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Objections and parallels to the priestly tabernacle

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Introduction

It has been claimed that the description of the tabernacle in Exodus and onwards in the Pentateuch is the product of exilic and/or post-exilic scribes, trying to make a past for their people and religion. Many have concluded from the similarities to the account of Solomon's temple in 1.Kings 6-7 that the tabernacle description in Exodus was inspired by memory of king David's tabernacle or even more Solomon's temple.¹ Swedish scholar Magnus Magnusson has also added the objection that making a tent from the instructions in Exodus would be close to practically impossible for the Israelites². There are of course even scholars who will deny the existence of the monarchy and an ancient Israelite people altogether, let alone the existence of the tabernacle.

The task of this essay is to examine how the Biblical narrative describes the tabernacle, which formal objections have been raised, and how archaeological parallels can help to shed light on the problem. Two recent articles will be presented as important input into the discussion. The first article presents already known extra-biblical parallels from Egypt, while the other presents new evidence from the Mari archives.

We shall commence with a study of the term tabernacle and the biblical description, along with formal objections made by critical scholars. From there we will look into the description in Exodus that is relevant for finally comparing it with the archaeological parallels presented.

1 Flemming 2000:496

2 By the time Magnus wrote his book, an Israelite billionaire had spent fifteen years and a fortune making a replicate of the tabernacle. On this background Magnus deems it improbable that the "desert people" could have managed the task. See Magnus Magnusson (1977) *Fynd i Bibelens länder* Kristianstad : Raben og Sjögren

Which tabernacle?

For most Christians the word *tabernacle* immediately turns the mind in the direction of a sacred tent, in which God spoke to Moses and where the Levite priests carried out the offerings of the Israelites. The description in Ex. 25-30 and again in 36-40 fits this idea³. The Hebrew word that corresponds to the English *tabernacle*, מִשְׁכָּן (miškan), simply means a dwelling place.⁴ The biblical narrative describes several features of this tabernacle, all emphasizing its central place and function. Literally it was located in the centre of the Israelite camp, but more significantly it was the centre of all worship and communication with YHWH.⁵ It was of that reason also the proper location for the revelation of the law (Lev 1:1). The cloud, which represented the presence of YHWH, was always present in or over the tent. Only when YHWH wanted the Israelites to move to a different place, the cloud would move away from the tent, in which case the Israelites would immediately pack their things and follow the cloud until it settled again (Ex.40:36-38; Num. 9:16-22).

The text of the Pentateuch does, however, also contain at least one mention of a smaller tent, not intended for offerings, but a place where God spoke face-to-face with Moses. (Ex.33:7-11) This tent did not have any organized offerings or Levite priests. Only Joshua son of Nun (who was not a Levite himself) resided in the tent as its caretaker. Moses explicitly gives the name אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד ('ohel mō'ēd) to the tent (v.7) meaning “tent of meeting.”⁶ While the cloud resided inside the tabernacle from where God spoke out to Moses, in this tent it was the other way around. Moses entered into the tent, while the cloud stayed outside. (v.9)

The term *tent of meeting* (אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד) along with a few other terms keep showing up further out in the Pentateuch. In some cases “tent of meeting” is used together with dwelling (מִשְׁכָּן), in which case it clearly refers to the tabernacle (Ex 39-40, Lev 17:4; 1Ch 6:32)⁷. Other terms include tabernacle of testimony (מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת), sanctuary (מִקְדָּשׁ), holy place (קֹדֶשׁ) and even the house of YHWH (בַּיִת יְהוָה)⁸. In Ex.27:21 tent of meeting clearly refers to the tabernacle. The question then remains whether the mention in Exodus 33 is an unique case which did not reoccur after the tabernacle was built, or whether the text refers to this tent on further occasions.

³ The mere fact that the second description is almost a verbatim copy of the first is by some scholars considered to be proof that the Pentateuch is composed from a variety of sources (See further out in the paper).

⁴ Brown, Driver, Briggs 1906:1015

⁵ Sommer 2001:42-43

⁶ Brown, Driver, Briggs 1906:168-169

⁷ Numbers 4:25 does use the two terms separate from each other, which may possibly be understood as referring to two different tents. It is however more likely that this is the Hebrew literary form of reputation.

⁸ Gooding 1980:1506

As a background for an article on *the conflicting constructions of divine presence*, Benjamin D. Sommer uses a model which' roots date back to the eighteen-hundreds (The Graf-Wellhausen model, widely embraced by critical scholars). The essence of this model is that the Pentateuch is made up from a variety of different sources. As a result Sommer (inheriting his views from amongst other Wellhausen himself) takes for granted that the different mentions of the tabernacle and the tent of meeting are extracted from two of the main sources. The priestly tabernacle (Mostly מִשְׁכָּן) comes from the more organized priestly code (P) while the mentions of the tent of meeting (Always אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד) are extracted from the Elohist narrative (E). From this point of view all utterances of the tabernacle, whichever term is used, refers to the one and same tabernacle. To clarify the difference between the two traditions Sommer uses the scriptures where the cloud is mentioned in context with the tabernacle: In the priestly code the cloud is ever present in and over the tent, while in the Elohist narrative it drops in on appropriate occasions. Scriptures used to support this claim include not only Ex.33 but also Num 11-12. Num 12:9-10 he considers to be especially important since those verses narrates the departure of YHWH.

As a result of such argumentation it is easy to argue that the tabernacle was made up from post-exilic scribes. The memory of Solomon's temple might then have melted together with the Elohist tradition of a much smaller “tent of meeting”, thus conceiving the notion of a large organized mobile sanctuary. In the best case scenario one could consider that there was an actual large tabernacle in the days of king David which inspired the notion.

D.W. Gooding⁹ on the other hand distinguishes between two different tents that served two different purposes. The large tabernacle, or the intended tabernacle, was to be “YHWH's portable sanctuary in which he dwelt among the Israelites in the desert”¹⁰. It was the meeting point between God and man (or more correctly: Israelite). The small tent, as mentioned in Ex. 33:7-11 was merely a temporary meeting place. The text is not a description from a different tradition, but it reveals a place for worship and prophecy before the large tabernacle was finished. Thus, according to Gooding, the mention of the tent of meeting in Exodus 33 must be unique.

From Shiloh to Jerusalem

The book of Joshua states that after the conquest of Canaan the tabernacle was permanently erected

⁹ Article on the tabernacle in the Illustrated Bible Dictionary

¹⁰ Gooding 1980:1506

in Shiloh. Friedman mentions the possibility that the silver sockets for the frames might have been added at this point, rather than at Mt. Sinai. Thereby he is able to ignore the allegation that the sockets might be too heavy to carry around the desert. From this point the tabernacle as such is not mentioned until the first book of Samuel, where new problems arise.

1Sam 4-6 narrates the capture and restoration of the ark. When captured by the Philistines the ark was separated from the tabernacle and when returned it was housed in Kiriath Jearim instead of Shiloh. The record does not suggest that the tabernacle was moved there also. In fact 1st Sam is unclear on what becomes of the tabernacle. On the contrary it may be suggested considering Jer. 7:12, 14; 26:6-9 that the tabernacle stayed in Shiloh and was later destroyed.¹¹ That theory will however cause problems explaining 1.Chronicles 16 (see below)

The ark was finally brought to Jerusalem, with a short stopover in Gittite. It was installed in *the* tent (תֵּהָאֵה) that David had pitched for it. Which tent this was is debated. Some have argued that it was the original tabernacle, while others think that it was a new one. Since the text only says “the tent” it may simply have been a regular small tent for temporary use. This may be reinforced by first Chronicles. The book does not narrate the capture and restoration of the ark although it does account for David bringing it from Kiriath Jearim to Jerusalem. More important for the current issue is that when David ordered Asaf and his sons to serve before the Ark, he also sent Zadok and his brothers to serve at the tabernacle in Gibeon (1Ch 16:37-39). This can not easily be reconciled with the tabernacle being destroyed.

Eventually the ark was brought into the temple of Solomon, an event that has caused even further discussion. Some have deemed impossible the thought of the temple taking over the worship of tabernacle. The mosaic law clearly defines the tabernacle as the only legitimate place of worship (Lev 17:1-9) But this problem is in fact caused by the Graf-Wellhausen model¹². Both 1Ki 8:4 and 2Ch 5:5 report that the tabernacle was moved into the temple at the same time as the ark. Friedman shows that it is not unthinkable that the tabernacle actually stood erected within the holy of holies in Solomon's temple¹³. This explanation seems probable, especially having in mind that not only is the tabernacle mentioned in other biblical sources as a part of the temple, but the installation is mentioned in Talmud and in the writings of Josephus¹⁴.

11 Friedman 1992:293

12 Friedman 1992:299

13 IBID

14 IBID

The architecture of the priestly tabernacle

The description in Exodus contains several details not only of the tabernacle itself (the holy place) but also the courtyard, the furniture and tools of the courtyard, and the even clothing of the Levite priests. The goal of this section is not to repeat every detail from the description in Exodus, but rather to describe the specific details which will be relevant for comparing the tabernacle with parallels presented later in the essay.

The interior of the tabernacle was divided into two rooms: the holy, which was the outer room, and the holy of holies, which was the inner room. The two rooms were separated by a veil, hung up on four gilded pillars of acacia wood.

Surrounding the holy and most holy space were the so-called קַרְשִׁים (q̄rāšîm). NIV renders this word as planks, while NET renders frames¹⁵. Whichever is the correct one may yet be debated, and is outside the scope of this essay. The frames (or planks) were joined together with five vertical bars on each side. The middle bar ran the whole length, while the others only made a part of it. Special frames were made for the corners, without doubt to increase the stability of the structure¹⁶. Exactly in which way the frames were ordered: Side by side or in an overlapping manner is uncertain. While the common idea is that they indeed were ordered side by side. Richard E. Friedman suggests the alternative and argues convincingly for it¹⁷. Nevertheless also this discussion is outside the scope of the essay and not relevant for later comparison.

Over the frames the ten linen curtains were stretched, covering the whole structure from the front to and including the rear. On top of this three new layers were stretched. First one layer from goat hair, then a second from coloured ram skins and a final one from fine leather¹⁸.

Parallels

In December 2000, Bible Review published an article by Kenneth A Kitchen on the historicity of the desert tabernacle. The article, although it is short, names several archaeological findings that have significant similarities to the design of the tabernacle.

Kitchen states early in the article that “if the Tabernacle as a structure had been invented by

15 The latter is supported by Gooding, mainly of two reasons: Firstly a frame would be easier to carry, and secondly it would allow the beautiful curtains to be seen from within the tabernacle. Also Friedman argues for this understanding. It may in fact be suggested in Ex.26:17 (Friedman 1992:295) See also footnote to Num 4:31 in NET

16 Gooding 1980:1508 and Kitchen 2000:17

17 Friedman 1992:296

18 The meaning of the word תַּתְּשִׁים, which is the material of the outermost layer, is debated. See footnote to Ex. 25:5 in NET

someone during or after the Exile, we would expect to find parallels in Mesopotamia in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C, not in Egypt during the thirteenth century B.C. and earlier.”¹⁹ Kitchen states that almost no evidence is found in Mesopotamia dating to the relevant period, while there are several archaeological parallels in Egypt. Following are some of the evidence put forth by Kitchen and Daniel E. Flemming.

Parallels in Egypt

Excavations in Egypt have revealed both paintings and some remains of portable pavilions that were presumably used for burial ceremonies. Kitchen's article shows a photograph of such a painting, where the god of mummification, Anubis prepares the body of a craftsman for burial. The painting also shows the curtains of the pavilion, which contain a repeated pattern much like the ten linen curtains of the tabernacle. The painting, found in the tomb of the craftsman, dates back to approximately the same time as the Exodus.

Another set of findings that parallels to the tabernacle on a quite different level are the tombs of several Pharaohs of Egypt's new kingdom (c 1550-1070 BC). The coffins containing the mummies were enclosed in four nested wooden boxes. Much like the frames of the tabernacle (קַרְטָיִם) the sides of the boxes were gold plated and joined together by tenon and socket joints. They could easily be taken apart for transportation.

One of the best preserved parallels found in Egypt, is the portable pavilion of queen Hetep-Heres, dated to around 2600 BC. It does admittedly not have any religious feature (apart from being buried with the queen) but the structure of it is quite interesting. The framework was made from wood, covered with gold. Upright rods were attached to vertical beams, top and bottom. The pavilion also had special corner pieces for stability, equivalent to the corner pieces of the tabernacle. The reconstruction at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston shows in addition vertical rods between the top beams for holding up the roof, and further stabilizing the structure. Such rods are not part of the description of the tabernacle, but have been suggested by Gooding:

There were probably (the text does not say so, but it omits many details which one would need to know to make a tabernacle) wooden struts running across the top of the framework from side to side.

...

Allegations that the instructions for the building of the tabernacle are in parts impracticable, and thus evidently the work of an idealist, would be valid only if the records were intended to be fully detailed blueprints. They are not that, of course, but records 'for our learning'. Hence many practical details of no aesthetic, symbolic or

¹⁹ Kitchen 2000:15

spiritual value are omitted.

Whether or not the tabernacle had any vertical roof-rods or beams, the following is evident: The excavation of the Hetep-Heres' tomb and finding of the portable pavilion confirms that a wooden structure, similar to the frames of the tabernacle, were known in Egypt long before the Exodus.

Kitchen goes on describing other discoveries that resemble the divided interior of the tabernacle and even the layout of the Israelite camp. Summarizing the whole Kitchen is able to state that “all in all, the evidence makes it untenable to claim any longer that the construct of the Tabernacle is an Exilic fiction.”²⁰

Parallels in Mesopotamia

When it comes to parallels that have been found in the Mesopotamian area an interesting discovery has been made by Daniel E. Flemming. Remains of an Amorite city-state named Mari were excavated in the early and mid nineteen hundreds, in a location near the modern Tel Hariri in SE Syria. Over 22.000 clay tablets were found containing all sorts of information. Those have been used as background information for the patriarchal era, while the city seems stood from the third century to around 1760 BC²¹. One of the tablets, more precisely the M.6873 contains the following details.

One large tent: 16 men;
 10 framing(?[*qé-er-su*]) units: 20 men;
 5 stands(?): 5 men;
 14 fence(?) units: 2 men;
 total: 43 men pertaining to the large tent.

Flemming, although modest in his assumptions, concludes that this text is a list of the components of a large tent (*hurpatum*). The number of men mentioned with each item he believes to be the crew needed for its transportation. Using human transporters, rather than animals or carts, may suggest that these items were valuable.

Even though the text does not explain in which context the tent was used, Flemming concludes that it must have been public. There are however a couple of hints. The word that is translated as framing is *qersum* and bears an obvious resemblance to the Hebrew word *qeresh* (קֶרֶשׁ), which in the Exodus is used for the framework of the tabernacle. A mention of the word in a ritual text from the same excavation suggests that *qersum* in fact has a connection to certain

²⁰ Kitchen 2000:20

²¹ Wiseman 1980:1946

religious rituals, or more precisely the same structure as in the tabernacle.

While on the subject Flemming brings up an old discovery made by Frank M. Cross. In an Ugaritic Baal myth the goddess Athirat visits El on the behalf of Baal²² One verse from this myth mentions that El “returned” to his *qrš*. Supporting him self on the work of Cross and later Richard J Clifford, Flemming concludes that *qrš* is the “tent-shrine” of El, adding to the reliability of the notion that El lived in a portable structure. Flemming closes this portion of his article with saying that “With the material made explicit in the Mari tent description it would be premature to dismiss this sort of wood-framed construction as foreign to pre-exilic Israel”²³

Conclusion

None of the arguments put forth in this essay proves the non-existence of the tabernacle. Neither are there any arguments that prove the opposite. That does however not mean that the discussion has no value.

The formal arguments put forth against the reliability of the Biblical narrative have shown to be vain. Even if the Pentateuch can be divided into different sources, it does not automatically dismiss the notion of the priestly tabernacle. The claim that the tabernacle is fabricated by exilic or post-exilic scribes, based on the similarities between the tabernacle and Solomon's temple, is not supported by archaeological evidence. Rather the opposite is true. Remains, paintings, and inscriptions have shown the usage of several components were known prior to the Exodus. Rich woven curtains in sanctuaries and mobile shrines were used in Egypt several hundred years before Moses. The wooden framework of the tabernacle seems to have parallels and mentions all over the relevant area, both in Egypt and Mesopotamia (although not in the exilic time according to Kitchen.) It seems that the design described in Exodus was neither new nor revolutionary to the Israelites.

From a “scientific” viewpoint it must therefore be considered to be just as safe to read the Biblical narrative with the faith that it describes actual events, as it is to doubt it.

22 Flemming 2000:491-492

23 IBID

Litterature

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