

Exodus 30-31

These chapters will bring to conclusion the plans for the design, support, and consecration of the tabernacle along with examining some concluding issues.

The first additional item needed for the tabernacle is a second altar. This is the altar of incense. Unlike “**the altar**” which was to be used for animal sacrifices, this altar is used only for the burning of incense. It is to be made of gold and have four horns just as “the altar.” What is interesting about this altar is that it is used twice daily, morning and evening at the same time as the lighting of the candelabras. While it has been speculated that this incense would help offset the smell of burning animal flesh, Kass argues that the smoke coming from the incense is a reminder to the priests that they enter and leave God’s presence through a cloud of smoke, just as Moses does on the mountain. This smoke then would be a reminder that the priests are just priests and not gods themselves.

The second item discussed is the half shekel which each male over the age of 20 must give when they come to be registered as a “ransom” for their lives. The connection with the altar of incense is that both of these (altar and half-shekel) are tied to ransom/atonement. Just as a drop of the blood of the annual atonement offering is dabbed on the altar of incense, this half-shekel is to atone for the sin of registering/counting the people. Why is it a sin to register/count the people? There are three possibilities. First, counting is a preparation for war, and so one is atoning for the killing that will take place. Second, counting reduces every man going to war as no more than a number, an interchangeable “thing” so one is atoning for dehumanizing God’s creatures. Third, counting shows a lack of trust in God, that perhaps God has not provided enough men to meet the challenge, so one is atoning for not trusting God. Note that everyone, rich or poor, gives a half shekel. This not only equalizes all those involved in the offering, but it also makes all interdependent.

The third item discussed is the bronze basin. This is simply used by the priests to ritually prepare themselves to meet God. It is one more way in which the priests are reminded that they are about to encounter and serve the holy.

The fourth item discussed are the anointing oil and incense. This oil and incense are to only be used for holy things (priests, tabernacle, and incense to God). Again, these are a reminder that the priesthood and tabernacle are separate spaces in which God is encountered and so they ought to be anointed and treated as such. This will help the priests to remember that they are involved in a sacred act and it will remind the people that there is a sacred space in which God dwells.

The story now shifts to three concluding concerns: who will construct/create the tabernacle, does the sabbath still matter and how is Moses to remember all of this. First, the tabernacle will be created by men (Bezalel and Oholiab) who have been gifted by God for this work. In other words, the tabernacle and all its beauty are not created by human ingenuity, but by Godly gifts. This will prevent those who create it from taking excessive pride in their work. Also, it allows these men and their co-workers to be co-creators with God (like Noah) in God’s saving work.

Second, the sabbath remains the most important reminder of the covenant. Even with all the Tabernacle beauty and holy functionality, it is the sabbath that is the “sign forever” between God’s and God’s people as a mark of the covenant. Though in the past, sabbath has been linked to freedom from Egypt (people are not to be worked like slaves), here it is a sign that humans, who are made in God’s image, should be able to rest like God rested.

Finally, there are the stone tablets on which all these laws and building plans have been written by God. Thus no one can change or alter them. They are God’s words to the people.

Reflections: The primordial sin of human beings is idolatry; meaning we pretend to be gods, or at least as wise as God. The instructions in this section of Exodus are intended to prevent idolatry. They are all reminders that there is a gulf between humans and the divine, even when the divine dwells with us. This reminder might be useful for human beings in our current age when we believe that we can speak for God without humility; when we believe that we can save ourselves; when we treat God as a “buddy” and not the divine; and when we believe that what we have accomplished is solely our doing.

Questions:

1. How do you separate the sacred/holy from ordinary life?
2. Has Jesus changed your understanding of this separation?
3. How do you maintain your humility and give God at least partial credit for your accomplishments?