

# Genesis 1 and the Building of the Israelite Sanctuary

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During the last 25 years the scholarly world has been interested in the study of the rituals performed in connection with the Israelite tabernacle. Linguistic and theological studies have contributed to a better understanding of the book of Leviticus and the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.

Interestingly, some scholars have used Genesis 1-3 to gain insights into the theology of the Israelite sanctuary. They have been able to identify a number of interesting connections between the narrative describing the building of the Israelite sanctuary (Exod. 25-31) and the Creation account in Genesis 1-2:3.<sup>1</sup> This article will summarize the result of those studies from an Adventist perspective. In our next article (appearing in April), we will examine the results of similar studies made on Genesis 2:4-3:24.

When it comes to Genesis 1, most of the parallels between the Genesis Creation account and the building of the Israelite sanctuary are based on the use of the number "seven" in the story of the building of the tabernacle, but there are also some linguistic parallels that will require our attention.

## Parallels

1. *Six days plus a seventh day.* According to Exodus 24:15-17, Moses climbed Mount Sinai to receive instruction for the building of the sanctuary, waited for six days and on the seventh day the Lord spoke to him from the theophanic cloud. The sequence of six days and a seventh day is the same we find in Genesis. It is uncertain whether the seventh day in this case was a Sabbath, but the reference to six and seven days suggests a connection between the two narratives. In both cases the seventh day provided the time during which there is a special meeting between God and humans.

2. *Seven divine speeches.* God gave Moses instructions concerning the building of the sanctuary through seven speeches introduced by the phrase "The Lord said to Moses" (25:1; 30:11, 17, 22, 34; 31:1, 12). The seventh speech brings the instructions for the building of the sanctuary to a close with a call to keep the Sabbath (31:13, 17). "From the context the inference would appear to be that just as God rested after creating the world so must Israel after constructing the sanctuary."<sup>2</sup> In the Creation narrative in Genesis, God spoke during seven days and rested on the seventh day. It seems that it is that pattern that is being followed in the building of the tabernacle.

3. *Seven and the construction of the tabernacle.*<sup>3</sup> While the instructions to build the sanctuary ended with a discussion on the Sabbath, the narrative of the actual construction begins with a reference to the Sabbath commandment (35:1-3). The building of a sacred sanctuary does not justify violating the sanctity of the Sabbath. Sacred time is more important for the Lord than the building of sacred space. Yet, both are important (Lev. 19:30; 26:2).

Seven is also important in Exodus 40:17-33. The phrase "as the Lord commanded [Moses]" is used seven times in 40:17-33 to describe the actual building of the sanctuary. It is in obedience to God and following His specific instructions that the sanctuary is progressively built. The emphasis on seven suggests a movement from nothing to a completed creation or construction.

4. *Linguistic parallels.* There are some terminological parallels between Genesis 1-2:3 and the building of the sanctuary.<sup>4</sup> (a) God saw everything He had made and behold it was very good

(Gen. 1:31); Moses saw all the work and behold, they had done it (Exod. 39:43). (b) Genesis states that the heavens and the earth were finished (Gen. 2:1, 2); after the building of the sanctuary it is stated that "all the work on the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting was finished" (Exod. 39:32; 40:33). (c) God finished His creative work and blessed the seventh day (Gen. 2:3); Moses finished the tabernacle and blessed the people (39:43).

During Creation week God "separated" light "from" darkness, water from water, day from night (Gen. 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18). After Genesis 1 the phrase "between . . . to separate" is used again in the setting of the tabernacle. A veil was to separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy (Exod. 26:33) and the priests were to separate or distinguish from or between the holy and the common, the clean and the unclean (Lev. 10:10). The emphasis is on the fact "that the creator-God is a God of order."<sup>5</sup>

5. *Presence of the Spirit of God.* The "Spirit of God" is mentioned in both the Creation narrative and in the construction of the tabernacle.<sup>6</sup> In Genesis 41:38 Pharaoh uses the phrase the "spirit of G/god(s)," but he most probably had in mind his own gods. Therefore, the next biblical reference to the Spirit of God, after Genesis 1:1, is found in Exodus 31:3. God enabled certain individuals to build the sanctuary by filling them with His Spirit (31:3; 35:31).

### **Significance of the parallels**

1. *New encounter with God.* The sequence of six days leading to a seventh day points to the fact that God and humans can again enjoy permanent fellowship. God descended to the space where humans were located. The six days of Creation culminated in permanent fellowship between God and humans and the same was again available at the sanctuary. At the end of Creation week the Sabbath was instituted; at the end of the building of the sanctuary the sanctity of the Sabbath was reaffirmed and the tabernacle was inaugurated. In both cases something holy came into existence. One was a sanctuary in time, the other a sanctuary in space. The realm of existence of the creature was filled now in a special way with the sanctifying presence of the Creator.

2. *New orderly creation.* Creation and the sanctuary came into existence through the divine word. God gave the commands and as a result of the divine speaking the tabernacle was built. The seven speeches find their counterpart in the seven times that the completion formula—"as the Lord commanded [Moses]"—is used during the building of the tabernacle.

God's act of creation seems to serve as a model for the building of the tabernacle. Both, Creation and sanctuary, "are the products of the divine command. Just as the creation through the word of God meant that the creation was completed precisely according to the will of God, so also the completion of the tabernacle according to a heavenly 'pattern' (25:9, 40) meant that it corresponded exactly to the divine will."<sup>7</sup>

There was progression and order in Creation and in the building of the sanctuary. One element followed the other, their specific functions were established and consequently something new came into existence.

3. *New creation and the Spirit:* He who was present in Genesis I was also active in the building of the tabernacle and the result was harmony, aesthetic balance, elegance, beauty. The intricate craftsmanship of those used by the Spirit "mirrors God's own work. The precious metals with which they work take up the very products of God's beautiful creation and give new shape to that beauty within the creation."<sup>8</sup>

4. *New creation in a world of sin:* The sanctuary creation was located in a world of disruption and uncleanness. God's original creation was "very good." The sanctuary itself was

also very good, but it was built in the midst of a world characterized by chaos and rebellion. In this creation the Lord was separating vying elements from one other.

In the tabernacle the act of separation was motivated by a different concern than in the case of Genesis 1. Disruption/disorder, absent in Genesis 1-2, and harmony and order, present there, were assigned to different spheres. There were now two main realms of existence: the holy and the common, the clean and the unclean. God's people were placed in the realm of the holy.

In the construction of the tabernacle God was reestablishing the original harmony described in Genesis 1-2 by excluding the elements of disruption and uncleanness from His presence and from the life of His people. That order was established and maintained "through the careful observation of categorical divisions, through the recognition and maintenance of boundaries."<sup>9</sup> God was now dwelling among His people and this "constitutes the beginnings of God's bringing creation back to what it was originally intended to be."<sup>10</sup>

The order reestablished in the Israelite sanctuary was to reach cosmic dimensions. It would appear that the theology of Genesis 1, found in the passages dealing with the construction of the sanctuary, points "to a perception and understanding of that institution as a symbol [the sanctuary] that is connected with, though not necessarily grounded in, cosmogony."<sup>11</sup> The fact that the construction of the sanctuary was finished at the beginning of a new year (Exod. 40:17), "underscores the idea that a new era in the life of the people has begun and the cosmogonic association of the Tabernacle is thereby strengthened."<sup>12</sup>

We could suggest that "the tabernacle is a realization of God's created order in history."<sup>13</sup> But this blessing should not be limited to Israel alone because "this microcosm of creation is the beginning of a macrocosmic effort on God's part. In and through his people, God's presence is on the move to a new creation for all. . . . God's presence in the tabernacle is a statement about God's intended presence in the entire world. The glory manifested there is to stream out into the larger world."<sup>14</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The sanctuary is a reconstructed portion of God's original creation in the state of purity and harmony with which He endowed it at the beginning. The harmony and purity that characterizes this unique place is graciously extended by God to His own people. Yet, His final goal is for the whole world to be possessed by the glory of the One who in the earthly tabernacle was dwelling in the midst of the impurities of His people.

We should not overlook the fact that the tabernacle was built according to a heavenly model shown to Moses, a *tabnît* (Exod. 25:8, 9). The implication is that the fragment of the original creation is modeled after a heavenly reality. The space of God's presence in a world of disorder reflects the space of God's presence in a heavenly world of harmony and order.<sup>15</sup> God's place of residence in the heavenly realm extends itself to the world of humans and creates a holy space where God locates Himself.

This is necessary because God's original creation (Gen. 1-2) is no longer available to humans. But the heavenly world still exists and the world of humans can be incorporated into it through an act of re-creation. One could say that the tabernacle was a symbol of cosmic order<sup>16</sup> in that the harmony and order present there should reach the whole world.

The cosmic symbolism of the tabernacle means that universal order is restored only when God's presence in His heavenly dwelling is felt and experienced in the world of humans. It is through the divine descent to the human sphere that order is created and instituted in a world of chaos (Exod. 19:18; 40:34, 35).

Within that theological frame of reference, the sacrificial system served the purpose of initiating, preserving, and restoring the state of order and harmony recreated by God in the tabernacle?<sup>17</sup> This adds significance to the ritual of the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), which can now be understood as a ritual that "symbolically restores both the individual and the world to the founded order of creation."<sup>18</sup>

During the activities of that day the evil cosmic powers are defeated by God, and in an act of sovereignty He returns to them uncleanness and sin. The separation of the holy and the unclean reaches cosmic dimensions and points to a future permanent and universal experience.<sup>19</sup>

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1 See J. Blenkinsopp, "The Structure of P," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 28 (1976):275-292; J. Kearney, "Creation and Liturgy: The P Redaction of Ex. 25-40," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89 (1977):375-387; N. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 213-215; E. H. Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 47; Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus: Interpretation* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1991), 268-272; and Samuel E. Balentine, *The Torah's Vision of Worship* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1999), 136-141.

2 Blenkinsopp, 281.

3 Balentine, 138.

4 This summarizes what is found in Blenkinsopp, 280. Cf. Sarna, *Exploring*, 213, 214.

5 Benedikt Otzen, in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 2. See Frank H. Gorman, Jr, *Ideology of Ritual Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 40-45.

6 Blenkinsopp, 282.

7 Fretheim, 271.

8 *Ibid.*, 269.

9 Gorman, 45. When dealing with cultic materials he discusses "three distinct orders of creation—the cosmological, the societal, and the cultic. All three orders were given shape, brought into being, and established by the speech of God. . . . The conceptual element that holds these three orders together is that of order through separation. Just as the cosmological order is achieved by acts of separation—the establishing of boundaries between different categories of created things—so also the societal and cultic orders achieve order through categorical distinctions" (44). There are also conceptual categories—space, time, and status. According to him, "each of these conceptual categories is given concrete expression through a foundational image of separation—space in the separation of the holy of holies from other areas; time in the separation of the Sabbath from all other days; status in the separation of the priests from all other persons" (45).

10 *Ibid.*

11 Sarna, *Exploring*, 214.

12 Nahum M. Same, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 156. Some have seen a connection between that date and the fact that on that same date, after Noah's flood, a new world emerged from the floodwaters (Blenkinsopp, 283). It has also been suggested that "floodwaters and wilderness are the two most prominent symbols for chaos in the Old Testament. Both 'sanctuaries' [the ark and the tabernacle] are portable, one

on sea, one on land, they are used to carry the people through the waters/sands of chaos. Both are viewed as a means by which the people of God can move in a secure and ordered way through a world of disorder on their way to a new creation. . . . One is thereby invited to see the building of the tabernacle in [Exodus] chapters 35-40 in terms of re-creation, God's beginning again with world/Israel on the far side of apostasy" (Fretheim, 268, 269).

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid. Italics his. Cf. Sarna, 214.

15 Jon D. Levenson comments that the Israelite temple "is simply the earthly manifestation of the heavenly Temple. . . . The Temple in Zion is the antitype to the cosmic archetype." *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: Winston Press, 1985), 140.

16 S. Balentine, 163. Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, has some interesting and important comments on the idea that the temple "is the epitome of the world, a concentrated form of its essence, a miniature of the cosmos" (138). By this he means that, "In the Temple, God relates simultaneously to the entire cosmos, for the Temple (or mountain or city) is a microcosm of which the world itself is the macrocosm. Or, to put it differently, the center (or navel or axis or fulcrum) is not a point in space at all, but the point in relation to which all space attains individualization and meaning. The center sustains the world, as the umbilical cord sustains the embryo, or as the seed sustains the seedling, except that the world does not outgrow its center as the baby outgrows the need for an umbilical cord or as a plant comes to shed its seed" (139, 140). There seems to be some value in his view that the temple and the cosmos are connected in some significant way and yet they can be distinguished from each other.

17 Gorman, 52-55.

18 Balentine, 75.

19 Gorman writes, "By sending the goat to Azazel, Israel was sending its sin, the cause of cosmic, social, and cultic disorder, into the realm of chaos. In this way, the nation once again saw the triumph of order over chaos, and, thereby, the reestablishment of order in the world via the cult"(99).

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