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Was the Tabernacle Oriental?

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THIS question may seem unnecessary. The movable place of worship of the Israelites was called אהל, the ordinary name for a tent of goat's-hair cloth, and משכן, the ordinary name of a dwelling formed by pitching a tent. These names suggested the outer and inner aspects respectively of the oriental nomadic habitation.

But I raise the question, Was the tabernacle oriental? because almost no one is willing to admit that it was. In none of the works on the subject do we find a structure represented which an oriental would recognize as having any resemblance to his tent. With a single exception to be noted hereinafter, every one who has reconstructed the tabernacle has given it a frame of timber, and has thereby supported the roof, although not a word is said in the Bible of any framework supporting a roof. Probably no one has given so much study to the tabernacle as the late Dr. T. O. Paine, whose best forty years were devoted to it and to the temple. Now, in the magnificent work¹ which is the fruit of his labors we find represented a structure exactly like a little New England barn, having a roof of sharp pitch supported by a frame, which construction came partly from the author's imagination and largely from his New England surroundings.

This departure from the oriental form may be seen elsewhere. *The Speaker's Commentary*, in an elaborate note by the Rev. Samuel Clark, adopts from Smith's *Bible Dictionary* the theory of Mr. James Fergusson, that the tabernacle had a framework, such as we give to a house, and a roof angle of ninety degrees. He draws this frame in a way which pays no regard to the Bible story.²

This very point has been discussed of late in the *Quarterly Statement* of the Palestine Exploration Fund. In the issue for April,³ 1896, Mr. Berryman Ridges brought the subject forward. To him

¹ *The Holy Houses*. By T. O. Paine, LL.D. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co. 1885.

² *Com.* i. page 377.

³ Page 189.

in the issue of July,⁴ 1896, the Rev. W. H. B. Proby replied that, after much study, he adhered to Mr. Fergusson's theory, except that he believed the ridge to have been supported by a cord. To this suggestion of Mr. Proby an answer was made in the *Statement* for April,⁵ 1897, by Mr. William Brown, author of a work on *The Tabernacle and Its Services*. Mr. Brown declares that the theory propounded by Fergusson and adopted by Proby "does not agree with the text," and, while he believes that there was a ridge-pole, he does not support it as do Messrs. Fergusson and Proby. Upon my suggesting in the *Statement* for July,⁶ 1897, that there was neither a ridge-pole nor a ridge-cord, the venerable Dr. Conrad Schick took up the controversy,⁷ siding with Mr. Fergusson, and doubting the analogy between the tabernacle and oriental tents, and saying that the former had the boards "similar to which there is nothing in any regular oriental tent, and hence the necessary conclusion is that the tabernacle was a special tent-building not in full conformity to other tents."

Here the matter stands at present, except that Mr. G. Woolworth Colton, well known as a maker of maps, issued in 1895 a little book on *The Sanctuary or Tent of Meeting*,⁸ in which at the outset he presents an engraving of an ordinary Arab tent, having a closed back, an open front, and an uneven roof supported by poles. When he reaches the question of the support of the roof of the tabernacle he expresses his belief that the boards at the sides and west end, the pillars on which the veils were hung, and possibly the bars or staves on which the articles of furniture were borne, afforded the needed support.⁹

Without going into this or any special inquiry, let me call attention to the description of a Bedouin tent given by John Lewis Burckhardt, whose *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys* was printed after his death in London in 1830, and is still the best authority on matters of this kind, for modern travellers describe hastily what he described with the utmost thoroughness. The particulars which are to be briefly remarked upon are the following, as stated by him:

1. When the tents are few they are pitched in a circle, more considerable numbers in a straight line.¹⁰ There is a sheik's or chief's tent.¹¹
2. The covering of a tent consists of pieces of stuff made of black goat's-hair, about three-quarters of a yard in breadth, its length being equal to that of the

⁴ Page 223.

⁵ Pages 154, 155.

⁶ Pages 225, 226.

⁷ *Statement*, October, 1898, pp. 241-244.

⁸ New York: G. W. & C. B. Colton & Co.

⁹ Page 74.

¹⁰ Page 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

tent. According to the depth of the tent, ten or more of these pieces are stitched together. This goat's-hair covering keeps off the heaviest rain, as I know by experience.¹²

3. It is usual to have nine tent-poles or posts, three in the middle, and an equal number on each side.¹³

4. The back part of the tent is closed by a piece of goat's-hair stuff from three to four feet high, which hangs down to the ground. It keeps out the wind. It is fastened to the tent covering by the three hind posts, and in winter is carried likewise along the side posts.¹⁴

5. The tent is divided into two parts, separated by a white woollen carpet drawn across the tent and fastened to the three middle posts. This is sometimes interwoven with patterns of flowers.¹⁵

6. The corner end of the tent covering always advances a little and hangs down floating in the wind.¹⁶

7. The short sticks to which the outer ends of the ropes are fastened are driven into the ground at three or four paces distant from the tent.¹⁷

From these statements it appears,—

First. That in every encampment there is an orderly arrangement, and that one tent is conspicuous on account of its size. So was it in the camp of Israel, where the tabernacle of some forty-five feet in length and at least fifteen feet high (the boards were ten cubits long) must have been conspicuous among all the tents arranged in some order about it as it stood east and west (Num. 2²).

Second. That the curtains of goat's-hair were of precisely the same stuff now in use, and they were made in long strips to be joined together at the sides; and we know that this was a protection against the weather for the embroidered work and furnishings (Ex. 26⁷⁻¹³).

Third. In the tabernacle there were tent-poles or columns standing at the entrance in a row of five there, and of four at the entrance of the holy of holies (Ex. 26³²⁻³⁷).

Fourth. In the oriental tent there is a means of closing the rear and sides against wind and intrusion by using a strip of goat's-hair hung up by hooks. In Stanley's *Sinai and Palestine* we read of stones so used in a low wall "with the tent drawn over the top,"¹⁸ and travellers may now see the tents near Huleh closed with mattings made of the reeds which abound there. Thus, instead of Dr. Schick's statement being true, that nothing analogous to the boards of the tabernacle exists, we have three kinds of wall in use by the Arabs for the same purpose subserved by the boards; namely, goat's-hair, stones, and reeds (Ex. 26¹³⁻²³).

¹² Page 21.

¹⁴ Page 22.

¹⁶ Page 23.

¹⁸ New York, 1885, p. 299.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Page 22.

¹⁷ Page 22.

Fifth. Tents are divided into two apartments by a hanging, and the tabernacle was divided into the holy and holy of holies by the embroidered veil hung upon the pillars (Ex. 26³³).

Sixth. There is an overhang in the oriental tent, and the tabernacle curtains were expressly so arranged that "the remnant that remaineth of the curtains of the tent, the half curtain that remaineth, shall hang over the back side of the tabernacle" (Ex. 26¹²).

Seventh. Express reference is made in Ex. 35¹⁸ 38²⁰ and elsewhere to the "pins of the tabernacle," showing that ropes held its coverings in place, and that they were fastened to pins as oriental tents are fastened.

Perhaps these few points furnished by Mr. Burckhardt are sufficient to indicate the probability that the tabernacle stood among the tents of Israel, not like a foreign structure altogether, as great a mystery to them as an American chapel would be, but as a tent of their own kind made beautiful and rich beyond what they had seen, but yet constructed of the materials which they themselves had furnished, and in a manner which would approve itself to their ideas formed from the habits of oriental shepherds. In other words, the tabernacle was wholly constructed on oriental lines.