

A Court for the King

Exodus 24:1–40:38

The Treaty Is Sealed

When Moses returned from the smoking mountain and recounted the covenant stipulations, the people responded enthusiastically. Yahweh's pyrotechnics had impressed them, and they were back in their Reed Sea mood. So Moses wrote down the whole treaty and called the document "the Book of the Covenant."

The next day he held a covenant ratification ceremony in which men from each of the tribes sacrificed bulls to express their commitment. Moses sprinkled half of the blood on the altar he had built to symbolize that Yahweh forgave any past wrongdoing and accepted the offering. Then when he had reread the Book of the Covenant and the people had sworn allegiance, he sprinkled the rest of the blood on them. "This is the blood of the covenant," Moses pronounced solemnly. It was a tangible expression that this commitment was sacred and serious. To break faith after being sprinkled with the sacrificial blood would mean incurring bloodguilt (equivalent to murder) and Yahweh's judgment.

After that, Moses took Aaron, Aaron's two oldest sons, and seventy clan elders partway up the mountain. It was customary for the parties of a covenant to seal it with a meal, so the

seventy-four men ate and drank the covenant meal in Yahweh's presence. Then Moses took Joshua and climbed farther up the mountain, leaving Aaron and an elder named Hur in charge until they returned. The cloud of glory settled over the mountain, looking like a consuming fire from the Israelite camp. Moses and Joshua disappeared into the cloud for forty days.

A Royal Tent

Yahweh spent most of this forty days giving Moses minute instructions for constructing, furnishing, and staffing a royal tent for Himself. To get His people used to the idea that He was their King, He Who Is Actively Present, He would have a dwelling in the center of their camp like that of a great sheikh. The tent was called a "tabernacle" (dwelling place) and a "sanctuary" (holy place).

It was an elaborate affair, as befitted royalty. It stood about forty-five feet long by fifteen feet wide by fifteen feet high. It consisted of a sectionalized wooden framework covered by four layers of curtains (embroidered linen on the inside, then woven goat hair, then ramskin leather, then sea-cow hide). On the inside it was divided into two compartments: the Holy Place (about thirty feet by fifteen feet) and the Most Holy Place (about fifteen feet by fifteen feet). The Most Holy Place was thus a perfect cube.

Linen, ramskin, and sea-cow hide were all precious fabrics. Likewise, the embroidery and even the loops to hang the curtains were of blue, purple, and scarlet thread; these were royal colors because the dyes were extremely expensive (they came from shellfish and the eggs and carcasses of a special kind of worm). The tent frame was covered with gold, which was considered a perfect, royal metal because it was uncontaminated by other metals. The furnishings inside the tabernacle were also of gold.

The bases that supported the structure were of silver, made from the money that ransomed each firstborn male Israelite. Yahweh had declared that each firstborn in Israel belonged to Him because He had spared them in the last plague on Egypt. Rather than sacrificing the firstborn, the Israelites had to ransom them with silver money. Thus Yahweh's tent stood on the people's ransom price.

Beginning with the base of the tabernacle's entrance, the furnishings outside the holy tent were of bronze. This is a harder metal, more suited for heavy use. It is also an alloy, so it is by definition not pure. It symbolized judgment for sin.

The tabernacle was erected on the west side of a surrounding courtyard measuring about one hundred and fifty feet by seventy-five feet. All around this courtyard, except for an entryway some fifteen feet wide on the eastern side, was a curtain almost eight feet high.

The furnishings of Yahweh's tent all symbolized important truths He wanted to impress on His people. In the Most Holy Place was a hardwood chest covered in gold called the "ark [chest] of the covenant." Its pure gold lid was flanked with two golden cherubim (angels) like the winged sphinxes that often adorned the arms of Near Eastern thrones. For this "atonement cover" was the throne of Yahweh. The ark was fitted with rings so that it could be carried on poles like a litter when the camp moved.

The Holy Place contained a table upon which bread would be laid as an offering of Israel's produce, a seven-branched lampstand to represent Yahweh's glory reflected in the people's holy lives, and an incense altar where the burning fragrance would symbolize the people's prayers going up to God. All this was of gold.

In the courtyard stood an altar of bronze-covered wood seven and a half feet square and four and a half feet high—large enough to burn whole bulls and rams. There was also a bronze basin in which one had to wash before entering the tent or offering a sacrifice.

The people were supposed to supply the fabric, wood, and metal to construct all of this out of their own love for Yahweh. They would also continually provide the bread, oil, incense, and animals as their gifts.

To staff this royal residence, Aaron and his sons would be set apart as priests—Yahweh's personal servants. They would offer the sacrifices, fill the lamp, bake the bread, and so on. No one but a priest would be allowed in the tabernacle, and a priest had to be of the prescribed family, consecrated with certain intricate

rites, and dressed in precisely defined garments. All of this had just one point: to impress on Israel Yahweh's utter holiness.

Yahweh spelled all of this out to the last detail, including the names of the men who would oversee the construction. In some mysterious way, the tabernacle reflected the spiritual realities of Heaven.

Then He sent Moses back down the mountain with these instructions plus two tablets of stone. On each tablet, Yahweh had inscribed a copy of the ten basic covenant commands. It was customary to make two copies of a covenant document, one for each party. Each party usually put his copy in the presence of his god. Therefore, both copies of Israel's covenant with the Lord were going to be kept in the ark of the covenant.

The Price of Impatience

Meanwhile, the Israelites were getting bored and concerned waiting for Moses. They finally decided that he had disappeared forever and that they would have to choose another leader and invoke another god to get them from Sinai to Canaan. So they persuaded Aaron to melt down the gold jewelry they had taken from the Egyptians and cast it into an idol in the form of a calf. (To stockbreeders, young bulls represented strength and virility, so they were standard fare for idols.) Then the people held a typical pagan festival: animal sacrifices, food and alcohol, dancing, and debauchery.

Moses was at that very moment on his way down the mountain. Yahweh warned him what was going on and said, "These people are like stiff-necked oxen who won't respond to a pull on their yoke. I'm going to wipe them out and let you father a nation who will plow my way."

Moses blanched. He had been serving as mediator between the King and His subjects in liberating them and giving them their laws. Now he found himself having to beg the Sovereign to forgive their treason. He reminded Yahweh of His great plan and His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and he implored the Lord to relent.

This was just the response Yahweh wanted from Moses. The covenant mediator was supposed to stand between Him and

His people to seek mercy when the people broke the agreement. Yahweh's justice demanded that He punish rebels, but He always preferred to be merciful. (His children were no worse than their warped father Adam, and He loved them.) There was something — as yet secret — about a mediator's intercession (standing between) that satisfied the required justice and allowed mercy.

Moses sighed his relief, then set off to find Joshua and get back to camp. But when he saw the orgy, he lost his temper, smashed the tablets, and threw the calf into the fire. He could get nothing out of Aaron but excuses, so he waved him away and shouted, "Whoever is for Yahweh, come to me." His kinsmen, the Levites, rallied to him. He ordered them to start killing revelers until the party stopped.

The next day Moses interceded again, offering to give up his own life if Yahweh would forgive Israel. But not even Moses' life was a sufficient substitute. Yahweh had to send a plague through the camp because the price of rebellion had to be proportional to the nearness of the Holy One. But in His mercy He spared as many people as possible. Then He ordered them to set out for Canaan without Him.

The people were stunned. Abandoned by Yahweh? They wept while Moses strode into the temporary meeting tent, where he and the King had a frank exchange.

"If You're not going to go with us," Moses stated bluntly, "then don't send us. How will we be any different from any of the dozens of roving tribes? We can't accomplish Your plan without You, and it's doubtful we'll survive."

Yahweh liked the way Moses never minced words. He and Abraham had been friends like that; Abraham had respected Him, but he was never afraid to say what he felt and ask for what he cared about (see Genesis 18:16-33). For friendship's sake, Yahweh granted Moses' plea.

Moses followed with a personal request: he wanted to really see Yahweh. So the next day found Moses on the mountain again with a replacement pair of stone tablets. The glory descended on the peak, and Yahweh let Moses see His "back" (whatever that meant), for no one could see Yahweh's "face" and survive. As He passed by, Yahweh proclaimed His identity:

"[Yahweh, Yahweh], the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7)

Moses fell on his face and worshiped. Yahweh reaffirmed that He had forgiven Israel by restating the covenant terms, but He warned emphatically that the people must not make treaties with the Canaanites but must obliterate their debauched religion. If Israel compromised, she would be sucked into the seductive cults and commit spiritual adultery against her Husband. And Yahweh, "whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exodus 34:14).

When Moses descended this time, his face shone with the reflection of God's glory. It was so bright that people could not look at him unless he wore a veil.

Chastened by the plague, the Israelites were only too glad to contribute their wealth and their time to construct Yahweh's dwelling. When it was finished, the glory enveloped and filled the tent so that not even Moses could enter it. From then on, when the cloud lifted off the tabernacle and began to move across the desert, Israel knew it was time to pack up and move out. And when the glory halted, they made camp, set up the tent, and watched in awe as the cloud settled in. Everything—their diet, their moving and stopping, their whole lifestyle—was dictated to them as infants by the awesome Parent who hovered nearby, eager to see them grow up.

A Generation Lost

Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Living with a King

Yahweh was now enthroned right in the midst of His subjects. But He still could not wander among them as He had in Eden; He had to confine His undiluted presence behind four layers of curtains and a screened courtyard. His holiness would scorch such polluted people if He lowered the barriers. Yahweh wanted them to be holy with Him—set apart from the world order that years of the Serpent's influence had perverted—so that He and they could enjoy each other face to face.

But their haste to lapse into religious lechery, greed, and power-lust showed they still had only the vaguest idea of the true God's character, values, and expectations. Even at their current distance, Yahweh would continually have to send plagues to satisfy the requirements of His holiness. So besides the laws that governed what we might call "secular" life, Yahweh gave Israel a detailed system of rituals to illustrate graphically what holiness meant. The message was that as citizens of Yahweh's Kingdom, they had no secular life; all of life was sacred, set apart for His service.

The main act of worship was animal sacrifice at the taber-