

## SANCTUARY THEOLOGY IN THE BOOK OF EXODUS

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The book of Exodus is the first OT book that mentions the Israelite sanctuary. This book provides us not only with precise information with respect to the sanctuary's physical structure and furniture, but also with basic information on its significance.

The present study proposes to take an overview of several important theological motifs that emerge in connection with the ancient Israelite sanctuary as portrayed in the book of Exodus. Although various of these aspects have already been noticed by other researchers, my hope herein is to bring together certain significant elements in such a way as to broaden our understanding of the ancient Hebrew concept of the meaning of the ancient Israelite sanctuary.

At the outset, it is appropriate to state that the various elements we shall consider all have a bearing upon, and contribute to, an overarching theological concern related to the OT sanctuary/temple: namely, the presence of Yahweh. Moreover, the book of Exodus is foundational for a proper understanding of this basic motif, as it describes how the people of Israel were miraculously delivered from Egyptian slavery by Yahweh, and how, by his grace, they became a holy nation under his leadership. He entered into a covenant relationship with them, and gave them the precious gift of his own presence.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The theology of the presence of God is a very important one in the OT. Among significant studies relating to it are the following: Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York, 1978); R. E. Clements, *God and Temple* (Oxford, 1965); Baruch A. Levine, "On the Presence of God in Biblical Religion," in *Studies in the History of Religions* 14, *Religions in Antiquity* ed. J. Neusner (Leiden, 1968), pp. 71-87; W. Brueggemann, "Presence of God, Cultic," *IDB*, Supp. Vol., ed. Keith Crim (Nashville, Tenn., 1976), pp. 680-683. Brueggemann provides further bibliographical references.

### 1. *Redemption as the Background and Basis for the Israelite Sanctuary*

In the book of Exodus, a key text concerning the sanctuary is 25:8—"And let them make me [Yahweh] a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." This divine command forms the link between the first twenty-four chapters of the book and the final fifteen chapters.

The preceding material in Exodus may actually be divided into two sections: chaps. 1-18 and 19-24. The first eighteen chapters describe the plight of the Israelites in Egypt, their deliverance from Egypt in the Exodus, and their journey to Sinai. Thus, the redemption feature lies at the very heart of this section of the book, for Yahweh had heard Israel's cries in Egypt (3:7-8) and now had delivered them from the house of bondage (20:1). As a result of that prior goodness on the part of Yahweh—that redemptive act in delivering Israel from bondage in Egypt—the covenant between Yahweh and his people was entered into at Sinai. Chaps. 19-24 in Exodus give details concerning this event.

The purpose of the redemption was a continuing freedom—a freedom which included the right to worship. When Moses had been instructed by Yahweh in the theophany earlier at Mt. Horeb, the divine command had been, "You and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, we pray you, let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice [*zābah*] to the Lord our God'" (Exod 3:18, RSV; cf. 5:3, 8:27-29, and 10:25).<sup>2</sup> Pharaoh was also told that the Lord wanted the Israelites to be free in order for them to hold a feast to him in the wilderness (Exod 5:1; cf. 8:20 and 10:9).<sup>3</sup> It is clear that Pharaoh understood what was

<sup>2</sup>Except for individual words and short technical phrases, the English renditions herein are from the RSV.

<sup>3</sup>The three reasons for the Exodus given by Moses (to sacrifice, to serve the Lord, and to hold a festival) are closely related. The act of sacrificing could refer particularly to the covenant sacrifices mentioned in 24:4-5 (see R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* [Downers Grove, Ill, 1973], p. 72); the act of serving the Lord, or worship, includes the offering of sacrifices, but also expresses the idea of Yahweh's lordship over Israel (see Foster R. McCurley, *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers: The Proclamation Commentaries* [Philadelphia, 1979], p. 113); the holding of a feast to Yahweh probably refers to the joyous procession from

being asked, for one of his suggestions was to have the people offer their sacrifices in Egypt (8:25; cf. 5:17; 8:8; 10:7, 8, 11, 24). To this suggestion, Moses replied that in order for the Israelites to offer sacrifices to Yahweh, complete freedom—away from the Egyptians—was indispensable (8:26-27).<sup>4</sup>

That freedom finally came through the redemption experience of the Exodus, in which the Passover lamb became instrumental and symbolic (Exod 12). It was this new freedom that made it possible for Israel to enter into a covenant relationship with Yahweh at Sinai (chap. 19)—with Israel as Yahweh's people and Yahweh as Israel's God. In short, redemption lay at the very foundation of the covenant relationship which bound together the ancient twelve-tribe Israelite federation and which, according to the records, was in fact the beginning of the entity that was to become the Israelite nation. In Exod 19:6, the significance of this new entity in its covenant relationship with Yahweh is expressed as its being a "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation."

It is significant that only after the description of the Exodus from Egypt and the covenant at Sinai does the command come from Yahweh to "let them make me a sanctuary" (Exod 25:8). God had manifested himself in the Exodus, he had appeared on Mt. Sinai (Exod 19), and now his instruction is that a sanctuary be built so that he might dwell among his people.

## 2. *Yahweh's Closeness to His People*

In the statement of Exod 25:8, the verb translated "dwell" is *šākan*, which means "to tabernacle, to encamp."<sup>5</sup> Each Israelite

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Egypt to Sinai which culminates in the offering of sacrifices (on the meaning of the term *hāgag*, see B. Kedar-Kopfstein, "חג *chagh*," *TDOT* 4: 201-213; and also J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1971], p. 90).

<sup>4</sup>Moses' answer to Pharaoh was a very polite one. He did not want to offend the Egyptians by sacrificing to Yahweh animals which the Egyptians considered sacred (see W. H. Gispen, *Exodus*, trans. Ed van der Maas [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1982], pp. 93-94; J. Coert Rylaarsdam, "The Book of Exodus," *IB* 1:901; George A. F. Knight, *Theology as Narration: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1976], p. 65). What Moses was really asking for was freedom to worship.

<sup>5</sup>See Frank M. Cross, Jr., "The Priestly Tabernacle," *BAR* 1 (1961): 224-226; cf. W. Michaelis, "*skene*," *TDNT* 7: 369-372.

had a tent; now the Lord also expressed a desire to dwell in a tent in the midst of Israel.

Throughout the ancient Near East in general, sanctuaries/temples were built for the gods, and were considered to be the earthly dwellings of the gods.<sup>6</sup> The image of the god was placed in the temple as a symbol of the presence of the deity. As a matter of fact, the god was considered to be somehow present in his image.<sup>7</sup> The gods lived in temples mainly because they had some basic needs which man was supposed to satisfy. They especially needed food, which was provided for them by means of sacrifices.<sup>8</sup> If an individual cared for the deity, it was said that the deity would also provide and care for the well-being of the individual. Indeed, the basic relationship established between the individual and his god was determined by the principle of *do ut des*, "I give that you may give."

In Israel the situation was completely different. Yahweh's decision to dwell among his people was not motivated by any physical necessity. The sacrifices were not food for Yahweh. In fact, when the Israelites later adopted the pagan concept of sacrifices, the Lord rejected their offerings and sacrifices (cf. Ps 50:7-15).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>See Helmer Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Philadelphia, 1973), pp. 27, 77; O. R. Gurney, *The Hittites* (Baltimore, Md., 1952), p. 149; Harold H. Nelson, "The Egyptian Temple," *BAR* 1 (1961): 147; G. Ernest Wright, "The Temple in Palestine-Syria," *BAR* 1 (1961): 172.

<sup>7</sup>Wright, p. 170, states: "In all ancient temples the proof of the deity's presence was his statue, which somehow was thought to house his essence. In neither Egypt nor Mesopotamia did religious leaders, at least, believe that the statue *was* the god, or that it confined him. Nevertheless, he was believed to be *in* the statue." For a discussion on the image of the god in Babylonian religion, see A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago, 1964), pp. 184-187.

<sup>8</sup>E. P. Dhorme, *La religion Assyro-Babylonienne* (Paris, 1910), pp. 267-272; Giuseppe Furlani, *La Religione degli Hittiti* (Bologna, 1936), pp. 292-293; Ringgren, pp. 81-82; T. H. Gaster, "Sacrifices and Offerings, OT," *IDB* 4: 149-150.

<sup>9</sup>There are some passages in which the sacrifices are called food for the Lord (Lev 3:11, 16), or bread of God (Lev 21:6, 8, 17, 21; cf. Num 28:2); and it is even said that Yahweh smelled the pleasing odor of the sacrifices (Lev 1:9, 13, 17). Some OT scholars find in such expressions "a relic of the ancient belief that the sacrifice actually nourished the God" (e.g., C. R. North, "Sacrifice," in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson [New York, 1950], p. 206); but also they are often willing to recognize that those expressions are not to be taken in a literal sense (cf., e.g., Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Religious Institutions* [New York, 1961],

In the Hebrew sanctuary, the Israelites could not give anything to Yahweh in order to enrich or bribe him. Instead, it was really Yahweh who was the giver. His presence among them had enriched Israel to the point where they were provided with a religious and national identity (Exod 33:16).

In summary, the theological significance of Yahweh's tabernacling with his people in their wilderness encampment means that God was not a wrathful being to be propitiated, like the gods of the surrounding nations, but was rather a loving God who should be worshiped and who had an intimate concern for the welfare of his people. The sanctuary is, therefore, a proclamation of God's immanence, rooted in his loving grace.

### 3. *God's Transcendence Safeguarded in the Sanctuary*

Not only was the sanctuary to reveal God's immanence, however, but it was also to safeguard his transcendence. Such a combination of immanence and transcendence was manifested when God came down upon Sinai to make the covenant with his people. Various investigators have noticed a parallel between God's appearance on the mountain and God's manifestation in the sanctuary subsequently.

With respect to the experience at Sinai, as soon as the people arrived there, the Lord commanded them to get ready for the meeting with him. The Israelites were to consecrate themselves and to wash their garments (Exod 19:10). On the third day Moses was to bring them out of the camp to meet God (vs. 17).<sup>10</sup> The people

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p. 449). Sometimes the expressions are taken to be, in the words of George Buchanan Gray, "petrified expressions preserving the forms of once living but long dead beliefs" (*Sacrifices in the Old Testament* [New York, 1925], p. 22); or they are, according to Robert J. Daly, metaphors to indicate God's acceptance of the sacrifice (*The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* [Philadelphia, 1978], pp. 21-22). Cf. also Werner H. Schmidt, *The Faith of the Old Testament: A History*, trans. John Sturdy (Philadelphia, 1983), p. 129, who states: "The understanding of sacrifice as feeding God is still to be heard in some expressions . . . , but had long been given up as a conscious intention."

<sup>10</sup>The expression *liqra* ʾ<sup>l</sup> (RSV, "to meet") could function not only as an infinitive but also as a preposition, "toward" (Brown-Driver-Briggs, *Lexicon*, p. 896). In both cases, the idea of the meeting of two persons is present (cf. Brevard S. Childs,

prepared themselves for the appointment, and “on the morning of the third day” Mt. Sinai was “wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire” (vss. 16-18). Although Yahweh and his people were to meet, the people themselves actually were not to have access to the mountain: “And you shall set bounds for the people round about, saying, ‘Take heed that you do not go up into the mountain or touch the border of it’” (vs. 12). Sinai became holy because of God’s presence, and it was fenced in so as to avoid any violation of its sanctity by the Israelites.<sup>11</sup>

An altar was also built at the foot of the mountain (Exod 24:4), to which only certain young men, selected by Moses from among the people, could go to offer sacrifices (vs. 5). Access to the mountain itself was limited to Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel (vs. 1), who could go up a certain distance on the mountain only after the covenant had been ratified (vss. 6-9). There they would worship the Lord “afar off” (vs. 1), and participate in the covenant meal. While there, they saw God (vss. 10-11)—or perhaps more particularly, the place where the Lord was standing (vs. 10).<sup>12</sup> Moses alone could ascend all the way up the mountain, near to Yahweh (vs. 2), where the glory of Yahweh was manifested in a special way.<sup>13</sup> He went up there to get the tables of stone containing God’s law (vs. 12).

The similarity of arrangement here with that of the subsequent tabernacle is striking. (See the illustration on the facing page.) The fence around the mountain, with an altar at the foot of the mountain, would correspond to the court of the sanctuary with its altar of burnt offering; the limited group of people who could go up to

*The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* [Philadelphia, 1974], pp. 341, 343).

<sup>11</sup>Cole, p. 147, states: “The area of the mountain itself was ‘sealed off’ by some kind of markers. Since the mountain was holy . . . , then anything or anyone that touched it would also become ‘holy’ or devoted to God. For a living creature that meant sacrifice, which, in turn, meant death.” The verb *gāḥal* (RSV, “set bounds”) means “to establish a border.” Here it refers to the boundary of a cultic area (see Magnus Ottosson, “גָּחַל *gēbhāl*,” *TDOT* 2: 363).

<sup>12</sup>See Rylaarsdam, p. 1018; Childs, pp. 506-507.

<sup>13</sup>The biblical text seems to suggest that Moses and Joshua went up together (24:13). But according to 24:15-18, Moses alone “entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain.”



a certain point on the mountain would correspond to the priests of the sanctuary, who could enter into the first apartment or "holy place"; and the fact that only Moses could go up to the very presence of Yahweh would correspond to the activity of the high priest, who alone could enter into the presence of Yahweh in the inner apartment of the sanctuary, or "most holy place."<sup>14</sup>

The theological implications of these structural parallels should not be missed. First of all, as indicated above, the ancient Israelite tabernacle was to be a perpetuation of the Sinai experience. Indeed, the very statement about the "glory of the Lord" settling on Mt. Sinai (24:16) uses the Hebrew term *šākan*, "settled" (or more appropriately, "tabernacled"). However, Yahweh did not intend simply to tabernacle on Mt. Sinai. He was leading the Israelites to the land of Canaan, in accord with the promise he had made to the patriarchs (Exod 3:16-17), and he desired to travel with them. The original connection between Sinai and the tabernacle was recognized in accounts of the later Hebrew experience and in Hebrew poetic literature. For instance, we find in the Pentateuch clear affinities between cultic theophanies in the tabernacle and the one on Sinai (see Exod 40:38 and Lev 9:23).<sup>15</sup> The same holds true for the descriptions found in the Psalms concerning the sanctuary as the place where God reveals himself: Expressions from the Sinai theophany are also used in a number of instances there (cf., e.g., Ps 50:2-3; 18:8-16; etc.).<sup>16</sup> Brevard Childs has pointed out that "what

<sup>14</sup>Rylaarsdam, p. 1018, writes, "Moses is asked to come up to God, to enter what in the temple was known as the holy of holies." Knight, p. 159, states that "Moses enters into the mystery, just as does the High Priest in later days, when he enters the Holy Place in the Temple." G. Henton Davies, "Tabernacle," *IDB* 4: 503-504, has established the same connection between Sinai and the tabernacle that I have indicated, as Jacob Milgrom, in *Studies in Levitical Terminology* 1 (Los Angeles, 1970): 44-46, has especially noticed that Mount Sinai "is the archetype of the tabernacle."

<sup>15</sup>This has been especially noticed by Manuel Oliva, "Interpretación teológica del culto en la perícopa del Sinaí de la Historia Sacerdotal," *Bib* 49 (1968): 345-354. Cf. also Ronald de Vaux, "Ark of the Covenant and Tent of Reunion," in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (New York, 1971), p. 146; and Victor P. Hamilton, "שָׁכַן (*shākan*) dwell, tabernacle," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago, 1980), 2: 926.

<sup>16</sup>Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, trans. Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia, 1962), finds the different theophanic allusions mentioned in the Psalms to



happened at Sinai is continued in the tabernacle"; and in the words of R. E. Clements, God's presence in the sanctuary causes the Sinai theophany "to be repeated in Israel's cultic life."<sup>17</sup>

A second theological implication, contingent on this first one, is that of Yahweh's desire to be present with his people wherever they are. It is his desire to remain accessible, in a covenant relationship. Thus, the ancient Israelite tabernacle becomes also an extension of the covenant experience of Sinai, in which the transcendent God has become immanent.

But, as already noted, this very extension of the Sinai experience in the tabernacle structure and liturgy also safeguards the fact that God is transcendent. In a sense, he is both accessible and at the same time inaccessible. That is to say, he is present with the congregation in their midst, but it is only through a group of carefully selected persons that the congregation itself has access to him (Exod 28:1; 29:1-46). Although present in the sanctuary, his manifestation to the congregation itself is only through the cloud and fire (cf. 19:9; 16:10). Also, the very concept of *kābôd*—specifically, of God's "glory"—is a clear testimony in Exodus of God's being both immanent and transcendent. The *kābôd* is the splendor, or the brightness, which testifies of God's presence among his people.<sup>18</sup> It is also his majesty—that which he "possesses in His own right," a "kind of totality of qualities which make up His divine power."<sup>19</sup>

be related to the Sinaitic theophany. On pp. 28, 29, 38-42, he discusses a number of phrases which have theophanic motifs. He considers the cultic theophany to be at the heart of his hypothetical Covenant Festival (p. 38).

<sup>17</sup>Childs, p. 540, and Clements, p. 22. Jörg Jeremias, *Theophanie: Die Geschichte einer alttestamentlichen Gattung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1965), denies that Yahweh's theophany at Sinai played any significant role in the cultic theophanic traditions of the OT (cf. also his "Theophany in the OT," *IDB*, Supp. Vol., pp. 896-898). Yet, the fact remains that in the book of Exodus in its canonical form, there is a clear connection.

<sup>18</sup>Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, trans. David E. Green, 2d ed. (Atlanta, 1978), p. 80; W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, 2 (Philadelphia, 1967): 32.

<sup>19</sup>Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York, 1958), p. 79.

In this respect, God's glory is inaccessible to human beings (Exod 33:18-23), who can see only some of the outwardly visible aspects of this glory—for example, its brightness (Exod 24:17). As pointed out by W. Eichrodt, the manifestation of God's glory in the sanctuary testifies of a "real entry of the transcendent God into the realm of the visible without, however, thereby prejudicing His transcendence."<sup>20</sup>

We should remember, furthermore, that while Yahweh's glory tabernacled in the sanctuary, his real and permanent abode was in the heavens. Whenever the OT refers to God's heavenly abode, it uses the verb *yāšab* (literally, "to sit down"). Yahweh "sits down" (*yāšab*) in the heavens, but "tabernacles" (*šākan*) among his people on earth.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the God who meets with Israel in the *ʾohel mōʿēd* ("tent of meeting") is in reality the transcendental Lord of the universe, who dwells in the heavens.

In considering the Sinai-sanctuary correspondences, we should note here one further significant item: namely, the concept of "meeting" or "having an appointment" with Yahweh. Before the Exodus from Egypt, Yahweh had indicated to Moses at the theophany at

<sup>20</sup>Eichrodt, 2: 32.

<sup>21</sup>On the distinction between *šākan* and *yāšab*, see Cross, pp. 226-227; and Clements, pp. 116-117. The problem of the divine transcendence and the sanctuary is addressed in a special way by Solomon during his prayer for the dedication of the Temple. Although he built a house for the Lord "to dwell in for ever" (1 Kgs 8:13), he is willing to raise the difficult question: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee [Yahweh]; how much less this house which I have built!" (8:27). The solution to this problem offered by Solomon is found in what is frequently called "name theology"—Solomon's temple as "the place of which thou [Yahweh] hast said, 'My name shall be there'" (8:29). In Hebrew thinking, the name of a person represented the essential nature of the person. Yahweh had a name by which he could be invoked, and that name had been entrusted to Israel (see H. Bietenhard, "Name *Onoma*," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [hereinafter *NIDNTT*], ed. Colin Brown [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1976], 2: 648-656). Israel can call upon the Lord and he will answer: "It is not another mediating god who is present in the 'name of Yahweh,' but Yahweh himself, and he alone" (Zimmerli, p. 78); it is Yahweh revealing himself, making himself accessible to his people (see Eichrodt, 2: 41). What Solomon is stating is that in spite of God's transcendence, God is present in the temple in his name (see Roland de Vaux, "Le lieu que Yahvé a choisi pour y établir son nom," in *Das ferne und nahe Wort*, Festschrift Leonhard Rost, ed. Fritz Maass [Berlin, 1967], pp. 219-228). On the theology of the name, see also Jacob, pp. 82-85; and H. Bietenhard, "Onoma," *TDNT* 5: 255-258.

the burning bush that when Moses had brought the people out of Egypt, he would serve God upon "this mountain [Horeb]" (Exod 3:12). That appointment was met at Sinai, where, as we have noted, Israel entered into a covenant relationship with Yahweh. Now, however, the meeting place is the sanctuary: "There I will meet [*yā<sup>c</sup>ad*] with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory" (29:43). The verb *yā<sup>c</sup>ad* means in this verse "to have an appointment." And thus, the sanctuary has become the *place*, or *space*, where the transcendental God comes to meet with his people.

#### 4. *Divine Dynamic in the Sanctuary*

God's tabernacling in the sanctuary was not a static matter, but was dynamic in meaningful activity for Israel. The very fact that the sanctuary was to be built "in the midst" (*b<sup>e</sup>tōk*) of the Israelite encampment identifies it as the heart of the camp—for which, and from which, all activity evolved between God and his people.

The sanctuary was the place where God revealed his will. Just as from the "most holy place" on top of Mt. Sinai God proclaimed the Decalog, so from the sanctuary the covenant code was given to Moses (Exod 20:21-23:33). That covenant code, as well as the Decalog, was to remain in the sanctuary, in the inner apartment or "most holy place," within the ark of the covenant. From that ark, the Lord would continue to reveal his will to the people of Israel (25:22).

But the sanctuary was also the center from which Yahweh ruled as King or Lord over the world. The fact that Yahweh had chosen to dwell among the Israelites might seem to suggest that he was going to rule over only Abraham's descendants. However, there was a divine movement or outreach from the Hebrew sanctuary to the world at large. Already Yahweh had defeated the Egyptians in order to deliver and redeem his people from their bondage in Egypt; and in Exod 15:3 he is described as "a man of war" who fought in behalf of his people.<sup>22</sup> He had desired that his people reach Canaan

<sup>22</sup>Concerning the interpretations and problems relating to Exod 15, see the bibliographies and discussions in Childs, pp. 240-253; and Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Kitchener, Ontario, 1980), pp. 46-60, 185-186.

(cf. 15:17), and the nations of Canaan were afraid of that glorious and powerful God (15:14-15). Now, from the sanctuary his power reached far beyond the boundaries of that holy abode, as Yahweh would take away the land from the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, and would give it to Israel (cf. 3:8 and 23:23). Thus, from the sanctuary Yahweh's presence and power reached out to encompass the nations of the world.

Inasmuch as Yahweh fought for his people, the sanctuary became for them the central locus from which he protected them, redeemed them, blessed them (20:24) and guided them (cf. 40:36-38).<sup>23</sup> In short, for the Israelites the sanctuary was the source of their life as a nation, representing the fulfillment of the covenant promise that God would dwell among the people of Israel and would be their God (29:45).<sup>24</sup>

### 5. *The Center for Worship*

The converse side of the fact that Yahweh's presence and activity in behalf of his people were centered in the sanctuary was the fact that the sanctuary became for the people also the center of worship. As already noted in sections 1 and 3 above, a major issue Moses put before Pharaoh while the children of Israel were still in Egypt was the need for worship of Yahweh; and Yahweh had even prior to that made an appointment with Moses concerning a meeting at Mt. Horeb. But as we have also noted (mainly in sections 2 and 3), Yahweh descended from the mountain to make his presence available in the tabernacle that moved along with the children of Israel on their journey to Canaan. That central tabernacle was now, therefore, the place where God would meet with his people. The very terminology that we have noted earlier—the verb *yā<sup>c</sup>ad* (“to have an appointment”) and *ʔohel mō<sup>c</sup>ēd* (“tent of meeting”)—indicates the same fact.

The sanctuary was for the Israelites, above all else, the place where they went to discover God's will for them. Even the priest's regalia gave answer at times to specific questions which the wor-

<sup>23</sup>See Levine, pp. 72, 83.

<sup>24</sup>Childs, p. 541.

shiper might have (28:30), and the sanctuary was the place where instruction with respect to the *torah* was given for the people (25:22).

### 6. *The Sanctuary and the Sin Problem*

In its origin, the sanctuary had nothing in common with sin. It was to be God's holy dwelling, where his redeemed people would come to meet with and worship him. Sin, on the other hand, separates human beings from God. In a sense, it might be said that sin and the sanctuary are therefore, in essence, mutually exclusive.

The book of Exodus illustrates this point from an experience of the Israelites—an experience that, in turn, carries us to the manner in which the sanctuary and its services came to deal with the problem of sin. While Moses was at the top of Mt. Sinai, the Israelites broke the covenant that had already been ratified, by worshipping the golden calf. From the mountaintop God witnessed what Israel was doing, and “the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves’” (32:7).

We find here two important concepts. First, Israel has separated itself from God. God refers to them as “your [Moses'] people.” They belong to Moses, who had brought them up out of Egypt. The covenant relationship with Yahweh had now been violated by the people. Second, the people have “corrupted” (*šihēt*) themselves. The Hebrew verb *šihēt* is applied in Lev 22:25 to animals which, because of some physical defect (see the preceding verses) could not be used as sacrificial victims. They could not be brought to the sanctuary. Also in that same verse *šihēt* is used in synonymous parallelism with *mûm*, a term which in Lev 21:17-23 designates priests who, because of physical defects, could not officiate at the sanctuary. The point to notice here is that the people of Israel as a whole now have a moral defect that separates them from God. They cannot come to the sanctuary, for they have rejected God, and thus have become like a defective animal or a disqualified priest, unable to come into God's presence.

Since God was already dwelling among the Israelites, there appeared to be only one solution for the situation: “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may

burn hot against them and I may consume them'” (Exod 32:9-10). God's presence was about to consume (<sup>ʿ</sup>*āḫal*) the people of Israel because of their sin. When God had appeared to Moses in the midst of the burning bush, it was not “consumed” (*ʿāḫal*; 3:2).<sup>25</sup> The bush had been sanctified by the Lord's presence, but that was not Israel's experience now. Sin was found in the people, and the Lord was ready to consume them through his presence. Indeed, Israel had become, like the non-Israelites, separated from God.

As the account in the book of Exodus continues, Moses interceded for Israel before Yahweh, and a second alternative solution was suggested to Moses: “I will send an angel before you, . . . but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you in the way” (33:2-3). Yahweh was thus going to withdraw his presence from among the sinful people. He would remain faithful to the promise made to Abraham by sending his angel to lead Israel in its journey to Canaan, but Yahweh himself would not accompany them.<sup>26</sup> The tent of meeting that served as a temporary place of worship was placed a considerable distance from the camp (33:7).<sup>27</sup>

Moses continued to intercede. His request was for a third solution to Israel's apostasy—namely, forgiveness (32:30-32; 33:12-16). He knew that forgiveness was costly, and was even willing to offer himself in atonement for Israel.<sup>28</sup> Yahweh accepted Moses' intercessory pleadings to forgive Israel, but the basis for the atonement was not in Moses' giving up his life. That atonement, as indicated in Exod 33:19, was based exclusively on Yahweh's own graciousness (*ḥānan* = “be gracious”) and compassion (*riḥam* = “have compassion on”).

<sup>25</sup>See Knight, p. 186.

<sup>26</sup>The angel mentioned in 23:20 is Yahweh himself, while in 32:34 and 33:2 “the Angel is not Yahweh. Instead Yahweh sends his Angel; for Yahweh himself has withdrawn his presence from Israel's midst” (Knight, p. 193; cf. Gispén, p. 233).

<sup>27</sup>The nature of this tent has been the cause of much debate and speculation, but is beyond the scope of our discussion here. For some of the differing views, see Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, I (New York, 1962): 234-238; Clements, pp. 36-39; de Vaux, “Ark of the Covenant,” pp. 136-151; John A. Scott, *The Pattern of the Tabernacle* (Ann Arbor, Mich., University Microfilms, 1966), pp. 277-308; Hyatt, pp. 259-264; R. W. L. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32-34* (Sheffield, Eng., 1983), pp. 63-66, 171-177; and Childs, pp. 590-593.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Childs, p. 571; Knight, p. 190.

Now the covenant could be, and was, renewed. Moses ascended Sinai and witnessed there a very special theophany. This time Yahweh proclaimed from his most holy place his willingness to forgive his people for their iniquity (<sup>c</sup>*āwôn*), rebellion (*peša<sup>c</sup>*) and sin (*ḥaṭṭā<sup>3</sup>āh*), while yet punishing the high-handed sinner (34:6-7). Once more Moses interceded before the Lord, asking Yahweh to “go in the midst of us, . . . and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thy inheritance” (34:9). God’s response was one of covenant renewal (“Behold, I make a covenant” (34:10), and thus Israel was once again God’s people, with the covenant promise re-established: “I will dwell among you.” Sinai had now become the place of atonement when estrangement had occurred.

In light of this background, the sanctuary too, came to be seen not only as the meeting place for Yahweh with his redeemed people, but also as the place of atonement. In other words, it was now manifest that God was willing to deal with the sin problem from his dwelling, and the sanctuary thus became the meeting place for Yahweh and repentant sinners. The mystery and costliness of God’s forgiveness are partially revealed through the sacrificial system described in detail in the book of Leviticus.<sup>29</sup>

It can be said that God’s desire to be among his people was so strong that he was ready to pitch his tent amidst “their uncleannesses” (Lev 16:16). Forgiveness was available for the sinner at the sanctuary of God. Yahweh, in his graciousness, had decided not to remove the sinner from his presence, but rather to remove the sin. Thus, God and the forgiven sinner, who was now no longer “corrupt” (*šihēl*), could remain together.

<sup>29</sup>See A. Manual Rodríguez, *Substitution in the Hebrew Cultus* (Berrien Springs, Mich., 1979), pp. 75-260. It is to be recognized, of course, that the offering of sacrifices and the concept of divine forgiveness were not new at Sinai, as the record in the book of Genesis amply demonstrates. What was new was the incorporation of these into a new and broader context—namely, into the experience of the recently constituted Israelite federation. Both Sinai and the sanctuary were, in the first instance, places for communion of this covenant community with their divine Redeemer—rather than being settings for forgiveness and atonement. However, the sin problem that was manifested in the golden-calf episode revealed that there was need, too, for forgiveness and atonement at the very place where God most visibly and directly met his people. Hence, at Sinai at that time, God added this dimension necessary for restoring the communion with him which sin had broken—a dimension which was then naturally perpetuated in the sanctuary, as well.

### 7. *Built According to the "Model"*

In the book of Exodus, considerable detailed instruction is given to Moses concerning the construction of the tabernacle and its furniture. This information came to Moses in two forms: (a) Orally, the Lord told Moses what he wanted and what materials were to be used (chaps. 25-31); and (b) through a vision, Yahweh caused Moses to see the "model" (*tabnîṭ*) of the tabernacle (25:9, 40; 26:30; 27:8). The term *tabnîṭ* (RSV, "pattern") is somewhat difficult to translate. The Koehler-Baumgartner *Lexicon*, for instance, gives as many as eight different meanings: "original, prototype, copy, duplicate, model, image, something like, architect's plan."<sup>30</sup> The term *tabnîṭ* could denote either the original from which a copy is made, or could indicate the copy itself.

The question remains, however, as to the nature of this *tabnîṭ*. There are about five different interpretations: (1) an original miniature model; (2) an architect's plan; (3) a miniature model which is a copy of an original; (4) an architect's plan which is based on an original; and (5) the original itself, in this case the heavenly sanctuary.<sup>31</sup> In most of the references to *tabnîṭ* in the OT there seems to be an indication of a solid object, not an architect's plan.<sup>32</sup> It would not be unusual, therefore, to find the term being applied in Exodus to a solid or a three-dimensional object.

It seems most probable that what Moses saw was either the heavenly sanctuary archetype itself (i.e., the original) or a miniature three-dimensional model of it. Several considerations point in this direction: First, the mentality in the ancient Near East envisioned the earthly dwelling of the gods as corresponding structurally with their heavenly abode.<sup>33</sup> Second, and of more significance, the OT itself indicates that in heaven there is a temple where

<sup>30</sup>Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, 2d ed. (Leiden, 1958), p. 1018.

<sup>31</sup>For a discussion of these different interpretations, with bibliographical references, see Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture* (Berrien Springs, Mich., 1981), pp. 372-374.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 376.

<sup>33</sup>Rylaarsdam, p. 1021, writes, "The notion of a heavenly model for temples, cult objects, and laws is universal in the ancient Near East." See also Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* (New York, 1978), pp. 172-173. We find the same concept in the Canaanite religion; see E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine*



Yahweh dwells.<sup>34</sup> When the people pray in the earthly sanctuary, God hears their prayers in his heavenly sanctuary (cf. 1 Kgs 8:30). When the psalmist, in his distress, prays to God, God hears from his heavenly temple and descends from heaven to help his servant (Ps 18:6, 9-10). Elsewhere in the Psalter, as well as in the prophetic books, we find further references to God's heavenly temple (e.g., Pss 11:4; 60:6; 102:18-19; Isa 6:1-7; Mic 1:2). It is exegetically sound, therefore, to consider that that heavenly sanctuary or a model of it is the *tabnît* which Moses saw.<sup>35</sup>

The book of Exodus thus posits that behind Israel's sanctuary there is a much more sublime reality, God's heavenly abode. And with the heavenly serving as a model for the earthly, there should exist not only a basic structural corespondence but also a functional correspondence. Accordingly, the heavenly sanctuary would be *the place* in the heavens where God would center his activity of dwelling among his creatures throughout the universe. From that sanctuary, he rules over his entire creation, blessing his creatures, redeeming and judging them. It is, in reality, from that particular place that his will is revealed, and that locus would be the center of worship for the whole universe.

Finally, it may be noted that, as in the case of Yahweh's earthly abode, the transcendental God is, in his heavenly sanctuary, also the immanent God, who reaches out to touch his entire creation. The heavenly reality, moreover, should be at the same time the place in which God deals with the sin problem. It is there that the repentant sinner actually is forgiven; it is the place where the mystery of atonement reaches its consummation.

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*Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, Calif., 1980), pp. 169-170; and Richard J. Clifford, "The Tent of El and the Israelite Tent of Meeting," *CBQ* 33 (1971): 221-227. These parallels do not necessarily show that Israel borrowed its ideas from the other ancient Near Eastern practices. Rather, they may go back to a common source.

<sup>34</sup>On this topic, see Niels-Erik Andreasen, "The Heavenly Sanctuary in the Old Testament," in *The Sanctuary and the Atonement*, eds. A. V. Wallenkampf and W. Richard Leshner (Washington, D.C., 1981), pp. 67-86; and Davidson, pp. 382-383.

<sup>35</sup>It should be noted that the concept of a heavenly sanctuary occurs in the NT (e.g., Heb 8:1-2; 9:23-24; Rev 11:19), and also in the Jewish Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. See, e.g., George W. MacRae, "Heavenly Temple and Eschatology in the Letter to the Hebrews," *Semeia* 12 (1978): 179-199.

In terms of theological meaning, the significance of the tabernacle built by Moses was clearly determined by the fact that it pointed to God's real dwelling in the heavens. As stated by Richard Davidson, it is probable "that Moses was given a vision of the heavenly sanctuary and then provided with a miniature model of the heavenly as a pattern to copy in constructing the earthly."<sup>36</sup> The term *tabnîṭ* would then designate both the original and the model based on the original.

### 8. Conclusion

The concept of the sanctuary is a central one in the book of Exodus. The provision of a sanctuary was the fulfillment of the covenant promise. Yahweh was to dwell in the midst of his redeemed people. Originally, there appears to have been a concept of sin and sinners being excluded from his holy habitation, with only redeemed people able to worship there. However, although the sanctuary was the place where a holy God met with a redeemed people, it also was seen as the place where this holy God dealt with the sin problem—the place at which, through Yahweh's gracious love, the repentant sinner could come and find forgiveness. Thus, the mystery of atonement resided in the sanctuary.

The sanctuary represented, indeed, the greatest gift that Yahweh could bestow upon his people—the gift of his own presence. It perpetuated the Sinai experience; and in it, the divine transcendence also became immanent—making Yahweh accessible to his people, while continuing to safeguard his transcendence.

The sanctuary was, moreover, the specific place from which God continued to reveal his will to Israel through the covenant law, as at Sinai he had proclaimed the basic stipulations at the heart of the covenant—namely, the Ten Commandments. The sanctuary was, as well, the center of worship for the Israelites. It was the place where they expressed their gratitude to Yahweh for their redemption.

Finally, the ancient Israelite sanctuary, though embodying the glorious presence of Yahweh, was not Yahweh's eternal abode. This earthly dwelling was simply a pale copy of his heavenly

<sup>36</sup>Davidson, p. 385.

abode. That heavenly sanctuary served as a model for the earthly one, and there is therefore a structural and functional correspondence between the two. It is the place from which, in fact, the forgiveness is granted to the repentant sinner. It is also the place where Yahweh reigns as King of the universe and makes known his will to all his creatures.