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THE TENT OVER THE TABERNACLE

by M. L. G. GUILLEBAUD

MRS. GUILLEBAUD, whose husband, the late Ven. H. E. Guillebaud, Archdeacon of Ruanda, was a contributor to *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY* a number of years ago, gives fresh consideration to some features of the construction of the Mosaic tabernacle which have not always been satisfactorily explained.

IN spite of the very minute description given in the book of Exodus for the erection of the Tabernacle, the average student is continually perplexed by what we may call the "traditional" picture, which is to be found in almost every book on the subject, and is also used in models and flannelgraphs. These models follow most scrupulously all the Biblical measurements but they attempt to make them fit on to a constructional idea which in itself does not agree with the description given in the Bible.

This "traditional" picture is of a quadrangular structure of boards, open at the top and at one end, with a division in the middle. So far it is perfectly correct. But it shows the specified curtains and coverings as being thrown across it from side to side somewhat "as a pall is thrown over a coffin". Nothing more unlike the very clear description given in Exodus 40: 19 can well be imagined. Here we read of Moses setting up the Tabernacle, and we are told that he "spread abroad the tent (*'ohel*) over the tabernacle (*mishkan*) and put the covering (*mikseh*) of the tent above upon it". Surely nothing can be clearer than that? Yet in spite of this (and many other verses of the same type), we find with surprise that, as Canon Cooke puts it (*Holy Bible with Commentary*, Vol. I, p. 376), "the subject has been encumbered ever since the time of Philo with certain traditional notions which are opposed not only to the words of Exodus, but to the plainest principles of constructive art".

Yet so familiarized are we with this "traditional" picture, that the great students of the Tabernacle (such men as Dolman, Frank White, Slemming and others) seem to have accepted it without

query, probably because their interest lay in the typology rather than in the problems of construction.

For many years during which I had been giving some teaching to primitive African catechists on this subject, I had always used the "traditional" pictures to which I had been accustomed since my childhood. All the same there were certain problems which constantly bothered me, and which appeared to be insoluble, such as the "half curtain" of Exodus 26: 12 and the phrase "under the taches". But it was not until I started writing a contemporary story of the Tabernacle for my grandchildren, which included a description of the making and setting up of the same, that I found myself really up against facts which could not be reconciled with the "traditional" picture. I then came across Mr. Fergusson's article on the Temple, in Smith's *Bible Dictionary*, and immediately I saw that by taking the actual description of Exodus 40 at its face value, and ignoring the old idea, many of my problems were at once solved. And I believe that if we can let go our preconceived ideas of the way in which the coverings were placed, we shall find that the Bible explains the construction so accurately that all the difficulties vanish away.

Let us consider the main constructional problems with which we are faced if we are to adhere to the "traditional" picture, and then see how completely they are met if we follow closely the very accurate directions given in the Bible.

First of all let us see what the three Hebrew words, translated as Tabernacle, Tent and Coverings, indicate.

(a) The Tabernacle (*mishkan*). This word always means "dwelling-place" (see Young) and is formed by the golden board framework roofed over by the ten lengths of fine linen (Ex. 26: 1, 15), for we read that the fine linen curtains shall be coupled together "and it shall be one tabernacle". Thus we see that the fine linen curtains are actually part of the *mishkan*.

(b) The Tent (*'ohel*). This word is always used in connection with the goat's-hair curtains, which are to be a "covering upon the Tabernacle" or "over the Tabernacle". There were eleven lengths of these coupled together into two curtains by "taches" of brass, and here we see (Ex. 26: 12) that these taches are to "couple the Tent together".

(c) The Coverings (*mikseh*). No dimensions are given for these: we are simply told that they are two in number, one of rams' skin dyed red (suggestive perhaps of beautiful moroccan leather), one of a word translated badgers' skin or seal-skin. As there were no

badgers in that part, it is reasonable to suppose that it was in reality leather, made from the skins of seals, porpoises or other marine animals. In any case the purpose was to make the whole erection completely weatherproof (see Smith's *Bible Dictionary*).

Let us then consider some of the very real problems which the traditional picture raises in one's mind.

1. *The Problem of how the curtains and coverings were placed.*

According to the traditional theory, we are faced with three very heavy coverings being placed over an exquisitely woven and embroidered fine linen cover. And we know that these covers will have to be pulled into position not once but frequently. No matter how much care was exercised it would have been impossible to put the goat's-hair curtains and the ram's-skin and leather covers into place, without very soon causing the fine linen curtains to become rubbed and worn. Added to this difficulty is the question as to how such a weight of covering could be stretched sufficiently tautly across a span of 15 feet without undue sagging, however carefully it might have been pegged down. Sooner or later rain or the heavy dews would form pools and cause the covers to stretch.

2. *The Problem of the Size of the Fine Linen Curtains.*

Assuming the traditional picture of a flat roof, we know that the area to be covered was 675 square feet (the Tabernacle was 45 ft. x 15 ft.). But there were ten strips of fine linen, each measuring 42 ft. x 6 ft. and giving a total area of 2,520 square feet. This appears to indicate that the fine linen curtains were more than three times larger than was necessary if they were only to be applied as a flat ceiling.

3. *The Problem of the Taches.*

We are told specifically in Ex. 26: 33 that the Veil was to be "hung under the taches". These taches were the clasps which held the two fine linen curtains together. Bishop Ellicott in his commentary says that "if under the taches means 'directly under' them, we must then regard the *mishkan* as being divided into two chambers of equal size". But as it is almost universally accepted that the Holy of Holies was a perfect cube, he goes on to say that the word "under" may perhaps be used with "some vagueness" Canon Cooke (*Holy Bible with Commentary*, Vol. I, p. 375) goes still further and says that "the statement that the veil was hung 'under the taches' remains unexplained". But ignoring a difficulty does not remove it! Besides if we accept the position of the Veil as being fixed by the pillars dividing the Tabernacle, we are then

faced with a length of two and a half curtains (i.e. 15 feet) hanging down uselessly over the back.

4. *The Problem of the Half Curtain.*

We are told (Ex. 26: 9, 12), that the eleven goat's-hair strips shall be coupled by six and five to make two curtains, and that the sixth curtain "shall be doubled in the forefront of the tabernacle". We are also told that the "half curtain that remaineth, shall hang over the backside of the tabernacle".

But seeing that the total length of the two curtains when joined is 66 feet, and the entire length of the Tabernacle was only 45 feet, it seems somewhat difficult to reconcile the two measurements. Many attempts have been made to solve this, but as long as we hold the traditional theory, there seems no satisfactory answer.

5. *The Problem of the Fifth Pillar.*

We are told that there were to be four pillars to hold the Veil in place, but five pillars for the hanging of the Door. Seeing that the Tabernacle is of the same width all along, why should a fifth or central pillar be needed?

6. *The Problem of Space.*

As one tries to visualize the Tabernacle in the form we are all so accustomed to, many other questions arise in one's mind. For instance in that plan where do we find any place provided for the following activities? : —

- (a) The robing and unrobing of the priests, and of the high priest.
- (b) The preparation and the cooking of the wave offering (Lev. 10: 4).
- (c) The preparation and storage of the spices.
- (d) The making of the shewbread.
- (e) The storage of the oil for the lamp.
- (f) The cleansing of the various utensils connected with the daily worship.
- (g) The storage of the travelling covers and of the staves.
- (h) The storage of the tools needed for the erection and repairs of the Tabernacle.
- (i) The medical examinations of people for leprosy and other complaints, and for their subsequent rehabilitation.

These, and many other such details, could hardly have taken place in full view of everyone, especially when we consider how small the Court really was, after allowing for the space which would have been occupied by the necessary ropes which held the wall in place. If all these things had to be done in the open court,

it is hard to see how the order and cleanliness, which we associate with that enclosure, could have been preserved.

Such then are some of the many problems with which we are faced while we follow the traditional picture.

Now let us see what happens if we face the subject with an open mind, and try to get a picture of it exactly as the Bible states it. We shall then have not only the *mishkan* with its shining golden board walls, and fine linen covering, but we shall also have a Tent over it, made of the goat's-hair curtains, and above that again will be spread the Coverings. Many of our problems will now find a natural explanation. First of all there must of necessity be a framework placed over the Tabernacle, to hold the heavy covers of the Tent in place. If we study the theory of James Fergusson, F.R.S., F.R.A.S. (see Smith's *Bible Dictionary*), we shall see that this framework was probably large enough not only to cover it, but also to provide a covered way running all round. The Problem of the Fifth Pillar is thus solved, for a tent pre-supposes a ridge-pole, and this ridgepole (made in sections for convenience in carrying) would necessitate a central pole or pillar, higher than the rest. The picture then is of not only one pole but five of graded heights, placed both back and front of the Tabernacle at intervals of about $7\frac{1}{2}$ feet (5 cubits) and at an equal distance from the front and back. The remaining poles would have been joined together from end to end by rods or "fillets", and the central ridgepole would have had extra support from at least one triangle resting on top of the golden boards. Such a structure or something very similar would have been needed to support the tremendous weight of the great curtains and coverings. This would give a ridgepole of 60 feet, and the distance from the top of the central pole to the top of the outer poles would then be just about 14 feet. Now the length of the fine linen curtains, which form the *mishkan*, was 28 feet, which would thus appear to be correct. Allow also that the said fine linen curtains are not thrown *over* the ridgepole, but suspended by loops from beneath it, then the problem of wear and tear at once disappears. This method is familiar to all who have used tropical tents, where there is always an air space left between the tent proper and its "fly", thus giving protection both from heat and rain.

So we have the Tabernacle as an enclosure with golden walls and a gabled or tent-like ceiling of beautiful woven linen in blue and purple and scarlet, with cherubim embroidered upon it, a fit dwelling-place indeed for the Lord God. This was divided by the

Veil into the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies.

Now we see that the problem of the size of the curtains has also been solved, for all the length will be needed, and the two and a half curtains which before seemed so wasted, will now fall down in folds below the ridgepole, thus filling up the triangular space above the back wall. This "backside of the Tabernacle" is also part of the *mishkan*. The remaining width on either side would have been stretched out (but always kept below the framework), so that it formed a ceiling to the surrounding corridors. Thus all its beauty would be fully displayed. It could not, however (so it seems to me), be used as Mr. Fergusson suggests, as a *lining* for the goat's-hair, for that would immediately bring back the problem of wear and tear. It is far more likely that it was attached separately to the framework but below it. Thus we have the Holy of Holies wrapped in darkness behind the Veil, while adequate light would penetrate the Holy Place above the "Door" or screen which would have been stretched between the five pillars before the entrance to the Tabernacle. This method also disposes of the problem of the taches, as we have seen that two and a half curtains were now needed for the back.

Then there are the goat's-hair curtains. With a ridgepole of 60 feet long, and a total length of curtains of 66 feet, we find that the problem of the half-curtain is also solved. For the width of a curtain was 6 feet, therefore if the whole piece is centrally placed, there would be a half curtain (3 feet) hanging over the ridgepole at either end, just as stated in Exodus 26.

Thus we now have a Tent over the Tabernacle, exactly corresponding to the Bible description, and also constructionally correct according to all known principles of tent "architecture". Also we have now accounted for the need for two sets of tent pegs ("pins"), one for the Tabernacle and one for the Court, which are mentioned more than once in the above chapters of Exodus.

Now if Mr. Fergusson's theory, and his measurements as seen in the diagram, on which I have based my own, are correct, we then find that every measurement is exactly half the equivalent measurements given for Ezekiel's Temple. Furthermore if we accept the thought of a covered way or verandah running the whole way round the Tabernacle, the sides corresponding to the space under the eaves of a tropical tent, and the back and front like the verandahs, we shall then see the Door as a great screen, stretching right across the front pillars, and of the same measurements as the Entrance Gate to the Court ($7\frac{1}{2} \times 30$ feet). Thus not only is the

interior of the Tabernacle completely hidden from those who bring their sacrifices to the great Altar of Burnt Offering, but the covered verandahs are also hidden. These would now correspond with the "side chambers" of Ezekiel's Temple (Ezek. 42: 13-14), which were provided for just such purposes as we have already noticed, robing rooms, examination rooms, storage, etc. This method of placing the Door, also does away with any difficulty of entrance to the Tabernacle, allowing as it would, ample room for the priests to enter without being impeded by hangings. In this connection it is worth noticing that the Door is always spoken of as the Door of the *'ohel*, and never as the Door of the *mishkan*.

It may of course be objected that there is no mention in the Bible of such things as tent-poles or ridgepoles, but surely they would be taken for granted as being essential to the erection of any tent, and would not therefore necessarily be enumerated. At any rate there is nothing in Scripture to contradict such a theory.

The result then as seen from the outside is just a Tent, made of similar goat's-hair to the hundreds of tents around it (also called *'ohel*), and except for its greater size and possibly its shape, like them in general appearance. Certainly it is a tent, with all that that implies of impermanence. This thought of a temporary dwelling is entirely in accordance with all the typological teaching that is associated with it. So also is the fact that nothing of beauty could be seen from the outside, but that all the glory and beauty are within (cp. Isa. 53: 2).

Cambridge.