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Fine Twined Linen and Blue and Purple and Scarlet Yarns Exodus 26:1-37 & 36:8-38

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My first job in high school was working as a draftsman for a residential architect. Most of my time was spent drawing what we called “study plans” and architectural renderings of houses. To this day I don’t understand why, but most people struggle to make sense of architectural blueprints—understanding floor plans and being able to see three-dimensional representation in their mind’s eye based on floor plans and elevations of the outside walls. My job was to take a set of working drawings—the plans used by builders—and turn them into a simplified floorplan that anyone could understand and to draw a three-dimensional rendering of the finished house. We sent these for publications in newspapers and home plan magazines and that sort of thing.

The last six months I was there we had a downturn in business. The architect couldn’t afford to pay me \$5 an hour to draw those fancy renderings and floorplans. He was also looking for way to increase revenue, so he had the idea to photocopy our hundreds of house plans, reducing them down to 8 ½” x 11” sheets that could be put in three-ring binders for the public to browse. It was a good idea. The only problem is that most people, again, have trouble reading working drawings. So my job that last five or six months was to sit most days with a box of red ballpoint pens, colouring in the walls on the floorplans so that they’d be easier for people to read. I went through a red Bic about once every four hours and, for what it’s worth, it did seem to help.

I was thinking about those days scribbling in floorplans so that people could make sense of them as I looked at Exodus 26. That’s our passage today in our study of Exodus. In Chapter 25 we saw the Lord’s instructions for the furnishing of the tabernacle: the ark, the mercy seat, the lampstand, and the table for the bread of the presence. In Chapter 26 we read the Lord’s instructions for the tabernacle itself, for the tent inside which all of these furnishings would be placed. And if the instructions for the furnishings were difficult to understand, the instructions for the tabernacle itself may be even more difficult. It’s as if we were to translate several pages of blueprints into text. There’s a ton of detail, but we’re still left scratching our heads as to exactly how it all works out. And so, not surprisingly, there are a number of different interpretations out there as to how these details come together. Once again we’re told that the Lord “showed” the plan to Moses, but we aren’t privy to that plan anymore. The best explanation I’ve found is that of Richard Elliott Freedman,¹ but I don’t think there’s any reason to take a dogmatic stance on how the frames and curtains of the tabernacle were arranged. I’ll do the best I can here, but at the end of the day it comes to this: the tabernacle was a tent. It was a glorious tent that housed the presence of the Lord, but it was tent. Think about that as we read these details. The Israelites were, at the time, basically desert nomads on their way to a new home and the Lord met them and dwelled with them where they were at. They were living in tents and so he came to live in their midst in a tent of his own. The Lord meets his people where they’re at. As I read these verses I can help but think of the prologue to St. John’s Gospel. “The word became flesh and dwelt—tabernacled—amongst us.” Jesus took our nature upon himself that he might dwell in the midst of his people and set them free from their bondage to sin

and death. The tabernacle shows us something about the character of God, about how he deals graciously with his people, and in that it points us ultimately to Jesus. Now, let’s look at Exodus 26.

“Moreover, you shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet yarns; you shall make them with cherubim skillfully worked into them. The length of each curtain shall be twenty-eight cubits, and the breadth of each curtain four cubits; all the curtains shall be the same size. Five curtains shall be coupled to one another, and the other five curtains shall be coupled to one another. And you shall make loops of blue on the edge of the outermost curtain in the first set. Likewise you shall make loops on the edge of the outermost curtain in the second set. Fifty loops you shall make on the one curtain, and fifty loops you shall make on the edge of the curtain that is in the second set; the loops shall be opposite one another. And you shall make fifty clasps of gold, and couple the curtains one to the other with the clasps, so that the tabernacle may be a single whole. (Exodus 26:1-6)

There are four main parts to this tent. The instructions begin with the tabernacle itself, the *mishkan* in Hebrew. The fine linen and expensive dyed yarns given by the people were to be woven into these great cloths. They were woven in ten sections about 2 metres wide and 14 metres long. A design of cherubim was to be woven into them. As with the cherubim on the mercy seat, we don’t know exactly what they looked like, but I expect they had a fierce appearance. Remember that it was cherubim that were placed by the Lord to guard the entrance to the garden. Here they cover the walls of the tent, surrounding the place of the Lord’s presence—the Lord’s heavenly court.

¹ “Tabernacle” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), VI.292-300.

Once made, these sections of fabric were sewn together, five in one panel and five in another. And down the middle, these two great panels were joined together with fifty golden rings. That they had to be made in sections and that even when sewn together, the tabernacle had to be left in two sections highlights how heavy it was. But what was to be done with this great piece of beautiful woven cloth? Let's jump down to verses 15-16:

“You shall make upright frames for the tabernacle of acacia wood. Ten cubits shall be the length of a frame, and a cubit and a half the breadth of each frame.

There were no aluminium poles with shock-cords in the Second Millennium B.C. This wasn't a dome tent that pops up in a few minutes. The skeleton of the tabernacle was a series of frames made of that rot-resistant acacia wood and covered in gold. The Hebrew words suggests that they were sort of trellis-like rather than solid, making them lighter and easier to carry and transport. They were a little over a half-metre wide and about five metres tall. There were twenty per side and six for the back with two more to reinforce the corners. They were held together with horizontal bars, again made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold. And each frame had two tenon or legs that were set in heavy silver sockets. Imagine something like a concrete footing—the sort you might use under your support beams when building a deck—but made of solid silver.

These wooden frames were arranged, again, twenty on the north side and twenty on the south and six forming the back wall. I'm of the opinion that they overlapped for greater structural support. So they made an enclosure about 10 metres or 30 feet long and about 4 metres or 12 feet wide and open at the east end. The fabric of the tabernacle, the two pieces, were laid one top of the other over the frame in a double thickness. At 14 metres

wide, it would drape down both sides to the ground and fold over to fully cover the outside of the west wall as well. The golden rings used to hold the two large sections of cloth together ran around the entrance.

To give you some perspective, this tent would have easily fit in our church here. It was about the same length as our nave. It was about as wide as our centre section of pews and the two aisles. And the two tie rods the run across our vault are just about 5 metres high, which is how tall the tabernacle was. As beautiful and as glorious as it was, it was pretty small in comparison to a modern church building—and our building is pretty small by modern standards. But, remember, the tabernacle wasn't a church. It was where the people gathered to worship, but only the priests ever entered into it and only ever a few at a time. It was the place of the Lord's presence, the tent that housed his throne. As much as the Lord was in the midst of his people, they had to keep a respectful distance from the holy.

Look now at verses 7-8:

“You shall also make curtains of goats' hair for a tent over the tabernacle; eleven curtains shall you make. The length of each curtain shall be thirty cubits, and the breadth of each curtain four cubits. The eleven curtains shall be the same size.

I said there were four main components to the tabernacle. The first was the tabernacle, the *mishkan*, itself, the great cloth tent embroidered with cherubim. The second component was the support structure composed of gold-over-wood frames or trellises. The third is the *ohel*. That's simply the common Hebrew word for “tent”. I've forgotten lots of Hebrew vocabulary over the years, but *ohel* is not one of them. My professor had a running joke that he liked to tell over and over...and over. He didn't

like camping, but his wife loved it and he was always joking that the Hebrews came up with this word, because “Oh hell!” was the natural response to the news that they'd be camping in tents in the wilderness. (There, now you know a Hebrew word you probably won't forget either.)

So the *ohel* or tent was a great, heavy covering for the tabernacle itself made of woven goat hair. Like the tabernacle, it was woven in eleven sections that were later sewn together into two big panels. Like the panels of the tabernacle, these were joined together with fifty rings, but in this case bronze instead of gold. The whole thing was doubled over with the rings surrounding the entrance and the rest covering the tabernacle and draping over the sides and back.

Both the linen and yarns and the goat skins were the common materials of the day for constructing tents. The inner tent made of linen and other fine cloths and the outside covered with tent of black cloth made of woven goat hair to keep the weather off. The cherubim, the gold and bronze rings, the silver sockets for the frames and the gold overlay make this much more than ordinary tent, but it is still, nevertheless, a tent.

Verse 14 gives instructions for two more layers to be placed on top of the protective goat-hair tent:

And you shall make for the tent a covering of tanned rams' skins and a covering of goatskins on top.

I'm not sure why the ESV does what it does at this point. The Hebrew notes that the covering of rams' skin is to be dyed red. I'm not sure how they got “tanned” from that. Not only do we have evidence of other Ancient Near Eastern peoples constructing tents as religious sanctuaries, we also have evidence of those tents being covered with skins that were dyed red. The Kaaba in Mecca in pre-Islamic times being just one example. Red dye was

very expensive and it seems to have been used to mark out holy places. The Hebrew word used for the covering over the top of that is a rare one and its meaning isn't certain. The equivalent Arabic word refers to dolphins or porpoises. It might refer to a fine leather from Egypt, which is in the realm of possibility when we consider all the treasures they gave to the Israelites. The ESV, however, seems to read the Hebrew word as one simply meaning covering, in which case this might simply be a covering used to protect all the components of the tabernacle when it was being transported. If they're right, this would leave the red rams' skin covering as the outer layer, making it very distinctive.

So that's the tabernacle and the outer tent that covered it. Let's go inside and look at verses 31-35:

“And you shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. It shall be made with cherubim skillfully worked into it. And you shall hang it on four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, with hooks of gold, on four bases of silver. And you shall hang the veil from the clasps, and bring the ark of the testimony in there within the veil. And the veil shall separate for you the Holy Place from the Most Holy. You shall put the mercy seat on the ark of the testimony in the Most Holy Place. And you shall set the table outside the veil, and the lampstand on the south side of the tabernacle opposite the table, and you shall put the table on the north side.

This is the fourth and, maybe, most important component of the tabernacle, the veil or *paroket* in Hebrew. As the Hebrew language evolved, this came to be understood as a curtain that hung in front of the ark of the covenant, but that idea doesn't fit very well with the text here which says that it is to hang *over* the ark. It's better, I think, to see the veil as a

pavilion, supported by the four pillars, covering the ark and separating it from the rest of the tabernacle. I think this makes more sense in that it doesn't cover over the cherubim tapestries on either the tabernacle itself or the veil. So cherubim surround the entire tabernacle, but here in the holies of holies sits the Lord's throne, surrounded above and around with another cohort of angels.

It's not clear if the fabric for the veil is any different than the fabric of the tabernacle. Both are fine linen and dyed yarns and both are embroidered with cherubim. The veil is supported by four wooden pillars overlaid with gold. And like the frames for the tabernacle, these pillars are set in silver supports. The veil serves, again, as a pavilion for the ark within the tabernacle. Here we're told the placement of the furnishings we read about last week. The table for the bread of the presence is to stand outside the veil and along the north wall of the tabernacle and opposite, on the south wall, the lampstand is to be placed. Later we'll learn about the altar of incense, which was placed in front of the veil. The veil marks out the holy of holies, the inner sanctum. This is the Lord's throne room, so to speak.

Finally, in verses 36-38 we read of the screen to be placed at the entrance of the tabernacle:

“You shall make a screen for the entrance of the tent, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, embroidered with needlework. And you shall make for the screen five pillars of acacia, and overlay them with gold. Their hooks shall be of gold, and you shall cast five bases of bronze for them.

The screen is similar to the curtains that compose the tabernacle and the veil, but the cherubim are absent because this is the entrance. The entrance is flanked by five wooden pillars, again overlaid with gold. They

too are set in precious support sockets, but this time of bronze, not silver. Do you see how, as you moved from the entrance, through the holy place, and approached the holy of holies the materials of the tabernacle become more precious? The inner tent is fine linen embroidered with cherubim and held together with gold rings. The outer layer is made of woven goat hair and held together with bronze rings. The frames of the tabernacle are held by sockets of silver, but the outer entrance pillars are set in sockets of bronze. As the priests moved from the outer enclosure into the tabernacle they were confronted, even with the construction materials, by the presence of the holy.

In the next chapter we'll get a look at the instructions for the outer court of the tabernacle and the altar that was there. But so far we've seen the Lord's plan for the ark and mercy seat—his throne, the place where his presence sat in the midst of his people—and the other furnishings of the tabernacle, again all focuses on the fact that he is the God who dwells with his people. And now we've seen his plan for the tent that would house his throne room and the space where his priests would attend him.

If we were to jump to Exodus 36, just as with the last part about the tabernacle furnishings, we'd see these details repeated almost word for word, but whereas the Lord's instructions are structured around seven speeches introduced by “The Lord said”, in those later chapters the details of each part of the tabernacle and its furnishings are introduced by the words “the craftsman and the workmen made”. It's a reminder of the Creation and of God's creative word. In the beginning the Lord spoke and by the power of his word, his creation came into being. It's interesting that we see the same theme in the story of Noah's ark. Judgement was coming and to save a remnant of the human race, the Lord spoke to Noah. The Lord gave him detailed

instructions for an ark, and Noah made it just as the Lord had said. And now, once again, as the Lord calls together a people through whom he will bring salvation to the world, he speaks and they obediently make. The Lord's creative work calling the tabernacle into existence.

And the tabernacle becomes a microcosm of Creation. If Israel is to be the people who live with the Lord in their midst, a people who witness to the world in some sense what creation and humanity set to rights and ordered by the Lord looks like, here in the midst of that people we see it again. The tabernacle, the Lord's sanctuary, is built according to his design, it sits in the midst of his people, it houses his throne. The tabernacle said, not just to Israel, but to the watching nations, that this is the place where the Lord is sovereign, the reign of God is visible, and we see it radiating out to the people. As we'll see later, the twelve tribes were to set up their camps in an orderly fashion and according to a specific pattern, arranged around the tabernacle. It stood at the centre. And it gives a wonderful visual of the reign of God. The priests coming and going, in and out of the sanctuary, performing the duties the Lord had given them, attending to his throne room in an orderly fashion. But it's not just the priests who actually go into the tabernacle. The people, Israel, go about their lives and their business with the Lord in the centre of the camp. Everything they do is governed by the order-establishing *torah* the Lord had given them.

It's not without reason that the day on which the tabernacle was dedicated became Israel's New Year's Day. The Lord was beginning the work of new creation with the creation of this people, chosen and called and set apart to be his own and to be light to the nations. The scholarly consensus these days seems to be that Genesis 1 was probably something of a liturgical text written to be used in the dedication of the tabernacle, driving

home this work of new creation through which the Lord would begin to set his creation and his people to rights.

Here in this small and lonely place in the wilderness, the Lord's rule was established and it speaks to his plans for the rest of the world: the priests going to and from his throne, mediating his presence to Israel, but then Israel mediating his presence from there out to the nations. They are a kingdom of priests.

And so there's a connection between what we see here in Exodus and the life we live in Jesus. The presence of God, as I said last week, is no longer restricted to a tent into which no one is allowed. Through Jesus, through his redemptive death on the cross, the veil has been torn and all are invited into the presence of the Lord. But, too, through Jesus, he has made his very people his tabernacle, filling us with his own Spirit. The church has now become the microcosm of creation set to rights, from here we go out into the world, to be families, to go to school, to our jobs, to interact with friends and neighbours, and like Israel, as we do so, we carry the light of God's new creation out into the world to make known the saving rule of the Lord.

Let's pray: Gracious Father, we thank you for the work of new creation that are doing in this world. We have rebelled against you and made a mess of your world, but through Jesus you have forgiven us and made us your people, through your Spirit you have regenerated our hearts and renewed our minds. Lord, you have spoken, give us the grace to be obedient to your word as we live as your people and proclaim your good news to the world. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.