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FACE TO FACE WITH GOD

A Biblical Theology of
Christ as Priest and Mediator

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Chapter One

WHERE HEAVEN AND EARTH MEET

IN HIS LETTER TO THE HEBREWS, the author contributes significantly to our understanding of Jesus Christ by highlighting his role as a perfect high priest in the heavenly sanctuary. Whereas other New Testament writers concentrate on Jesus' earthly life and especially the life-transforming significance of his death and resurrection, the author of Hebrews focuses on the ascended Christ, taking his readers into the very presence of God in heaven. Exhorting his readers to remain steadfast in their confession, he compares and contrasts the high priestly role of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary with that of the Aaronic high priest in the portable sanctuary that the Israelites constructed at Mount Sinai.

Not surprisingly, many modern readers struggle to comprehend the book of Hebrews because they lack familiarity with the responsibilities of a high priest serving in a sanctuary. To comprehend the details of the exhortation in Hebrews, we need to understand the significance of the tabernacle created at Mount Sinai and the nature of the high priest's role within that portable sanctuary. This takes us back to something initiated by God about 3,500 years

ago, but it ultimately gives us a vital insight into what is happening for our benefit at this very minute in God's heavenly presence.

To appreciate the nature of Christ's ongoing activity in heaven, we must understand first the role of the Aaronic priesthood, appointed by God at Mount Sinai. In this chapter, we shall consider the significance of the portable sanctuary constructed by the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land. Its creation marks a partial restoration of the unique relationship that humans had with God in the Garden of Eden. In subsequent chapters, we shall focus on the nature of the portable sanctuary and the role of the priesthood that is intimately linked to it. By visualizing what happens at the copy of the heavenly sanctuary, we gain an insight into what takes place in the real sanctuary where Christ now serves as our great high priest.

COMING OUT AND COMING DOWN

The creation of the portable sanctuary at Mount Sinai is described in the second half of the book of Exodus. Exodus takes its name from the Greek expression *tēs exodou tōn huiōn Israēl ek gēs Aigyptou* (Ex 19:1), which may be translated “the exodus/departure of the children of Israel from the land of Egypt.” The concept of “exodus” encapsulates well the first eighteen chapters of the book, which record God's deliverance of the Israelites from the control of a tyrannical dictator. This rescue is the greatest salvific event recorded in the Old Testament. However, chapters 19–40 move beyond the “exodus” to have a different focus. At the heart of these chapters is the concept of God's coming down to dwell with the Israelites. This takes place at Mount Sinai, which is proleptically designated the “mountain of God” as early as Exodus 3:1, when Moses first encounters God at the burning bush. Whereas chapters 1–18 record the events that brings the Israelites to the mountain of God, chapter 19 records how the former slaves camp at the foot of Mount Sinai and prepare for God's arrival. This latter event marks the beginning of major new stage in the life of Israel as a nation. From this time onward, they alone of all the peoples on earth have the privilege of knowing God's presence among them. This outcome rests on the covenant that God establishes with the Israelites at Mount Sinai, a covenant that requires the Israelites to give God their exclusive allegiance. In return, God commits to dwelling permanently among the people.

As Yahweh declares to Moses, “I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God” (Ex 29:45-46 ESV). God’s words emphasize that he rescues the oppressed Israelites from Egypt in order that he may reside with them.

The significance of God’s coming to live alongside the Israelites cannot be overestimated. For the first time since Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the opportunity arises for people to experience God’s continuous presence with them on earth. Prior to the making of the Sinai covenant, selected individuals had brief encounters with God (e.g., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob). These were highly significant occasions, but their experience of God’s presence did not last long. At Mount Sinai, something entirely new begins. This explains why so much attention is given to recording the construction of the portable sanctuary where God will live. As he accompanies the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land, God will occupy a tent, like the Israelites. However, his tent is no ordinary structure. The extensive use of gold, silver, and colored fabrics in the manufacture of the tent highlights the royal nature of its occupant; these valuable materials reflect appropriately the glory of the one who inhabits the portable sanctuary.

In the light of Yahweh’s remarkable deliverance of the Israelites from slavery, the portable sanctuary is, as Angel Rodriguez remarks, “a proclamation of God’s immanence, rooted in his loving grace.”¹ God’s willingness to come and reside among the Israelites is a partial return to the intimacy that Adam and Eve experienced with God in the Garden of Eden. They, however, were exiled from God’s presence. The construction of the sanctuary signals a major new development in God’s redemptive activity on earth. Importantly, it also anticipates a much greater exodus in the future, involving all the nations of the world.

For most readers of Exodus, chapters 25–31 and 35–40 lack the dramatic appeal of the rest of the book. Compared to the miracle-filled account of God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (chaps. 1–15) and his guidance of them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai (chaps. 16–18), the instructions for the building of a portable sanctuary (chaps. 25–31) and

¹Angel M. Rodriguez, “Sanctuary Theology in the Book of Exodus,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 24 (1986): 131.

the implementation of these instructions (chaps. 35–40) lack narrative appeal. The dryness of the instructions and their almost word-for-word implementation is relieved briefly in chapters 32–34 by the disturbing account of the Israelites' inappropriate use of a golden idol that threatens to end their special covenant relationship with God.

Importantly, we should be slow to dismiss the account of the making of the portable sanctuary as unimportant merely because we find it monotonous or uninteresting. For the author of Exodus, the many paragraphs devoted to the portable sanctuary are essential, describing the necessary preparations so that God may come to dwell among the Israelites. God's presence in the midst of the Israelite camp marks the climax toward which the story in Exodus moves. Central to this is the construction of the ornate tent and its surrounding courtyard.

Before looking in detail at the construction of the tent and its furnishings, it may be helpful to consider briefly the relationship between chapters 25–31 and 35–40, which respectively record the instructions for the manufacture of the portable sanctuary and their implementation. Several features are noteworthy. First, the order in which items are placed in each section differs. In chapters 35–39, “the sequence of the account of the execution of the work . . . is in logical order.”² The process of manufacture begins with the tent (Ex 36:8–38) and then proceeds to its furnishings (Ex 37:1–29). After this, items for the courtyard are listed (Ex 38:1–20). Finally, the text describes the manufacture of the priestly garments (Ex 39:1–31). In contrast, the order of the instructions in chapters 25–31 reflects the tent's two main functions. The items described in Exodus 25:8–27:19 highlight the tent's role as a dwelling place. Attention then switches in Exodus 27:20–30:38 to the tent's function as a meeting place. Of note are the instructions in chapters 25–31 that contain information concerning the purpose of different items; this information is subsequently omitted in chapters 35–39 because it has no immediate relevance for the process of manufacture. In the rest of this chapter and in chapter three we shall consider further the tent's function as a dwelling place. Its role as a meeting place will be discussed in chapter four.

²Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus 20–40*, vol. 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 309.

Second, the report of the implementation in chapters 35–39 is almost a verbatim repetition of the instructions given in chapters 25–31, allowing for minor changes. While this repetition may turn off modern readers, it achieves two important purposes. First, it underlines that the instructions were carried out with great precision; God’s commands are followed to the very letter. Second, by repeating these details so fully, the narrative emphasizes the importance of the portable sanctuary. As Cornelis Houtman helpfully observes, “YHWH’s instructions are precisely carried out; YHWH wants his house to be built exactly as he has instructed . . . the importance of a matter and the attention devoted to it are directly proportional.”³ The detailed repetition found in chapters 35–39 is in keeping with other ancient Near Eastern temple-building accounts that conform to a distinctive literary pattern in which implementation sections are included after divinely given building instructions.⁴

While instructions for the construction of a portable sanctuary are rare among discovered ancient Near Eastern texts, there is no reason to view such a structure as unrealistic or fictional, as some scholars have suggested. According to Old Testament scholar Richard Averbeck, “There is good evidence for suggesting that the tabernacle-type structure is realistic in the Bronze Age world of the ancient Near East. The biblical account that puts the tabernacle back into the late Bronze Age is not an unrealistic projection of later ideologies and realities back into the Mosaic period.”⁵ Evidence for comparable ancient Near Eastern structures exists.⁶ The portable sanctuary with all its furnishings would have been very substantial. According to Numbers 7:2-9 it was transported in six covered carts, pulled by twelve oxen.

³Houtman, *Exodus 20–40*, 317.

⁴Victor A. Hurowitz, “The Priestly Account of Building the Tabernacle,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105 (1985): 26, argues that the account of the construction of the portable sanctuary in its received form (Ex 25–29; 35–40; Lev 8–10; Num 7) reflects a “standard literary pattern” found in the ancient Near East. He also observes, “Although the tabernacle story may be encumbered by constant repetitions, long lists and seemingly displaced fragments, its overall structure is deliberate, clear and well-ordered” (23).

⁵Richard E. Averbeck, “Tabernacle,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. D. Alexander and D. W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 819.

⁶Cf. Daniel E. Fleming, “Mari’s Large Public Tent and the Priestly Tent Sanctuary,” *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000): 484–98; Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 276–80.

THE SINAITIC COVENANT AND GOD'S PRESENCE

God's commitment to dwell with the Israelites rests on the covenant relationship that is established at Mount Sinai. When God proposes such a relationship, he requires the Israelites to obey him and keep the obligations of the covenant (Ex 19:4-6). Unlike the Egyptian pharaohs, who cruelly subjugated the Israelites against their will, God invites the people to submit themselves voluntarily to his sovereignty. In the light of what God has already done for them, it is hardly surprising that the Israelites willingly enter this relationship, unanimously agreeing to do all that the Lord has said (Ex 19:8; cf. 24:3, 7). Unfortunately, their subsequent actions do not reflect their initial enthusiasm to obey God.

To establish this special relationship, Yahweh speaks directly to the Israelites, setting out the principal obligations of the covenant (Ex 20:2-17); they are now commonly known as the Ten Commandments, although in Exodus they are later designated "the Ten Words" (Ex 34:28 NJB; this translation reflects more closely the original Hebrew text than "Ten Commandments"). God gives further obligations that are mediated through Moses to the people (Ex 20:22-23:33); these are recorded by Moses in a document known as the "Book of the Covenant" (Ex 24:4-7).

By requiring exclusive obedience from the Israelites, Yahweh underlines his claim to be the one and only true God. To distinguish the religious practices of the Israelites from those of other contemporary cultures, God prohibits the people from making idols. Elsewhere, the use of idols was an important component in religious practices because the deity was believed to be present in the idol. Worshipers believed that they encountered their deity in the idol, but the idol itself was not the complete manifestation of the deity. In marked contrast, for the Israelites, God's presence is not located in idols but in a unique sanctuary. The existence of only one sanctuary emphasizes the monotheistic nature of Israelite religion. In other cultures, idols of different gods could be present in the same location. Yahweh, however, prohibits the Israelites from having other gods in his presence (Ex 20:3).

The obligations of the Sinai covenant in chapters 20-23 and the instructions for the manufacture of the portable sanctuary in chapters 25-31 witness to the existence of a single deity and reveal how his presence is to be known.

While some biblical scholars have argued that the accounts of the Sinai covenant and the building of the portable sanctuary were originally unconnected, Exodus 19–40 displays a remarkable unity when understood correctly. Theologically, the present unified account is much richer than the separate parts that make it up. As we shall observe in chapter five, close connections are to be drawn between what happens at Mount Sinai and the rituals associated with the portable sanctuary.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR BUILDING THE PORTABLE SANCTUARY

The detailed instructions for the manufacture of the tent and its furnishings are recorded in Exodus 25–27. Initially, God lists the materials to be used in constructing the tent and everything associated with it (Ex 25:2-9). Yahweh then instructs Moses regarding the manufacture of three items of furniture for inside the tent. The first of these is a gold-plated wooden chest with an ornate lid (Ex 25:10-22). The second item is a gold-plated table (Ex 25:23-30), and the final item is a golden lampstand (Ex 25:31-40). Similar types of furniture could be found in the tents of ordinary Israelites. The lavish use of gold reflects the regal status of the tent's occupant. The three items to be manufactured highlight appropriately that the tent will function as a dwelling. To underline that God resides in the tent, the Israelites are to provide food and drink (Ex 25:29-30) and light (Ex 25:37) day and night.

God's instructions for the making of the two-compartment tent are recorded in Exodus 26. Chapter 27 contains directives that relate to a courtyard that will surround the tent. A curtained fence creates a rectangular courtyard surrounding the tent (Ex 27:9-19). The entrance to the tent faces eastward, as does the entrance to the courtyard. Between these two entrances will stand a large bronze altar, which plays an important role in the cultic activities associated with the portable sanctuary. The instructions for the manufacture of this altar are recorded in Exodus 27:1-8.

GOD'S DWELLING PLACE

To underline that the tent's primary function is to be a dwelling, the Hebrew term *miškān* is used fifty-eight times in Exodus, occurring most frequently

in chapters 26 (sixteen times), 36 (twelve times), and 40 (seventeen times). The noun *miškān* underlines that the tent functions as a dwelling place for Yahweh. Most English versions of the Bible translate *miškān* as “tabernacle,” an old-fashioned word that comes from the Latin *tabernaculum*, meaning a “tent.” Unfortunately, the rendering of *miškān* as “tabernacle” or “tent” is slightly misleading, for *miškān* is best translated “dwelling,”⁷ the translation adopted in the New Jerusalem Bible. The term *miškān* does not simply refer to tents; it may denote other types of dwellings. The related Hebrew verb *škn* comes in Exodus 29:45-46 and 40:35 to denote God’s dwelling among the Israelites (cf. 24:16, where the same verb is used of God’s glory dwelling on Mount Sinai for six days).

Confirmation of the tent’s purpose comes in the final verses of Exodus. After the tent is erected, God’s glory descends on it and remains within it, preventing Moses from entering it (Ex 40:34-35). During daylight a cloud settles on the tent to indicate that God is present within it. At night, the cloud glows with fire, reminding the Israelites that God resides inside the tent. Whenever God wants the Israelites to relocate their camp, the cloud moves from over the portable sanctuary, guiding the people as they journey toward the Promised Land. The brief summary in Exodus 40:36-38 is complemented by a fuller description in Numbers 9:15-22:

On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony. And at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. So it was always: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. And whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out, and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped. At the command of the LORD the people of Israel set out, and at the command of the LORD they camped. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the people of Israel kept the charge of the LORD and did not set out. Sometimes the cloud was a few days over the tabernacle, and according to the command of the LORD they remained in camp; then according to the command of the

⁷See Ralph E. Hendrix, “*Miškān* and *’ōhel-mô ’ēd*: Etymology, Lexical Definitions, and Extra-Biblical Usage,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 29 (1991): 213-23.

LORD they set out. And sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning. And when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out, or if it continued for a day and a night, when the cloud lifted they set out. Whether it was two days, or a month, or a longer time, that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, abiding there, the people of Israel remained in camp and did not set out, but when it lifted they set out. (ESV)

The cloud's association with the portable sanctuary reinforces the idea that God dwells there.

The Jewish scholar Menahem Haran highlights another way in which the tent functions as a divine residence. He observes how the cultic activities associated with the tent are intended to cater for the senses of the divine king.

Taken together, the six regular rites performed inside the tabernacle . . . are at once seen to embrace almost all the human senses, and to cater, as it were, for almost all man's possible needs. The incense provides for the sense of smell, the lamps for the sense of sight, while the loaves of bread are a symbol of the need for food. The bells attract the sense of hearing, the stones on the ephod and the breastpiece awaken the "sense" of memory, and the diadem on the high priest's forehead evokes the "sense" of grace (for even these last two qualities could be conceived, by the ancients, as manifestations of spiritual or "sensorial" activity).⁸

From its furnishings to its rituals, the tent has every appearance of being Yahweh's residence.

Although the evidence for the tent being a divine abode is compelling, some scholars are troubled by the idea of God's presence being restricted to this location. Such unease is evident in this comment by the Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna:

The sanctuary is not meant to be understood literally as God's abode, as are other such institutions in the pagan world. Rather, it functions to make perceptible and tangible the conception of God's immanence, that is, the indwelling of the Divine Presence in the camp of Israel, to which the people may orient their hearts and minds.⁹

⁸Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 216.

⁹Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 158. Sarna comes to this conclusion largely on the basis that when God remarks in Exodus 25:8 and 29:45 about living among the Israelites, he makes no

While Sarna sees the tent as making tangible God's presence within the Israelite camp, he rejects the idea that God dwells in the tent. However, from all that is said in Exodus, its author intends the reader to take literally the idea that the sanctuary is God's abode. This does not mean, as we shall observe, that God's full presence is confined to the tent. Rather, the innermost compartment of the tent is perceived by the Israelites as being connected to a heavenly sanctuary, where God also resides. This link between heaven and earth is supported by the observation that the "ark of the covenant," a gold-plated chest, functions as the footstool of the heavenly throne.

THE FOOTSTOOL OF THE HEAVENLY THRONE

Of the various furnishings manufactured for the portable sanctuary, the ark of the covenant stands apart as exceptional. The gold-plated chest with its distinctive lid is the first item to be listed in the construction details (Ex 25:10-22) and the only item that will be placed inside the innermost compartment of the tent. With good reason Robert Longacre remarks, "This crucial piece of furniture is, in this sense, the living heart of the whole tabernacle and entails the construction of all that accompanies and surrounds it."¹⁰

Although some scholars claim that the chest functioned as a throne, this is highly unlikely.¹¹ According to 1 Chronicles 28:2, King David equates "the ark of the covenant of the LORD" with "the footstool of our God." Other biblical references support the idea that the gold-plated chest serves as the footstool of the heavenly throne (e.g., Ps 99:5; 132:7; Is 60:13; 66:1; Lam 2:1).¹² As other

reference to the tabernacle. See Benjamin D. Sommer, "Dating Pentateuchal Texts and the Perils of Pseudo-Historicism," in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, ed. T. B. Dozeman, K. Schmid, and B. J. Schwartz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 88-90, for a helpful critique of various scholars (e.g., Cross, von Rad, Milgrom) who dismiss the idea that God lived permanently within the portable sanctuary.

¹⁰Robert E. Longacre, "Building for the Worship of God: Exodus 25:1-30:10," in *Discourse Analysis of Biblical Literature: What It Is and What It Offers*, ed. W. R. Bodine (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 31.

¹¹E.g., Willem H. Gispen, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 246, views the chest as God's throne. According to Ronald E. Clements, *God and Temple: The Idea of the Divine Presence in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 28-35, this assumption derives from an unsatisfactory study by Wolfgang Reichel, *Über vorhellenischen Götterkulten* (Vienna: Holder, 1897).

¹²Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel*, 255-57.

ancient Near Eastern texts reveal, footstools were sometimes attached to thrones.¹³ This practice is illustrated in the Chronicler's description of Solomon's royal throne:

The king also made a great ivory throne and overlaid it with pure gold. The throne had six steps and a footstool of gold, which were attached to the throne, and on each side of the seat were armrests and two lions standing beside the armrests, while twelve lions stood there, one on each end of a step on the six steps. Nothing like it was ever made for any kingdom. (2 Chron 9:17-19 ESV)

As a footstool, the "ark of the Testimony" forms the lowest part of a throne that the Israelites perceived as extending from heaven to earth. While the divine king is enthroned in heaven, his feet rest on the golden footstool within the Most Holy Place. Something of this imagery is captured in Isaiah 60:13, which associates God's feet with his earthly sanctuary: "The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the juniper, the fir and the cypress together, to adorn my sanctuary; and I will glorify the place for my feet" (Is 60:13).

By linking heaven and earth, the portable sanctuary functions as an *axis mundi* ("axis of the world"). This reality is reflected in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:30-51; 2 Chron 6:22-39). The temple constructed by Solomon on Mount Zion in Jerusalem replaced the portable sanctuary that was manufactured in the time of Moses. In doing so, it preserved the fundamental structure of the portable sanctuary, performing similar functions. In his prayer Solomon speaks of God's hearing "from heaven" where he resides (1 Kings 8:30, 39, 43, 49; 2 Chron 6:21, 23, 30, 33, 39). Yet Solomon indicates that prayers should be directed toward the earthly temple (1 Kings 8:38; 2 Chron 6:38). In a similar vein, Ronald Clements observes that in the Psalms "we discover that Yahweh's dwelling in heaven, and his presence on Mount Zion are mentioned in the same psalm, without any consciousness of contradiction between the two"¹⁴ (e.g., Ps 11:4; 14:2, 7; 20:2, 6; 76:2, 8; 80:1, 14). This reflects the sanctuary's role as an *axis mundi*.

¹³Choon L. Seow, "Ark of the Covenant," *ABD*, 1:389. He writes, "The cherubim thrones of the sarcophagus of Ahrim and the ivory plaque of Megiddo both show boxlike footstools at the base of the throne. The god El, the enthroned deity par excellence among West Semitic deities, also has a stool (*hdm*, as in Hebrew) on which he places his feet (*CTA* 4.4.29-30; *ANET*; 133)."

¹⁴Clements, *God and Temple*, 68.

When the portable sanctuary is eventually erected, Moses places inside the golden footstool the “terms of agreement” or “testimony” of the covenant that God establishes with the Israelites. For this reason, the chest is sometimes called the “ark of the Testimony” (e.g., Ex 25:22; 30:6; 39:35; Num 4:5; 7:89 ESV) or the “ark of the covenant of the LORD” (e.g., Num 10:33; Deut 10:8).¹⁵ Evidence for storing treaty documents inside a footstool attached to a throne is found elsewhere in the ancient Near East.¹⁶

Many English versions refer to the lid of the ark as a “mercy seat” (e.g., AV, CSB, ESV, NJB, NRSV). Unfortunately, this conveys the mistaken idea that the ark of the covenant functioned as a seat. The lid of the chest is designated a *kappōret* in Hebrew, a term used only of the ark’s lid in the Old Testament. Since the related verb *kipper*¹⁷ is often translated “to atone,” the NIV renders *kappōret* “atonement cover” (cf. NET, TNK). According to Leviticus 16:1-34, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest atoned for “the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been” (Lev 16:16) by sprinkling blood from two different sacrifices on the lid of the chest (Lev 16:14-15). Since the covenant obligations were stored inside the ark of the covenant, it is highly appropriate that atonement for the sins of the people should be made on the lid covering the chest, the footstool of God’s throne.¹⁸

According to some Old Testament passages, God sits or dwells among the cherubim (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chron 13:6; Ps 80:1; 99:1; Is 37:16). This could possibly imply that the ark of the covenant was a seat, for on either end of the lid stood two golden cherubim, facing each other with outspread wings (Ex 25:18-20; 37:7-9). However, since other cherubim were woven or embroidered into the fabric of the inner layer of the tent (Ex 26:1, 31; 36:8, 35), the idea of God sitting among the cherubim does not necessarily require the ark itself to be a throne.

¹⁵Cf. Alan R. Millard, “The Tablets in the Ark,” in *Reading the Law: Studies in Honour of Gordon J. Wenham*, ed. J. G. McConville and K. Möller (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2007), 254-66.

¹⁶Seow, “Ark of the Covenant,” 389; cf. Gispén, *Exodus*, 247.

¹⁷Jay Sklar, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 53, argues that the verb has the dual sense of “to ransom” and “to purify”; cf. Jay Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), 44-79.

¹⁸Millard, “Tablets in the Ark,” 265.

A MODEL OF THE HEAVENLY SANCTUARY

Apart from giving Moses verbal instructions, God also shows him a visual “pattern” (Hebrew *tabnît*) of the portable sanctuary (Ex 25:9, 40; cf. 26:30; 27:8). What Moses sees when he ascends Mount Sinai is debated. On the one hand, some scholars favor the idea that Moses is shown a “construction plan”¹⁹ or “model.”²⁰ On the other hand, some scholars contend that Moses sees the heavenly sanctuary.²¹ Deciding between these alternatives is not easy. The Hebrew term *tabnît* is used in the Old Testament to imply different types of “likeness.” In Joshua 22:28 it is used to show that the altar made in Transjordan was a replica of the altar that the Israelites had on the other side of the River Jordan. The “likeness” was exact in every detail. Sometimes *tabnît* is used to describe how one object bears a likeness to another, as, for example, a photograph bears a likeness to the subject. Psalm 106:20 uses *tabnît* with reference to the golden calf/bull that the Israelites constructed at the foot of Mount Sinai. The idol was in the “likeness” of a calf/bull but made of gold. In Ezekiel 8:10 *tabnît* is used of wall carvings that resemble “all kinds of crawling things and unclean animals.”

Although it is impossible to be entirely certain, it seems probable that Moses saw more than simply a plan or model of the sanctuary that he was to construct. Moses probably saw the heavenly counterpart of the portable sanctuary.²² Those who ascended Mount Sinai with Moses after the sealing of the covenant may also have seen something of the heavenly sanctuary, but from a distance (Ex 24:9-11). This seems likely in the light of references to a heavenly sanctuary that come elsewhere in the Old Testament (Ps 11:4; 60:6; 102:18-19; Is 6:1-7; Mic 1:2). Adopting this interpretation, the author of Hebrews quotes Exodus 25:40, arguing that the sanctuary built by Moses resembles the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 8:5; cf. Acts 7:44, 48-50; Heb 9:11, 24; Rev 11:19).

Regardless of how *tabnît* is understood, Thomas Dozeman accurately remarks, “The construction of the sanctuary will replicate the heavenly temple

¹⁹E.g., Houtman, *Exodus 20–40*, 323.

²⁰E.g., Hurowitz, “Priestly Account of Building the Tabernacle,” 22. For such an example, see 2 Kings 16:10.

²¹E.g., Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 321.

²²E.g., Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 141, who remarks, “It is possible that he [Moses] was shown the earthly sanctuary’s heavenly counterpart.”

on earth and thus allow a holy God to dwell safely in the midst of the Israelites.”²³ Viewed within the larger biblical story, the portable sanctuary is an earthly “type” of a heavenly archetype. However, as the author of Hebrews observes, the tabernacle is only a “copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (Heb 8:5). Building on this observation, it becomes evident that the legislation and rituals associated with the tabernacle are “only a shadow of the good things that are coming” (Heb 10:1). The tabernacle “as a system of prophetic symbols or shadows” points “forward to the coming great reality: the person and work of Jesus Christ.”²⁴ And as we shall observe shortly, the portable sanctuary anticipates a future antitype, when heaven and earth will merge to become one entity.²⁵

THE TABERNACLE AND THE GARDEN OF EDEN

While the construction of the portable sanctuary at Mount Sinai orientates the people’s expectations toward the future, it also reminds them of the past. The Exodus account of the manufacture of the portable sanctuary contains subtle allusions to the Genesis account of creation. Underlying this connection is the idea that God created the earth to be his dwelling place. The opening chapters of Genesis lend support to this idea. According to Richard Middleton,

The world is both a kingdom over which God rules and a cosmic building where a variety of creatures may live fruitfully together and flourish. . . . But is it possible to specify further the metaphor of the world as a cosmic structure? Suppose we press the question, *what sort of building* is God making in Genesis 1? Although not immediately obvious, the unequivocal answer given from the perspective of the rest of the Old Testament is this: God is building a *temple*.²⁶

²³Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 569.

²⁴David W. Gooding, “The Tabernacle: No Museum Piece,” in *The Perfect Saviour: Key Themes in Hebrews*, ed. J. Griffiths (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 71.

²⁵Cf. Barry G. Webb, “Heaven on Earth: The Significance of the Tabernacle in Its Literary and Theological Context,” in *Exploring Exodus: Literary, Theological and Contemporary Approaches*, ed. B. S. Rosner and P. R. Williamson (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 165-66.

²⁶J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), 81 (italics in original).

Although there is limited evidence within Genesis 1 itself to suggest that the earth is created to be God's dwelling place, John Walton suggests that the description of the seventh day of creation, as recorded in Genesis 2:1-3, implies that the cosmos is created to become God's temple. He writes,

On the seventh day we finally discover that God has been working to achieve a rest. This seventh day is not a theological appendix to the creation account, just to bring closure now that the main event of creating people has been reported. Rather, it intimates the purpose of creation and of the cosmos. God does not set up the cosmos so that only people will have a place. He also sets up the cosmos to serve as his temple in which he will find rest in the order and equilibrium that he has established.²⁷

Beyond the opening panoramic view of creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3, various scholars find evidence within the account of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:4–3:24 to suggest that the Garden was intended to be or become a divine sanctuary. According to Gordon Wenham, the first readers of Genesis viewed the Garden as an “archetypal sanctuary”:

The Garden of Eden is not viewed by the author of Genesis simply as a piece of Mesopotamian farmland, but as an archetypal sanctuary, that is a place where God dwells and where man should worship him. Many of the features of the Garden may also be found in later sanctuaries particularly the tabernacle or Jerusalem temple. These parallels suggest that the Garden itself is understood as a sort of sanctuary.²⁸

In support of this claim, Wenham offers the following evidence:²⁹

- The entrance to the Garden of Eden is located to the east and guarded by cherubim; all the entrances to the portable sanctuary are on the east side and the entrance-curtain into the Most Holy Place has

²⁷John H. Walton, “Creation,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. D. Alexander and D. W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 161; cf. John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); M. S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 108.

²⁸Gordon J. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,” *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 9 (1986): 19. Reprinted in Gordon J. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,” in *I Studied Inscriptions Before the Flood*, ed. R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumura (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 299-404.

²⁹Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,” 19-25.

cherubim woven into it (Gen 3:24; Ex 26:31; 36:35; 2 Chron 3:14; cf. 1 Kings 6:23-29).

- The lampstand placed in the Holy Place of the tabernacle resembles a tree, possibly recalling the tree of life in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:9; 3:22; cf. Ex 25:31-35).³⁰
- Genesis 2:11-12 refers to gold and onyx; these and other precious materials are used in the construction of the tabernacle (e.g., Ex 25:7, 11-13; 28:9) and the temple (e.g., 1 Kings 6:20; 1 Chron 29:2) and form part of the clothing of the high priest (e.g., Ex 25:7, 11, 17, 31).
- Parallels exist between the Lord God's walking in the Garden of Eden and his actions linked to the portable sanctuary (Gen 3:8; cf. Lev 26:12; Deut 23:15; 2 Sam 7:6-7).
- The Hebrew expression *lē'obdāh ûlēšomrāh* in Genesis 2:15 brings together the verbs *'abad* ("to serve, till") and *šamar* ("to keep/guard/watch over"). Elsewhere in the Pentateuch this combination of verbs refers to the activities of the Levites in the sanctuary (cf. Num 3:7-8; 8:26; 18:5-6). Adam's role involves guarding the Garden; when he fails to do this, this duty is transferred by God to cherubim (Gen 3:24). Adam, however, is still required to work the ground from which he was taken (Gen 3:23).

The evidence for linking the Garden of Eden with later Israelite sanctuaries is strong.³¹ However, as Block observes, these parallels do not necessarily

³⁰Carol L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah: A Synthetic Study of a Symbol from the Biblical Cult*, vol. 2 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), 169-72. The use of arboreal decorations within the Jerusalem temple also recalls the Garden of Eden. Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven: The History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem* (London: SPCK, 1991), 57, writes, "Solomon built the temple as a garden sanctuary; the walls of the *hekal* were decorated with golden palm trees and flowers, set with precious stones; the bronze pillars were decorated with pomegranate patterns and the great lamp was a stylized almond tree."

³¹A largely overlapping list of parallels is provided by Gregory K. Beale, "The Final Vision of the Apocalypse and Its Implications for a Biblical Theology of the Temple," in *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander and S. Gathercole (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 197-99; cf., e.g., Gregory K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Leicester, UK: Apollon, 2004), 66-80; Gregory K. Beale, "Eden, the Temple, and the Church's Mission in the New Creation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (2005): 7-10; Richard M. Davidson, "Earth's First Sanctuary: Genesis 1-3 and Parallel Creation Accounts," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 53 (2015): 65-89; J. Daniel Hays, *The Temple and*

require the Garden to be a sanctuary.³² It is equally possible that the sanctuaries were thought to resemble the Garden of Eden, recalling the time when humans enjoyed intimate access to God. While the Garden is viewed as a special location, the evidence for God dwelling in the Garden of Eden, or close to it, is weak. Although the Garden is clearly associated with God's presence, the text of Genesis 2–3 says nothing that points conclusively to God dwelling there. Moreover, beyond Genesis 3, God's presence is associated principally with heaven, until he chooses to dwell within the portable sanctuary constructed at Mount Sinai.³³ In the light of the story that unfolds throughout the whole of Scripture, it seems likely that God intended humans to create a holy city, centered on Eden, where God would dwell with people (cf. Is 60:1-22; Rev 20:1–22:5).

CONCLUSION

We began this chapter by observing that the author of Hebrews contrasts the high priesthood of Jesus Christ with that of the Aaronic high priest. In contrasting their roles, the author of Hebrews highlights how the Aaronic high priest serves in a copy of the heavenly sanctuary, whereas Jesus Christ serves in the heavenly sanctuary itself. This contrast rests on how the tabernacle is portrayed in the Old Testament as an earthly model of God's heavenly residence. While the tabernacle resembles the heavenly sanctuary, it is nevertheless only a "copy and shadow" of the real thing (Heb 8:5).

To appreciate the significance of the portable sanctuary that was constructed at Mount Sinai, we need to recall the opening chapters of Genesis. Although the first human couple enjoyed a special intimacy with God in the Garden of Eden, this idyllic situation was wrecked when they succumbed to the temptation of the serpent and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Their subsequent expulsion ended their opportunities to meeting

the Tabernacle: A Study of God's Dwelling Places from Genesis to Revelation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 20-27.

³²Daniel I. Block, "Eden: A Temple? A Reassessment of the Biblical Evidence," in *From Creation to New Creation: Biblical Theology and Exegesis*, ed. D. M. Gurtner and B. L. Gladd (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 3-29.

³³Genesis 18:20-21 speaks of God's coming down to investigate the wickedness of Sodom. Similarly, Jacob's vision at Bethel also points to God's residence being in heaven (Gen 28:12).

with God in the verdant setting that he had created for them. With their expulsion from the Garden, subsequent generations of humans found themselves alienated from God. A partial restoration of the harmonious divine-human relationship that initially existed in the Garden of Eden occurs when God graciously comes to dwell among the Israelites in the sanctuary manufactured and erected at Mount Sinai. As we shall see in our next chapter, this sanctuary is highly significant, for it not only mirrors the heavenly sanctuary where God dwells but also anticipates a future time when God's glory will fill the whole earth.

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