

The basis for the Lord's instruction regarding a sanctuary and priesthood was His intention, now formally established by covenant, to dwell in the midst of His people. Yahweh had designated the entire land of Canaan as His sanctuary, but the practicalities of communing with His covenant "son" (further complicated during the period prior to Israel's settling in Canaan) necessitated that He establish a specific dwelling place where Israel could meet with Him. The tabernacle would serve this purpose, being a portable sanctuary designed to accompany Israel throughout its journey to Canaan where it could then be established in a fixed place assigned by God (ref. Deuteronomy 12:1-11).

- c. Appropriately, Yahweh began His instruction concerning His sanctuary by directing Moses to take from the people a contribution of various materials to be used for constructing the tabernacle and its furnishings and providing the sacred trappings for the priests (25:1-7). Among other things, that contribution was to consist of precious metals and exotic fabrics and fine linen – materials not found in the wilderness of Sinai, but brought from Egypt. As the Lord had promised to Abraham centuries earlier, He made the hearts of the Egyptians favorable to the sons of Israel at the time of the Exodus so that they left with abundant possessions (cf. Genesis 15:13-14 with Exodus 3:19-22, 12:35-36). Like a triumphal army – though they had taken no weapon in hand, Abraham's descendents had plundered their oppressors, and now the wealth of Egypt was to be used to build a sanctuary for Yahweh, Israel's conquering King.

The significance of this arrangement may not be immediately evident, but it established a fundamental principle that would be crucially important in the upward movement of salvation history leading to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

In this first instance of building a house for Himself – and in every one to follow after it – the Lord would do so by gathering to Himself the wealth of the nations.

It would be that way with the first and second temples, and so also preeminently with the spiritual house prefigured by all its physical predecessors: Once more, in the fullness of the times, Yahweh would shake the world, gathering in the precious value of the nations to serve as "living stones" for building His ultimate and everlasting sanctuary (cf. Haggai 2:1-7 and Zechariah 6:9-15 with 1 Peter 2:1-10; also 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:17-22).

- d. After issuing His charge to collect various kinds of materials for constructing His sanctuary, the Lord proceeded to instruct Moses in the specific items to be made from them. He began with the *furnishings* of the sanctuary rather than its physical structure, notably moving outward in his enumeration from the inner sanctum – that is, from the Most Holy Place ("Holy of Holies") to the Holy Place outside the veil. The reason is that the Holy of Holies epitomized God's dwelling; if Canaan was Yahweh's holy mountain – His sanctuary, and the tabernacle represented its local expression, the Holy of Holies was the precise place of His presence. It was the holiest site on earth, rendering its furnishings most holy and therefore to be endowed with the greatest honor.

- 1) Beginning, then, in the inner sanctuary, the Lord first described to Moses the construction of the **Ark of the Covenant**. This would be the sole article in the Holy of Holies, and therefore the most sacred of all the tabernacle's furnishings (25:10-22). The ark was to be a box structure made of acacia wood, a dense and tight-grained wood valued for its durability and resistance to insect damage. The wooden panels were to be overlaid on both sides with pure gold with a solid gold molding applied, probably as an ornate rim circumscribing the box at the top. As one of Yahweh's holy things, the ark was to be transported on the shoulders of designated men, and gold rings with gold-overlaid acacia poles were provided for this.

The ark was a five-sided box having a separate cover of solid gold. This cover was known as the *kapporeth*, or "mercy seat." The mercy seat was highlighted by two cherubim bowed toward each other with their wingtips touching. As the ark symbolized the footstool of Yahweh's royal throne (ref. 1 Chronicles 28:2; cf. Isaiah 66:1), so the *kapporeth* represented the place of atonement – the place where the blood of the sin offerings would be sprinkled on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:1-15). In this role, it stood symbolically between God, represented by His glory-cloud (*Shekinah*) over the wings of the cherubim, and the covenant itself, represented by the tablets of the testimony inside the ark (25:17-22). The significance of this in the life of Israel was both obvious and profound:

In the context of its unfaithfulness to the covenant, the mercy seat and its annual ritual conveyed to Israel that divine grace in the provision of substitutionary atonement constituted the mediating agency that bound them as covenant-breakers to Yahweh, their faithful covenant Father-God.

- 2) Moving outside the Holy of Holies, the Lord next described the **Table of Showbread**. It would utilize the same materials as the ark (25:23-30) and it, too, was to be carried with acacia poles overlaid with gold. Because of its function, it was to include various dishes, bowls, jars, and pans made of pure gold. The table would be situated on the north side of the outer sanctuary (the Holy Place) and was designed to hold the "bread of the face," more commonly known as the *bread of the presence*. This consisted of twelve loaves arranged in two rows of six, with the loaves corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel (ref. Leviticus 24:5-9). God commanded that this bread was to be always set before Him, and for this reason it is also called the "perpetual bread" (Numbers 4:7). The first of the priests' weekly Sabbath obligations was its replacement.

Symbolically, it testified in a unique way to God's covenant presence among Israel. His presence was most powerfully represented by the *Shekinah* over the mercy seat in the Most Holy Place, but the same representation in the bread of the presence was to communicate to Israel that Jehovah was their "bread," and therefore their life and sustenance.

“Jehovah, who dwelt in the Most Holy Place between the Cherubim, was the God manifest and worshipped in the Holy Place. There the mediatorial ministry, in the name of, and representing Israel, ‘laid before’ Him the bread of the Presence...The ‘bread’ ‘laid before Him’ in the northern or most sacred part of the Holy Place was that of His Presence, and meant that the Covenant-people owned ‘His Presence’ as their bread and their life.” (Alfred Edersheim, The Temple, Its Ministry and Services)

Furthermore, frankincense was set along the two rows of bread and Edersheim notes its significance as follows: *“...pure incense was placed between the shewbread – for, the life which is in His presence is one of praise; while the incense was burned before the shewbread was eaten by the priests, to indicate God’s acceptance and ratification of Israel’s dependence upon Him, as also to betoken praise to God while living upon His presence. That this ‘Presence’ meant the special manifestation of God, as afterwards fully vouchsafed in Christ, ‘the Angel of His Presence,’ it is scarcely necessary to explain at length in this place.”*

- 3) Yahweh moved next to the **Menorah** (lampstand) that would stand opposite the bread of the presence on the south side of the Holy Place (25:31-40). It was to be an exquisite work of art and craftsmanship, being formed in one piece out of hammered gold. It, too, would have accessories fashioned of pure gold. Moses was instructed to construct the lampstand in the appearance of an almond tree, having six branches off the main “trunk,” each with its own set of bulbs and flowers, for a total of seven distinct lamps. This arrangement and arboreal appearance made an important contribution to the lampstand’s symbolism.

- The first thing to note is the significance of the almond tree imagery. In Hebrew there is a play on words between the noun for *almond tree* and the verb *to watch* (ref. Jeremiah 1:11-12). This linguistic suggestion of watching, considered in relation to the lampstand’s perpetual light, conveyed the idea that, by the light of His presence, Yahweh ceaselessly watches over His people.

- Each branch of the lampstand terminated with a bowl formed to look like an almond blossom. Those bowls contained the oil and wick and so were the source of the menorah’s light. To the person looking at the lampstand, it would appear as if the almond blossoms – which spoke of the promise of new life – were radiant with light. Light and life were thus combined in a powerful image. Vern Poythress observes: *“The tree symbolizes the growth of life. It issues new light in the form of fruit that in turn will give birth to new trees. The tree is truly both a tree of light and a tree of life. The reproductive living power of the tree is in its fruit, that is, the light, which shines on the earth and sustains its growth.”*

As the tabernacle in its entirety symbolized God's presence among His people, so the lampstand pointed to the fact that Israel's covenant Father was also its light and life (Psalm 36:7-9) – a truth that would find its ultimacy in Jesus Christ (cf. Job 33:1-30 with John 1:4, 8:12; ref. also John 12:30-36). The tree imagery of the menorah reminded Israel of the same truth communicated by the symbolism of the tree of life in God's first garden-sanctuary: *Life for the image-son is found in communion with the Father.*

The lampstand's seven lamps were to be kept burning continually, making trimming the wicks and refilling the oil part of the priests' daily responsibilities (Leviticus 24:1-4). This was also a practical necessity because the tabernacle had no windows and was covered with multiple layers of material; its only light came from the menorah. *There was no day or night in the sanctuary – no light of the sun or moon; the radiant light of the lampstand alone provided perpetual illumination of Yahweh's dwelling place and men's presence with Him.* The lampstand thus anticipated the day when, in the consummate sanctuary embracing the whole of creation, there would be no need for external luminaries; that sanctuary, too, was to find its illumination coming from within as the glory of God illumines it and the Lamb stands as its lamp (cf. Revelation 21:22-27, 22:1-5).

God had been Israel's light from the very beginning, causing the sun to shine in Goshen when the rest of Egypt was cloaked in deep darkness. And when He led His people out of the dark night of their bondage, Yahweh had gone before them as their perpetual and faithful "guiding light," leading them ceaselessly and inexorably toward the inheritance promised by covenant to Abraham. By night as well as by day, the light of the Lord's presence illumined Israel's path and directed their steps.

Later in the prophetic writings, this imagery would be used in reference to a greater redemption to come in which men would be led out of the spiritual darkness of sin's bondage and brought into the light of spiritual life and perpetual, covenant union with God (cf. Isaiah 9:1-7, 42:1-16, 49:1-13, 51:1-11, 59:1-60:22; also Micah 7:1-9; Zechariah 14:1-9). This prophetic imagery, drawing as it did upon the Exodus, was to find its fulfillment in Yahweh's Servant, the consummate light of His presence and power (Isaiah 8:5-9:7, 42:1-16, 49:1-12; cf. Matthew 4:12-17; Luke 2:25-32; John 1:1-9, 3:19-21, 6:23-58, 8:12, 9:1-5, 11:1-10, 12:20-46).

This symbolism of light – and, by contrast, darkness – had its origin in the emergence of light in the first creation. God called this light into existence that it should serve as the foundational point of order in a dark, disordered cosmos (Genesis 1:1-5). As the chaotic quality ascribed to the cosmos in its initial creation is epitomized in the idea of darkness, so the ordering of the primordial chaos is associated with the principle of light.

Most importantly, from the point of this initial act of creation the Bible attributes to the opposing principles of light and darkness a crucial and progressive spiritual significance in the upward movement of redemptive history that culminates with the new creation in Jesus Christ. Paul recognized this, and so correlated the cosmic entrance of light at the first creation with the divine illumination of the human soul in the Spirit's new creational work of regeneration (2 Corinthians 4:1-6).

Similarly, as the creation of light was the first act of God on the stage of redemptive history, so the destruction of darkness is seen to be His last act at its culmination (Revelation 22:1-5). In the very beginning light dispelled the disorder of the primeval chaos; at the end of the age the pure light that is God Almighty and the Lamb will finally and forever dispel the darkness of the chaos and disorder of sin and death.

- 4) The last furnishing of the outer sanctuary was the *Altar of Incense*. Notably, God didn't give Moses the prescription for it until He had instructed him concerning the priesthood (30:1-10). The probable reason for this was that the burning of incense most epitomized the priestly work of unending intercession and mediation between Yahweh and Israel.

Like the ark and table, the incense altar was to be constructed of acacia wood and overlaid with pure gold and provided with gold rings and gold-covered acacia poles for transporting it. It would stand in the center of the Holy Place right in front of the curtain that separated the two rooms of the tabernacle. Being located in the closest proximity to the ark, the incense altar was reckoned together with it as "most holy to the Lord" (cf. 30:9-10 with Hebrews 9:4). The altar was consecrated to Yahweh's worship, and so also was the incense to be burned on it; the Lord prescribed it to Moses as an exact blend of ingredients to be dedicated for exclusive use in His sanctuary. It, too, would be holy to the Lord (30:34-38).

Every morning and evening the priests burned the consecrated incense upon the altar, and its fragrance would have filled both rooms. Even between these times of offering, its sweet aroma would have lingered and provided a constant presence in the sanctuary. *The role of the incense altar was to symbolically highlight Israel's communion with Yahweh.* The smoke of its incense – offered up by the priest on behalf of the people and ascending into the Lord's presence – represented Israel's continual prayer by which the covenant son expressed his devotion to and dependence upon His divine Father. Thus the New Testament takes this symbolism and assigns it to the prayers of the saints (Revelation 5:8, 8:1-4). But beyond that, the sweet fragrance of the saints' prayers presupposes the prayers of the One who entered through the veil as forerunner on their behalf; the One whose prayers of intercession and mediation make theirs acceptable (John 17:1ff; cf. Hebrews 3:14-16, 5:1-7, 6:17-20, 7:23-27, 10:19-23).