

- g. The Sinai Covenant formalized Israel's relationship with the God of Abraham, and the tabernacle gave tangible, material expression to that relationship by symbolizing God's immediate presence with His elect "son." As He had promised, Yahweh was committed to dwelling with Abraham's descendents, but that commitment didn't negate the defining reality of *distance* that had resulted from the Fall. The first couple's insistence upon independence had introduced estrangement to the created order, destroying true intimacy between God and His image-son; divine-human interaction was now a matter of mediated distance.

And so, while Yahweh's dwelling was to be situated in the very midst of the camp of Israel, the physical structure of the tabernacle and the arrangement of the Israelites around it testified that He yet remained distant and unapproachable. Interaction between Father and son needed to be mediated – a fact that both Israel and Yahweh acknowledged by the request and appointment of Moses as mediator (ref. again 20:18-21 and Deuteronomy 18:15-18). But Moses would not live forever; a formal system of mediation was necessary to administer Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh throughout future generations. The Aaronic priesthood would serve this mediatorial function; the Sinai Covenant (the Law) had its basis – its foundational presupposition – in the priesthood (Hebrews 7:11).

Estrangement had defined the divine-human relationship since the expulsion from Eden, and Israel's initial blamelessness under the covenant didn't alter that fundamental reality. Sacred space – the realm in which God is present in His creation and personally accessible to His creatures – had become a matter of mediated distance, and so the Lord gave Moses His prescription for a mediating priesthood before Israel had broken its covenant vow. Not covenant violation, but the fact of Creator-creature estrangement necessitated the provision of a system of mediation (ref. 29:43-46). Thus the priestly ordination process itself included the sacrifice of sin offerings: Even Israel's priests – regardless of their covenantal blamelessness – required a sacrifice for sin if they were to minister before the Lord in His presence (ref. 29:9-14; cf. also Hebrews 7:26-27).

- 1) The first thing God specified was the *persons* who were to serve Him as priests. The entire tribe of Levi was to be consecrated to His service with regard to the tabernacle (Numbers 3:1-4:49), with the priests being taken from the one Levitical family of Aaron, Moses' brother (28:1). Aaron was to be the first high priest with his sons serving as priests under him. In each successive generation, both the high priest and the sanctuary priests would be drawn from Aaron's line of descent.
- 2) After specifying the individuals who would serve in the priesthood, the Lord described to Moses the *attire* (28:2-43) to be worn by Aaron (representing the high priest) and his sons (representing the regular sanctuary priests). Together, the various garments and their accessories spotlighted the central priestly elements of *consecration* and *mediation*.

The garments were to be of a unique design, set apart solely for use by the priests; like the men who wore them, they were *holy* (28:4). Their holy character was further emphasized by the materials they were constructed of. Like the tabernacle's inner covering and veil, the high priest's ephod with its shoulder pieces was to be made of fine twisted linen embroidered with gold thread and blue, scarlet and purple yarn. These materials linked the priests with the sanctuary, thereby emphasizing that they were ministers to the Lord in His dwelling place. Above every other component of the priestly dress, the gold plate attached to the high priest's turban emphasized the principle of consecration; engraved on that plate were the words, *Holy to the Lord* (28:36-37).

But this plate highlighting Aaron's consecration also spoke of the priestly work of mediation. It indicated the high priest's role in obtaining atonement for the nation of Israel and the things they offered to their God (28:38). Though Israel's priests were obligated to make atonement for themselves, that action facilitated their work as intercessors and mediators on behalf of the people. Thus the shoulder pieces that joined the two parts of the ephod had attached to them two onyx stones engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel (28:6-12). Similarly, the high priest's breastplate was set with twelve precious gems representing the twelve tribes (28:15-21). These features, along with the Urim and Thummim, expressed that the priests bore the burdens of the sons of Israel and carried them on their hearts before Yahweh (vv. 22-30; cf. 28:38).

Aaron and all future high priests were also to wear a blue robe under the ephod and breastplate. This robe was engraved with pomegranates on the hem with bells attached between them. These bells would tinkle as Aaron went about his duties in the sanctuary, and God linked this tinkling sound with his being preserved from death (ref. 28:31-35). The text provides no further explanation, and all sorts of interpretations have been proposed.

Some view this passage as pointing to the necessity of the high priest appearing before God in his priestly garb; failing to do so would result in the priest's death. Others have associated the pomegranates and tinkling bells with the sweetness of God's word as it sounded forth. The idea, then, is that the high priest was only to appear before Yahweh "clothed" with His word as the bearer of His testimony. More likely, the bells emphasized the fearfulness of appearing before God. The tinkling sound was intended to provide a constant reminder to Israel that violation of Yahweh's prescription for coming before Him would incur a terrible penalty.

The rest of the priests – initially, Aaron's sons – were to be clothed in similar fashion (28:39-43), but their garb lacked the breastplate and the engraved turban plate that highlighted the high priest's unique work in relation to the sacrifices for atonement (cf. 29:4-9; Leviticus 8:6-9).

- 3) After prescribing to Moses the priestly apparel, the Lord gave him detailed instructions for *ordaining* Aaron and his sons after the completion of the tabernacle (29:1-46; cf. Leviticus 8:1ff). The focal point of the ordination process was the foundational covenant principle of *consecration*. All the children of Israel – Aaron and his sons included – were to understand the significance of the priesthood: Israel itself was a holy nation, but these men were uniquely set apart to Yahweh for His service – service directly to Him in the form of worship, and service on behalf of His people by acting as mediators of the covenant relationship between Father and son.

This principle of consecration is emphasized first in the presentation of Aaron and his sons to Yahweh at the entrance to the tabernacle. They were being delivered to Him, and thus their presentation was marked by ritual washing and clothing in the priestly garments. Those who would minister in the Lord’s presence must be clean and undefiled, but they must also be purged from guilt. For this reason the heart of the ordination process was ritual sacrifice of atonement for sin that would apply first to the priests, but also to the altar defiled by the “guilty blood” that was sprinkled upon it (vv. 10-37). The series of sacrificial rituals were tied to three sacrificial animals: one bull and two rams.

- Under the Law, bulls were the highest form of sacrificial animal and so appropriately served as *sin offerings* for the priests (cf. Leviticus 4:1-3, 16:11). So it was with the process of ordination.
- After offering the bull as a sin offering for Aaron and his sons, Moses was to take the first ram and offer it to Yahweh as a *whole burnt offering* – a fragrant and soothing aroma to Him (29:15-18).
- The second ram was the *ram of ordination* (ref. Leviticus 8:22ff). This ram was to be slaughtered and its blood applied to the extremities of Aaron and his sons – their right ear lobes, thumbs, and big toes – as a symbolic testimony to their entire consecration to the Lord. This ritual was followed by two related rites of consecration: sprinkling the prospective priests and their garments with the ram’s blood, and then taking the holy parts of the ram and placing them, together with some of the unleavened bread and cakes, into the hands of the men and presenting them as a wave offering to the Lord (ref. 29:1-3, 21-24; cf. Leviticus 8:25-30).

The individual significance of these sacrificial rituals together with their order highlights a crucial principle: Those who will come before God and worship and serve Him must be consecrated to Him through a purifying process. This begins with *expiation* (satisfaction of justice due to guilt) which results in *propitiation* (the appeasement of just indignation) leading to *consecration* (reconciliation and establishment of intimacy).

- 4) Lastly, Aaron and his sons were to boil meat from the ram of ordination and eat it as a peace offering in God's presence along with the unleavened bread and cakes (cf. 24:4-11; Leviticus 7:11-15). What remained was to be burned with fire (29:31-34; cf. Leviticus 8:31-32). The entire sacrificial process would be repeated daily over a span of seven days (*seven* being the number of fullness or completion) during which time neither Aaron nor his sons were permitted to leave the tabernacle or remove their priestly garments (29:25-27; Leviticus 8:33-36).
- h. Having concluded his instruction to Moses regarding the priesthood, the Lord summarized it with a postscript that highlighted the priests' fundamental mediatorial role (29:42-46). In the face of His detailed prescription, Moses and the sons of Israel were not to lose sight of the significance of the tabernacle and priestly system: They represented Yahweh's commitment to fulfill His promise to Abraham to be the God of his descendents and dwell with them in the land He pledged to him. The tabernacle was to be His sanctuary, made holy by the presence of His divine glory. There He would make His dwelling above the wings of the cherubim, and from that place He would meet and interact with His elect covenant son. Nevertheless, the encounter between Father and son was to occur at a distance through the appointed priestly mediators.
- i. The postscript attached to the priesthood instruction is paralleled by God's closing statements as He prepared to give Moses the tablets of the covenant. Notably, that summary was concerned solely with the centerpiece of the covenant, namely the **sabbath** (31:17). The sabbath – not merely the weekly sabbath, but the principle of *shabbat* expressed in various sabbatical observances – was the sign of Israel's consecration under the covenant. In this way it built upon circumcision as its predecessor, which also signified consecration to God. Circumcision was the heart of covenant obedience for the Abrahamic household (Genesis 17:1-11); so it was to be with sabbath observance and Israel's righteousness (cf. Isaiah 56:1-7).

Israel's fidelity as Yahweh's devoted son would be epitomized in the observance of *shabbat* in all its expressions. But here God placed the emphasis on keeping the weekly sabbath (vv. 14-15), making clear His reason for doing so: *Among all the sabbath observances, the weekly sabbath was most closely associated with the creational sabbath* (vv. 16-17). This association, so important in the progress of biblical revelation, plays a crucial role here. By linking His sanctuary with the sabbath, God was emphasizing that His presence with His people implicated the principle of *shabbat* as it had defined the Creator-creature intimacy of the first creation. Thus Israel was to regard its future communion with Yahweh in His sanctuary-land – communion defined, established, and governed by the covenant – as a sabbatical existence. Eden had been defined by *shabbat* until estrangement destroyed it. But now divine Father and image-son were reconciled by covenant; God's dominion was once again marked by *shabbat*. For Israel, obedience to the covenant meant living as a consecrated, sabbath people, even as Canaan, representing a kind of restoration to God's garden-sanctuary, was a sabbath land.