
The Shape of Shadows:

The Tabernacle's Furnishings

Exodus 25

Introduction Illustration of great building projects: Versailles, Ludwig's Palace, Getty Mansion.
Illustration of former presidents commissioning their libraries...

During the first years of country, the President's house was to be a major feature of Pierre Charles L'Enfant's plan for the newly established federal city, Washington, D.C. The architect of the White House was chosen in a competition, which received nine proposals, including one submitted anonymously by Thomas Jefferson. George Washington traveled to the site of the federal city on July 16, 1792 to make his judgment. His review was brief and he quickly selected the submission of James Hoban, an Irishman living in Charleston, South Carolina. Washington was not entirely pleased with the original Hoban submission. He thought it too small, lacking ornament, and not fitting the nation's president. On Washington's recommendation the house was enlarged by thirty percent; a large reception hall, the present East Room, was added, probably inspired by the large reception room at Mount Vernon. The building Hoban designed is verifiably influenced by the first and second floors of Leinster House, a ducal palace in Dublin, Ireland

On the mountain God commissioned a building. A tent, it was particularly suited to their nomadic state. He directed exactly how it was to be built, furnished, transported and cared for. He would later direct exactly who could go where in the building and what was to be done in each area of the building and its grounds.

Two precarious slopes we want to guard against slipping down:

That we simply describe what was being built.

That we try to make every thread, pin and ring represent something.

So let us take this chapter about furniture and look at the shape of shadows.

The Provision for its Materials (v.1-8)

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.

In What is Commanded (v.1-2a)

The people of Israel are first directed to take a contribution. God commanded that plans and provisions be for so that offerings or givings could be received. He left open to the wisdom of the leadership exactly how what would be received, would be recorded and converted into useful materials for the project.

In What is Commended**(v.2b)**

Moses and the leaders were to receive the contributions from each one who gave. Giving moved by the heart is commended here. Moses was not to order the contributions in a way that made demands. Rather, he was to order the receiving of the contributions in a way that encouraged generosity from the heart.

Moses and the leaders were to trust God to move in people's hearts. This is not spontaneous giving primarily driven by the emotions in the moment. Rather the sense here is that God will move them to believe what God could do, to release their hold on what they had, to increase their desire for what their contributions would provide for and to bring them with joy.

In What is Contributed**(v.3-7)**

This is not then to say that Moses could not or did not announce the need, promote what God had planned nor seek to instill a strong desire for what God was doing. God tells Moses specifically what was to be contributed. He outlines what was going to be needed and what therefore the people should give. In their economy, they did not receive money and then go down to Lowe's Building Supply and buy all the materials they needed. Their contributions were the materials needed for the construction. It would make no sense to have a detailed list like this that at least, was not announced or posted. However, it seems that Moses, speaking at the Lord's direction, gives specific needs soliciting specific contributions.

In What is Constructed**(v.8)**

The purpose of their contributions is declared. They would be building a sanctuary, a tabernacle where God would dwell. This is meant to excite them. It is meant to stir them to want to give. This is one means that God used to put in their hearts to give. Here is a great goal. Here is something worth doing. Here is a beautiful tent, a place for the dwelling of God.

What kind of simple observations can we make about the way God intends to support His work in the world? I am looking backward from the New Testament and observing principles which are present here but illuminated more clearly by the New Covenant teaching on giving.

God intends that the work of the ministry be financially supported by His people. All through the Bible, God directs that His work in the world be supported materially and financially by His people. This is God's design. He could simply drop it down from heaven supernaturally. But God uses people who love Him and love what He is doing to support the ministry.

God intends that contributions for that work are collected and received and handled with honesty and wisdom. Misrepresentation in giving and misuse of God's money by the ministry are condemned by explanation and by example all through the Bible.

God intends that people give as motivated to by God's inward work and as enabled to by God's outward supply. While this is often highlighted as a feature of the New Covenant, notice that it was also present in the Old Covenant

as well. We even find the prophets condemning Israel for bringing the offerings near while their hearts were far away.

God intends that the leadership trust implicitly that God is at work to supply the needs of what He has directed. As Paul did with the church at Corinth, He trusted God while He exhorted the church. Remember, faith rests and works. Faith and trust are not passive; rather, they are active in their calling for and their doing of what God requires.

God intends that the leadership clearly declare what can and should be contributed for the ministry. The needs are to be openly announced so that the people will know how much and what needs to be given. In our culture, contributions are generally in money, but can be in goods. Note that time or service is never included as “contributions” or “giving”. We are to, by the enabling grace of God through the providential supply by God with purpose, planning and proportion, give to the work of the Lord through the church.

God intends that we see that giving is a necessary part of being God’s people. We should rejoice at our opportunities to give. We should be careful about our motivations when we cloak our giving in secrecy. We should see how every widow’s mite helps. We should give ourselves first, then give our money.

God intends that we are gripped by the happiness of giving and the holiness of what we are giving to make possible. They gave thread, goat skins, goat hair, precious metals and jewels. They built a portable worship center patterned on heaven and the portable throne of God. Their happy hearts gave holy offerings that built a sacred space. We do not build sacred spaces anymore. The true sanctuary and dwelling place of God has come in the incarnation. Now, we fulfill the holy mission we are given as happy hearts give holy offerings to shelter, shape and send the gospel and gospel people to the ends of the earth.

The Pattern for its Making

(v.9-40)

⁹ Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it. (See also verse 40.)

The top and tail, the bookends of this text tell us why it is given here. What they are making is to be the result of a pattern seen on the mountain. These pieces of furniture are being built according to a template.

Our son worked for a while building and restoring wooden hull ocean going sailing yachts and racing boats. Whenever they had a boat in to be worked on, they ordered the prints for it. What they received were massive sheaves of templates. Nothing was measured. Everything was marked and cut according to a template. When he was re-laying the teak deck on one ship, board by board, he would find the template for that board, lay on the template and mark the plank. Then, he would very carefully cut the plank and sand it to fit.

Moses and Israel’s craftsmen were to build according to a heavenly template. They were creating what the book of Hebrews calls, “shadows”. These are dim

reflections of much greater realities. The shadows are shaped by the substance. The New Covenant and heavenly realities are dimly reflected by the tabernacle, furniture and camp of Israel. Thus, because what they were making needed to accurately reflect what they were shown on the mountain, they needed to work very meticulously.

I am going to carefully follow the order of the text. First, God reveals and Moses records what will fill the sanctuary. He directs the design and construction of the furniture that will go in the tabernacle and later the Temple. Then, in the next chapter, God will reveal and Moses records what form the sanctuary takes. I want you to note that this is in the opposite direction of the creation narrative. There, God forms then fills. Here God fills and then supplies the form.

The Ark of the Covenant

(v.10-22)

The first piece of furniture is called the Ark of the Covenant. It had two primary parts. It was basically a box with a lid.



¹⁰ "They shall make an ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. ¹¹ You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside shall you overlay it, and you shall make on it a molding of gold around it. ¹² You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it. ¹³ You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. ¹⁴ And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark by them. ¹⁵ The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. ¹⁶ And you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give you.

The Ark²² of the Covenant was a gold plated chest about 45 inches²³ long, 27 inches wide and high. It had a molding of gold around all the edges. It feet on each of the bottom corners so that it would not sit directly on the ground. Rings were attached to each of the feet. Through these rings were run two, gold plated poles which were never to be removed. The chest of the ark was never to be touched once it was dedicated. It was to be carried only by the poles. The "testimony" that was to be placed into the ark were the Tablets of Stone. It is called the testimony because it was both the Word of God and the witness to the people's commitment to the covenant.

¹⁷ "You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. ¹⁸ And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. ¹⁹ Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. ²⁰ The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. ²¹ And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. ²² There I will meet with you, and from above

²² The word translated "Ark" is not the same as the word for the boat Noah built. The word here simply denotes a chest which was also used as a chair.

²³ This is assuming that a cubit is around 18 inches. The exact size is unknown.

the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.

The lid of the chest, the top for the Ark was called the mercy seat or the place of atonement. It was exactly the same size as the chest itself. On either side of the lid were to be mounted two, solid gold cherubim. They were to be made of beaten gold. They were to face one another with their faces looking down on the lid and their wings stretched out over the lid and the tips touching one another. Before this cover is placed on the ark, the tablets were to put inside. Then the lid was to be set on it.

Why the cherubim? They are the guardians where the presence of God dwells. We saw them at the gate to the Garden east of Eden in Genesis. We see them all through the decorations in tabernacle and Temple. We see it in Ezekiel with the portable throne of God. We see it in Isaiah at his commissioning. But here, God clearly announces that He will dwell between the cherubim on the mercy seat. Here is His royal throne. Here will be held the Book of the Covenant, the Tablets of Stone. Here is where God will meet with His people, where He Himself will show mercy and speak instruction to His people.



The Table for Bread

(v.23-30)

²³ "You shall make a table of acacia wood. Two cubits shall be its length, a cubit its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. ²⁴ You shall overlay it with pure gold and make a molding of gold around it. ²⁵ And you shall make a rim around it a handbreadth wide, and a molding of gold around the rim. ²⁶ And you shall make for it four rings of gold, and fasten the rings to the four corners at its four legs. ²⁷ Close to the frame the rings shall lie, as holders for the poles to carry the table. ²⁸ You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold, and the table shall be carried with these. ²⁹ And you shall make its plates and dishes for incense, and its flagons and bowls with which to pour drink offerings; you shall make them of pure gold. ³⁰ And you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me regularly.

The second piece of furniture was the table for bread. It was a wooden table, 36 inches long, 18 inches wide and 27 inches tall. It also was overlaid with gold and the top had a 3 inch border and molding running around its top. Where the legs joined the top, gold rings were attached through which another set of gold overlaid poles were run in order for it to be carried about.

A set of pure gold dishes, pans, goblets and pitchers were to be made. They were to be exclusively used to put out the bread and wine offerings. Each day a new set of bread was to be put out. There was to be bread in the plates at all times. In the wilderness, this was presumably made of manna. In the land, this would be made from the wheat offerings brought by the Israelites. The offerings of grain and wheat was stored in granaries and bread prepared by the priests.

What beautiful and elegant simplicity before the Lord! The worth and value of the table is in what it is made of. Its beauty is in the gold. The table itself is simple and not ornate. See how it would glow with deep golden light, the plates set around with the rustic brown bread sitting in its midst. Yet, the bread on the plate is the true source of life.

The Golden Lampstand

(v.31-39)

³¹ "You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. The lampstand shall be made of hammered work: its base, its stem, its cups, its calyxes, and its flowers shall be of one piece with it. ³² And there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it; ³³ three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on one branch, and three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on the other branch—so for the six branches going out of the lampstand. ³⁴ And on the lampstand itself there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms, with their calyxes and flowers, ³⁵ and a calyx of one piece with it under each pair of the six branches going out from the lampstand. ³⁶ Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it a single piece of hammered work of pure gold. ³⁷ You shall make seven lamps for it. And the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it. ³⁸ Its tongs and their trays shall be of pure gold. ³⁹ It shall be made, with all these utensils, out of a talent of pure gold. ⁴⁰ And see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.



The last piece of furniture was the golden lampstand. While some translations and works of art give you the impression this was an elegant candle stick, that is not the case. It was a stand for lamps. It was to be made of one single piece of hammered gold. It resembled a tree with a central trunk that ran all the way up the center to the middle lampstand. Evenly spaced off of each side were three branches, making six all together. They arched out from the trunk with a golden almond bud hanging at the attach point. They were to curve up to the top with lampstands on the top each at the same height as the central one. The lampstand on each end was shaped like an almond blossom and cupped to securely hold a lamp.

They were to make golden lamps that would burn continuously. They would have a bowl so as to hold the fragrant oil with a wick in the lid, probably in the center. The lamps were to be designed in such a way that the light from them was directed forward. This may have been accomplished with reflectors or with the shape of the burner part of the lamp itself.

They were also to make all the parts that would necessary for the handling of the lamps and the fire. There were golden trays to carry them on. There were long, golden snuffers to put out the fire when the lamps needed cleaning. All total, 75 pounds of gold would be needed for the project. At today's price of gold, that would be just over a million dollars in minted gold.

Do it all according to the pattern shown them on the mountain (v.40). What is recorded here for them to build was to follow exactly what they were shown on the mountain. Why is this so? These pieces of furniture, as well as much of the tabernacle itself, are types or pictures or representations of larger, greater realities.

Conclusion

The Ark of the Covenant points us to Christ on the mercy seat and throne in heaven.

The Table of Showbread points us to Christ who is the bread of life.

The Lampstand points us to Christ who is the light of the world.

We, the church, are His dwelling place by the Spirit.

Have you entered in by faith?

Notes