself, the priestly vestments function as a means of passage from the profane to the sacred. Their purpose parallels vestments in certain Christian traditions: putting them on prepares the priest for entry into the beautiful yet dangerous holiness of God's presence. The garments signal to the LORD that those who appear before him are those chosen and consecrated for divine service.

Usually translated "for glorious adornment," the phrase describing the vestments is literally "for glory and for beauty" (Exod 28:2). God demands beauty in worship not out of vanity but because holiness is beautiful, and the beauty crafted in worship reflects divine holiness back to Israel. The garments, fashioned by skilled hands, symbolize the transformation of the priests in God's presence and the mediation of God's presence to the people.

The artisans are those "whom I have endowed with skill" (Exod 28:3). The Hebrew *rûaḥ ḥokmāh*—"spirit of wisdom"—refers not only to intellectual ability but also to artistic craftsmanship. Wisdom in the Old Testament includes the skill to create beauty worthy of the divine. The garments include:

- The Ephod (Exod 28:6-14) — The ephod is a woven tunic in the same colors used in the Holy of Holies. The onyx stones on its shoulders bear the names of the twelve tribes, reminding the high priest that he carries Israel before the LORD, bearing the people's sins and needs into the divine presence.
- The Breastplate of Judgment (Exod 28:15-30) — Attached to the ephod is the breastplate of judgment, worn over the priest's heart. It contains the Urim and Thummim, associated with judgment beyond human capacity. As von Rad notes, these objects likely have pre-Mosaic roots in divination, but by the time of the Exodus narrative they function simply as symbols of the high priest's responsibility to render judgment as one who speaks for God.
- The Robe (Exod 28:31-35) — The robe beneath the ephod is adorned with bells, "so that he may not die" (Exod 28:35). Entering the Holy of Holies on behalf of a sinful people is a perilous act, and the bells serve as a reminder of the seriousness of approaching the all-holy God. The precise function of the bells remains mysterious, underscoring the awe surrounding the priest's role.
- The Gold Plate — The gold plate affixed to the high priest's turban bears the inscription "Holy to the LORD" (Exod 28:36), marking him as set apart for God's service. He alone may enter the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the people. The checkered linen cloth further distinguishes him from others.

Other priests sharing in the ministry in the tabernacle also wore special clothing that set them apart from the people: tunics, sashes, and caps for their “glorious adornment” (Exodus 28:40).

The Ordination of Priests (Exodus 29:1-46; completed in Leviticus 8:1-36)

Exodus 29:1–46 describes the ordination and consecration of Aaron and his sons. The narrative makes clear the intimate connection between blood sacrifice and priestly consecration. The blood of the ram—used to purify the altar through sacrifice—is also applied to the priests, linking them symbolically to the altar itself. The sprinkling of blood, together with the laying on of hands, signifies the transference of impurity from priest to animal, a cleansing enacted through the life that resides in the blood. The anointing of ear, thumb, and toe represents the consecration of the whole person.

After the sprinkling, Moses takes the fat and other portions of the ram, along with a bread offering, and “fills the hand” of the priest—literally placing the sacrificial elements into the priest’s hands to be offered to God. Having been consecrated, the priests may now stand before the LORD on behalf of Israel. The ordination lasts seven days, a number symbolizing completeness, during which the priest is fully purged of iniquity. Only then can he serve as mediator within the dangerous realm of divine holiness, offering sacrifices for himself and for Israel—a ministry essential to the nation’s life as it seeks to dwell in the divine presence.

The LORD’s concluding declaration summarizes the central theological theme of Exodus:

“I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God.” (Exodus 29:45-46)

Everything that has occurred—the deliverance from Egypt, the wilderness journey, the gift of the covenant, and the detailed instructions for the tabernacle and priesthood—serves this single purpose: that the LORD might dwell among the people. Through the tabernacle, the link between heaven and earth, between sacred and profane, is established. The divine residence stands at the heart of Israel’s life, the visible sign of God’s abiding presence with the covenant community.

The Altar Of Incense, The Bronze Basin, And The Oil & Incense (Exodus 30:1-38; Completed In Exodus 37:25-29; 38:8)

The final instructions in Exodus 30:1–38 appear somewhat out of place following the material on priestly garments and ordination; they would fit more naturally within the earlier instructions on the tabernacle and its furnishings in Exodus 25–27. This has led many scholars to view these verses as later additions to the text, reflecting concerns of the Second Temple period (post-exilic, late sixth century).

The altar of incense stood before the veil leading into the Holy of Holies and was used exclusively by the high priest, who burned incense upon it morning and evening. Incense was a common element of worship throughout the ancient Levant—an offering of considerable value that symbolized the purification of the worship space and the lifting of prayers toward the deity. In Exodus, it is described as “fragrant” (Exod 30:7) and as an “offering” (Exod 30:8), indicating its role in sustaining the LORD’s presence within the sanctuary. The rising cloud of incense may also have served as a visible reminder of God’s nearness, echoing the cloud that rested upon Sinai.

The bronze basin (Exod 30:17–21) in the outer court held water for priestly purification, water being a universal symbol of cleansing. In Solomon’s temple, the bronze basin was enormous—forty-five feet in diameter and seven and a half feet high—though in the portable tabernacle of Exodus it would have been much smaller. Its function, however, remained the same: to prepare the priests for entry into sacred space.

Exodus 30:22–38 describes the preparation of the oil, spices, and incense used in tabernacle rituals. The most striking feature of these materials is that they are themselves consecrated. They are not to be used outside the sanctuary or for ordinary purposes. Like every other element of the tabernacle, they are set apart for holy use and dedicated entirely to the LORD.

These final instructions reinforce the overarching theme of Exodus: every aspect of Israel’s worship—its space, its objects, its rituals, its personnel—is consecrated so that the LORD may dwell among the people in holiness, beauty, and abiding presence.

THE TABERNACLE AND THE SABBATH (Exodus 31:1-28)

Exodus 31:1–11 identifies Bezalel and Oholiab as the chief artisans of the tabernacle, chosen because they are “filled with divine spirit.” They are endowed with a wide range of artistic abilities (Exod 31:3), and Exodus 31:6 notes that others with skill were also appointed to assist. It is striking that the text does not suggest these men were suddenly inspired for this particular task; rather, God selects those who already possess natural skill and grants them wisdom and instruction to carry out the work. Their craftsmanship becomes an expression of divinely guided human ability.

With the instructions for creating holy space complete, the LORD turns in Exodus 31:12–17 to the creation of holy time. Remarkably, after all the detail devoted to the tabernacle, it is not the sanctuary but the Sabbath that is named as the sign of the covenant:

“You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.” (Exodus 31:13)

As D. C. Timmer observes, the priestly author places clear primacy on time over material and place, framing the tabernacle's construction with the Sabbath.⁵ Mark Scarlata notes that this emphasis aligns with Old Testament creation theology: "The tabernacle, a microcosm of creation and an image of Eden, is only complete when time is sanctified."⁶

This theological focus on time makes particular sense against the backdrop of the Babylonian exile—the likely period in which the final form of Exodus took shape, when the Jerusalem temple lay in ruins. The exiles needed assurance that the LORD's presence remained with them even without a physical sanctuary. The tabernacle and temple were the most sacred spaces of divine presence, yet the priestly authors point to Sabbath time as the enduring sign of God's relationship with his people. If Israel kept the Sabbath faithfully, they would be sanctified to the LORD and could trust the Creator to provide rest and renewal.

The hope of the covenant always looked toward restoration in the land, but Israel was first a wandering people formed in the wilderness. If the LORD provided manna and Sabbath rest in the desert to draw his people near, he could do so again for those wandering the wilderness of exile in Babylon.

⁵ DC Timmer, *Creation, Tabernacle, and Sabbath in Exegetical and Theological Perspective*, 2009, 28-60.

⁶ M Scarlata, *Abiding Presence*, 2018, 204.