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THE HEBREW TABERNACLE AS A WORK OF ARCHITECTURE

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The ancient Hebrews made but one great contribution to architecture, namely, the tabernacle. The explanation of this contribution—its quantity and its quality—is to be found in the history of the Hebrews.

In the days of Joseph's dictatorship they came to Egypt, and then continued to remain there as royal favorites during three and a half centuries of Hyksos rule, during which time they entered keenly into the appreciation of Egyptian art. But when their friends, the Hyksos, were driven out of power and the native Egyptian royal line was restored, the Hebrews at once fell into extreme disfavor and in a short time were forced into the severest serfdom. From such an existence they were rescued under the leadership of Moses, who took them out of Egypt, through the Sinai wilderness and toward Palestine. Forty years, however, were consumed in this trying journey and thus, although the Hebrews had entered the wilderness of Sinai with a broad knowledge of Egyptian art, that generation (with the exception of two men) all died in the wilderness; and it was their offspring—children of the desert—that came into the land of Canaan and into the brilliant civilization of the Canaanite.

Into this well defined and keenly developed art of Canaan, these desert-born Hebrews at once entered; but as far as literary evidence has shown, neither they nor their descendants developed any new phase of architecture. In Palestine they were copyists and not creators. One fact, however, is to be remembered in drawing such a conclusion, namely, that archeology has not yet given us more than a glimpse of the tangible remains of that age, and future evidence may display the Palestinian Hebrew as a more original builder than we now know him.

But the Hebrew of the forty years wandering was a true contributor to architecture, and his tabernacle ranks as a masterpiece of architectural conception and construction. Now, having seen the reason of this small quantity of the Hebrew's contribution to architecture, let us look at the exceptionally fine quality of this single contribution.

It must be remembered that the tabernacle is to be classed with temple architecture, and, as the background of all temple architecture is religion, we must first examine the religious thought of the Hebrew of the Exodus. In the episode of the ten plagues he had just witnessed the titanic struggle between monotheism and polytheism, between Jehovah and the gods of Egypt. He had watched the greatest religious ideals of Egypt being weighed in the balances and found wanting; and in the crisis of that struggle he had trusted in Jehovah's prophet and had escaped from serfdom unto the freedom of the Sinai country.

To put it briefly, he was in a new world, and he recognized that Jehovah was the creator of that new world. Therefore, it was but natural that he should desire to raise some worthy temple unto the God of his salvation.

A great difficulty confronted him, however, for all the temples of former times and peoples had been idolatrous. How then was this Hebrew to erect a fitting temple unto Jehovah? Two alternatives presented themselves; he might create an entirely new type of temple, or he might take a heathen temple type and remodel it. He chose the latter method and broadly speaking, followed the general type of the Egyptian temple, except that he left the most holy place of this new temple free from any idol. This physical change, although extremely slight, marks one of the greatest changes in the theory of religious architecture. We have no longer a temple built to enclose a sacred spot or to house a graven image, but we have a temple unto One who is circumscribed neither by time nor form —a temple where Spirit with spirit can meet. Thus by remodeling a polytheistic temple the Hebrew artist created the first monotheistic temple in the history of architecture.

But with the choice of a temple type came also the question of the actual construction of a building. This new Hebrew temple had not only to answer the problem of theism, but also the problem of humanity; it must be of a portable nature in order that it might accompany the people on the long and difficult wilderness journey. This meant a distinctly new form of construction. Many previous people had possessed portable shrines wherein they carried their gods in those processions so common to heathen holy days. But the Hebrew could neither possess nor carry such a shrine because his religion knew neither idol nor procession. Furthermore, even the portable shrine of the heathen was but a part of the furnishings of a permanent temple. Thus the Hebrew was forced to create not only a monotheistic temple, but also a portable temple.

The portable character of this temple presented many problems, for it demanded a building of light weight and sectional construction so that it might easily be taken apart, transported and quickly assembled. Stone or brick were an impossibility in the solution of such a problem. Timber alone would have proved too unwieldy and bulky for transportation. A simple tent with its canvases bulging in the wind, would have been too unstable and too undignified for God's temple. But by blending timber and canvas the Hebrews secured the ideal portable temple.

This tabernacle, like its Egyptian prototype, consisted of three elements: a court in which the temple was situated, the temple proper, and the peculiar internal arrangement of that temple, namely, a holy place and a most holy place. Herein are the Egyptian temples and the tabernacle similar; in all other features they are different.

The Egyptian temple court was enclosed by great walls of stone, somewhat similar to the walls that surround our penitentiaries. The tabernacle's court, however, was enclosed by a screen of curtains, much as a small chautauqua ground is to-day fenced in by a canvas screen. To-

ward the rear of this court, which measured 150 feet[1] by 75 feet, stood the tabernacle proper covering a ground area 45 feet by 15 feet. Its side walls and back wall, each about 15 feet high, were made of thin boards of acacia wood, thus giving a permanent shape to the interior. These wooden walls were then overlaid with gold and thus the interior appearance of the tabernacle was as fine and costly as that of any Egyptian stone temple. These boards, all of which stood upright, were held in place at the bottom by sockets of silver; each board had two tenons at the bottom and these fitted into two sockets. In their upper parts, the boards were held in place by bars running parallel to the ground at different levels and passing through rings in the boards.

The front of the tabernacle consisted simply of a curtain made of the finest Egyptian linen and woven in a color scheme of white, blue, purple and scarlet. It was held in place by being suspended from five acacia wood pillars which were overlaid with gold.

The interior was roofed over with curtains similar to the one which enclosed the front, except that these roof curtains were treated with cherubim design. They were joined together into one great sheet, which not only formed the roof of the tabernacle but also hung down over the sides and the rear to within a cubit of the ground. Over this wooden-curtain structure a goat's hair tent was spread, after the fashion of a modern tent fly; and above this was a waterproof covering consisting of one ply of ram's skin and one of seal's skin.

The interior of the tabernacle was separated into two rooms, the holy place toward the front and the most holy place toward the rear. They were separated by a curtain similar to the roof curtains and it was suspended from four acacia wood pillars overlaid with gold.

This tabernacle, although containing every essential architectural feature of the massive stone temples of

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[1]Cubit estimated at 18 (eighteen) inches.

Egypt, was so light that twelve oxen and six carts were sufficient for its transportation. Thus did the Hebrew artist solve the problem of a portable temple.

At first thought, one may question this inference that the portable tabernacle was a work of architecture, for one commonly thinks of permanence as the first requisite of a building worthy of the designation architecture. But let this situation be examined closely.

In planning a portable temple for a nation on the march the Hebrew faced a problem no other temple architect had ever been called upon to solve. Here is a case where we must go back of custom to reason, and art is first of all reasonable. There was no solution to the Hebrew's problem save a portable temple.

A second feature that allows the tabernacle to lay claim to its classification as architecture is the fact that when the wilderness journey was ended and after Palestine had been sufficiently pacified for national unity, Solomon did build a permanent temple, which although constructed by Phoenician builders, was patterned directly from the tabernacle.

While the Hebrew was making the temple monotheistic to conform with the spiritual demands of his life, while he was making it portable to conform with the physical exigencies of his day, he was also making it beautiful as a final tribute of his love to Jehovah. The beauty of the tabernacle is usually little appreciated because it is little understood or even studied. As to location, the tabernacle was well situated. It occupied the center, the heart of the great encampment of the children of Israel. Adjacent to it were grouped the tents of the tabernacle retinue and beyond these came the common tents of the camp. Thus it was given the finest position possible.

As it occupied the center of the camp, it was made worthy of such a situation. It forms an artistic study in mass. Look at it. One of the great wadies of the wilderness is literally teeming with tents, but in the center of that great mass of tents, there is one particular

tent. It is separated from the common tents by an open space, then by a slight band of tents, then by another open space. Then comes a great rectangular screen of finest Egyptian linen curtains hung upon equally spaced pillars that are resplendent in their brass bases and silver fillets. Within this court toward the front, a great brazen altar with its intricate service greets the eye and prepares the heart for the appreciation of the grand simplicity of the tabernacle proper that lies toward the rear part of the court. The outline of the building strikes the same lines as the court. Everything is a study in the square and multiples of the square. The court is two adjacent squares. The tabernacle in plan is three squares in a line—the rear one being the most holy place and the front two being the holy place. In side elevation we have also the three squares, and in front elevation we have the single square. At the side and rear this sense of rhythmatic mass is quickly grasped in the simplicity of the linen hangings. But it is not monotonous, as the brilliant color scheme and the joinings of the small curtains break the blank space, and the eye catches especially the line of gold clasps that mark the line of the veil within. Instantly one thinks of the Shekina Presence within. The mass is further softened by the plain goat's hair tent and its covering, that nestle close over the tabernacle and spread their edges beyond the building and out over the court, toward which they fall in gentle slope. They do not actually touch it, however, except with cords and stays, much as we fasten a tent fly. One thinks instantly of the eagle's wings spread out to protect the nest and the little ones.

The entrance of the tabernacle is in sympathy with the general treatment of mass. The location of the tabernacle proper within the court is such that the court has only one logical entrance, which is opposite the tabernacle and on its axis. The court's gateway is similar to the general curtain screen, with the exception of its color scheme, for this court is only slightly important in comparison with the tabernacle proper. But this building—God's home

among His people—is given a fitting entrance. Five gold plated pillars upon brass bases form the theme, while between them hang the soft and delicate lines of the great tapestry that covers the entire front.

There is another feature in the question of mass and proportion that is interestingly treated by the Hebrew. The long rectangles of the court and the tabernacle, and the location of the tabernacle in the rear of the court, with the brazen altar as an introductory theme, gives a fine sense of perspective as well as apparently magnifies the size of both court and temple. This apparent increase in size is also furthered by the lines of joining which in upright planes are always at right angles to the ground, and in the roof curtains are at right angles to the major axis of the rectangles. The greater spread of the tent is also contributory to this theme.

In connection with the study of mass, we have already treated the grouping of parts. The next step would naturally be a detailed study of the various parts as units. But this problem is exceedingly difficult as the scriptural description is often very meagre and always in quite general language. Thus it is impossible to enter more fully into a description of these units than we have already done in the preceding pages.

In the discussion of the beauty of the tabernacle only one feature remains to be noted. Our former remarks have been concerned chiefly with the external appearance of the tabernacle; now we must note more carefully the interior.

The lighting effects of the two rooms, that formed the interior of the tabernacle, were peculiar and the artistic study of the interior must be made from that angle. The front room, or the holy place, was lighted only by a great seven-branched golden candle-stick. This mellow quivering light softened the great golden walls at either side and played upon the brilliantly hued and artistically designed curtains that formed the roof and the front and rear walls of the apartment. The room, built on the de-

sign of two adjacent cubes, was planned for the furnishings; for it is to be remembered that the interior design of the tabernacle is secondary to its furnishings and its ceremonial. This fact accounts in part for the extreme simplicity of its interior. Toward the left wall of the holy place as one entered stood the great candle-stick, toward the right wall stood the table with its showbread, and toward the rear stood the altar of incense. This room did not stand as a detached unit. Its rear wall was a beautiful curtain hung upon four gold plated pillars similar to those at the outer entrance to the holy place, except that these were set in bases of silver.

These four golden columns stood out in bold relief against the multi-colored curtain and made a fitting facade to the room beyond, which was the heart of the structure, the holy of holies. This room was a perfect cube, 15 feet on a side. The roof was of curtain-work similar to the entrance and the remaining three walls were gold plated. Such a plain room was the proper setting for the ark of the covenant and the golden cherubim that rose upon it and between which rested the Shekina Light—the symbol of Jehovah's presence. The beauty of such grand simplicity of design, with such rich blending of color, marked one of the high points of art in the tabernacle.

The beauty of the tabernacle may be unappreciated by the western mind. We do not commonly think of the tent as in any way related to architecture. We little appreciate such a treatment of brilliant and contrasting colors, while gold is considered cheap and gaudy. We often judge simplicity as a sign of the primitive, and in our practical age we have no place for mysticism and intelligent symbolism. Thus it is hard for one whose mind has never travelled in the realms of Eastern thought to appreciate the beauty that radiated from God's dwelling place among His chosen people in the days of their great pilgrimage.

But may we not have been too narrow in our judgment? Perhaps our appreciation of oriental rugs and

tapestries will some day extend to the curtain architecture of the tabernacle. Our new findings on the use of brilliant hues in Greek architecture and sculpture may help us to judge favorably of the Hebrew's color scheme. And finally might not a little study in any Semitic language and philosophy, and a little careful reading of the Old Testament open new and fruitful fields of art?

Look again at the tabernacle. See it beneath an eastern sky; see it in the life of the Orient. Study it as an expression of Semitic thought; study it as an interpretation of the Hebrew faith. Then its beauty will fill your soul, and you will realize that the tabernacle is a work of art and a great contribution to architecture.

Thus far the tabernacle has been treated from a distinctly human angle; now it is time to study it from God's viewpoint, for temple architecture must have not only the approval of man but also the approval of God. This is the final test; this is the crucial test.

The Hebrew of the Exodus made the first monotheistic temple. At the same time he also made the first portable temple. And in the answering of the problems of his spiritual life and his practical life, he also answered the problem of his aesthetic life.

Jehovah bore a peculiar relationship toward the tabernacle, for it was he who expressly commanded its construction and it was he who showed the pattern of it unto Moses in the mount. Furthermore, when it was completed, he gave the Israelites a visible sign of his approval and appreciation of the work by filling the tabernacle with his presence. And generations later he put a second seal of approval upon the tabernacle by accepting, as a permanent house of worship, the temple at Jerusalem, which, although constructed of different materials, nevertheless followed the general plan of the tabernacle.

By analyzing the Biblical record in more detail it is to be noted that the tabernacle was extremely well fitted to serve as a temple unto Jehovah. It was commanded of God, but it was also the free will gift of the people—

indeed, more materials were offered than could be used. It was planned of God, but the elements that entered into the plan were so well understood by the skilled workmen of Israel that they executed the work to God's complete satisfaction. Being thus a mutual work, the tabernacle served most fitly as a common meeting place for God and man. They had been co-laborers in the building of the house; they were also co-dwellers in the common home.

In this home where God fellowshipped with his children, God's presence was made known by the sign of the cloud by day and the sign of the fire by night. With this sign of welcome and love continually beckoning them, the people came at all times that they might find God and commune with him. Here also in the tabernacle God and man together enacted the sacrificial system which pointed forward to the Messiah. Little, perhaps, of this great Messianic symbolism did the people understand—in spiritual things they were but little children living in the early dawn of revelation—but with the simple faith of a child and by such light as they had they entered into the worship of the tabernacle as best they knew and trusted God for the rest.

To the Hebrew of the Exodus and to the God of Israel the tabernacle held a three-fold meaning. First, it was a labor of love, wherein God and men were fellow-workers. Second, it was a place of fellowship for the Heavenly Father and his earthly children. And, third, mark it well—there was in it a spirit of prophecy which spoke of untold Glory yet to come.

The study is completed; let the conclusion be drawn. The tabernacle must always rank as one of the world's greatest examples of temple architecture, for not only does it bear the approval of human judges, but also that of the Divine Architect. He sealed it with his presence as worthy of his presence; it symbolized in terms of form the spirit of the invisible church.