

INTRODUCING THE TABERNACLE- PRIESTHOOD REGULATIONS

Overview

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I. Central Importance of the Tabernacle-Priesthood Regulations

The tabernacle-priesthood regulations in Exodus 25-40 occupy a place of central importance in the Pentateuch. This importance is highlighted in three different ways.

A. The tabernacle-priesthood regulations enjoy a highlighted *proportion*.

1. These regulations clearly dominate the text of the Sinai treaty in terms of space allocation. Within the Pentateuch, the following categorizations are found:
 - a. 2 chapters are devoted to general covenant laws
 - b. 3 chapters are devoted to civil-judicial laws
 - c. 7 chapters are devoted to ritual purity laws
 - d. 7 chapters are devoted to holiness laws
 - e. 23 chapters are devoted to the tabernacle-priesthood laws
2. Using these figures as a basis for calculation, nearly 55 percent of the law deals with the tabernacle. If the ritual purity laws are factored in, approximately 70 percent of the law deals with tabernacle-priesthood concerns. God was exceedingly clear about how he wanted his tent to appear, to be laid out, and to function. Such textual proportionality is no doubt theologically significant.
3. By way of analogy, modern writers and filmmakers will often arrange for the action to slow down when the stories reach their most critical moments, using techniques such as freeze frame, slow motion, and extended coverage. The technique of slow motion is used, for example, during the important track races in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. The slow pace of the action at those points effectively captures and accentuates each runner's agonized expression.
4. Similarly, the technique of extended coverage is used by the Gospel writers for the week before Jesus' execution. In terms of sheer space allocation, the attention given to Jesus' final week of ministry before the crucifixion, along with the 40-day period after the resurrection, occupies a significant portion of Gospel texts:
 - a. Matthew—8 of 28 chapters (29%)
 - b. Mark—6 of 16 chapters (38%)
 - c. Luke—5.5 of 24 chapters (23%)
 - d. John—8.7 of 21 chapters (41%)

All told, 28+ of the 89 chapters in the Gospel story (32%) are devoted to the period of time between the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and his ascension back to the Father. Yet this period is less than 1% of Jesus' entire 3.5 years of public ministry.

Note: In terms of literary style, this space allocation suggests that while the birth, life, teachings, and miracles of Jesus were important to the authors, it was the Passion of Christ (i.e., his final acts, sayings, trials, sufferings, and death) and the Resurrection of Christ (i.e., his empty tomb, post-resurrection appearances, and ascension) that were centrally important to their purpose for writing.

Martin Kähler, a late 19th-century German New Testament scholar, stated that the Gospels are “passion narratives with extended introductions.” While perhaps somewhat overstated, this assessment does strike at the ultimate goal of Jesus' earthly career.

By analogy, one could say that the tabernacle-priesthood laws of Israel represent the Old Testament “Passion Narrative,” inasmuch as the length of treatment is often proportional to the importance of the subject.

B. The tabernacle-priesthood regulations enjoy a highlighted *purpose*.

1. These regulations are introduced with a surprising statement of divine intent: “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (Exod 25:8).
2. God comes not only for Israel's deliverance but also for her delight. His desire is to live among, and be worshiped by the people he graciously saved from Egypt. At his own initiative, he comes to where his people are, and he tabernacles (“camps”) among them.
3. Moreover, his manifest presence in their midst would likely have compensated for any embarrassment caused by the elements of his abode that were out of sync with rest of the ancient Near East. As Israel's king, God would live in a tent, not in a palace. This tent would be similar to—but strangely different in some ways—from the other temples in the region. Israelites immediately learn from this legislation that:
 - a. God is not a man or a graven image, but an invisible spirit.
 - b. God is not dependent on any priest for life and sustenance.
 - c. God's priests are dependent on him for life and sustenance.

In comparison to the excessive religious activities and obligations in Egypt, the “yoke” of this God's cultic requirements would be easy, and the “burden” of his religious festivals would be light. His desire since Sinai has been to abide with his people and be their God and Father and King.

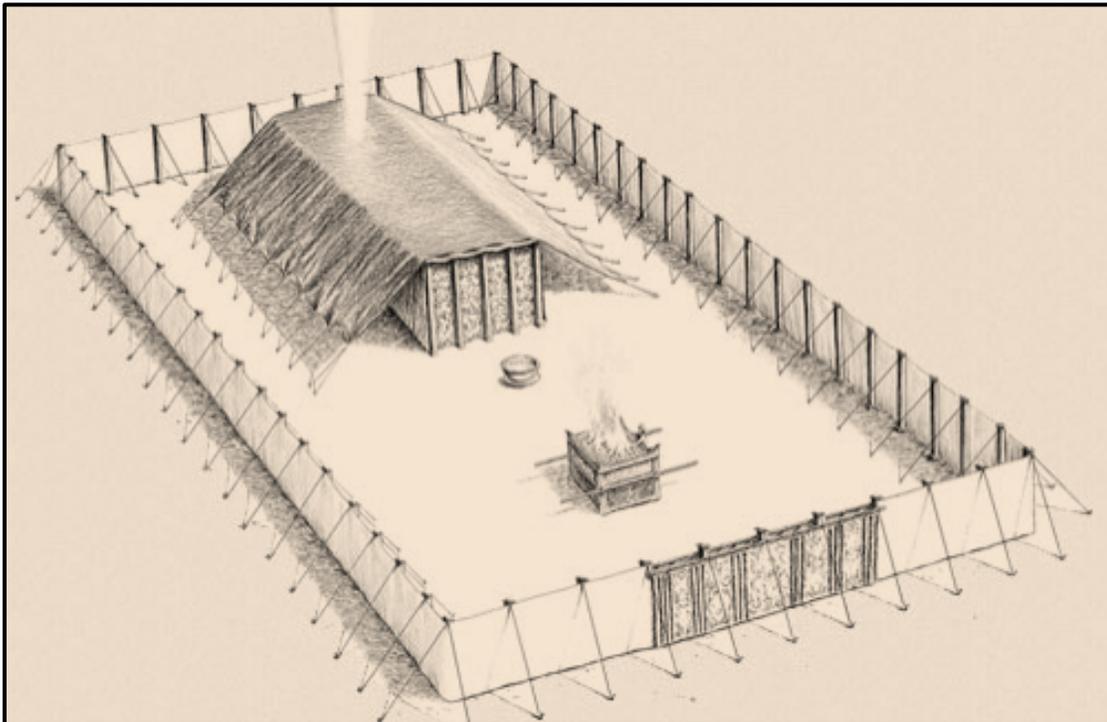
C. The tabernacle-priesthood regulations enjoy a highlighted *position*.

According to David A. Dorsey, these regulations are located at the literary center of the Pentateuch.¹ Moving from the macro level of the text to the micro level, his structural progression unfolds as follows:

¹ David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 82.

1. The literary center of the entire Pentateuch is the unit containing the treaty at Sinai (Exod 19:3-Num 10:10).
2. The literary center of the treaty at Sinai is the unit containing the tabernacle being built and filled with God's glory (Exod 34:29-40:38).
3. The literary climax of the tabernacle being built and filled with God's glory is the unit containing the materials used for making the tabernacle and all the priestly garments and accouterments (Exod 38:21-31).

Consequently, God's covenant, God's abode, God's glory, and God's priesthood are all at the center of the Law.



II. Literary Structure of the Tabernacle-Priesthood Regulations

- A. Dorsey notes, "The centerpiece of the entire Sinai treaty, its climax, is God taking up his abode among his people. . . . Yahweh's sacred presence is the reason for Israel's special status among the nations; and it is the focus of all its laws."²
- B. This literary center is also surprising in what it does *not* contain—a description of the idol, the idol's garments, and the priests' daily responsibilities to care for and feed the god(s). These omissions were no doubt as theologically revelatory to the Israelites as the affirmative teachings themselves.
- C. The "nesting centers" of the Pentateuch/Hexateuch may be visualized as follows:

² Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 82.

CENTRAL POSITION OF THE LAW WITHIN THE PENTATEUCH

(Genesis 1:1-Joshua 24:33)

- 1 **Primeval history; the nations settling in their lands** (Gen 1-11)
 - The nations receive their allotted territories
 - The nations' territories (גְבוּל, *gebûl*) are according to their families (לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם, *lemišpehōtām*)
 - Introduction of Israel's forefathers in Mesopotamia: Terah, Nahor, Abraham (Gen 11)
- 2 **Abraham:** God's promise to give (נָתַן, *nātan*) Canaan to Abraham's descendants made (Gen 12:1-21:7)
 - Land of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, etc., promised (Gen 15:20-21)
 - Abraham builds altar in Shechem; lives in area between Bethel and Ai; Hebron
 - Military victory against enemy from north; sudden attack, pursuit past Dan
- 3 **Isaac** and the death of Israel's founding father, Abraham (Gen 21:8-28:4)
 - Theme of death: Sarah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac (almost)
 - Theme of blessing: Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Esau
 - Abraham ascends Moriah; promise threatened but sees God's provision for Isaac; God swears to bless descendants
- 4 **Jacob:** A story illustrating the evils of social and family discord (Gen 28:5-37:1)
 - Story of social and family strife, murder, lying, theft, abuse of aliens, etc.
 - Plight of unloved wife, hired man; younger and older siblings; birthright
- 5 **Joseph:** A story of how God rewards faithful obedience (Gen 37:2-50:26)
 - Theme of faithfulness rewarded
 - Theme of disobedience punished
- 6 **Exodus from Egypt:** God saves Israel in a foreign land (Exod 1:1-13:16)
 - Host king fears Israel is too numerous
 - Calls magicians to oppose, but fails
- 7 **Failure and divine grace in the wilderness** (Exod 13:17-19:2)
 - Nation in migration; journey halted; arrival at Sinai; meeting Jethro
 - Israel complains (לִי, *lûn*); provision of water from the rock; manna; quail

CENTER: THE GIVING OF THE LAW AT SINAI (Exod 19:3-Num 10:10)
- 7' **Failure and divine grace in the wilderness** (Num 10:11-21:20)
 - Nation in migration; journey begins; departure from Sinai; meeting Jethro
 - Israel complains (לִי, *lûn*); provision of water from the rock; manna; quail
- 6' **Victory in Moab:** God saves Israel in a foreign land (Num 21:21-Deut 3:29)
 - Host king fears Israel is too numerous
 - Calls magicians to oppose, but fails
- 5' **Call to obedience** based on lessons from history (Deut 4-11)
 - History teaches that faithfulness is rewarded
 - History teaches that disobedience is punished
- 4' **Laws for stability and justice** in society and family (Deut 12-26)
 - Laws to counter social and family strife, murder, lying, theft, abuse of aliens, etc.
 - Laws for unloved wife, hired man; younger and older siblings; birthright
- 3' **Moses' final words** and the death of Israel's other founding father, Moses (Deut 27-34)
 - Theme of death: Curses for violating the covenant
 - Theme of blessing: Blessings for keeping the covenant
 - Moses ascends Nebo; promise unrealized but sees God's provision for Israel; God recalls oath to bless descendants
- 2' **Conquest of Canaan:** God's promise to give (נָתַן, *nātan*) Canaan to Abraham's descendants fulfilled (Josh 1-12)
 - Land of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites distributed (Josh 12:8)
 - Shechem altar; battle in area between Bethel and Ai; Hebron conquered
 - Military victory against enemy from north; sudden attack, pursuit past Dan area
- 1' **The nation of Israel settling in her land** (Josh 13-24)
 - The Israelites receive their allotted territories
 - Israel's tribal territories (גְבוּל, *gebûl*) are according to their families (לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם, *lemišpehōtām*)
 - References to Israel's forefathers in Mesopotamia: Terah, Nahor, Abraham (Josh 24)³

³ Adapted and expanded with approval from Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 101. Dorsey sees an overarching structure for the Hexateuch, in which the promise made to Abraham in Genesis is realized in Joshua (cf. Josh 21:45, 23:14).

THE GIVING OF THE LAW AT SINAI (Exodus 19:3-Numbers 10:10)

A The Ten Commandments—and holiness on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:3-20:21)

- Opens with Israel's arrival at Mount Sinai; date specified (19:1-2)
- God's glory on Sinai like cloud (19:9) and fire (19:18)
- Begins with God's presence on Sinai sounding like trumpets (19:16-19)
- Theme of holiness (19:3-25, 20:18-21)
- Commandments about idolatry, misusing the Lord's name, Sabbath, honoring parents, murder, stealing, adultery, perjury, etc.

B The Civil-Judicial Laws—emphasizing moral, ethical purity (Exod 20:22-24:11)

- Focus on moral, ethical behavior; some cultic regulations (21:1-23:19)
- Prohibition against bestiality, “following the practices” of Canaanites
- Prohibition against eating meat of an animal torn by wild beasts
- Use of blood, fat in sacrifices; sprinkling blood for ritual cleansing

C The Tabernacle Instructions—sacrificial altar (Exod 24:12-34:28)

- Instructions for altar, for all sacrifices
- Climax: Priests' ordination prescribed (28:1-29:46)
- Closing narrative: Sin of Aaron and the golden calf (32:1-33:23)
- Israel's idolatrous, debauched sacrificing, with drunkenness

D CLIMAX: TABERNACLE BUILT AND FILLED WITH GOD'S GLORY! (Exod 34:29-40:38; summary in Exod 40:36-38)

“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Exod 40:34-35).

C' The Sacrificial Instructions—for sacrificial altar (Lev 1:1-10:20)

- Instructions for sacrifices to be offered on altar
- Climax: Priests' ordination described (8:1-9:24)
- Closing narrative: Sin of Aaron's son's, Nadab and Abihu (10:1-20)
- Israel's sacrifices to be dignified, monotheistic, no drunkenness

B' The Purity Laws—emphasizing ritual, moral purity (Lev 11:1-18:30)

- Focus on moral, ethical behavior; some cultic regulations (17:1-18:30)
- Prohibition against bestiality, following the practices of the Canaanites
- Prohibition against eating meat of an animal torn by wild beasts
- Use of blood, fat in sacrifices; sprinkling blood for ritual cleansing

A' The Holiness Laws—most of the Ten Commandments repeated (Lev 19:1-Num 10:10)

- Closes with Israel's departure from Mount Sinai; date specified (Num 19:1-2)
- God's glory on Sinai like cloud (Num 9:15-22) and fire (Num 9:15-16)
- Ends with silver trumpets sounding orders from God's tabernacle (Num 10:1-10)
- Theme of holiness throughout
- Commandments about idolatry, misusing the Lord's name, Sabbath, honoring parents, murder, stealing, adultery, perjury, etc.⁴

⁴ Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 81.

TABERNACLE BUILT AND FILLED WITH GOD'S GLORY

“The Center of the Center of the Center”

(Exod 34:29-40:38)

A **INTRODUCTION: Moses' Face Shines from God's Glory on Mount Sinai (Exod 34:29-35)**

- Glory so intense, people cannot approach Moses unless he veils himself

B **Opening Convocation (Exod 35:1-36:7)**

- Moses assembles people and instructs them about properly making tabernacle and priestly garments; people bring to Moses all the materials for tabernacle and priests' garments

C **People Carry Out the Work (Exod 36:8-38:20)**

- Seven parts of the tabernacle, perhaps arranged from most holy to least holy:

- (1) Tabernacle
- (2) Ark
- (3) Table
- (4) Lampstand
- (5) Altar of incense
- (6) Bronze altar and basin
- (7) Courtyard

D **CENTER: Materials Used for Making the Tabernacle and Priestly Garments (Exod 38:21-31)**

TRV Commentary: Featured in this section are *materials*—various amounts of gold, silver, and bronze collected for the project, as well as the blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and fine linen. Various parts of the tabernacle complex are also referenced, including the entrance, the courtyard, the bronze altar with its grating and utensils, the Tent of Meeting, the curtain, and the hooks, posts, bands, bases, and tent pegs. The point seems to be that this space is *sacred space*.

Also featured in this section are *people*—the names of the various leaders and their families who led the sanctuary project (Moses, Aaron, Ithamar, Bezalel, Uri, Hur, Oholiab, and Ahisamach) and the tribes from which they came (Levi, Judah, and Dan). Highlighted also are the 603,550 men who gave to the project. The point seems to be that these people are *sacred people*.

Finally featured in this section is *Yahweh*—the LORD himself who commanded Moses to build the sanctuary after the pattern shown to him. What is conspicuously missing here is any description of an image or idol in the center of the sanctuary, a feature totally out of sync with the rest of the ancient Near East. The point seems to be that this God is a *sacred God*.

C' **People Carry Out the Work (Exod 39:1-31)**

- Seven parts of the priestly garments, perhaps moving from most holy to least holy:

- (1) Ephod
- (2) Breastpiece
- (3) Gold chains and rings
- (4) Robe
- (5) Tunic
- (6) Undergarments
- (7) Diadem

B' **Closing Convocation (Exod 39:32-40:33)**

- People bring to Moses all the completed work; Moses inspects and approves their work, and he sets up the tabernacle and dresses Aaron in priestly garments

A' **CLIMAX: TABERNACLE FILLED WITH GOD'S GLORY! (Exod 40:34-38)**

- Glory so intense, even Moses cannot approach it (supersedes glory on Sinai)⁵

⁵ Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 77.

THE TABERNACLE INSTRUCTIONS

(Exod 24:12-34:28)

This is the C Unit of “The Giving of the Law at Sinai” (Exodus 19:3-Numbers 10:10)

A Narrative Introduction (Exod 24:12-18)

- Moses goes up to receive stone tablets
- Accompanied by Joshua, Moses tells others to wait
- Aaron in charge
- Moses stays forty days

B Instructions for Building Tabernacle (Exod 25:1-27:19)

- No accompanying instructions for using items
- Items in order from most holy to least holy

- (1) Materials (25:1-9)
- (2) Ark (25:10-22)
- (3) Table (25:23-30)
- (4) Lampstand (25:31-40)
- (5) Tabernacle (26:1-37)
- (6) Bronze Altar (27:1-8)
- (7) Courtyard (27:9-19)

C Regular (*tāmîd*) Maintenance of Lamps (Exod 27:20-21)

- Before Yahweh
- From evening to morning

D CENTER: PRIESTLY GARMENTS AND DEDICATION (Exod 28:1-29:37)

C' Regular (*tāmîd*) Maintenance of Daily Sacrifices (Exod 29:38-46; concl. 44-46)

- Before Yahweh
- Evening and morning

B' Additional Instructions for Building and Maintaining Tabernacle (Exod 30:1-31:17)

- Instructions involve warnings
 - Regulations for priests and people
- (1) Altar of Incense (30:1-10)
 - (2) Atonement Money (30:11-16)
 - (3) Wash Basin (30:17-21)
 - (4) Anointing Oil (30:22-33)
 - (5) Incense for Incense Altar (30:34-38)
 - (6) Supervision by Bezalel and Oholiab (31:1-11)
 - (7) No Work on Sabbath (31:12-17)

A' Narrative Conclusion (Exod 31:18-34:28)

- Moses receives stone tablets
- While he stays on mountain with Joshua, people tire of waiting
- Aaron, the one Moses leaves in charge, leads Israel in sin with the golden calf⁶

⁶ Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 75.

III. Contemporary Relevance of the Tabernacle-Priesthood Regulations

- A. The tabernacle-priesthood regulations in Exodus 25-40 present a serious challenge to the issue of relevance. What is a Christian supposed to do with all these commands? What possible value or interest can there be in such a long verbal blueprint that contains no diagrams and very little drama?
1. Some preachers might be tempted to ignore these instructions completely. After all, they describe the sacred place and sacred practices of a religious institution that has been defunct for two millennia. Even on their own terms within the Exodus story, the regulations strike Victor P. Hamilton as being “anticlimactic.”⁷
 2. Other preachers might be tempted to conclude that the tabernacle-priesthood regulations are relevant today only in the sense that they typologically point to Christ. While typological analysis certainly has its place in biblical studies, even well respected Bible scholars can sometimes strain credulity when they use this tool on the tabernacle.
 - (a) Arthur W. Pink, for example, has modeled a rather extreme form of typology in his treatment of these regulations. Concerning the ark of the covenant, he writes:

The ark was two and a half cubits in length, one and a half in breadth, and one and a half in height. The repeated half at once arrests attention. The word ‘half’ in the Hebrew comes from a root which means to cut in two. Another has pointed out that these half cubits suggest that the knowledge of Christ given to us now is only partial: ‘Now we know in part’ (1 Cor 13:9). . . . Two and a half is half of five, and one and a half is half of three, and both of these numbers have a meaning in Scripture which is deeply significant. Take the latter first. Three is the number of manifestation. That is why it is the number of resurrection, for only in resurrection is life fully manifested; for the same reason three is the number of Deity, for God is fully manifested in the three persons of the Holy Trinity. How significant then that the breadth and height (which both have to do with the display of an object) of the ark were both half of three. Remembering that the ark speaks of the person of Christ and three is the number of manifestation, do we not find here more than a hint that when Christ came to earth He would not fully manifest himself?⁸
 - (b) Most interpreters would likely answer that question with a definitive, “No, we do not find here more than a hint of that. In fact, we do not find here even a *tiny* hint of that!” Such typological assertions are at best speculative and at worst nonsensical. They are without foundation, beyond control, and defy all attempts to verify their accuracy. Indeed, they are good examples of what happens when the New Testament is wrongly back-read onto the Old Testament. Such an approach usually produces “spiritual” meanings without asking what the text meant to the original audience that first received the biblical revelation. The net result is that we are nowhere closer to understanding the heart, mind, and intention of the author.
- B. Hamilton rightly warns, “The text of Exodus itself should caution us against reading too much symbolic interpretation into the tabernacle. To detect in each piece of furniture, in each piece of fabric, in each curtain ring, in each color some hidden meaning is more speculative than exegetical.”⁹

⁷ Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 214.

⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace, 2002), 193.

⁹ Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 219.

- C. Nevertheless, such an approach is widespread today, most likely because of the need to find some relevance in these regulations.¹⁰
- D. A better approach would be to focus on ancient Near Eastern comparative material to clarify the meaning and significance of various aspects of the tabernacle-priesthood regulations. This approach actually provides a stronger and richer foundation for the “types” and “shadows” of the tabernacle that find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ (cf. Heb 10:1a).

IV. Historical-Cultural Background to the Tabernacle-Priesthood Regulations

- A. The tabernacle-priesthood regulations in Exodus 25-40 relate *back* to the theophany at Mount Sinai, and *up* to heaven itself.
 - 1. Scholars often note that the tabernacle is meant to be a theological *extension* of Mount Sinai.¹¹ In other words, by divine decree, the theophany at the sacred mountain becomes enshrined and perpetuated in a cultic (or “religious”) tent for this new nation on the move. God’s presence will go with the Israelites as they journey to their appointed destination.
 - 2. Additionally, the tabernacle is often viewed as a “terrestrial objectification of a celestial image,” in keeping with the prevailing cosmology of the day.¹² That is, earthly temples are regarded as “scale models” of heavenly realities (cf. Heb 8:5).
- B. While these two background considerations are legitimate and theologically fruitful, there is another line of inquiry that needs to be pursued. Like any other section of Old Testament law, the Tabernacle-Priesthood section calls for an examination of the laws *in their Old Testament context*. One should therefore begin by asking questions such as:
 - 1. How did the Israelites understand these instructions?
 - 2. What was their concept of temple?
 - 3. What in these instructions would have surprised them?
 - 4. How would they have viewed their completed holy structure as compared to the sacred edifices around them?
 - 5. What did they learn about God and his ways from the tabernacle-priesthood regulations given to them at Sinai?

These kinds of questions should be asked and answered before back-reading any part of the New Testament onto these regulations.

- C. **When compared to other temples of the ancient Near East, God’s tabernacle becomes an impressive self-revelation that yields key theological insights.** To ascertain these insights, we will explore the typical function, size, design, furnishings, cost, materials, and role of priests in the temples of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

¹⁰ See Frederick W. Grant, *Genesis to Deuteronomy*, The Numerical Bible, vol. 1 (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1899), 217-66; A. B. Simpson, *Christ in the Tabernacle* (Oklahoma City: Wingspread Publishing, 1985); etc.

¹¹ See, e.g., Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 221.

¹² Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1996), 200.

1. Such an approach is warranted by God’s insistence that Moses make the tabernacle and its furnishings *exactly* as he orders (cf. Exod 25:9, 40, 27:8, 38:22).
2. God’s use of, and departure from regional conventions will speak volumes about who he is, how he thinks, and why he issues the pattern he does.
 - a. **The *function* of ancient Near Eastern temples provides a point of contrast to God’s tabernacle.**
 - (1) The primary purpose of an ancient Near Eastern temple was to provide the local deity with a place to live.¹³ As temples were often laid out like a king’s palace, the deity enjoyed all the physical comforts, amenities, and protections of royalty, and they were able to receive visits in the cella (“throne room”) from lesser gods.¹⁴ The enthroned god was also protected in his temple from cosmic forces that were greater than he. (Most gods had limitations and vulnerabilities.)
 - (2) A secondary purpose of the ancient Near Eastern temple was to provide a place where humans could feed, clothe, and care for the deity. Local gods were not self-sufficient. Serge Sauneron notes concerning the Egyptian deities, “From sunrise to sunset, they were bathed, clothed, perfumed, fed, distracted by song and music, and put in good humor, so that they might perform their divine task, which was to ensure the smooth functioning of the universe.”¹⁵
 - (3) In the tabernacle, these functions are turned completely upside down, as we will see.
 - b. **The *size* of ancient Near Eastern temples provides a point of contrast to God’s tabernacle.**
 - (1) In Mesopotamia, 1,439 temples have been attested in written records, and about 175 have been excavated so far. Representative sizes include:
 - (a) The Nabu temple, Assur:
80 yards by 80 yards
 - (b) The Anu-Adad temple, Assur:
110 yards by 80 yards
 - (c) The Assur temple, Assur:
120 yards by 80 yards
 - (d) The Esagila temple complex, Babylon (cleared portion):
90 yards by 86 yards
 - (e) The Babylonian ziggurat complex:
450 yards by 450 yards

¹³ For a list of items needed by the gods, see G. R. Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, Old Testament Studies, no. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1863), 93.

¹⁴ See A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 186-87, and F. A. M. Wiggermann, “Theologies, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Mesopotamia” in *CANE*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (Farmington Hills, MI: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 1857-70.

¹⁵ Serge Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, new ed., trans. David Lorton (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957; Paris: Éditions Perséa, 1988; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 75.

- (2) In Egypt, hundreds of temples have been attested in written records, and about 160 have been excavated so far. Representative sizes include:
- (a) The temple of Amon, Luxor (Thebes):
286 yards long
 - (b) The temple of Ramesses II, Thebes:
ca. 330 yards by 230 yards
 - (c) The temple of Ramesses II, Abydos:
ca. 330 yards long
 - (d) The temple of Ramesses III, Thebes:
ca. 400 yards long
 - (e) The temple of Amon, Karnak (inside the precinct):
ca. 450 yards long
 - (f) The temple of Ptah, Memphis:
ca. 600 yards by 500 yards
 - (g) The temple of Amon-Re, Karnak (Thebes):
ca. 700 yards by 600 yards
 - (h) The temple of Aton, Amarna
ca. 1/2 mile long
- (3) By contrast, God’s tabernacle is only 5 yards by 15 yards! This would have been utterly shocking and potentially embarrassing for the Israelites—that the all-powerful God who had just miraculously delivered them from Egypt with a strong and mighty hand does not want, need, or demand the most magnificent temple in the region.

c. The *design* of ancient Near Eastern temples provides a point of contrast to God’s tabernacle.

- (1) For the most part, temples in the ancient Near East were stationary, permanent buildings. They were generally tripartite, having a courtyard, a holy place, and an inner sanctum. This general layout paralleled the king’s palace.
- (2) Additionally, temples in the ancient Near East were generally splendid, multi-roomed mansions with ornate cultic (i.e., “religious”) features. Some were designed to house *hundreds* of different deities, each needing its own cella. The Nabu temple, Dur Sharukin, for example, had 45 rooms.
- (3) Typical rooms in an ancient Near Eastern temple included the following types of chambers:
 - (a) Parlors for visiting deities
 - (b) Storerooms for the idol’s clothing, incense, and other needs
 - (c) Vesting quarters for priests preparing to serve the deity

- (d) Ritual rooms where various ceremonies were held
 - (e) Offering halls where sacrifices were made
 - (f) The barque chapel in front of the sanctuary—a room that housed the carrying mechanism on which the idol rested during processional ceremonies and other occasions on which it was moved
 - (g) The inner sanctum for the idol
 - (h) The chapel of “the hearing ear”—a room behind the sanctuary with “priest holes” where the priests could go and inquire of the god
 - (i) A variety of kitchens, bakeries, and breweries
 - (j) Slaughtering houses with butchers’ work area
 - (k) Workshops for producing clothing for the idol
 - (l) Workshops for making and repairing the cultic images and furniture
 - (m) Rooms for the priestly preparation of food offerings, gifts, and floral arrangements for the deity
 - (n) Various storage rooms and granaries¹⁶
- (4) God’s tabernacle is likewise tripartite, but it is completely portable and comparatively plain. The only areas in his abode are the courtyard, the Holy Place, and the Most Holy Place (inner sanctum). While beautiful in its simplicity, it is not ostentatious in any way. The Israelites may well have been surprised by the fact that their God has no internal need or desire to play a game of “theological one-upmanship” in the design of his tabernacle.

d. The *furnishings* of ancient Near Eastern temples provide a point of contrast to God’s tabernacle.

- (1) To inventory the items of a typical ancient Near Eastern temple is to notice immediately the scarcity of fixtures in God’s tabernacle.
- (2) Generally speaking, the temples of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia contained the following eight furnishings:
 - (a) The local deity’s (often life-size) image
 - (b) The deity’s dais or throne, often flanked by terrestrial or celestial creatures pointing to and highlighting the idol
 - (c) The deity’s footstool so the god could rest his feet while sitting on the throne

¹⁶ See Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 68-71.

- (d) The deity's bed so the god could sleep or enjoy the delights of shrine prostitution
 - (e) The deity's chest of drawers for the god's various changes of clothing
 - (f) The cultic tables (with dishes, cups, and eating utensils) placed directly in front of the deity so he could eat when served his food
 - (g) The lamps and lampstands so the god and his priests could see to perform their duties
 - (h) The incense stands so the god would not be put off by any foul odors from humans¹⁷
- (3) By contrast, God's tabernacle contains only four items—a chest, a bread table, a lampstand, and an incense stand. The items that are omitted, the items that are included, and where they are all placed are theologically significant.
- (a) God does not need help to see, so he relocates the lampstand out to where the priests will minister. *They* need light.
 - (b) God does not need to eat, so he relocates the bread table out to where the priests will serve. *They* need food.
 - (c) God is not dressed by human hands, so he does not need a chest of drawers in the inner sanctum. Instead, God will arrange for his *priests* to be dressed (cf. Exod 28:2).
 - (d) God neither sleeps nor slumbers, so he does not need a bed. Additionally, he is morally pure, so he does not need a bed for shrine prostitution in his presence.
- (4) All told, the furnishings of the tabernacle—and where they were placed—reveal to Israel that God is self-existent, self-sufficient, and non-corporeal (i.e., he does not have a physical body to care for). He has no needs at all. Rather, he feeds, dresses, cares for, and illuminates his priests and his people, not the other way around. These revelations will be vitally important for the young nation of Israel.
- (5) **Illustration:** Perhaps an illustration at this point will help to communicate the original shock of all this to the Israelites. If visitors came to my house and saw the washer and dryer out on the front porch, they would immediately recognize those appliances and understand their functions in a typical suburban house, but they would also wonder why we had placed them in such an odd location. It would certainly strike them as being way out of the ordinary. Likewise, the Israelites would have immediately understood the typical functions of these four items, but the placement of the bread table, lampstand, and incense altar in the Holy Place instead of the Most Holy Place would have caught them by surprise. The various *omissions* of furniture would have also been shocking.

¹⁷ David A. Dorsey, "The Tabernacle-Priesthood Regulations" (classroom lecture notes, 555—*The Old Testament Law and the Christian*, Spring 2006, photocopy), 49-53. See also Kenneth A. Kitchen, "The Tabernacle—A Bronze Age Artifact," *Bible and Spade* 8 (1995): 30-46.

e. **The *cost* of ancient Near Eastern temples provides a point of contrast to God’s tabernacle.**

- (1) The cost to design, build, furnish, and operate a typical ancient Near Eastern temple was exorbitant. For example, Gudea of Lagash, who ruled at the end of the third millennium BC, wanted to be known as the paragon of temple builders. His work was funded by heavy and mandatory taxes.¹⁸
- (2) God’s tabernacle, by contrast, is funded entirely by voluntary contributions and freewill offerings (cf. Exod 35:4-29).

f. **The *materials* of ancient Near Eastern temples provide a point of contrast to God’s tabernacle.**

- (1) The materials of ancient Near Eastern temples were generally costly and exotic. Gudea, for example, secured various expensive and unusual materials from the far reaches of the ancient world for his Eninnu temple, dedicated to the god Ningirsu.¹⁹
- (2) God’s tabernacle, by contrast, contains materials that are simple, tasteful, and relatively inexpensive, not exotic. Furthermore, God orders materials that are readily available in Sinai (or had been plundered from Egypt), thus demonstrating that his requirements are reasonable. Obeying him in gathering the prescribed materials is not abject drudgery, as was building the store cities of Pharaoh (cf. Exod 1:11-14).

g. **The *role of priests* in ancient Near Eastern temples provides a point of contrast to God’s tabernacle.**

- (1) Priests in the ancient Near East were typically in charge of designing and initiating the construction of their gods’ temples.
- (2) Priests were also in charge of making, dedicating, and bringing to life their deities. The standard ceremony that priests performed on a newly fashioned idol was the “Opening of the Mouth” ritual, common in Egypt and Mesopotamia.²⁰ This elaborate ceremony took place in the workshop where the image had been made. When conducted by the priests, it was understood to cause the idol to come to life, and be able to speak and consume sacrifices.
- (3) After the idols had been brought to life, priests were typically in charge of designing clothing for, and then dressing and dedicating the deities in their temples. The statue’s wardrobe usually included a tiara, breastplate, and linens of royal blue or royal purple.
- (4) Finally, ancient Near Eastern priests were typically in charge of providing the deity with daily food and other comforts. The rationale for treating an inanimate object with such kindness and respect was because, “His or her numinous presence . . . was

¹⁸ Michael V. Fox, *Temple in Society* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1988), 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰ For the Egyptian ceremony, see David Lorton, “The Theology of Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt,” in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Michael B. Dick (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 123-210. For the Mesopotamian ceremony, see Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian *mīs pi* Ritual,” in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Michael B. Dick (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 55-121.

believed to be the fundamental prerequisite for success in all human endeavors. In its function as the patron deity's domicile, the temple gave the townspeople visible assurance of the deity's presence. . . . The god might indeed abandon the city, with unfailingly disastrous consequences for its inhabitants. All the more reason, then, to attend dutifully to the deity's needs."²¹

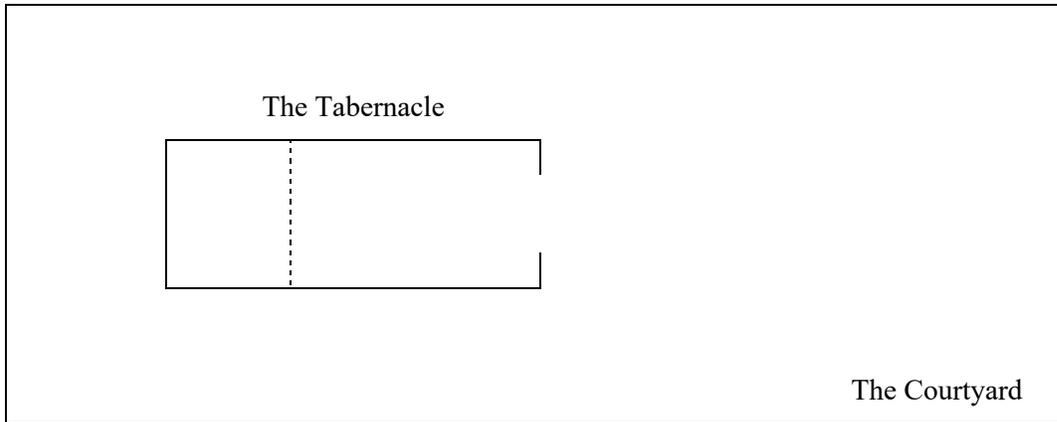
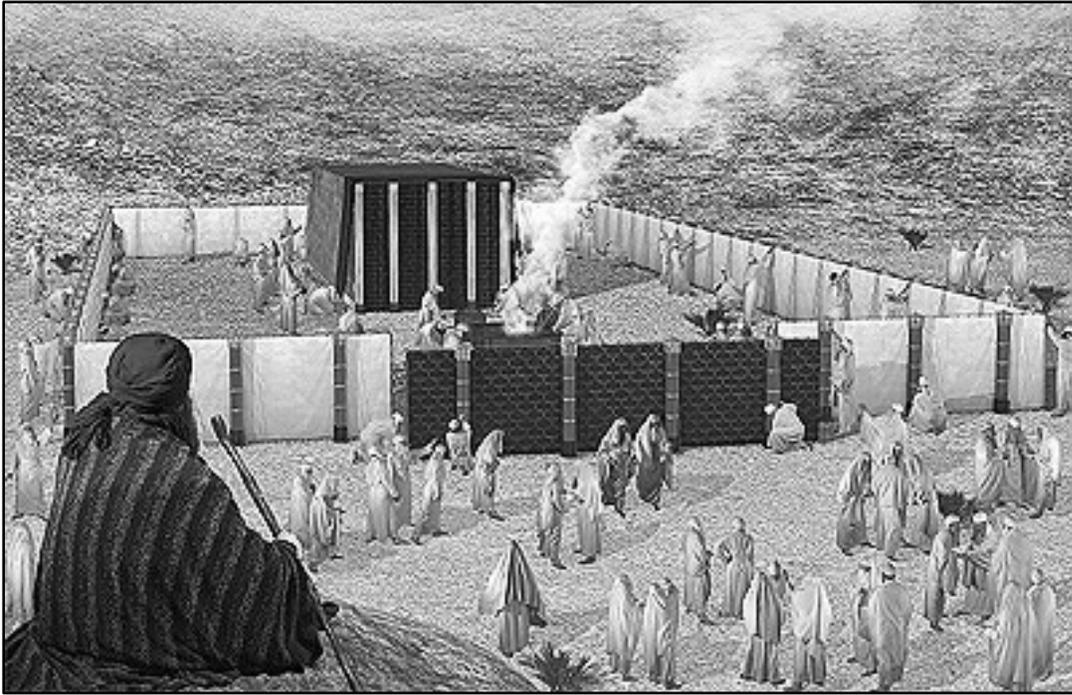
- (5) God's tabernacle, by contrast, has a priesthood that functions in a radically different way. Israel's departures from convention were numerous and significant.
 - (a) It is God who designs and initiates the construction of his abode, not his priests. God is in charge of designing clothing for, and dedicating his priests, not the other way around. God provides food for his priests via the table of showbread and the sacrifices, not the other way around.
 - (b) Clearly the tabernacle-priesthood regulations do not represent a man-made religion. It is not even a priest-led religion, as highlighted by the placement of the two "sin stories" involving priests (Exod 32-33 and Lev 10) on either side of the literary unit containing the cultic instructions for priests.
 - (c) Ultimately, there is never a need for Israel's priests to conduct an "Opening the Mouth" ceremony on God in order to bring him to life. God has life in himself. He gives life to his people, not the other way around.
 - (d) Also, God's detailed description of the priests' garments and the consecration ceremony (Exod 28:1-29:37) may well be a parody of the "Opening of the Mouth" ritual, which called for priests to cense, anoint, clothe, adorn, bejewel, and touch the idol at various places while reciting certain incantations.
 - (e) Against the backdrop of such farcical ceremonies to quicken an idol and open its mouth, God says to his own kingdom of priests, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open *your* mouth wide, and *I* will fill it" (Ps 81:10, emphasis mine).

Edmund P. Clowney notes, "God makes man in his image, but man may not replicate that image as the center of his worship. Of course, Israel had to be taught that God is an invisible Spirit, not a material being. But there was a further reason. God claimed a monopoly on his own self-revelation. He would appear to men as he chose, not as they might imagine. The empty seat about the ark was reserved for the One who was to come."²²

²¹ John F. Robertson, "The Social and Economic Organization of Ancient Mesopotamian Temples," in *CANE*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (Farmington Hills, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 444.

²² Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: R&R, 1988), 23.

V. Points of Clarification for the Tabernacle-Priesthood Regulations



A. The Overall Layout

1. The Courtyard (Exod 26:36-37; 27:9-19)
 - a. The Courtyard Fence (Exod 27:9-15)
 - b. The Courtyard Gate (Exod 26:36-37; 27:16; 17-19)

2. The Tabernacle (Exod 26:1-30)
 - a. The Holy Place (Exod 26:33, 35)
 - b. The Most Holy Place (Exod 26:33-34)

B. Elements in the Courtyard

1. The Altar of Sacrifice / Burnt Offering (Exod 27:1-8)
2. The Laver / Basin (Exod 30:17-21)

C. Elements in the Holy Place

1. The Lampstand / Candelabra (Exod 25:31-40; 26:35b; 27:20-21; 30:22-33)
2. The Bread Table / Table of Showbread (Exod 25:23-30; 26:35a)
3. The Altar of Incense (Exod 26:33b; 30:1-10; 30:34-38)
4. The Veil / Curtain (Exod 26:31-33a)

D. Elements in the Most Holy Place

1. The Ark of the Covenant with the Mercy Seat and the Cherubim (Exod 25:10-22; 26:34)
 - a. The Ten Commandments (Deut 10:1-5; 1 Kings 8:9; Heb 9:3-4)
 - b. The Jar of Manna (Exodus 16:33-34; Heb 9:3-4)
 - c. Aaron's Rod That Budded (Num 17:10; Heb 9:3-4)
2. The Divine Presence / Glory Cloud / "Shekinah" (Exod 40:34-35)

VI. Theological Insights from the Tabernacle-Priesthood Regulations

- A. Having analyzed some key points of contrast between God's tabernacle in the wilderness and other temples of the ancient Near East, we are now ready to enumerate some theological insights from our study and then set forth an understanding of their fulfillment in Christ. Ten theological insights emerge.²³
1. God is spirit and has no body or bodily needs. He is self-existent and self-sufficient. He does not need his people to feed him or take care of him or his image. Rather, God feeds and cares for his priests and his people. He has not come to be served but to serve. In this way God has radically distinguished himself from the other gods of the ancient Near East. The tabernacle-priesthood regulations are a strong, intentional anti-idolatry statement.
 2. God's power is not confined to a certain locale or country. The portability of his tabernacle declares this. In the biblical narrative, he leads his people to whichever lands he chooses, and he relates to them personally along the way.
 3. God's presence is not confined to his tabernacle or to the ark of the covenant (i.e., "God in a box"). His presence in the tabernacle is real and awesome, but still token. ("The heavens cannot contain him.") The tabernacle is dismantled daily, at which time God's manifest presence leaves the tabernacle and proceeds ahead of the tribes in order to lead them. His actual primary abode is beyond this world.
 4. God has given Israel her system of worship without any input from them. It is God, not his priests, who designs the tabernacle and gives them detailed instructions for its services. Violators of these laws (e.g., Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, etc.) are punished severely. This is not man making God in his own image, nor can it be considered a man-made religious system.
 5. God is not overly demanding but reasonable in his requirements. He asks his people to provide for him a simple, humble abode, made of materials that are readily available to them (e.g., acacia wood, linens, etc.).
 6. God exhibits a remarkable humility. His dwelling is simple and unpretentious. He lives in a modest goat's hair tent as do his people. God does not exhibit a need to compete with the other gods by making his tabernacle more magnificent than theirs. He is content with a simple kind of beauty and artistry.
 7. God himself is awesome and magnificent, even if his tabernacle is not. While his dwelling is unpretentious, the splendor of his presence *inside* the tabernacle is truly overwhelming. Unlike the majestic temples of the ancient Near East, which were devoid of any real divine presence, God's tabernacle is filled with a real and awesome glory. Anyone approaching his tent inappropriately would die. Instead of pomp and showiness, there is real power and authenticity.
 8. God is an effective teacher, taking his people from the known to the unknown in ways that are comprehensible to them. There is nothing exotic, esoteric, or unfathomable in his tabernacle. His instructions are clear, simple, and understandable. The significance of these instructions is readily apparent to the Israelites because God uses (and sometimes alters) culturally familiar concepts in order to teach his people about himself and his ways.

²³ Revised and updated with permission from David A. Dorsey, "The Tabernacle-Priesthood Regulations" (classroom lecture notes, 555—*The Old Testament Law and the Christian*, Spring 2006, photocopy), 53.

9. God delights to live among his people, to be known by them, and to fellowship with them. This, in fact, is the very purpose of the tabernacle (cf. Exod 25:8). He is willing to live among the people despite their unworthiness. Since leaving Egypt, they have doubted him, complained against him, and rejected him by worshiping the golden calf. Nevertheless, God does not abandon the tabernacle enterprise. Instead, he demonstrates that he is “slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exod 34:6-7).
10. God loves his people so much that he is willing to enter into a relationship with them despite their proclivity to reject him. By taking up his abode among them in the tabernacle, God places himself in a position where his people can spurn him, disobey him, or desecrate his sacred dwelling, all of which they will eventually do. Yet he remains the sovereign suzerain king.

B. Theocentricity Leads Naturally to Christocentricity

1. In reflecting on these theological insights, one can truly say, “Like Father, like Son.” Indeed, it becomes readily apparent why Jesus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9b) and “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). They share all things in common, displaying the same character, nature, priorities, values, and ways. In the Incarnation, Jesus “tented” (σκηνώω) among his people (cf. John 1:14), embodying all that God had revealed of himself in the tabernacle-priesthood regulations.
2. The flesh of Jesus’ “earthly tent” looked the same as ours, and he lived among us in meekness. He came to serve others, not to be served. He was authentic, not showy, often downplaying his own miracles. He had no beauty or majesty that we should esteem him, but his power and authority were great. Despite his humility, we beheld his glory, and those who saw his glory in contrast to their own sinfulness occasionally recoiled in shame or terror (e.g., Matt 17:6; Luke 5:8; John 18:5).
3. Jesus instructed us not to worry about what we would eat, drink, or wear because our heavenly Father knows our needs and is still the God who feeds and clothes his people. As the eternal Son of God, he had food that we knew nothing about, and he fed his people the bread of life. He came as the light of the world for people living in darkness. His yoke was easy, and his burden was light. He was an effective teacher, taking his people from the known to the unknown with simple stories and illustrations that were comprehensible to us. He offered up the incense of prayer to God the Father and interceded for his people.
4. Like Yahweh in relation to Israel, Jesus came to his own, but his own received him not (cf. John 1:11). He was despised and rejected by men, becoming at once both high priest and sacrifice on the altar of the cross. Despite his rejection, he did not abandon his people. Rather, he abounded in love and faithfulness, forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. With the sacrifice of himself on the cross, he made atonement for his people. By his blood he provided a new and living way as the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom at the moment of his death (cf. Matt 27:51). He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (cf. John 1:29).
5. In his resurrection, and now in his ascension, Jesus is not constrained by location. By the Holy Spirit he comes and leads his people wherever he chooses, and they follow him. Yet his primary actual abode is in heaven. He will come again from heaven at the end of the age, when the earthly tent will give way to the heavenly tent, and the cubically shaped Holy of Holies will give way to the cubically shaped holy city, the new Jerusalem. Then it will finally be said with immeasurable joy, “Now the dwelling (σκηνή) of God is with men, and he will live (σκηνώω) with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev 21:3).

Christians are edified by the embodiment of these laws in the person of Christ, and are challenged to mirror the communicable attributes of their Savior, especially humility, service, sacrifice, graciousness, holiness, and hospitality.

C. Discussion & Reflection

1. How might a fuller understanding of God’s tabernacle help clarify what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12); and “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:5)?
2. How might a fuller understanding of God’s tabernacle help clarify what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry” (John 6:35); and “I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:48-51)?
3. How might a fuller understanding of God’s tabernacle begin to help clarify the scene changes and theological emphases of the book of Revelation? To take just a few examples:
 - a. The seven lampstands (Rev 1:12-16)
 - b. The sea of glass (Rev 4:6; 15:2; cf. 1 Kgs 7:23-26; 2 Chron 4:2, 6)
 - c. The throne of God, surrounded by elders, living creatures, and angels (Rev 4-5)
 - d. The altar of incense (Rev 5:8)
 - e. The altar of sacrifice (Rev 6:9; 19:20; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8)
 - f. The ark of the covenant (Rev 11:19; 15:5-8)
 - g. The tabernacle of God on earth (Rev 21:3)
4. What similarities do you see between Dorsey’s proposed literary structure for “The Tabernacle Built and Filled with God’s Glory” (Exod 34:29-40:38) and Valentino’s proposed literary structure for “Christ and the New Jerusalem—Jesus Appearing as the Lamb within His Purified Church” (Rev 21:9-22:6)?
5. Discuss the historic Regulative Principle of Worship and how our study of the tabernacle-priesthood regulations might inform that particular issue.

VII. Visual Tour of the Tabernacle-Priesthood Complex

- “The Tabernacle” computer animated DVD produced by AnimMan Studios, distributed by Gateway Films/Vision Video, 2000.
- “The Tabernacle” laminated color pamphlet and wall chart from Rose Publishing, Inc., 2006.
- “The Tabernacle” PowerPoint presentation for pastors and teachers from Rose Publishing, Inc., 2006.
- Biblical Tabernacle Reproduction at the Mennonite Information Center, 2209 Millstream Road, Lancaster, PA 17602-1494, (717)-299-0954, <http://www.mennoniteinfoctr.com/tabncle.html>.
- Dowley, Tim. *The Kregel Pictorial Guide to the Tabernacle*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002.