

**GOD'S DWELLING
BREAKING and RENEWING
the COVENANT
EXODUS 25:1 – 40:28**

Directions for the Construction of God's Dwelling (25:1 - 31:18)

The authors of Exodus, knowing the importance of the temple cult in building and sustaining a community in post-exilic Judah, placed these divine instructions here on Sinai because they saw them as an expression of God's will and as essential to the life of the people of Israel from its beginnings. The text seems to draw on ancient stories of God's presence with his people during their journeying from Sinai to the Promised Land. The people dwelt in tents; and they had a tent set aside for their God. The stories told of the tent as the place of meeting between YHWH and Moses: 'There I will meet with you, and ... I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites' (25:22). Many of the details of the text, however, seem to be written in the light of the experience of the temple cult in Jerusalem, which was understood to be a later realisation of the ancient tent tradition. The key point is that the intimate presence of YHWH which the people of Israel experienced on the sacred mountain 'stayed with them on each stage of their journey' (40:38). The story tells of YHWH instructing Moses to have this Dwelling constructed as a reassuring sign that he was with his people in their journeying.

Abraham promised his servant: 'YHWH, before whom I walk, will send his angel with you and make your way successful' (Genesis 24:40). YHWH promised Isaac: 'I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfil the oath that I swore to your father Abraham' (Genesis 26:3). He promised Jacob: 'Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you' (Genesis 28:15). Jacob repeated this promise to his son, Joseph: 'God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your ancestors' (Genesis 48:21). The first time Moses encountered YHWH on Sinai, he was promised: 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain' (Exodus 3:12). The previous chapters have demonstrated that God is, indeed, with his people on this sacred mountain. But, they must move on. They cannot take Mount Sinai with them. God's tent will be a sign to them that God is still with them. As YHWH instructed Moses: 'Have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them' (Exodus 25:8).

I am presuming to note, with little comment, the details of the Tabernacle and its furnishings, especially since there has not been a temple in Jerusalem now for nearly two thousand years. The people of ancient Israel were in large part appropriating common traditions in the ancient Near East, traditions already saturated with symbolic meaning, much of which is inaccessible to us except in general outline. The sections of the Tabernacle that are described, the precious metals, the colours, the quality of the cloth, all graduate in such a way as to point to the central importance of the 'Most Holy Place' (26:33) – the inner sanctum where YHWH is present. Every detail is designed to draw the reader into an experience of the holy. For the people of Israel, the priestly vestments and the sacrifices described in these chapters conveyed an experience of the numinous and the mystical, the awesome closeness of God in the heart of their cult.

The opening verse places the whole of the section 25:1 to 30:10 as instructions given by YHWH to Moses during the ‘forty days and forty nights’ that Moses was with God on Mount Sinai (24:18).

The material needed to construct the tabernacle and its furnishings is to be an ‘offering’ from the people, freely given according to the promptings of their heart (25:2). The people declared earlier: ‘Everything that YHWH has spoken we will do’ (19:8; repeated in 24:3,7), thus committing themselves and their posterity to the covenant. So here, God is asking their free compliance. His promise to be with them is unconditionally offered. They can receive it, however, only if they freely welcome it.

YHWH wants the people to make him a ‘sanctuary’ (miqdāš): a place where He, the Holy One, can ‘dwell (šākan) among them’ (19:8).

In verse nine the sanctuary is called a ‘Tabernacle/Dwelling’ (miškān); that is, a place where God ‘dwells’ (šākan). Every detail of its construction and use is to be in accordance with God’s instructions.

¹YHWH said to Moses:

²Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me.

³This is the offering that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, ⁴blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine linen, goats’ hair, ⁵tanned rams’ skins, fine leather, acacia wood, ⁶oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, ⁷onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and for the breastpiece.

⁸And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them.

⁹In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

The Ark (25:10-16)

The importance of this ‘ark’ (‘arôn, ‘box’) lies in where it is and what it contains.

¹⁰They shall make an ark of acacia wood; it shall be two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high.

¹¹You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside you shall overlay it, and you shall make a molding of gold upon it all around.

¹²You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side.

¹³You shall make poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold.

¹⁴And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, by which to carry the ark. ¹⁵The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it.

¹⁶You shall put into the ark the covenant that I shall give you.

‘Covenant’ (25:16), here, and throughout this section (see, for example, 25:21-22 below), translates the Hebrew ‘ēdût. It refers to something that *witnesses* to the covenant (b’rît). Aaron was instructed to keep a jar of manna in front of it (see Exodus 16:34 and the commentary there).

The Mercy Seat (25:17-22)

‘Mercy seat’ (25:17) translates the Hebrew kappōret. It is placed on top of the ark (25:21), and functions as the platform of the place where God is present. It seems to derive its name from the ritual of Yom Kippur when God ‘clears away’ (kipper) any ritual impurity. It is the place where God brings about ‘atonement’, clearing away ritual impurity, forgiving sin, and drawing his people back into the intimacy of divine communion.

¹⁷Then you shall make a mercy seat of pure gold; two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its width.

¹⁸You shall make two cherubim of gold; you shall make them of hammered work, at the two ends of the mercy seat. ¹⁹Make one cherub at the one end, and one cherub at the other; of one piece with the mercy seat you shall make the cherubim at its two ends. ²⁰The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings. They shall face one to another; the faces of the cherubim shall be turned toward the mercy seat.

God placed cherubim at the entrance to the garden of Eden ‘to guard the way to the tree of life’ (Genesis 3:24). These representations of mythical creatures, which express all the forces of nature, including intelligence, speed, and power, are sculptured here. YHWH rides on them (Psalm 18:10; Ezekiel 10:1). They warn anyone against daring to encroach upon the divine precinct.

²¹You shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark; and in the ark you shall put the covenant that I shall give you.

²²There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites.

The Table for the Bread of the Presence (25:23-30)

²³You shall make a table of acacia wood, two cubits long, one cubit wide, and a cubit and a half high. ²⁴You shall overlay it with pure gold, and make a molding of gold around it. ²⁵You shall make around it a rim a hand-breadth wide, and a molding of gold around the rim. ²⁶You shall make for it four rings of gold, and fasten the rings to the four corners at its four legs. ²⁷The rings that hold the poles used for carrying the table shall be close to the rim. ²⁸You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold, and the table shall be carried with these. ²⁹You shall make its plates and *cupped utensils* for incense, and its flagons and bowls with which to pour drink offerings; you shall make them of pure gold. ³⁰And you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me always.

The bread, renewed each sabbath, is an offering to God, a symbolic reminder that God is the one who fulfills all our needs.

The Lampstand (m^enôrâ, 25:31-40)

Indeed, YHWH, you are my lamp, YHWH lightens my darkness.

– 2Samuel 22:29

It is you who light my lamp; YHWH, my God, lights up my darkness.

– Psalm 18:28

³¹You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. The base and the shaft of the lampstand shall be made of hammered work; its cups, its calyxes, and its petals shall be of one piece with it; ³²and there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it; ³³three cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with calyx and petals, on one branch, and three cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with calyx and petals, on the other branch—so for the six branches going out of the lampstand. ³⁴On the lampstand itself there shall be four cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with its calyxes and petals. ³⁵There shall be a calyx of one piece with it under the first pair of branches, a calyx of one piece with it under the next pair of branches, and a calyx of one piece with it under the last pair of branches—so for the six branches that go out of the lampstand. ³⁶Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it one hammered piece of pure gold. ³⁷You shall make the seven lamps for it; and the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it. ³⁸Its snuffers and trays shall be of pure gold. ³⁹It, and all these utensils, shall be made from a talent of pure gold. ⁴⁰And see that you make them according to the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.

Verse forty repeats God's earlier instruction (25:9). Every detail must be carried out according to God's declared will.

The Curtains for God's Dwelling (miškān) (26:1-14)

¹Moreover you shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twisted linen, and blue, purple, and crimson yarns; you shall make them with cherubim skillfully worked into them. ²The length of each curtain shall be twenty-eight cubits, and the width of each curtain four cubits; all the curtains shall be of the same size. ³Five curtains shall be joined to one another; and the other five curtains shall be joined to one another. ⁴You shall make loops of blue on the edge of the outermost curtain in the first set; and likewise you shall make loops on the edge of the outermost curtain in the second set. ⁵You shall make fifty loops on the one curtain, and you shall make fifty loops on the edge of the curtain that is in the second set; the loops shall be opposite one another. ⁶You shall make fifty clasps of gold, and join the curtains to one another with the clasps, so that the tabernacle may be one whole. ⁷You shall also make curtains of goats' hair for a tent over the tabernacle; you shall make eleven curtains.

The tent ('ohāl, 26:7) is the outer cover of the Dwelling.

⁸The length of each curtain shall be thirty cubits, and the width of each curtain four cubits; the eleven curtains shall be of the same size. ⁹You shall join five curtains by themselves, and six curtains by themselves, and the sixth curtain you shall double over at the front of the tent. ¹⁰You shall make fifty loops on the edge of the curtain that is outermost in one set, and fifty loops on the edge of the curtain that is outermost in the second set. ¹¹You shall make fifty clasps of bronze, and put the clasps into the loops, and join the tent together, so that it may be one whole. ¹²The part that remains of the curtains of the tent, the half curtain that remains, shall hang over the back of the tabernacle. ¹³The cubit on the one side, and the cubit on the other side, of what remains in the length of the curtains of the tent, shall hang over the sides of the tabernacle, on this side and that side, to cover it. ¹⁴You shall make for the tent a covering of tanned rams' skins and an outer covering of fine leather.

The Curtain Frames (26:15-30)

¹⁵You shall make upright frames of acacia wood for the tabernacle. ¹⁶Ten cubits shall be the length of a frame, and a cubit and a half the width of each frame. ¹⁷There shall be two pegs in each frame to fit the frames together; you shall make these for all the frames of the tabernacle. ¹⁸You shall make the frames for the tabernacle: twenty frames for the south side; ¹⁹and you shall make forty bases of silver under the twenty frames, two bases under the first frame for its two pegs, and two bases under the next frame for its two pegs; ²⁰and for the second side of the tabernacle, on the north side twenty frames, ²¹and their forty bases of silver, two bases under the first frame, and two bases under the next frame; ²²and for the rear of the tabernacle westward you shall make six frames.

²³You shall make two frames for corners of the tabernacle in the rear; ²⁴they shall be separate beneath, but joined at the top, at the first ring; it shall be the same with both of them; they shall form the two corners. ²⁵And so there shall be eight frames, with their bases of silver, sixteen bases; two bases under the first frame, and two bases under the next frame. ²⁶You shall make bars of acacia wood, five for the frames of the one side of the tabernacle, ²⁷and five bars for the frames of the other side of the tabernacle, and five bars for the frames of the side of the tabernacle at the rear westward. ²⁸The middle bar, halfway up the frames, shall pass through from end to end. ²⁹You shall overlay the frames with gold, and shall make their rings of gold to hold the bars; and you shall overlay the bars with gold. ³⁰Then you shall erect the tabernacle according to the plan for it that you were shown on the mountain.

Verse thirty repeats 25:9 and 40 (see also 27:8 on the following page).

The Most Holy Place (haqq^odāšīm, 26:31-35)

³¹You shall make a curtain of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen; it shall be made with cherubim skillfully worked into it. ³²You shall hang it on four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, which have hooks of gold and rest on four bases of silver. ³³You shall hang the curtain under the clasps, and bring the ark of the covenant in there, within the curtain; and the curtain shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy. ³⁴You shall put the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant in the most holy place. ³⁵You shall set the table outside the curtain, and the lampstand on the south side of the tabernacle opposite the table; and you shall put the table on the north side.

The Entrance to the Tent (ʿohāl) (26:36-37)

³⁶You shall make a screen for the entrance of the tent, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, embroidered with needlework. ³⁷You 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 Altar for Sacrifice (mizbēah, 27:1-8)

¹You shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits wide; the altar shall be square, and it shall be three cubits high. ²You shall make horns for it on its four corners; its horns shall be of one piece with it, and you shall overlay it with bronze. ³You shall make pots for it to receive its ashes, and shovels and basins and forks and firepans; you shall make all its utensils of bronze. ⁴You shall also make for it a grating, a network of bronze; and on the net you shall make four bronze rings at its four corners. ⁵You shall set it under the ledge of the altar so that the net shall extend halfway down the altar. ⁶You shall make poles for the altar, poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with bronze;

The Courtyard

⁷the poles shall be put through the rings, so that the poles shall be on the two sides of the altar when it is carried. ⁸You shall make it hollow, with boards. They shall be made just as you were shown on the mountain.

The Sacred Enclosure (27:9-19)

As we shall see, only priests can enter the Dwelling. The sacred enclosure is open to others (provided they are ritually pure).

⁹You shall make the court of the tabernacle. On the south side the court shall have hangings of fine twisted linen one hundred cubits long for that side; ¹⁰its twenty pillars and their twenty bases shall be of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their bands shall be of silver. ¹¹Likewise for its length on the north side there shall be hangings one hundred cubits long, their pillars twenty and their bases twenty, of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their bands shall be of silver. ¹²For the width of the court on the west side there shall be fifty cubits of hangings, with ten pillars and ten bases. ¹³The width of the court on the front to the east shall be fifty cubits. ¹⁴There shall be fifteen cubits of hangings on the one side, with three pillars and three bases. ¹⁵There shall be fifteen cubits of hangings on the other side, with three pillars and three bases. ¹⁶For the gate of the court there shall be a screen twenty cubits long, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, embroidered with needlework; it shall have four pillars and with them four bases. ¹⁷All the pillars around the court shall be banded with silver; their hooks shall be of silver, and their bases of bronze. ¹⁸The length of the court shall be one hundred cubits, the width fifty, and the height five cubits, with hangings of fine twisted linen and bases of bronze. ¹⁹All the utensils of the tabernacle for every use, and all its pegs and all the pegs of the court, shall be of bronze.

The Eternal Flame (27:20-21)

²⁰You shall further command the Israelites to bring you pure oil of beaten olives for the light, so that a lamp may be set up to burn regularly. ²¹In the tent of meeting, outside the curtain that is before the covenant, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening to morning before YHWH. It shall be a perpetual *statute* to be observed throughout their generations by the Israelites.

The 'tent of meeting' ('ohel mō'ēd) is the most holy place where YHWH dwells among his people (25:8), and where he meets with Moses to reveal his will (25:22).

The Vestments for the Priests (kohēn, 28:1-43)

¹Then bring near to you your brother Aaron, and his sons with him, from among the Israelites, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. ²You shall make sacred vestments for the glorious adornment of your brother Aaron. ³And you shall speak to all who have ability, whom I have endowed with skill, that they make Aaron's vestments to consecrate him for my priesthood.

⁴These are the vestments that they shall make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a checkered tunic, a turban, and a sash.

The 'breastplate' (hōšēn), as described in 28:15-30, is a kind of pouch covered in jewels which holds the sacred lots used for discerning God's will. The 'ephod' is the main priestly garment, suspended from the shoulders and closely associated with the 'breastplate'. The 'robe' (me'īl) is a long outer garment, under which, against the body, is the inner garment, the tunic (ketōnet).

When they make these sacred vestments for your brother Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests, ⁵they shall use gold, blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine linen.

⁶They shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, skillfully worked. ⁷It shall have two shoulder-pieces attached to its two edges, so that it may be joined together. ⁸The decorated band on it shall be of the same workmanship and materials, of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen. ⁹You shall take two onyx stones, and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel, ¹⁰six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth. ¹¹As a gem-cutter engraves signets, so you shall engrave the two stones with the names of the sons of Israel; you shall mount them in settings of gold filigree. ¹²You shall set the two stones on the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel; and Aaron shall bear their names before YHWH on his two shoulders for remembrance. ¹³You shall make settings of gold filigree, ¹⁴and two chains of pure gold, twisted like cords; and you shall attach the corded chains to the settings.

¹⁵You shall make a breastpiece of judgment, in skilled work; you shall make it in the style of the ephod; of gold, of blue and purple and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen you shall make it. ¹⁶It shall be square and doubled, a span in length and a span in width. ¹⁷You shall set in it four rows of stones. A row of carnelian, chrysolite, and emerald shall be the first row; ¹⁸and the second row a turquoise, a sapphire and a moonstone; ¹⁹and the third row a jacinth, an agate, and an amethyst; ²⁰and the fourth row a beryl, an onyx, and a jasper; they shall be set in gold filigree. ²¹There shall be twelve stones with names corresponding to the names of the sons of Israel; they shall be like signets, each engraved with its name, for the twelve tribes. ²²You shall make for the breastpiece chains of pure gold, twisted like cords; ²³and you shall make for the breastpiece two rings of gold, and put the two rings on the two edges of the breastpiece. ²⁴You shall put the two cords of gold in the two rings at the edges of the breastpiece; ²⁵the two ends of the two cords you shall attach to the two settings, and so attach it in front to the shoulder-pieces of the ephod. ²⁶You shall make two rings of gold, and put them at the two ends of the breastpiece, on its inside edge next to the ephod.

²⁷You shall make two rings of gold, and attach them in front to the lower part of the two shoulder-pieces of the ephod, at its joining above the decorated band of the ephod. ²⁸The breastpiece shall be bound by its rings to the rings of the ephod with a blue cord, so that it may lie on the decorated band of the ephod, and so that the breastpiece shall not come loose from the ephod. ²⁹So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart when he goes into the holy place, for a continual remembrance before YHWH. ³⁰In the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart when he goes in before YHWH; thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the Israelites on his heart before YHWH continually.

The Urim and the Thummim seem to have been used to discover a 'Yes' or 'No' answer to a question addressed to God. Proverbs 16:33 seems to be referring to its use: 'The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is YHWH's alone.'

³¹You shall make the robe of the ephod all of blue. ³²It shall have an opening for the head in the middle of it, with a woven binding around the opening, like the opening in a coat of mail, so that it may not be torn. ³³On its lower hem you shall make pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, all around the lower hem, with bells of gold between them all around— ^{34a}a golden bell and a pomegranate alternating all around the lower hem of the robe. ³⁵Aaron shall wear it when he ministers, and its sound shall be heard when he goes into the holy place before YHWH, and when he comes out, so that he may not die.

³⁶You shall make a rosette of pure gold, and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, "Holy to YHWH." ³⁷You shall fasten it on the turban with a blue cord; it shall be on the front of the turban. ³⁸It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall take on himself any guilt incurred in the holy offering that the Israelites consecrate as their sacred donations; it shall always be on his forehead, in order that they may find favour before YHWH.

³⁹You shall make the checkered tunic of fine linen, and you shall make a turban of fine linen, and you shall make a sash embroidered with needlework.

⁴⁰For Aaron's sons you shall make tunics and sashes and headdresses; you shall make them for their glorious adornment.

⁴¹You shall put them on your brother Aaron, and on his sons with him, and shall anoint them and ordain them and consecrate them, so that they may serve me as priests.

⁴²You shall make for them linen undergarments to cover their naked flesh; they shall reach from the hips to the thighs;

⁴³Aaron and his sons shall wear them when they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister in the holy place; or they will bring guilt on themselves and die. This shall be a perpetual *statute* for him and for his descendants after him.

The Consecration of the Priests (29:1-35)

¹Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them, so that they may serve me as priests. Take one young bull and two rams without blemish, ²and unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers spread with oil. You shall make them of choice wheat flour. ³You shall put them in one basket and bring them in the basket, and bring the bull and the two rams. ⁴You shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and wash them with water. ⁵Then you shall take the vestments, and put on Aaron the tunic and the robe of the ephod, and the ephod, and the breastpiece, and gird him with the decorated band of the ephod; ⁶and you shall set the turban on his head, and put the holy diadem on the turban. ⁷You shall take the anointing oil, and pour it on his head and anoint him. ⁸Then you shall bring his sons, and put tunics on them, ⁹and you shall gird them with sashes and tie headdresses on them; and the priesthood shall be theirs by a perpetual *edict*. You shall then ordain Aaron and his sons.

¹⁰You shall bring the bull in front of the tent of meeting. Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the bull, ¹¹and you shall slaughter the bull before YHWH, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, ¹²and shall take some of the blood of the bull and put it on the horns of the altar with your finger, and all the rest of the blood you shall pour out at the base of the altar. ¹³You shall take all the fat that covers the entrails, and the appendage of the liver, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, and turn them into smoke on the altar. ¹⁴But the flesh of the bull, and its skin, and its dung, you shall burn with fire outside the camp; it is a *purification* offering.

The ‘purification offering’ (ḥaṭṭā’t) is to purify oneself from accidental or unavoidable offences against ritual purity. This purification is demanded before daring to draw near to the all-holy God.

¹⁵Then you shall take one of the rams, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the ram, ¹⁶and you shall slaughter the ram, and shall take its blood and dash it against all sides of the altar. ¹⁷Then you shall cut the ram into its parts, and wash its entrails and its legs, and put them with its parts and its head, ¹⁸and turn the whole ram into smoke on the altar; it is a burnt offering to YHWH; it is a pleasing odor, an offering by fire to YHWH. ¹⁹You shall take the other ram; and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the ram, ²⁰and you shall slaughter the ram, and take some of its blood and put it on the lobe of Aaron’s right ear and on the lobes of the right ears of his sons, and on the thumbs of their right hands, and on the big toes of their right feet, and dash the rest of the blood against all sides of the altar. ²¹Then you shall take some of the blood that is on the altar, and some of the anointing oil, and sprinkle it on Aaron and his vestments and on his sons and his sons’ vestments with him; then he and his vestments shall be holy, as well as his sons and his sons’ vestments.

²²You shall also take the fat of the ram, the fat tail, the fat that covers the entrails, the appendage of the liver, the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, and the right thigh (for it is a ram of ordination), ²³and one loaf of bread, one cake of bread made with oil, and one wafer, out of the basket of unleavened bread that is before YHWH; ²⁴and you shall place all these on the palms of Aaron and on the palms of his sons, and raise them as an elevation offering before YHWH. ²⁵Then you shall take them from their hands, and turn them into smoke on the altar on top of the burnt offering of pleasing odor before YHWH; it is an offering by fire to YHWH. ²⁶You shall take the breast of the ram of Aaron's ordination and raise it as an elevation offering before YHWH; and it shall be your portion. ²⁷You shall consecrate the breast that was raised as an elevation offering and the thigh that was raised as an elevation offering from the ram of ordination, from that which belonged to Aaron and his sons. ²⁸These things shall be a perpetual ordinance for Aaron and his sons from the Israelites, for this is an offering; and it shall be an offering by the Israelites from their *communion sacrifices*, their offering to YHWH. ²⁹The sacred vestments of Aaron shall be passed on to his sons after him; they shall be anointed in them and ordained in them. ³⁰The son who is priest in his place shall wear them seven days, when he comes into the tent of meeting to minister in the holy place. ³¹You shall take the ram of ordination, and boil its flesh in a holy place; ³²and Aaron and his sons shall eat the flesh of the ram and the bread that is in the basket, at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ³³They themselves shall eat the food by which atonement is made, to ordain and consecrate them, but no one else shall eat of them, because they are holy. ³⁴If any of the flesh for the ordination, or of the bread, remains until the morning, then you shall burn the remainder with fire; it shall not be eaten, because it is holy. ³⁵Thus you shall do to Aaron and to his sons, just as I have commanded you; through seven days you shall ordain them. ³⁶Also every day you shall offer a bull as a *purification* offering for atonement.

Consecration of the Altar and the Tent of Meeting (29:36-46)

Also you shall offer a sin offering for the altar, when you make atonement for it, and shall anoint it, to consecrate it. ³⁷Seven days you shall make atonement for the altar, and consecrate it, and the altar shall be most holy; whatever touches the altar shall become holy. ³⁸Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs a year old regularly each day. ³⁹One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer in the evening; ⁴⁰and with the first lamb one-tenth of a measure of choice flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of beaten oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine for a drink offering. ⁴¹And the other lamb you shall offer in the evening, and shall offer with it a grain offering and its drink offering, as in the morning, for a pleasing odour, an offering by fire to YHWH.

⁴²It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before YHWH, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. ⁴³I will meet with the Israelites there, and it shall be sanctified by my glory; ⁴⁴I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate, to serve me as priests. ⁴⁵I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God. ⁴⁶And they shall know that I am YHWH their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am YHWH their God.

The purpose of this consecration is so that the Tabernacle can be a place where the all-holy God can dwell among his people, and meet them there through the mediation of Moses and the consecrated priests (see the commentary page 132).

The Altar for the Offering of Incense (30:1-9)

This is not in its logical place in the account. It appears to be an addition. The altar is overlaid with gold (30:3), for, unlike the bronze altar for sacrifice (27:1-8), it is inside the tent, and it is directly associated with the Most Holy Place (30:6).

¹You shall make an altar on which to offer incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. ²It shall be one cubit long, and one cubit wide; it shall be square, and shall be two cubits high; its horns shall be of one piece with it. ³You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top, and its sides all around and its horns; and you shall make for it a molding of gold all around. ⁴And you shall make two golden rings for it; under its molding on two opposite sides of it you shall make them, and they shall hold the poles with which to carry it. ⁵You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold. ⁶You shall place it in front of the curtain that is above the ark of the covenant, in front of the mercy seat that is over the covenant, where I will meet with you. ⁷Aaron shall offer fragrant incense on it; every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall offer it, ⁸and when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening, he shall offer it, a regular incense offering before YHWH throughout your generations. ⁹You shall not offer unholy incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering; and you shall not pour a drink offering on it.

The yearly Rite of Atonement and the yearly Tax (30:10-16)

¹⁰Once a year Aaron shall perform the rite of atonement on its horns. Throughout your generations he shall perform the atonement for it once a year with the blood of the atoning *purification* offering. It is most holy to YHWH.

¹¹YHWH spoke to Moses: ¹²When you take a census of the Israelites to register them, at registration all of them shall give a ransom for their lives to YHWH, so that no plague may come upon them for being registered. ¹³This is what each one who is registered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as an offering to YHWH.

The introductory words ‘Yahweh spoke to Moses’ mark this as an addition (see 30:17,22,34).

Ritual Washing and Consecrating Oil

¹⁴Each one who is registered, from twenty years old and upward, shall give YHWH'S offering. ¹⁵The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than the half shekel, when you bring this offering to YHWH to make atonement for your lives. ¹⁶You shall take the atonement money from the Israelites and shall designate it for the service of the tent of meeting; before YHWH it will be a reminder to the Israelites of the ransom given for your lives.

Ritual Washing (30:17-21)

¹⁷YHWH spoke to Moses: ¹⁸You shall make a bronze basin with a bronze stand for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it; ¹⁹with the water Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet. ²⁰When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to make an offering by fire to YHWH, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. ²¹They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die: it shall be a perpetual ordinance for them, for him and for his descendants throughout their generations.

Consecrating with Oil (30:22-33)

²²YHWH spoke to Moses: ²³Take the finest spices: of liquid myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet-smelling cinnamon half as much, that is, two hundred fifty, and two hundred fifty of aromatic cane, ²⁴and five hundred of cassia—measured by the sanctuary shekel—and a hin of olive oil; ²⁵and you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil. ²⁶With it you shall anoint the tent of meeting and the ark of the covenant, ²⁷and the table and all its utensils, and the lampstand and its utensils, and the altar of incense, ²⁸and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin with its stand; ²⁹you shall consecrate them, so that they may be most holy; whatever touches them will become holy. ³⁰You shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, in order that they may serve me as priests. ³¹You shall say to the Israelites, "This shall be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations. ³²It shall not be used in any ordinary anointing of the body, and you shall make no other like it in composition; it is holy, and it shall be holy to you. ³³Whoever compounds any like it or whoever puts any of it on an unqualified person shall be cut off from the people." ('Cut off from the people', see 12:15,19).

Incense (30:34-38)

³⁴YHWH said to Moses: Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (an equal part of each), ³⁵and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; ³⁶and you shall beat some of it into powder, and put part of it before the covenant in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you; it shall be for you most holy.

³⁷When you make incense according to this composition, you shall not make it for yourselves; it shall be regarded by you as holy to YHWH. ³⁸Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from the people.

Inspired Craftsmen (31:1-11)

¹YHWH spoke to Moses: ²See, I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: ³and I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, ⁴to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, ⁵in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. ⁶Moreover, I have appointed with him Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and I have given skill to all the skillful, so that they may make all that I have commanded you: ⁷the tent of meeting, and the ark of the covenant, and the mercy seat that is on it, and all the furnishings of the tent, ⁸the table and its utensils, and the pure lampstand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, ⁹and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin with its stand, ¹⁰and the finely worked vestments, the holy vestments for the priest Aaron and the vestments of his sons, for their service as priests, ¹¹and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense for the holy place. They shall do just as I have commanded you.

Sabbath Observance (31:12-17)

¹²YHWH said to Moses: ¹³You yourself are to speak to the Israelites: "You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, YHWH, sanctify you. ¹⁴You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. ¹⁵Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to YHWH; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. ¹⁶Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. ¹⁷It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days YHWH made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed."

It is no accident that YHWH's instructions end with the sabbath. So did the creation account (see Genesis 2:1-3). The Tabernacle creates space that is outside space. The sabbath creates time that is outside time. In both we have access to the divine, to eternal holiness. This is the third time the sabbath observance has been mentioned in Exodus (see 16:23ff and 20:8ff). The sabbath is a witness to the covenant ('ēdût).

¹⁸When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

These tablets are witnesses to the covenant ('ēdût), promised in 24:12. They are to be placed in the ark under the mercy seat in the Most Holy Place/God's Sacred Dwelling (25:16,21).

¹When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." ²Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."

³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to YHWH."

⁶They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought communion sacrifices; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

To place this scene in context we need to go back and re-read 24:12-18, where we were told that, in response to YHWH's invitation, Moses left Aaron and Hur in charge, and 'went up on the mountain' where he was for 'forty days and forty nights'(24:18). In the intervening chapters we have been listening to YHWH's instructions to Moses to build 'a sanctuary so that I may dwell among them'(25:8). We are now back with the people.

From his first appearance to Moses on Mount Sinai we were introduced to YHWH as One who hears the cry of the oppressed and is determined to liberate them (3:7-8). In spite of Moses' initial hesitations and Pharaoh's stubborn resistance, YHWH has faithfully carried out his purpose. He has brought the Israelites to his holy mountain, offered them a special intimacy (19:5-6), shown them how to respond so as to enjoy communion with him (20:1-17), and now he is organising a way to remain with them as they journey on.

What of the Israelites? In spite of their understandable complaints while still in Egypt (5:21), and when they were confronted with the Egyptian army (14:11-12), the miracle of their escape led them 'to believe in YHWH and in his servant Moses'(14:31). This faith was tested as they journeyed through the wilderness. At first their complaints were well grounded (15:24), but the weakness of their faith soon became obvious (16:2-3,28; 17:2-4), in spite of YHWH's faithful care of them. At Sinai all seems to be resolved when in a united voice they exclaim: 'Everything that YHWH has spoken we will do'(19:8; 24:3,7).

But all is not well. In this scene we see that the people whom God has chosen to be his own are a people quite capable of resisting grace and of substituting their own gods, or, to use Luke's words when commenting on this scene, of 'revelling in the works of their own hands'(Acts 7:41).

This is a criticism of Israel that we hear frequently levelled at them by the prophets. This scene is here to make the point that it was ever so. There was no golden age from which they fell away. Right here on Sinai that showed their capacity to break the first commandment (20:1-6), and so all the others that are dependent upon it.

The point is clearly not to paint a totally black picture, but to state, from the outset, that God's love transcends human sinfulness and is not dependent on the perfection of the human recipients of that love. In other words, love from God necessarily implies forgiveness – as we will see in the following chapters.

Though the story as related here may well go back to an ancient tradition, there is one particular event in the history of Israel that could have coloured the way this apostasy is portrayed. It is worth quoting in full. On the death of Solomon, the northern kingdom broke away from Judah. The leader of this movement of independence, Jeroboam, was concerned that if people kept going to the temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices they would end up back under Judah's dominance. The text reads:

So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. And this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one at Bethel and before the other as far as Dan. He also made houses on high places, and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not Levites. Jeroboam appointed a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the festival that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar; so he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made. He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he alone had devised; he appointed a festival for the people of Israel, and he went up to the altar to offer incense.

– 1Kings 12:28-33

There are a number of parallels even in the first six verses upon which we are commenting. More will emerge as the story unfolds. The story we have here in Exodus is, of course, not only about Israel. Every religious institution is capable of worshipping its own creations: its own cultic practices; its own theological systems; its own traditions (the Bible itself can be used as a substitute for God). It is a story that shows us who we are, and what can happen when we grow impatient, restless and bored in the absence of any tangible experience of God's presence in our midst. It is a story of the need for waiting, for hope. It is a lesson not to take our eyes off the mountain, off the promise. It is about what happens when we fail to remember.

On the mountain God told Moses to ask the people to be generous with their gold and to offer it according to the prompting of their heart for the building of a dwelling where he could manifest his continued presence among them (25:2-3). Down on the plain, the people offer their gold, but to forge for themselves something that would be a substitute for this God who could be so silent and who expected them to believe. They want something tangible, something that allows them to 'eat, drink and be merry' (32:6).

Aaron comes out of this scene badly. In the light of the dominant position in post-exilic Judah of the priesthood that claimed to come from Aaron, it is to the credit of the authors that this story was included. This is further proof of the care they took faithfully to include traditions that they had received, however uncomfortable some of them were. They knew from their history that even a high priest is capable of sin!

⁷YHWH said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"

⁹YHWH said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

¹¹But Moses implored YHWH his God, and said, "YHWH, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'"

¹⁴And YHWH changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

This whole chapter is one of the finest literary compositions in Exodus. At the foot of the mountain verse six leads directly to verse fifteen. Verses seven to fourteen are not to be thought of as belonging to the chronology of the story. Rather, they give us God's perspective prior to letting the story unfold. God is fully aware of what is going on (32:7-8).

Note how, in speaking to Moses, God calls them 'your people' (32:7). God's judgment is just. The people are obstinate in not bending to the yoke of the one who has liberated them from slavery and who promises them the amazing freedom that comes with divine communion (32:9).

At first it would appear that the only way forward is to repeat the equivalent of the Flood and to start again with Moses, as God did with Noah, and again with Abraham (32:10; see Genesis 12:2). But this time God is opening the way for Moses to intercede – which Moses does (32:11-13).

Moses makes no attempt to excuse the inexcusable behaviour. But he knows two things. Firstly, he knows that this is the people that God has chosen to reveal to Egypt and to the whole world, his true nature as YHWH (32:11-12). Note how, in speaking to God, Moses counters by calling them 'your people' (32:11; see 32:1).

Secondly, he knows that God is faithful to his promises (32:13). The people have failed, but Moses knows that God cannot fail. As Paul will say later:

If we are faithless, he remains faithful
– for he cannot deny himself.

– 2Timothy 2:13

As we follow the unfolding of the story over the next chapters, we know from 32:14 that, whatever happens, God will not destroy his chosen people.

Having been given a preview of the essential elements of the outcome, we return to the narrative. YHWH's invitation to Moses was:

Come up to me on the mountain,
and wait there; and I will give you
the tablets of stone, with the law
and the commandment, which I
have written for their instruction.

– Exodus 24:12

Now, 'forty days and forty nights' later (24:18), Moses is coming down with the promised tablets, witnesses to the covenant ('ēdūt, 32:15, see 31:18). The text has, as yet, given no clear indication as to exactly what God wrote on them, 'written on both sides, written on the front and on the back' (32:15). Perhaps this is intentional, as the 'words' (20:1-17), the 'edicts' (21:1 - 23:19), the 'law' (24:12), and the 'commandment' (24:12) – are these meant to cover 25:1 - 31:17? – have all been presented as having YHWH as their author. The matter will be taken up in chapter 34.

Joshua (32:17; see 24:13) hears the noise in the camp. Moses discerns it as the noise of revelling (32:18). When he sees what is happening he is stirred to anger. He shatters the tablets in a powerful statement of the significance of what he sees happening before his eyes (the shattering by the people of the covenant), and immediately acts to eradicate the evil.

When questioned by Moses, Aaron's response is pathetic. Firstly he puts all the blame on the people whom he describes as 'bent on evil' (32:23), and then he tries to distance himself from any blame by claiming, untruthfully, that the calf somehow miraculously came out of the fire of its own accord.

¹⁵Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back.

¹⁶The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets.

¹⁷When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." ¹⁸But he said, "It is not the sound made by victors, or the sound made by losers; it is the sound of revelers that I hear."

¹⁹As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.

²⁰He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

²¹Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?"

²²And Aaron said, "Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil.

²³They said to me, 'Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' ²⁴So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, take it off'; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"

²⁵When Moses saw that the people were running wild (for Aaron had let them run wild, to the derision of their enemies), ²⁶then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, "Who is on YHWH'S side? Come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered around him.

²⁷He said to them, "Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbour.'"

²⁸The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day.

²⁹Moses said, "Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of YHWH, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day."

Behind this scene lie centuries of a power-struggle within the priesthood. Most of the material on priesthood in the Bible comes from the Priestly School which, as we have already seen, gives a straightforward account of God's will in the matter. One of the matters on which Moses was instructed while on the mountain concerned the consecration of priests for service in the Tabernacle. Moses was told to take 'Aaron and his sons'(28:1), and 'anoint them and ordain them and consecrate them so that they may serve me as priests'(28:41). In the temple in post-exilic Judah at the time the Torah was being completed, the priesthood was exercised exclusively by a group of priests who claimed to be descended from Aaron. Other subsidiary roles in the cult were carried out by 'Levites'.

A reading of Deuteronomy, however, gives a very different impression. Speaking of the death of Aaron in the wilderness, it states:

At that time YHWH set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of YHWH, to stand before YHWH to minister to him, and to bless in his name, to this day. Therefore Levi has no allotment or inheritance with his kindred; YHWH is his inheritance, as YHWH your God promised him.

– Deuteronomy 10:8-9 (see 33:8-11; 18:1-8)

A full study of the complex history includes David's moving the ark to Jerusalem, Solomon's building the temple, the collapse of Samaria, Josiah's reform and the centralising of the cult in the Jerusalem temple, the exile in Babylon and the return. Jeremiah seems to have favoured the exercise of the priesthood by all Levites (see Jeremiah 33:17-22). Ezekiel supported a less extensive group, and it is the latter that won the day.

The point of noting this here is to observe that Exodus 32 paints a poor picture of Aaron, and portrays 'the sons of Levi' as the only ones who rallied to Moses 'on YHWH's side'(32:26). In tension with the instructions given him on the mountain (28:41 – from the Priestly School), Moses declares the Levites to be ordained for the service of YHWH, because of their fidelity (32:29). This does not exclude Aaron, who, like Moses himself, is listed among the 'sons of Levi'(Exodus 6:16,20; see 4:14), but it is not restricted to Aaron and those who claim to be his 'sons'.

In sharp contrast with Aaron, who accuses the people of being ‘bent on evil’ (32:22), and who shows interest only in exonerating himself (32:23-24), Moses does not deny that they ‘have sinned a great sin’ (32:30), but he knows the heart of YHWH and thinks only of praying for them: ‘Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin’ (32:30). ‘Make atonement’ translates the Hebrew *kipper*. As noted earlier it is related to the ‘mercy seat’ (*kappōret*, 25:17) that is to be placed on top of the ark (25:21). Moses knows YHWH as a God who forgives. He ascends the mountain pleading with God for his people that God will renew the covenant in spite of the people’s infidelity. Furthermore, unlike Aaron, Moses is willing to put his own life on the line for the people (32:32).

It is not that easy. We are each responsible for the evil we do. The authors need YHWH to punish in some way. Hence the plague of 32:35. The main outcome, however, is that YHWH tells Moses to ‘lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you’ (32:34). In this way he confirms what we have already been told: ‘YHWH changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people’ (32:14). God’s choice transcends our sin.

Paul warns the Christians of Corinth:

Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.”

– 1 Corinthians 10:7

Clearly Paul sees his own community as capable of the same sin.

Stephen lists this scene as one in a long line of the people’s refusal to heed God’s word (Acts 7:38-41). But he speaks of those who sinned as ‘*our* ancestors’ (7:39). He is not condemning them as an outsider. Like the prophets before him, he is pleading as one of them to ‘stop opposing the Holy Spirit’ (7:51), and he dies, pleading: ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’ (7:60). Who was it said: ‘There but for the grace of God go I’?

³⁰On the next day Moses said to the people, “You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to YHWH; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”

³¹So Moses returned to YHWH and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold.

³²But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.”

³³But YHWH said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book.

³⁴But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin.”

³⁵Then YHWH sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf—the one that Aaron made.

The people repent of their sin

¹YHWH said to Moses, "Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.'

²I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ³Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey;

but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."

⁴When the people heard these harsh words, they mourned, and no one put on ornaments. ⁵For YHWH had said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, and I will decide what to do to you.'"

⁶Therefore the Israelites stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

To try to work out a chronology for chapter 33 in relation to what has gone before and what will come after is to misunderstand what is happening here. The authors have gathered together a number of traditions to explore the complex issues of divine presence and yet divine absence, of divine forgiveness that in no way lessens the gravity of sin, and of the place of intercession along with the necessity of repentance.

Verses one and two pick up from 32:34 and 23:23-31. YHWH will be faithful to the promise he made to their ancestors. In spite of the people's apostasy, he will continue to guide them to the Promised Land.

The second part of verse three, however, introduces a distinction. Yahweh will 'send an angel before you'(33:2), but 'I will not go up among you'. The apostasy of the 'stiff-necked people'(see 32:9) has cut them off from God's presence, which instead of being a fire that would enlighten them, could only consume them.

In verses four to six we are told of the people's repentance, symbolised by their removal of ornaments.

It is important to repeat the comment made on the previous page. The authors are not presenting a chronological account here. The 'tent of meeting', mentioned twelve times between 27:21 and 31:7 in God's instructions to Moses, has not yet been constructed. What we have here is a separate tradition, and a much simpler 'tent' than the one described by the Priestly School.

The same paradox of God's presence yet absence that we have just seen in verses one to three is also here. God is present, but the tent is 'outside the camp' (33:7).

We witness at a more profound level the change of heart of the people. Their renewed respect for Moses is evident in verse eight.

Their renewed commitment to YHWH is evident in verse ten.

Moses' mediatory role has been highlighted throughout Exodus. Nowhere has it been expressed in such beautiful terms as we find it here in verse eleven. We are being prepared for the extraordinary verses that are to follow.

The description of Joshua reminds us of the young Samuel (1Samuel 2:11 - 3:21). Neither Joshua nor Samuel are priests, yet they have a special role in the sanctuary. We might have expected Aaron to fulfil this role here. He is excluded, it seems, for his role in the apostasy.

⁷Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought YHWH would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp.

⁸Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent.

⁹When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and YHWH would speak with Moses.

¹⁰When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent.

¹¹Thus YHWH used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.

Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent.

My presence will go with you

¹²Moses said to YHWH, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight.'

¹³Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."

¹⁴He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

¹⁵And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

¹⁷YHWH said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name."

YHWH keeps promising to send an 'angel' (23:23-31; 32:34, and again just now 33:2). Moses wants something more. YHWH keeps reassuring Moses of the special intimacy that they share, expressed here in terms of his knowing Moses by name. Compare the following from the Isaiah scroll:

But now thus says YHWH, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

– Isaiah 43:1

I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, YHWH,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I surname you, though you do not know me.

– Isaiah 45:3-4

Taking advantage of their special intimacy (33:11), Moses claims that it is unfair. YHWH knows Moses. Moses wants to know YHWH's 'ways'. Even more he wants to know YHWH: 'that I may know *you*'(33:13). His request is not just for himself; it is for the nation 'your people'(33:13).

Moved by Moses' profound longing, for himself and for the people, YHWH makes a commitment: 'my presence will go with you, and I will give you rest (*gûah*)'(33:14). We recall the following:

YHWH is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside *restful* (*m^egûhâ*) waters.

– Psalm 23:1-2

We recall Jesus' words:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

– Matthew 11:28-29

Moses is overjoyed (33:15-16), reassuring God that nothing less can make the journey worthwhile, satisfy his longing for communion, and show 'every people on the face of the earth' how special Israel is to God.

There are no limits to Moses' longing for communion with God. God's promise of such amazing intimacy encourages Moses to ask that he may experience the full radiance of God's inner beauty (God's 'glory').

There are no limits on what YHWH is willing to offer. There are, however, necessarily, limits on what a creature can 'see'. YHWH will hold nothing back: 'I will make *all* my goodness pass before you' (33:19).

YHWH's words surely remind Moses of their first encounter when Moses asked YHWH his name, and YHWH replied: 'I will be who I will be' (3:14). We human beings cannot name God, but we can watch and believe and allow God to reveal himself as we journey. YHWH repeats the same message here: 'I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy' (33:19). No one can see God, but we can see his compassion and mercy and we can know-in-faith that he is with us.

YHWH invites Moses to come up 'by me' (33:21). In a gentle, intimate, way he covers Moses' eyes so that Moses will not be blinded by God's 'face'. But then he takes his hand away, showing Moses his 'back'.

Moses has asked to see God's 'ways' (33:13). That is what God has been showing him in revealing to him the 'Torah' (24:12). We cannot see God's face, but we can see how to follow after God, how to live in such a way as to experience the intimacy of communion with God. This is what the Torah is, and Moses' intercession and the people's repentance, has made it possible for God to renew the covenant. God is 'gracious' and 'merciful'. God cannot and will not force love upon us. Our repentance (openness of heart), and Moses' extraordinary longing, invites YHWH to carry out his deepest desires for his chosen people.

¹⁸Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray."

¹⁹And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'YHWH'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."

²¹And YHWH continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²²and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

The Covenant is renewed

¹YHWH said to Moses, “Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke.

²Be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain. ³No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain; and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain.” ⁴So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as YHWH had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone.

⁵YHWH descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, “YHWH.” ⁶YHWH passed before him, and proclaimed, “YHWH, YHWH, a God tenderly compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

⁸And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped. ⁹He said, “If now I have found favour in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let YHWH go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.”

YHWH’s instructions are clear. Moses is to ascend the mountain on his own (34:4). He is to bring two stone tablets ‘like the former ones’(34:1), on which YHWH will write exactly what was on the former ones (see the comment on 32:15). God’s forgiveness is complete, and he is renewing the covenant broken by the people’s apostasy.

Verses five to eight are YHWH’s response to Moses’ request to see YHWH’s glory (33:18), and in fulfilment of his promise: ‘I will proclaim before you the name YHWH’(33:19).

Verses five to six are the nearest we have in the Hebrew Bible to a statement of YHWH’s essential characteristics. It is echoed throughout the Bible (see the following page). Verse seven reminds us that this covenant is being made with a sinful, but forgiven, people. It echoes the first commandment, now more urgent in light of their recent apostasy:

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I YHWH your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

– Exodus 20:5-6

YHWH does not make a covenant with an innocent people, but with ‘a stiff-necked people’(34:9; 32:9; 33:3,5), a sinful people. This is the people YHWH pardons, for it is his ‘inheritance’(34:10), the people he has chosen for his own (compare 19:5-6).

We might recall Paul’s words:

God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

– Romans 5:8

The following texts echo 34:5-6:

YHWH your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him.

– 2Chronicles 30:9

Return to YHWH, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

– Joel 2:13

I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.

– Jonah 4:2

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession?
He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing steadfast love.
He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot.
You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.
You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.

– Micah 7:18-20

Although he causes grief, he will be tenderly compassionate according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

– Lamentations 3:32

Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments.

– Daniel 9:4

You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and tenderly compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them.

– Nehemiah 9:17

You, O Lord, are a God tenderly compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

– Psalm 86:15 (see 111:4 and 145:8)

Psalm 103 is an extended reflection on Exodus 34.

YHWH forgives all your guilt ...
and surrounds you with steadfast love and tender compassion ...
so that your youth is renewed like an eagle's ...
He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.
YHWH is tenderly compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will accuse, but not always; he will be angry, but not forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our guilt ...
As a father has compassion for his children, so YHWH has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we are; he remembers that we are dust ...
The steadfast love of YHWH always was and always will be for those who fear him, and his righteousness passes on from children to grandchildren, to whoever keeps his covenant and remembers to carry out his commandments.

– Psalm 103:3,4,5,7-10,13-14,17-18

They must not break covenant with YHWH

¹⁰He said: I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of YHWH; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.

¹¹Observe what I command you today. See, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

¹²Take care not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you are going, or it will become a snare among you.

¹³You shall tear down their altars, break their pillars, and cut down their sacred poles

¹⁴(for you shall worship no other god, because YHWH, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God).

¹⁵You shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, someone among them will invite you, and you will eat of the sacrifice.

¹⁶And you will take wives from among their daughters for your sons, and their daughters who prostitute themselves to their gods will make your sons also prostitute themselves to their gods.

Verses ten to twenty-six appear to be another version of the covenant (b^erît) from an equally old tradition as the one recorded in 20:22 – 23:19. This is yet another tradition that the authors have incorporated into their Sinai narrative. These introductory verses have a homiletic ring about them and appear to have been influenced by the Deuteronomic School (see Deuteronomy 7; also Exodus 23:20ff).

Verse eleven repeats God's promise to 'blot out' these nations (23:23), and adds a warning not to get caught up in the religious practices that they find in Canaan. The background to this warning is their worship of the golden calf (32:1-6).

They must 'tear down their altars' (34:13). The 'pillars' that they are to break (see 23:24) represent the consort of the high god, El. 'Sacred poles' translates the Hebrew 'ašērâ, represented in poles and also in sacred trees. Jeremiah (contemporary with Deuteronomy) complains about 'the kings, officials, priests and prophets', who:

say to a tree, "You are my father,"
and to a stone, "You gave me birth."

– Jeremiah 2:27 (see 3:9)

They are warned against inter-marriage, for that will lead them to 'make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land' (34:15), and thus break covenant with YHWH.

As noted earlier, the following regulations appear to be, like those of 20:22 – 23:19, from tribal, pre-monarchic Israel. Verse seventeen recalls the first commandment (20:4) with direct echoes of the golden calf (32:4,8). Verse eighteen is almost word for word with 23:15. Verses nineteen and twenty are almost word for word with 13:12-13. ‘No one shall appear before me empty-handed’ (34:20) is identical with 23:15.

Verse twenty-one recalls the third commandment (20:9-10). The phrase ‘even in ploughing time and in harvest time you shall rest’ (34:21) is unique to this verse.

Verses twenty-two and twenty-three are almost identical with 23:16-17, except that here the festival of the first fruits of wheat harvest is called ‘the festival of weeks’. Verse 24 is special to this code. God will make sure that they are not invaded during the time of pilgrimage.

Verse twenty-five is paralleled in 23:18, and includes the pasch detail from 12:10. The concluding verse (34:26) is identical with the concluding verse of the other code (23:19, see the commentary).

For ‘forty days and forty nights’ (see 24:18), Moses writes down all the words (dābār) of the covenant (bʿrīt) YHWH has made with his people.

The ‘ten words’ (34:28) have a unique importance. YHWH himself writes these on the tablets, as he had promised (34:1).

¹⁷You shall not make cast idols.

¹⁸You shall keep the festival of unleavened bread. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month of Abib; for in the month of Abib you came out from Egypt.

¹⁹All that first opens the womb is mine, all your male livestock, the firstborn of cow and sheep. ²⁰The firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. No one shall appear before me empty-handed.

²¹Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even in ploughing time and in harvest time you shall rest.

²²You shall observe the festival of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the festival of ingathering at the turn of the year. ²³Three times in the year all your males shall appear before YHWH God, the God of Israel.

²⁴For I will cast out nations before you, and enlarge your borders; no one shall covet your land when you go up to appear before YHWH your God three times in the year.

²⁵You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven, and the sacrifice of the festival of the pasch shall not be left until the morning.

²⁶The best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of YHWH your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.

²⁷YHWH said to Moses: Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.

²⁸He was there with YHWH forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten *words*.

²⁹Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.

³¹But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³²Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that YHWH had spoken with him on Mount Sinai.

³³When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face;

³⁴but whenever Moses went in before YHWH to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining;

and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

These are the tablets of stone written by YHWH for the instruction of the people (24:12), carried down by Moses (32:15), but broken by him when he witnessed the people's apostasy (32:19). As he promised (34:1), YHWH has written them again (34:28). Written on them by YHWH himself are the 'ten words'(34:28) – the ten words recorded in 20:1-17. These stone tablets are a witness to the covenant ('ēdūt, 34:29).

In these final verses of chapter thirty-four along with a profound theological interpretation of the meaning of the Sinai covenant, we have a superbly beautiful literary composition. 'Because he had been talking with God'(34:29), Moses face is sending out rays of radiant light (qārān). Because this verb can also mean to grow horns (qeren), it was sometimes translated that way here (hence the traditional images of Moses in this scene). Were the rays of the dawning sun likened to the antlers of a gazelle?(see Psalm 132:17; Isaiah 58:8).

Everyone is stunned by the radiance, but Moses calls them all to him. They must hear God's commands and allow them to shine upon them with all their glory, and light up their path. When Moses has finished communicating God's words he covers his face with a veil. It is the radiance of God's words that is important.

In verses thirty-four to thirty-five the form of the verb changes to describe an ongoing situation. When Moses is not acting as mediator, that is, when he is not receiving God's word in intimate communion or communicating it to the people, his face is covered in a veil. Whenever he goes 'before YHWH to speak with him'(34:34), he removes the veil and speaks to God 'face to face as one speaks to a friend'(33:11); and whenever he communicates to the people what he has heard in God's presence, they 'see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face is shining'(34:35).

Here we have the essence of mediation.

2Corinthians chapter 3

Paul devotes a whole chapter to a reflection on this beautiful passage from Exodus. We examine Paul's treatment here partly to illustrate the difference between the method of interpretation followed by Paul (a method obviously followed also by his contemporaries, even though some would have drawn different conclusions), and the method followed by scholars today. We touched on this in the Introduction (pages 3-6).

Paul's opponents are accusing him of lacking letters of recommendation such as they have from people high up in the Jerusalem church. Paul counters by saying that his opponents need such letters; he doesn't, because the Corinthian Christians themselves are his letter of recommendation. They are written on Paul's heart, and Christ himself is the author. It is God's Spirit who is acting through Paul's ministry as the founder of the community. If they are looking for some sort of guarantee to authenticate Paul's ministry among them, let them look at the life which they have in Christ, and they will find there, from Christ himself, the best letter of recommendation that anyone could produce.

Paul carries the image of the letter further. The letters produced by the rival missionaries are written in ink. Christ has composed his letter (the Christian lives of the Corinthians themselves) through the gift of 'the Spirit of the living God' inscribed on their hearts.

You are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

– 2Corinthians 3:3

It is here that Paul begins the connection with the present scene from Exodus. Wonderful as are God's words written on 'tablets of stone' – thus witnessing to God's fidelity to his enduring word – God promised something even more wonderful. Though Paul does not quote the following passages here, he is drawing on their message:

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.

– Jeremiah 31:33

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you.

– Ezekiel 36:26-27

Paul is convinced that it is this promised covenant that God gave through Jesus, and he understands his ministry as that of a herald of this 'new covenant, not of letter, but of Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life' (2Corinthians 3:6). As a lover of the Torah, and as one who saw himself as being faithful to the mission given by God to Abraham, Paul is making the point that, beautiful as the law is, it cannot give life. Life can be given only by the Spirit. Paul is not belittling the law; he is recognising our need of the Spirit. We are sinners, unable without the Spirit to open our hearts to the light shining upon us in the law. Because of our hardness of heart the law, left to itself, remains only a letter. It is not an instrument of death – death is the result of our disobedience. But the law needs the Spirit to make it possible for us to obey God's will and to enjoy the divine communion which is the goal of God's revelation.

Paul goes on to speak of the scene described in Exodus 34:29-35. He writes:

Now if the ministry of death, chiselled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses' face because of the glory of his face, a glory set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory! Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory; for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory!

– 2Corinthians 3:7-11

Two points stand out. Scholars today attempt to discover and communicate what the authors of Exodus were saying, and why it was that the text was treasured and faithfully copied by generations of Jews. This is not Paul's aim. He is precisely looking at the text in the reflected light of what he has come to know through coming to know Jesus. He is comparing one wonderful reality to an even more wonderful one. In speaking of Moses' ministry as a 'ministry of condemnation' he is simply reflecting on people's failure to follow what God commands there. He is saying nothing more than the authors of Exodus when they describe the people as 'stiff-necked'. God, as we have seen, is faithful, even though we are not. God heard Moses' plea: 'Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance' (Exodus 34:9).

The second point is Paul's use of the expression 'set aside'. This is based on the fact that in the text Moses does, as it were, 'set aside' the glory when he puts on the veil. By contrast, there is no way of 'setting aside' the 'permanent' glory of what is revealed in Christ. The glory of the stars is overwhelmed by the glory of the rising sun. Paul may also be drawing on reflections that were current during his schooling in the Torah as a Pharisee. The veil on Moses' face is never mentioned again in the Bible. Was it permanently 'put aside'? If so, this is perhaps because, according to the conclusion of Exodus 'Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle' (Exodus 40:35). It is not difficult to imagine the Rabbis arguing that the reason why the veil is not mentioned later is that Moses stopped going into the tabernacle and so there was no need for it. Whatever the argument, it is reasonable for us to assume that Paul was drawing on current reflections. He is too good a thinker to base an argument on a premise that could simply be dismissed as erroneous. Paul continues:

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the outcome of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts.

– 2Corinthians 3:12-15

The basis of Paul's 'hope', that which enables him to place the future lovingly in God's hands and to focus on the present full of confidence, is the knowledge that it is God's saving love in Christ that is being revealed through his ministry. In and through his weaknesses he 'acts with great boldness.' This is evident in the power of the Spirit present in his ministry. He contrasts this with the actions of Moses in putting on a veil.

Moses needed to be veiled so that the people would not gaze at God's glory. The 'outcome' of such an encounter would have been judgment and death. To preserve the sinful people with their hardened hearts from gazing upon their own destruction, Moses' face was veiled. Such a veiling was not needed by Paul, for his ministry is to proclaim the good news that God, through Jesus, is giving sinners his own Spirit which can change their hearts so that they can be in communion with the Holy One and gaze upon the face of God without fear of condemnation and death.

In the passage just quoted we discover the nature of the problem that is behind Paul's argument in this section. If the gospel is what Paul has proclaimed it to be, why is it that the majority of Jews continue not to welcome it? Paul's opponents are arguing that the failure of the Jews to accept Paul's proclamation is proof that his ministry is not authentic. Paul points out that this failure to open their hearts to God's revelation has been there from the beginning. This is also the subject of many a prophetic accusation. Suffice here to instance Isaiah who uses a similar image to Paul when he speaks of the 'prophets' having 'closed eyes', and the 'seers' having a veil over the heads (Isaiah 29:10).

The only one who can remove the veil, says Paul, is Christ; and the only way that a Jew can receive a new heart is 'in Christ', by allowing him/herself to be drawn by the Spirit of Christ into the communion of love that is found within the Christian community that is formed through the proclamation of the gospel; in other words, through Paul's ministry. Their failure to accept the good news proclaimed by Paul is a sign, not that Paul's ministry lacks authenticity, but that their minds remain 'hardened' and 'a veil lies over their hearts'. Note Paul's point: they are still not listening to *Moses*! What Isaiah said is still true: 'these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me' (Isaiah 29:13). If they listened to Moses, they would welcome Paul's ministry for they would recognise that through it God is offering them the promised Spirit who would give them a new heart. Paul concludes his reflections on Exodus 34:

When one turns to the Lord the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2Corinthians 3:16-18

The text which Paul is analysing clearly states: 'whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off' (Exodus 34:34). A Jew who wishes to have the veil removed must do what Moses did. He/She must 'turn to the Lord'. How? By looking for where the activity of the Lord (the Spirit) is revealed. God promised through the prophet Jeremiah: 'I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart' (Jeremiah 24:7). It is only through the active power of God's saving love that a Jew can receive this new heart, and, as the Corinthians know from their own experience, the Spirit is given through Paul's ministry of proclaiming the gospel. With the gift of the Spirit and a new heart they will at last be free from all that enslaves them – free to hear God's word and to obey God's will; free at last to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deuteronomy 6:5).

In his earlier letter Paul wrote: 'obeying the commandments of God is everything' (1Corinthians 7:19). This is still his view. It is not the law written on tablets of stone that is the problem. It is our hardened hearts. And God's answer is found in Christ.

He concludes his reflection with a beautiful description of the essence of the Christian life of all those who welcome the proclamation of the gospel, Jews and Gentiles. It picks up the beautiful portrait of Moses upon which Paul is reflecting and takes it further. Paul presents Christ as the Wisdom of God, 'a breath of the power of God', 'a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty', 'a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness' (Wisdom 7:25-26). Christ is the 'mirror', the 'image' of the Lord (see 2Corinthians 4:4,6), and when 'with unveiled faces' we contemplate Christ, we see there 'the glory of the Lord'. As Moses was transformed when he went into the presence of God, so are we. For us Christians, however, for 'all of us', it is into Christ that we are transformed. It is the Spirit of the Lord who effects this transformation (see Romans 8:11,13-15), for it is the Spirit who is 'the source of your life in Christ Jesus' (1Corinthians 1:30). Paul is its minister.

The redeeming, healing and saving love of God revealed in the heart and on the face of Jesus, invites us to look upon him with faces unveiled. Daring to believe the good news proclaimed by Paul, we contemplate Christ and are bathed in his light. He gives us his Spirit who purifies our hearts. The Lord God, whose glory we contemplate on the face and in the heart of Christ, is the Spirit who purifies our hearts, and transforms them into the heart and the mind of Christ. It is in the Christian life of the minister of the new covenant, and in the Christian lives being lived in their own community, that the Corinthians are to see the radiance of God's glory.

* * * * *

Paul is writing as a disciple of Christ. He is writing for disciples of Christ. He has drawn his imagery from Exodus and produced a superb and beautiful Christian reflection. It should be clear, however, that his inspiration does not come from the Exodus text itself. It comes from his experience of Christ and he finds in the Exodus text useful imagery to make the points he wishes to make. Paul's is a masterly work. He gives evidence of a careful examination of the Exodus account. He does not claim that the inspired human authors understood the text as he has expounded it. Their understanding of Moses covering his face is not the same as Paul's understanding of Moses 'setting aside' the glory. There is nothing in their understanding of the text that indicates any lack of 'boldness' on Moses' part. Paul's aim differs from that espoused by modern scholarship. The difference does not lie in our commitment to read scripture in the light of Jesus. It lies in our commitment to examine the text first of all in its own right, so that our further reflections are based on the inspired meaning carried by the text itself.

We may not reach the depths that Paul attains, but his achievement does not come from his method of interpretation. There have been plenty of commentators who followed his methodology and used scripture to support their uninspired assumptions. The aim of modern scholars is first of all to be as faithful as possible to the intention of the inspired human authors, and, only then and building on that basis, to penetrate more fully into the mystery towards which the text points (see also the Introduction pages 3 to 6).

Building the Tabernacle (Exodus 35-40)

YHWH's instructions to Moses concerning the building and furnishing of the tabernacle were recorded in 25:1 – 31:18. Here in these final chapters of Exodus, YHWH's instructions are carried out in perfect obedience to his command. This is illustrated by the fact that, apart from some abbreviation, and a small amount of reorganising, these chapters are, for the most part, a word for word repetition of YHWH's instructions. First we see the full cooperation of all the people (35:4-35); then the skilled craftsmen make everything 'in accordance with all that [YHWH showed Moses] concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture' (25:9; 36:1 – 39:31); and finally Moses does what he has been instructed to do (40:1-33). For the same reasons given at the beginning of chapter 25, I will simply reproduce the text, with appropriate headings and references to the earlier parallel sections, offering a few comments where it seems appropriate.

¹Moses assembled all the congregation of the Israelites and said to them: These are the things that YHWH has commanded you to do:

Sabbath (35:2-3; see 31:12-17)

The most significant factor here is that this command (much abbreviated) has been separated and placed here at the beginning. This is an indication of its importance to the Priestly School. The stipulations concerning the fire are new, but were implied, for example, in 16:23. Some Jewish interpreters translate 'kindle' as 'permit to burn'. They insist on all lights being extinguished on the sabbath. One reason suggested is that light was God's first creation. We must not copy this action on the sabbath.

²Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy sabbath of solemn rest to YHWH; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. ³You shall kindle no fire in all your dwellings on the sabbath day.

Call for Voluntary Offerings (35:4-9; see 25:1-9)

⁴Moses said to all the congregation of the Israelites: This is the thing that YHWH has commanded:

⁵Take from among you an offering to YHWH; let whoever is of a generous heart bring YHWH'S offering: gold, silver, and bronze; ⁶blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine linen; goats' hair, ⁷tanned rams' skins, and fine leather; acacia wood, ⁸oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, ⁹and onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breastpiece.

Inviting Skilled Workmen (35:10-19)

¹⁰All who are skillful among you shall come and make all that YHWH has commanded: the tabernacle, ¹¹its tent and its covering, its clasps and its frames, its bars, its pillars, and its bases; ¹²the ark with its poles, the mercy seat, and the curtain for the screen; ¹³the table with its poles and all its utensils, and the bread of the Presence; ¹⁴the lampstand also for the light, with its utensils and its lamps, and the oil for the light;

¹⁵and the altar of incense, with its poles, and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense, and the screen for the entrance, the entrance of the tabernacle; ¹⁶the altar of burnt offering, with its grating of bronze, its poles, and all its utensils, the basin with its stand; ¹⁷the hangings of the court, its pillars and its bases, and the screen for the gate of the court; ¹⁸the pegs of the tabernacle and the pegs of the court, and their cords; ¹⁹the finely worked vestments for ministering in the holy place, the holy vestments for the priest Aaron, and the vestments of his sons, for their service as priests.

Presentation of the Offerings (35:20-29)

This passage highlights the willingness of heart that accompanied the offerings – something which was part of YHWH’s instructions (see 25:2).

²⁰Then all the congregation of the Israelites withdrew from the presence of Moses. ²¹And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought YHWH’s offering to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the sacred vestments. ²²So they came, both men and women; all who were of a willing heart brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and pendants, all sorts of gold objects, everyone bringing an offering of gold to YHWH. ²³And everyone who possessed blue or purple or crimson yarn or fine linen or goats’ hair or tanned rams’ skins or fine leather, brought them. ²⁴Everyone who could make an offering of silver or bronze brought it as YHWH’s offering; and everyone who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work, brought it. ²⁵All the skillful women spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and crimson yarns and fine linen; ²⁶all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun the goats’ hair. ²⁷And the leaders brought onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breast-piece, ²⁸and spices and oil for the light, and for the anointing oil, and for the fragrant incense. ²⁹All the Israelite men and women whose hearts made them willing to bring anything for the work that YHWH had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to YHWH.

Commissioning of Bezalel and Oholiab (35:30 – 36:1; see 31:1-6)

³⁰Then Moses said to the Israelites: See, YHWH has called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; ³¹he has filled him with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, ³²to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, ³³in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. ³⁴And he has inspired him to teach, both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. ³⁵He has filled them with skill to do every kind of work done by an artisan or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and in fine linen, or by a weaver—by any sort of artisan or skilled designer. ^{36:1}Bezalel and Oholiab and every skillful one to whom YHWH has given skill and understanding to know how to do any work in the construction of the sanctuary shall work in accordance with all that YHWH has commanded.

The Offerings given to the Artisans (36:2-7)

²Moses then called Bezalel and Oholiab and every skillful one to whom the YHWH had given skill, everyone whose heart was stirred to come to do the work; ³and they received from Moses all the freewill offerings that the Israelites had brought for doing the work on the sanctuary. They still kept bringing him freewill offerings every morning, ⁴so that all the artisans who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary came, each from the task being performed, ⁵and said to Moses, "The people are bringing much more than enough for doing the work that YHWH has commanded us to do." ⁶So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp: "No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary." So the people were restrained from bringing; ⁷for what they had already brought was more than enough to do all the work.

Making the Curtains (36:8-19; see 26:1-14)

Note that 26:12-13 is missing. These instructions concern the hanging of the curtains. They can be carried out only after the construction of the tabernacle is completed.

⁸All those with skill among the workers made the tabernacle with ten curtains; they were made of fine twisted linen, and blue, purple, and crimson yarns, with cherubim skillfully worked into them. ⁹The length of each curtain was twenty-eight cubits, and the width of each curtain four cubits; all the curtains were of the same size. ¹⁰He joined five curtains to one another, and the other five curtains he joined to one another. ¹¹He made loops of blue on the edge of the outermost curtain of the first set; likewise he made them on the edge of the outermost curtain of the second set; ¹²he made fifty loops on the one curtain, and he made fifty loops on the edge of the curtain that was in the second set; the loops were opposite one another. ¹³And he made fifty clasps of gold, and joined the curtains one to the other with clasps; so the tabernacle was one whole. ¹⁴He also made curtains of goats' hair for a tent over the tabernacle; he made eleven curtains. ¹⁵The length of each curtain was thirty cubits, and the width of each curtain four cubits; the eleven curtains were of the same size. ¹⁶He joined five curtains by themselves, and six curtains by themselves. ¹⁷He made fifty loops on the edge of the outermost curtain of the one set, and fifty loops on the edge of the other connecting curtain. ¹⁸He made fifty clasps of bronze to join the tent together so that it might be one whole. ¹⁹And he made for the tent a covering of tanned rams' skins and an outer covering of fine leather.

The Curtain Supports (36:20-34; see 26:15-29)

²⁰Then he made the upright frames for the tabernacle of acacia wood. ²¹Ten cubits was the length of a frame, and a cubit and a half the width of each frame. ²²Each frame had two pegs for fitting together; he did this for all the frames of the tabernacle. ²³The frames for the tabernacle he made in this way: twenty frames for the south side; ²⁴and he made forty bases of silver

under the twenty frames, two bases under the first frame for its two pegs, and two bases under the next frame for its two pegs. ²⁵For the second side of the tabernacle, on the north side, he made twenty frames ²⁶and their forty bases of silver, two bases under the first frame and two bases under the next frame. ²⁷For the rear of the tabernacle westward he made six frames. ²⁸He made two frames for corners of the tabernacle in the rear. ²⁹They were separate beneath, but joined at the top, at the first ring; he made two of them in this way, for the two corners. ³⁰There were eight frames with their bases of silver: sixteen bases, under every frame two bases. ³¹He made bars of acacia wood, five for the frames of the one side of the tabernacle, ³²and five bars for the frames of the other side of the tabernacle, and five bars for the frames of the tabernacle at the rear westward. ³³He made the middle bar to pass through from end to end halfway up the frames. ³⁴And he overlaid the frames with gold, and made rings of gold for them to hold the bars, and overlaid the bars with gold.

The Curtain and Screen for the Most Holy Place (36:35-38; see 26:31-37)

Moses is instructed to put things into the Most Holy Place. So the fulfilment of 26:33-35 is found later in 40:20-21.

³⁵He made the curtain of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen, with cherubim skillfully worked into it. ³⁶For it he made four pillars of acacia, and overlaid them with gold; their hooks were of gold, and he cast for them four bases of silver. ³⁷He also made a screen for the entrance to the tent, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen, embroidered with needlework; ³⁸and its five pillars with their hooks. He overlaid their capitals and their bases with gold, but their five bases were of bronze.

The Ark (37:1-5; see 25:10-14)

¹Bezalel made the ark of acacia wood; it was two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. ²He overlaid it with pure gold inside and outside, and made a molding of gold around it. ³He cast for it four rings of gold for its four feet, two rings on its one side and two rings on its other side. ⁴He made poles of acacia wood, and overlaid them with gold, ⁵and put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, to carry the ark.

The Mercy Seat (37:6-9; see 25:17-20)

The instructions given in 25:21-22 do not concern the artisan, and so are not mentioned here.

⁶He made a mercy seat of pure gold; two cubits and a half was its length, and a cubit and a half its width. ⁷He made two cherubim of hammered gold; at the two ends of the mercy seat he made them, ⁸one cherub at the one end, and one cherub at the other end; of one piece with the mercy seat he made the cherubim at its two ends. ⁹The cherubim spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings. They faced one another; the faces of the cherubim were turned toward the mercy seat.

The Table for the Bread of the Presence (37:10-16; see 25:23-30)

Moses was instructed (25:30) to put the Bread of the Presence on the table, not the artisans. This instruction is carried out by Moses in 40:23.

¹⁰He also made the table of acacia wood, two cubits long, one cubit wide, and a cubit and a half high. ¹¹He overlaid it with pure gold, and made a molding of gold around it. ¹²He made around it a rim a handbreadth wide, and made a molding of gold around the rim. ¹³He cast for it four rings of gold, and fastened the rings to the four corners at its four legs. ¹⁴The rings that held the poles used for carrying the table were close to the rim. ¹⁵He made the poles of acacia wood to carry the table, and overlaid them with gold. ¹⁶And he made the vessels of pure gold that were to be on the table, its plates and *cupped utensils* for incense, and its bowls and flagons with which to pour drink offerings.

The Lampstand (m^enôrà, 37:17-24; see 25:31-39)

¹⁷He also made the lampstand of pure gold. The base and the shaft of the lampstand were made of hammered work; its cups, its calyxes, and its petals were of one piece with it. ¹⁸There were six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it; ¹⁹three cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with calyx and petals, on one branch, and three cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with calyx and petals, on the other branch—so for the six branches going out of the lampstand. ²⁰On the lampstand itself there were four cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with its calyxes and petals. ²¹There was a calyx of one piece with it under the first pair of branches, a calyx of one piece with it under the next pair of branches, and a calyx of one piece with it under the last pair of branches. ²²Their calyxes and their branches were of one piece with it, the whole of it one hammered piece of pure gold. ²³He made its seven lamps and its snuffers and its trays of pure gold. ²⁴He made it and all its utensils of a talent of pure gold.

The Altar for the Offering of Incense (37:25-28; see 30:1-5)

This section has been moved here to its more logical place. The instructions as to where it is to be placed and the offerings to be made on it (30:6-10) are not for the artisans.

²⁵He made the altar of incense of acacia wood, one cubit long, and one cubit wide; it was square, and was two cubits high; its horns were of one piece with it. ²⁶He overlaid it with pure gold, its top, and its sides all around, and its horns; and he made for it a molding of gold all around, ²⁷and made two golden rings for it under its molding, on two opposite sides of it, to hold the poles with which to carry it. ²⁸And he made the poles of acacia wood, and overlaid them with gold.

The Altars and the Enclosure

Making the Oil and the Incense (37:29; see 30:22-25; 34-36)

This section is much briefer and leaves out the instructions directed at the priests.

29He made the holy anointing oil also, and the pure fragrant incense, blended as by the perfumer.

The Altar for Sacrifice (38:1-7; see 27:1-8)

1He made the altar of burnt offering also of acacia wood; it was five cubits long, and five cubits wide; it was square, and three cubits high. 2He made horns for it on its four corners; its horns were of one piece with it, and he overlaid it with bronze. 3He made all the utensils of the altar, the pots, the shovels, the basins, the forks, and the firepans: all its utensils he made of bronze. 4He made for the altar a grating, a network of bronze, under its ledge, extending halfway down. 5He cast four rings on the four corners of the bronze grating to hold the poles; 6he made the poles of acacia wood, and overlaid them with bronze. 7And he put the poles through the rings on the sides of the altar, to carry it with them; he made it hollow, with boards.

Washing Basin (38:8)

There are no instructions for this in the earlier section, and the kind of service provided by the women is unclear.

8He made the basin of bronze with its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.

The Sacred Enclosure (38:9-20; see 27:9-19)

9He made the court; for the south side the hangings of the court were of fine twisted linen, one hundred cubits long; 10its twenty pillars and their twenty bases were of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their bands were of silver. 11For the north side there were hangings one hundred cubits long; its twenty pillars and their twenty bases were of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their bands were of silver. 12For the west side there were hangings fifty cubits long, with ten pillars and ten bases; the hooks of the pillars and their bands were of silver. 13And for the front to the east, fifty cubits. 14The hangings for one side of the gate were fifteen cubits, with three pillars and three bases. 15And so for the other side; on each side of the gate of the court were hangings of fifteen cubits, with three pillars and three bases. 16All the hangings around the court were of fine twisted linen. 17The bases for the pillars were of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their bands were of silver; the overlaying of their capitals was also of silver, and all the pillars of the court were banded with silver. 18The screen for the entrance to the court was embroidered with needlework in blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine twisted linen. It was twenty cubits long and, along the width of it, five cubits high, corresponding to the hangings of the court. 19There were four pillars; their four bases were of bronze, their hooks of silver, and the overlaying of their capitals and their bands of silver.

²⁰All the pegs for the tabernacle and for the court all around were of bronze.

Record of the Skilled Artisans (38:21-23)

²¹These are the records of the tabernacle, the tabernacle of the covenant, which were drawn up at the commandment of Moses, the work of the Levites being under the direction of Ithamar son of the priest Aaron. ²²Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, made all that YHWH commanded Moses; ²³and with him was Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, engraver, designer, and embroiderer in blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and in fine linen.

Record of the Materials Used (38:24-31)

In today's measurements it is estimated that they used over one ton of gold, three and a quarter tons of silver, and two and a half tons of bronze.

²⁴All the gold that was used for the work, in all the construction of the sanctuary, the gold from the offering, was twenty-nine talents and seven hundred thirty shekels, measured by the sanctuary shekel. ²⁵The silver from those of the congregation who were counted was one hundred talents and one thousand seven hundred seventy-five shekels, measured by the sanctuary shekel; ²⁶a beka a head (that is, half a shekel, measured by the sanctuary shekel), for everyone who was counted in the census, from twenty years old and upward, for six hundred three thousand, five hundred fifty men. ²⁷The hundred talents of silver were for casting the bases of the sanctuary, and the bases of the curtain; one hundred bases for the hundred talents, a talent for a base. ²⁸Of the thousand seven hundred seventy-five shekels he made hooks for the pillars, and overlaid their capitals and made bands for them. ²⁹The bronze that was contributed was seventy talents, and two thousand four hundred shekels; ³⁰with it he made the bases for the entrance of the tent of meeting, the bronze altar and the bronze grating for it and all the utensils of the altar, ³¹the bases all around the court, and the bases of the gate of the court, all the pegs of the tabernacle, and all the pegs around the court.

The Vestments for the Priests (39:1-31; see 28:1-43)

Verse one summarises 28:1-5. From verse two the instructions are carried out meticulously. Once again the focus here is on the making of the vestments. Instructions for the priests are omitted as not relevant for the artisans.

¹Of the blue, purple, and crimson yarns they made finely worked vestments, for ministering in the holy place; they made the sacred vestments for Aaron; as YHWH had commanded Moses. ²He made the ephod of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen. ³Gold leaf was hammered out and cut into threads to work into the blue, purple, and crimson yarns and into the fine twisted linen, in skilled design. ⁴They made for the ephod shoulder-pieces, joined to it at its two edges.

⁵The decorated band on it was of the same materials and workmanship, of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen; as YHWH had commanded Moses. ⁶The onyx stones were prepared, enclosed in settings of gold filigree and engraved like the engravings of a signet, according to the names of the sons of Israel. ⁷He set them on the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, to be stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel; as YHWH had commanded Moses. ⁸He made the breastpiece, in skilled work, like the work of the ephod, of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen.

The breastplate (39:8) is not called the 'breastplate of judgment' (28:15).

⁹It was square; the breastpiece was made double, a span in length and a span in width when doubled. ¹⁰They set in it four rows of stones. A row of carnelian, chrysolite, and emerald was the first row; ¹¹and the second row, a turquoise, a sapphire, and a moonstone; ¹²and the third row, a jacinth, an agate, and an amethyst; ¹³and the fourth row, a beryl, an onyx, and a jasper; they were enclosed in settings of gold filigree. ¹⁴There were twelve stones with names corresponding to the names of the sons of Israel; they were like signets, each engraved with its name, for the twelve tribes. ¹⁵They made on the breastpiece chains of pure gold, twisted like cords; ¹⁶and they made two settings of gold filigree and two gold rings, and put the two rings on the two edges of the breastpiece; ¹⁷and they put the two cords of gold in the two rings at the edges of the breastpiece. ¹⁸Two ends of the two cords they had attached to the two settings of filigree; in this way they attached it in front to the shoulder-pieces of the ephod. ¹⁹Then they made two rings of gold, and put them at the two ends of the breastpiece, on its inside edge next to the ephod. ²⁰They made two rings of gold, and attached them in front to the lower part of the two shoulder-pieces of the ephod, at its joining above the decorated band of the ephod. ²¹They bound the breastpiece by its rings to the rings of the ephod with a blue cord, so that it should lie on the decorated band of the ephod, and that the breastpiece should not come loose from the ephod; as YHWH had commanded Moses. ²²He also made the robe of the ephod woven all of blue yarn; ²³and the opening of the robe in the middle of it was like the opening in a coat of mail, with a binding around the opening, so that it might not be torn. ²⁴On the lower hem of the robe they made pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen. ²⁵They also made bells of pure gold, and put the bells between the pomegranates on the lower hem of the robe all around, between the pomegranates; ²⁶a bell and a pomegranate, a bell and a pomegranate all around on the lower hem of the robe for ministering; as YHWH had commanded Moses. ²⁷They also made the tunics, woven of fine linen, for Aaron and his sons, ²⁸and the turban of fine linen, and the head-dresses of fine linen, and the linen undergarments of fine twisted linen, ²⁹and the sash of fine twisted linen, and of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, embroidered with needlework; as YHWH had commanded Moses.

³⁰They made the rosette of the holy diadem of pure gold, and wrote on it an inscription, like the engraving of a signet, "Holy to YHWH." ³¹They tied to it a blue cord, to fasten it on the turban above; as YHWH had commanded Moses.

Everything is brought to Moses (39:32-43)

³²In this way all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was finished; the Israelites had done everything just as the LORD had commanded Moses. ³³Then they brought the tabernacle to Moses, the tent and all its utensils, its hooks, its frames, its bars, its pillars, and its bases; ³⁴the covering of tanned rams' skins and the covering of fine leather, and the curtain for the screen; ³⁵the ark of the covenant with its poles and the mercy seat; ³⁶the table with all its utensils, and the bread of the Presence; ³⁷the pure lampstand with its lamps set on it and all its utensils, and the oil for the light; ³⁸the golden altar, the anointing oil and the fragrant incense, and the screen for the entrance of the tent; ³⁹the bronze altar, and its grating of bronze, its poles, and all its utensils; the basin with its stand; ⁴⁰the hangings of the court, its pillars, and its bases, and the screen for the gate of the court, its cords, and its pegs; and all the utensils for the service of the tabernacle, for the tent of meeting; ⁴¹the finely worked vestments for ministering in the holy place, the sacred vestments for the priest Aaron, and the vestments of his sons to serve as priests. ⁴²The Israelites had done all of the work just as YHWH had commanded Moses. ⁴³When Moses saw that they had done all the work just as YHWH had commanded, he blessed them.

Repetition of the Instructions to be carried out by Moses (40:1-15)

¹YHWH spoke to Moses: ²On the first day of the first month you shall set up the tabernacle of the tent of meeting.

The tabernacle is to be set up on New Year's Day: a new beginning (compare Genesis 1:1; 8:13). The fourteenth day of this first month, the day of the full moon, will mark one year since they left Egypt (see 12:2,6). The first celebration in the new Tabernacle will be the Passover. 'Covenant' here is 'ēdâ. It is a 'witness to the covenant'.

³You shall put in it the ark of the covenant, and you shall screen the ark with the curtain. ⁴You shall bring in the table, and arrange its setting; and you shall bring in the lampstand, and set up its lamps. ⁵You shall put the golden altar for incense before the ark of the covenant, and set up the screen for the entrance of the tabernacle. ⁶You shall set the altar of burnt offering before the entrance of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting, ⁷and place the basin between the tent of meeting and the altar, and put water in it. ⁸You shall set up the court all around, and hang up the screen for the gate of the court. ⁹Then you shall take the anointing oil, and anoint the tabernacle and all that is in it, and consecrate it and all its furniture, so that it shall become holy. ¹⁰You shall also anoint the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and consecrate the altar, so that the altar shall be most holy.

Setting up the Tabernacle

¹¹You shall also anoint the basin with its stand, and consecrate it. ¹²Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and shall wash them with water, ¹³and put on Aaron the sacred vestments, and you shall anoint him and consecrate him, so that he may serve me as priest. ¹⁴You shall bring his sons also and put tunics on them, ¹⁵and anoint them, as you anointed their father, that they may serve me as priests: and their anointing shall admit them to a perpetual priesthood throughout all generations to come.

Moses carries out YHWH's Instructions (40:16-33)

¹⁶Moses did everything just as YHWH had commanded him. ¹⁷In the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month, the tabernacle was set up. ¹⁸Moses set up the tabernacle; he laid its bases, and set up its frames, and put in its poles, and raised up its pillars; ¹⁹and he spread the tent over the tabernacle, and put the covering of the tent over it; as YHWH had commanded Moses. ²⁰He took the covenant and put it into the ark, and put the poles on the ark, and set the mercy seat above the ark; ²¹and he brought the ark into the tabernacle, and set up the curtain for screening, and screened the ark of the covenant; as YHWH had commanded Moses. ²²He put the table in the tent of meeting, on the north side of the tabernacle, outside the curtain, ²³and set the bread in order on it before YHWH; as YHWH had commanded Moses. ²⁴He put the lampstand in the tent of meeting, opposite the table on the south side of the tabernacle, ²⁵and set up the lamps before YHWH; as YHWH had commanded Moses. ²⁶He put the golden altar in the tent of meeting before the curtain, ²⁷and offered fragrant incense on it; as YHWH had commanded Moses. ²⁸He also put in place the screen for the entrance of the tabernacle. ²⁹He set the altar of burnt offering at the entrance of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting, and offered on it the burnt offering and the grain offering as YHWH had commanded Moses. ³⁰He set the basin between the tent of meeting and the altar, and put water in it for washing, ³¹with which Moses and Aaron and his sons washed their hands and their feet. ³²When they went into the tent of meeting, and when they approached the altar, they washed; as YHWH had commanded Moses. ³³He set up the court around the tabernacle and the altar, and put up the screen at the gate of the court. So Moses finished the work.

God's presence on Sinai was described earlier in these terms:

The appearance of the glory of YHWH was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain.

– Exodus 24:17-18

God's design in having Moses set up the 'tent of meeting' was as a sign to the people of his continued presence among them as they journeyed from Sinai to the Promised Land. The 'cloud' and the 'glory' that were over Sinai are now over the 'tent' (40:34). Far from being of a lesser nature, it is even greater. Moses was able to 'enter the cloud' on Sinai. Not so here, so intense is YHWH's presence (40:35; compare Leviticus 1:1, where YHWH speaks to Moses from inside the tent).

Verse thirty-six looks to the future, for there is a lot to happen before the people leave Sinai. The whole of Leviticus and the first six chapters of Numbers are presented as though they happen outside time in the presence of the glory of YHWH. The opening verse of Numbers chapter seven picks up the story from Exodus 40:33. It begins: 'On the day when Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle ...'

The final verses of Exodus leave us with a wonderful sense, not only of God's presence among his people, but of their constantly looking to God for guidance. They set out only when YHWH's presence sets out. They stay when YHWH's presence stays. All eyes are on the luminous mystery that is among them, the luminous mystery that is their reason for being a people. And so it was 'at each stage of their journey' (40:38).

May it be so for us.

³⁴Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle.

³⁵Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle.

³⁶Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey;

³⁷but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up.

³⁸For the cloud of YHWH was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.