

Tabernacle

What is the tabernacle and what is its historical context?

After the Exodus out of Egypt and the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, God initiates, instructs, and details the building of the tabernacle.

*[25:1] The LORD said to Moses, [2] “Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me. [3] And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, [4] blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats' hair, [5] tanned rams' skins, goatskins, acacia wood, [6] oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, [7] onyx stones, and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. [8] **And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.** [9] Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.
(Exodus 25:1-9)*

The tabernacle was a portable tent where the presence of God would dwell. Wherever the tabernacle was built the rest of the encampment would set up their tents surrounding the tabernacle which stood at the center of the camp. This was to show that God dwells in the midst of and rules his people. God is intimate and affectionate towards his people.

*[34] **Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.** [35] 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. [36] Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. [37] But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. [38] **For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.**
(Exodus 40:34-38 ESV)*

The tabernacle replaces the altar as the primary location where God intimately reveals his presence to his people. God's presence among his people is no longer occasional as it was with the altars but ongoing now that there is a consistent dwelling place for God.

What does the tabernacle consist of and how is it linked to the Garden of Eden?

The tabernacle was a tent called “the tent of meeting” (Ex. 40:34). It was a divine sanctuary where God met with his people.

The tabernacle was designed and decorated in a way to symbolize heaven.

The Garden of Eden was an archetypal divine sanctuary where God dwelled and man worshiped him. God was in intimate, unmediated fellowship with Adam and Eve before the Fall.

The tabernacle represents God's love and closeness with his people but also shows his holiness and inaccessibility through the inner layers of the tabernacle. (points to our need for a great high priest / mediator)

Only priests were allowed in the Holy Place of the tabernacle, and only the high priest was allowed in the Holy of Holies once a year. Adam and Eve had the priestly duties of caring for and working the Garden sanctuary.

The tabernacle structure had its entrance facing towards the east. It had to be entered going west.

The entrance of the Garden of Eden faced east.
He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:24)

The degrees of separation and holiness were apparent as one moved inwards towards the Most Holy Place, the dwelling place of Yahweh. The separation between each space is designed to isolate each space so that the unholiness of the people cannot come in contact with the holiness of God. The tabernacle itself is filled with gold while the courtyard outside contained the less precious bronze items.

The tabernacle proper was draped with 4 layers of cloth - the innermost being made of fine-twined linen. The inner rooms and space were made of more precious items and ornate details.

The courtyard was a large area bordered by linen cloths. All were allowed to come into this area to observe or participate in a sacrifice on the bronze altar. The bronze altar was the burning of animal sacrifices as a representation for the people's repentance before God. The bronze laver was filled with water for the priests to wash their hands and feet. The courtyard is also representative of the earth while the tabernacle itself represents a heavenly place.

The outer room / the Holy Place was a part of the actual tent and was the first room one would enter from the outside. Only those specially ordained could enter this place. It contained three items – a golden lampstand, a table for the bread of presence, and an altar of incense. The sweet smell of incense would fill the entire tent and cover the smell of burnt animal sacrifices from the courtyard while also reminding of the presence of God.

The inner room / Holy of Holies was a perfectly square room that held the ark of the covenant and where God's very presence dwelt. This room could only be entered once a year by a high priest. A veil with cherubims on it separated the Holy Place with the Holy of Holies.

The earth was to be God's dwelling place and the construction of the tabernacle is a significant step towards the fulfillment of this. The tabernacle points us back to the Garden and forward to the temple and beyond. God is not a distant God but one who lives among his people and longs to be in close fellowship with them.

The parallels between the Garden and tabernacle suggest the continuation of God's plan for the Garden (a sanctuary where he dwells among his people that worship him).

Symbolism of the Tabernacle

Just as the Garden of Eden was a place where God could dwell among his people in intimate fellowship, the tabernacle and temple are special sanctuaries for God to dwell.

God comes once again in the ultimate dwelling in the flesh of Jesus, the incarnate God. (John 1:14)

Each believer is also a dwelling place of God. When Jesus ascends into heaven, he sends the Holy Spirit to be among us as a Helper and Comforter. (1 Cor. 6:19-20)

The final dwelling place of God with his people is in the New Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem is both the people of God corporately as well as the eternal heavenly city.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)