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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 13: COVENANT AND TABERNACLE

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapters 3-5, “Leviticus” to “Deuteronomy” in *Discovering the Bible*.

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read Exodus chapters 24-31 carefully before reading the following background information.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

Beginning in Exodus 24 we find the establishment of God’s covenant with ancient Israel and a detailed description of the tabernacle that was to be constructed as a portable sanctuary. Archaeological background helps illuminate both of these important aspects of Israel’s relationship with God.

The Covenant:

Skeptics once claimed that Moses (most likely to be dated c. 1300-1200 BC) could not have recorded the words of the covenant that the Bible explicitly says he wrote down (Exodus 24:4) because they presumed that Semitic peoples did not have phonetic writing until long after Moses’ time. However, due to archaeological discoveries made in recent years, we now know that the phonetic writing of Semitic languages existed from well before the time of Moses – perhaps as early as 1900-1800 BC. Interestingly, it is in Sinai and its surrounding regions that the earliest known writing of this type (the “proto-Sinaitic” scripts) has been found. Every alphabet in the world is ultimately derived from these early scripts, which were far simpler than earlier complex writing systems (such as Egyptian hieroglyphs) and allowed most people to be able to read.

In the last unit we saw that the structure of the Ten Commandments shows similarities with ancient covenant treaties, and we will look at those treaties more closely now because the whole covenant God made with Israel was given in that way – like legal agreements between a great king who promised his support and protection to a group of people who promised to be loyal to him.

The form of such ancient Near Eastern covenants changed somewhat through time, but in the period in which Moses lived they included six essential aspects. These may all be seen in the following examples from a Hittite document (the Treaty of Muwatallis II with Alaksandus of Wilusa, c. 1280 BC) and from the reaffirmation of the Mosaic covenant in the Bible in the book of Deuteronomy (see Note 1):

An Example of Near Eastern and Biblical Covenant Parallels

1. Introduction of the Covenant-Maker –

“These are the words of Muwatallis ... King of the land of Hatti” (§ 1, I. B 1–2)

“These are the stipulations, decrees and laws Moses gave” (Deuteronomy 4:45).

2. Historical Prologue –

“When, in former times my grandfather attacked the land of Wilusa, he conquered [it]” (§ 2, I. B 2–8)

“When they came out of Egypt ... They took possession of ... the land” (Deuteronomy 4:45, 47).

3. Stipulations –

“You, Alaksandus, shall protect the [king] as a friend!” (§ 6, I. A 65–7)

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 6:5 ESV).

4. Publication of the Covenant –

“let someone read this tablet which I have made for you three times each year” (§ 19, III. 73–4)

“you shall read this law before them in their hearing” (Deuteronomy 31:11).

5. Invocation of the Gods –

“The Sun god of heaven ... the Sun goddess ... the Weather-god” (§ 20, IV. 1–30)

“the LORD, the God of your ancestors” (Deuteronomy 27:3).

6. Blessings and Curses –

“If you ... break the words of this document ... then may these oaths destroy you and ... your seed from the face of the earth. But if you keep these words, then may the thousand gods ... keep you” (§ 21, IV. 31–46)

“If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands ... All these blessings will come on you... if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands ... all these curses will come on you” (Deuteronomy 28:1-2, 15).

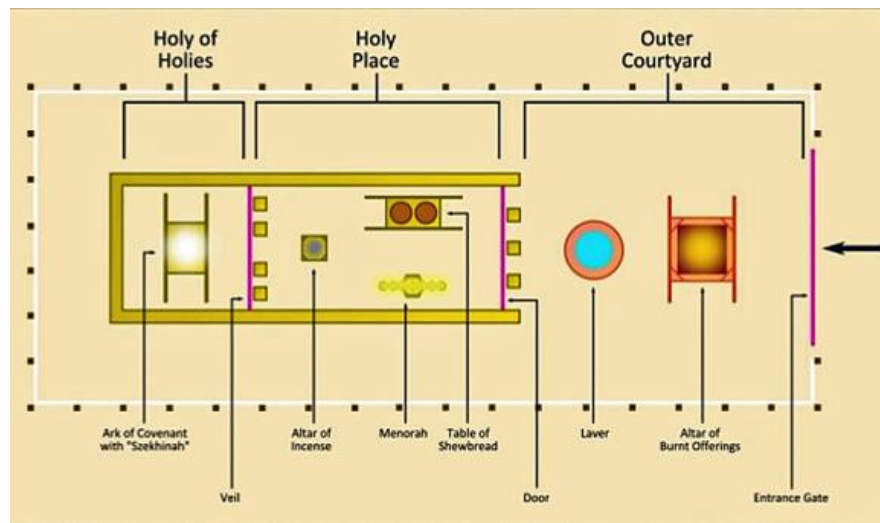
These parallels are not just interesting similarities – they help us understand many of the things said about the covenant in the Old Testament and help us recognize the significance of the language used in its description. Other language used in the Mosaic covenant is based on ancient contracts of a more limited and intimate type – for example, marriage and adoption contracts or covenants. In the marriage contracts of some of the cultures of the biblical period, the groom stated, “She is my wife, and I am her husband;” and in adoption contracts the father might announce “I will be his father... he shall be my son.” These were not just affirmations of the obvious, but key statements sealing the covenant or contract – and are virtually identical in form to the words we find God speaking to Israel “I ... will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 26:12; etc.) in adopting Israel (Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 8:5; 14:1).

When these and many other similarities are brought together, we see that God clearly used the legal forms of Moses’ day in order to make a binding relationship with his people – just as we saw he did centuries earlier in establishing his covenant with Abraham. Being aware of the legal forms and their significance can give us a far better appreciation of what the covenant meant to the people of that time.

The Tabernacle:

The tabernacle, together with its sacrifices and other rituals, was much more closely related to the covenant than might at first appear. The relationship between them is seen in several ways. Firstly, we should realize that rather than being a place of communal worship like modern religious buildings, the tabernacle functioned like the temples of the world at that time – as an enclosed, private sanctuary for the presence of God and as an ongoing expression of Israel’s covenant responsibility to him.

The tripartite format of the tabernacle – of outer courtyard, “holy place,” and inner “most holy place” or “holy of holies” (see the illustration below) – followed the standard form of Egyptian temples. In both cases, each of the three areas was progressively more restricted and the innermost area was accessible to the high priest only. In both cases the outer area was open to the sky and the inner areas become progressively more private and darkened. Both Egyptian temples and the tabernacle were designed with an east-west (sunrise to sunset) orientation that stressed the continuous and ongoing nature of the daily sacrifices and the maintaining of relationship with the gods/God.



Plan of the Wilderness Tabernacle. Image: Slideshare

Many items of the furniture of the tabernacle also reflect those of Egyptian temples, from the altar of burnt offerings (of an Egyptian pattern) and the laver (like the purification pool in many Egyptian temples), to the innermost shrine. In Egypt, this is where the god lived; and in the case of the tabernacle, the innermost portable shrine – the ark of the covenant – also directly signified God’s presence with Israel. In Egypt, winged deities guarded shrines in the same manner that the cherubim guarded Israel’s ark.

There are many other similarities between Israel’s tabernacle and the actual temples and mythological homes of the gods of surrounding nations at that time (see Note 2). These parallels show that although God was revealing himself to Israel as being completely different from the gods of that world, he also provided a means for Israel to covenant with him and worship him in ways that were familiar to them.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Exodus 24 describes the formal acceptance by the people of Israel of the covenant God had initiated with them. This occurred in a number of steps. First: “Moses went and told the people all the Lord’s words and laws, they responded with one voice, ‘Everything the Lord has said we will do.’ Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said” (vss. 3-4). After the wording of the covenant had been explained to the people and their verbal acceptance of it had been recorded, Moses then erected an altar and twelve stone pillars as the next part of the covenant initiation ceremony. The altar and pillars represented the presence of God and the twelve Israelite tribes, respectively. Such stone pillars were commonly set up in the ancient biblical world as a memorial or witness to agreements (Genesis 31:45-54; etc.).

Next we are told that Moses read out the “book of the covenant” and the people responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey” (vs. 7). As we saw above, Near Eastern treaties from the same period of history likewise included a public reading of the text of agreements made. In Israel’s case, the people’s response is interesting as on the surface it seems to repeat the same idea: 1) to do everything God said, and 2) to obey. However, the Hebrew is literally “to do everything ... and to *hear*” and means “to do everything and to understand.” It has sometimes been said that this order reflects a truth of life – we often have to do what God tells us before we understand the reasons for the command.

Exodus tells us that after sacrificing animals and splashing their blood on the altar, “Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words’” (vs 8). As splashing the blood on all the people would be difficult if not impossible, the blood splashed “on the people” was probably on the twelve stones that represented them (the other half being splashed on the altar representing God). In any event, the sealing of the covenant with blood in this manner was an important final step in the process and helps us to understand why the New Testament tells us the new covenant was “sealed” with the blood of Christ (Luke 22:20).

After the covenant-making proceedings were concluded, we are told that Moses spent forty days (see Note 3) on Mount Sinai being instructed by God in all the details of how to build the tabernacle that was to be the portable sanctuary for God (Exodus 25:1-9). Nearly all the information on the structure of the tabernacle is repeated in the final chapters of Exodus. This is because the earlier chapters (Exodus 25-31) describe God’s instructions about *how* to construct the tabernacle, and the later chapters (Exodus 35-40) describe the tabernacle’s actual construction. There may be an important lesson in what may seem like simple repetition in these chapters – that our fulfillment of God’s commands must be exactly, not approximately, what he tells us. Nevertheless, more chapters are devoted to the tabernacle and the details of its construction and functioning than to any other subject in the five books of Moses – showing the great importance of the portable sanctuary, beyond just its physical details.

Each part of the tabernacle’s construction symbolically showed something about God or mirrored an aspect of the creation. To take a very simple example, when we look carefully at the materials from which the different areas of the structure were to be made, we find that the items of the outer area were made of copper, in the next area of silver, and in the holy of holies (the innermost chamber symbolizing God’s presence) they were made of gold. In this way the increase in beauty and worth the closer one moved toward God’s presence was taught to the Israelites in a practical but unforgettable way. In a similar manner, many scholars believe that the menorah, the seven-branched candlestick situated along the southern wall in the darkened inner part of the tabernacle, represented the seven moving luminaries visible to the naked eye (the Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) that cross the southern sky, giving continuous light, night and day, that symbolized the eternal light of God himself.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

Christianity teaches that God’s covenant with ancient Israel was a foreshadowing of the new covenant that would be established in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 8:8-13). While most Christians understand this, it is very common for believers to therefore disregard the Mosaic or old covenant as purely Jewish in nature and extent. But in reality, the old covenant has much to teach us – both of itself, and in terms of our understanding the new covenant. For example, the fact that the old covenant involved the adoption of ancient Israel to “sonship” (Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 8:5; 14:1; etc.) is stressed in the New Testament

by the apostle Paul (Romans 9:4) and is the basis of what he says about Christian adoption as sons and daughters of God (Romans 8:15; Ephesians 1:5; Galatians 4:5).

At its heart, in fact, the old covenant is not greatly different from the new in terms of its goals and purposes, but as Christians we tend not to see that because of the physical rituals that might seem to obscure the similarity. Yet if we look closely, Moses himself stressed the underlying essence of the old covenant that was of greater importance than the physical rites it involved. Take, for example, the words of Moses regarding the role of circumcision and the greater purpose that underlay it: “The LORD your God will circumcise *your hearts* and the hearts of your descendants, *so that* you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live” (Deuteronomy 30:6, emphases added).

It is easy to presume that the old covenant stressed law and the new one stresses love, but verses like this show that within the old covenant, love was precisely what God called Israel to (see also Deuteronomy 6:5; 10:19; etc.). All the moral commandments within that covenant simply clarified how love should be expressed. The covenant administered through Moses called for life-encompassing love, and Christians today are not given a different *goal*, but the help of Jesus Christ in fulfilling the same one.

The tabernacle also tied directly to the goal of love in the old covenant because God gave the people the opportunity to express their love in their sacrifices and also in the tabernacle’s construction: “Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give” (Exodus 25:2). Normally, God gives commandments we must keep whether we want to do so or not. But when it comes to our giving to God – even if it is commanded – God wants only what we *want* to give to him in an expression of our love. The love that God called for was, of course, reciprocal. And we even see that in the construction of the tabernacle: “They are to make a sanctuary for me so that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8 CSB). We would expect this verse to read, “They are to make a sanctuary for me so that I may *dwell in it*” – but God’s desire was not for somewhere to live, but somewhere for his presence to be manifested among the people he loved.

Israel met God at Sinai in a tangible manner, but his people could not stay there – they were called to move on – and the tabernacle became the place where the nation’s encounter with the divine could take place on a regular basis. It was made to house not just the presence of God, but also his ongoing revelation of himself to them, as they traveled to the promised land.

* Note 1: Note that the citations from Deuteronomy are from various parts of the book. The same is true of the citations from the Hittite document. The essential elements of covenants of this type might have other material interspersed between them in the ancient texts – they just needed to be present in the document for the covenant or contract to be valid. However, in both the biblical and other ancient documents of this type, the essential elements almost always occur in the same order.

* Note 2: For example, in ancient Canaanite texts the dwelling place of the chief Ugaritic god is frequently said to be a tent, and the term used for his dwelling was *mashkan* which is almost identical to the Hebrew word for the tabernacle: *mishkan*. The deities of several Near Eastern societies were said to have such portable tent-shrines or tabernacles

*Note 3: The number forty is frequently used in the Old Testament to represent the completion of an approximate period of time – for example, a generation (Genesis 25:20) or the rule of a judge (Judges 3:11). The frequency with which this number is used and the lack of specific close numbers such as thirty-eight or forty-three indicates that forty was often used to show a general rather than a precise period of time.

REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

What types of Near Eastern covenants or contracts does ancient Israel's covenant with God resemble?

What are three ways in which the tabernacle symbolized the ongoing passage of time?

Write a short paragraph summarizing the main underlying theme of the Mosaic covenant.

Looking Below the Surface:

God told the Israelites they were to be different from the world around them (Deuteronomy 14:2). Considering that many physical aspects of the covenant he gave them and the tabernacle he instructed them to build were similar to those of the cultures of the world in which they lived, what must God have meant by the uniqueness he wanted his people to have?

Everyday Applications:

The Israelites' everyday lives were affected in many ways by the covenant God made with them. How does the fact that Christians believe they have a new covenant with God affect our everyday lives?

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