



# DOES GOD DWELL IN HOUSES MADE BY HANDS?

*SERIES: THE TABERNACLE: GOD'S PRESENCE WITH HIS PEOPLE*

Exodus 25:8-9

Second Message

Bernard Bell

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I spent a significant part of my childhood in Thailand. Among the familiar sights were spirit houses; they were everywhere, and still are prevalent throughout Thailand and adjacent countries. A spirit house is a little house or temple mounted on a pedestal, usually located in a corner of the yard. In rural areas these are simple, but for major businesses in Bangkok they are elaborate. A spirit house provides a home for the spirit of that place. The spirit needs a place to dwell, and the residents need the spirit to be happy if it is to play its protective and beneficent role.

Is the same true for God? Does he need a house made by human hands in which to dwell? Last week we started a new series looking at the tabernacle, the tent in which God dwelt in the midst of his people. But does God really need such a man-made residence?

We saw last week that the Lord instructed Moses to have the people bring him their freewill contributions: seven categories of materials. What are they to do with these materials?

**“And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.” (Exod 25:8-9 ESV)**

“Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.” To us this seems a wonderful sentiment. Our call to worship started, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord” (Ps 84:1). Even the sparrow and the swallow find a home in God’s house. Several of our songs have echoed this theme. But it must have been a terrifying prospect for the Israelites at the time. It was only a few days prior that the Israelites had arrived at Mt Sinai, where they encamped at its base. Moses prepared the people to meet God: he consecrated them and they washed their garments. He set a security perimeter around the base of the mountain lest they venture onto the mountain and die.

**On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain... Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off. (Exod 19:16-20; 20:18)**

Moses drew near and engaged in shuttle diplomacy between the Lord and the people, acting as mediator in the making of a covenant

between the two parties. With the Lord and his people now bound together in covenant, the Lord came down to dwell:

**The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. (24:16-17)**

Now this God whose presence is like a consuming fire wants to put his presence in the midst of the people! The top of Mt Sinai can scarce contain his glory; how will he be able to put that glory in the midst of his people? How will the people ever survive his presence among them?

And why does the Lord want to dwell with his people, to put his presence in their midst? Is the Lord lonely that he needs a people around him? No, the Lord isn’t lonely: he is fully relational and satisfied within the triune community of the Godhead. He didn’t make the world or humans out of loneliness; nor did he call Israel to be his people to meet any relational needs. He creates and redeems through the overflow of his love. But why does he want to dwell with a people so prone to grumbling?

**“I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.” (29:45-46)**

The Lord did not need a man-made structure in which to dwell. It was Israel that required such a structure. It would be a visible sign to them so they would know. They would know that they were his people, that he was their God, and that he was the one who had brought them out of Egypt. Since Israel was to be a holy nation and a royal priesthood, it would also be a sign to the nations so that they would know that the Lord was in Israel’s midst. If Israel lived in a manner appropriate to this presence, then the nations would be drawn towards Israel and its God.

What man-made structure can possibly contain the Lord? The people are to make him a sanctuary, a tabernacle. In today’s language a sanctuary implies a refuge, a place of safety. But a sanctuary is really a holy place. The Lord is a holy God. Here there is a problem: how can a holy God put his presence in the midst of an unholy people?

What do we even mean by holy? Holy is that which is “other,” set aside from that which is common or ordinary. Rudolf Otto, in his classic book, *The Idea of the Holy*, describes the one who is holy as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery that causes trembling and fascination.<sup>1</sup> The holy God is a *mysterium*. Because there is such a gulf between us and God, because we are on opposite sides of the Creator/creature divide, God must necessarily be mysterious. We can know him only as he has chosen to reveal himself to us. And this revelation of himself to us is necessarily limited in the interests of our

own survival. But it is because God is mysterious that we worship him. If there were no mystery we would not worship.

He is a *mysterium tremendum*. Again because of the gulf between us and God we tremble in his presence; we don't take him lightly. But he is also a *mysterium fascinans*, a mystery that fascinates. Though we tremble when confronted with this Holy One who is mysterious, we are also fascinated and drawn to him.

In the children's book *The Wind in the Willows*, which like all good children's books is best read as an adult, Mole and Rat experience this mystery that both terrifies and fascinates when they are confronted with an august Presence:

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror—indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy—but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend, and saw him at his side cowed, stricken, and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew...

"Rat!" he found breath to whisper, shaking. "Are you afraid?"

"Afraid?" murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. "Afraid! Of HIM? O, never, never! And yet—and yet—O, Mole, I am afraid!"

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.<sup>2</sup>

Many of you are familiar with this dialog from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, as Mr Beaver tells the children about Aslan:

"But shall we see him?" asked Susan.

"Why, Daughter of Eve, that's what I brought you here for. I'm to lead you where you shall meet him," said Mr Beaver.

"Is—is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man!" said Mr Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."<sup>3</sup>

The Lord's presence among his people will be a compelling presence: it will be the focus of Israel's life. But it is not a safe presence. The Lord's holiness is constantly threatening to break out against his people. But they will learn that it is also a kind and gracious presence. Soon he will reveal himself as:

**The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. (34:6-7)**

It is this God, who is not safe but who is merciful, good and kind, who comes to dwell in the midst of his people. To those who know him as a merciful and gracious God his presence will be good. But to those who take his presence for granted or who ignore the holy requirements of his presence he will burst forth in terrifying ways.

The Lord is a holy God. He will dwell amidst his people in a holy sanctuary. This sanctuary will be arranged in three degrees of holiness: the courtyard, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. Though he has called his people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, he will differentiate them into three degrees of increasing holiness: the people, the Levites and the priests with the high priest as the most holy. The degree of holiness determines how close they can approach the holy God, into what zone of holiness they can penetrate. The people will bring their sacrifices to the entrance of the tabernacle. The priests can enter the courtyard to serve at the altar and can enter the Holy Place. Only the high priest can enter the Most Holy Place and only on one day. The holy God can be approached, but only in a limited manner.

The Lord will dwell in his holy sanctuary in the midst of his people. What form will this holy sanctuary take? It is to be a *mishkan* (v. 9). The word simply means a dwelling place; it is cognate with the verb "dwell" (*shakan*) of the previous verse. Furthermore, it is a movable dwelling place, a nomad's tent rather than a permanent building. God's holy dwelling place among his people will be in the form of a tent (Lat. *tabernaculum*) amidst the people's tents.

Both the tent, the Dwelling Place, and its seven pieces of furniture are to be made exactly according to the pattern the Lord will show Moses on Mt Sinai. The need to conform to this divinely-revealed pattern will be reiterated several times in subsequent chapters.

And yet the tabernacle also follows an earthly pattern. The basic design of a tent with an inner and outer chamber, surrounded by a courtyard, erected in the midst of the people's camp, is found in surrounding cultures, especially in Egypt. It is not surprising that God should accommodate himself to the culture of the day; this is by no means the only example in Scripture. The uniqueness of the tabernacle lies not in its basic design of a tent but in its theology.

What is the pattern which the Lord shows Moses on Mt Sinai? And how many tabernacles are there? Clearly, one tabernacle is to be built on earth. Clearly, Moses is shown some pattern on Mt Sinai. Is this a scale model of the earthly tabernacle, or perhaps its blueprints? In which case the earthly tabernacle is the real and only tabernacle. Or is there a second tabernacle, a heavenly one? If so, is the pattern a model of this heavenly tabernacle, or its blueprints? Or does the Lord directly show Moses the real tabernacle in heaven? It is hard to know for sure. Biblical theology suggests that the tabernacle to be built at Sinai is the earthly pole of a heaven-earth axis. The earthly tabernacle corresponds to or mirrors a heavenly reality. This *axis mundi*, this world axis, connects the earthly residence of God and his heavenly residence, his earthly throne room and his heavenly throne room. There is much in Scripture that suggests this axis.

What does the earthly tabernacle represent?

The tabernacle is a new Eden. The language of Genesis 2 portrays Eden as a sanctuary, as the earthly footprint of the heavenly God. It was the earthly pole of the heaven-earth axis. Here God put the human to serve and keep his commandment, priestly language. Here he walked in the cool of the day, expecting to find the humans whom he had put there for his presence. Here he stationed cherubim to guard the sanctuary. Now for the first time since expelling Adam

and Eve from the garden sanctuary, the Lord is restoring a sanctuary to earth: the tabernacle where the Lord will walk among his people, and where the people, the Levites and the priests will serve him and keep their charge. Both Eden and the tabernacle are an intrusion of heaven onto earth.

The tabernacle goes even further back than Eden: it is a new creation. This is seen in multiple ways. The Lord's instructions to Moses (chap. 25–31) are given in seven speeches, with the seventh being about the Sabbath. The fulfilment of these instructions also features sets of seven with the seventh especially significant.

Bezalel will make the tent and its furniture, then the people make the priestly garments for ministering in the sanctuary. Seven times it is stated, "They made...as the LORD had commanded Moses" with the seventh being the gold plate for the high priest's turban, inscribed, "Holy to the LORD." "Thus all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was finished, and the people of Israel did according to all that the LORD had commanded Moses; so they did" (39:32). They brought all the components of the tabernacle to Moses.

**According to all that the LORD had commanded Moses, so the people of Israel had done all the work. And Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had done it; as the LORD had commanded, so had they done it. Then Moses blessed them. (39:42-43)**

Where God saw all he had made and behold it was very good (Gen 1:31), Moses saw all the people's work, and behold it was exactly as the Lord commanded.

The Lord commanded Moses to erect the tabernacle; he did so in seven stages, each ending, "as the LORD had commanded Moses," with the seventh being the placing of the basin so the priests could ceremonially wash before entering the tent. "So Moses finished the work" (40:33), again echoing God finishing his work on the seventh day (Gen 2:2).

The tabernacle is thus the cosmos in microcosm. God made the world in six days as a temple in which to place his image, namely humanity. Now he will have his people make the tabernacle as a dwelling in which to place his presence. Just as God changed a formless and empty disorder into an ordered cosmos, so the tabernacle will be the center of an ordered sacred geography. It represents a repairing of the cosmos.

As well as looking back, the tabernacle also looks forward. It is a type of what is to come. When Israel is settled in the land, a permanent temple will be built to replace the portable tent. David gave Solomon the plan. In his prayer of dedication, Solomon acknowledged that God doesn't really dwell in a house made by human hands:

**"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet ... listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive." (1 Kgs 8:27, 30)**

Despite the incongruity, God really will put his presence in the temple that Solomon built. Furthermore, Solomon understood that the man-made temple was a conduit between God in his heavenly dwelling place and his people on earth. As the people prayed towards the earthly sanctuary, so God in heaven would hear; his eye, ear and heart would be open. It would be a merciful presence: he would

forgive. But it could also be a terrifying presence. The religious leaders of Jeremiah's day took God's presence for granted, treating it like a lucky charm. "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD," they said (Jer 7:4), assuming that the Lord's presence in the temple guaranteed their safety, regardless of their behavior. God did the unthinkable: he removed his presence. The temple became just another man-made building, which he allowed to be destroyed. For centuries thereafter the Lord's presence did not dwell on earth among his people.

Until... "The word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us" (John 1:14). "Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made Man."<sup>4</sup> The tabernacle points beyond the temple to Jesus. This presence of God in Jesus was not a safe presence. To those seeking mercy, it was a kind and gentle presence, a presence which welcomed sinners to the table. To the self-righteous leaders, fixated on the magnificent man-made building in their midst, this was a presence that caused trembling. The leaders killed this one who dared challenge their fine building, who dared tell them that they had turned a house of prayer for all peoples into a den of rebels.

Not long thereafter, Stephen gave a history lesson to the Sanhedrin, the same Jewish leadership which had condemned Jesus. Our Scripture reading (Acts 7:44-50) was the portion in which Stephen talks of the tabernacle and temple. He dared to point out that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands." This so enraged them that they killed him. The temple they prized was again ripe for destruction.

Meanwhile, God took his presence which had been mobile in Jesus and, through his Spirit, has placed it in the church, in his family made up of those who are in Christ. What does it mean to have God dwelling among us, not in a man-made building, but in a temple of living stones, built upon the cornerstone of the Living Stone who was rejected by men but chosen by God and precious? It is a holy presence: he is a holy God and we are called to holy living, for which he puts his Holy Spirit in us. It is an awesome presence: we bow in worship. It is a fascinating presence: we are drawn to him.

But there's yet a stage to come:

**And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." (Rev 21:2-3)**

The descent of the holy city from heaven to earth means that the dwelling place of God will be fully realized on earth. He will be fully present to his people, who will see him.

Does God dwell in houses made by human hands? For a season he graciously allowed his presence to fill a man-made structure, first the tabernacle and then the temple. Both tabernacle and temple pointed to greater things. They pointed up to heaven, God's realm. They pointed back to creation. They pointed ahead to Jesus, to the Spirit-filled church, and to the New Jerusalem.

God dwells in us, a spiritual house of living stones created and Spirit-gifted by himself. We may think of ourselves as chipped and cracked stones, but God is fitting us as living stones into a structure made by himself, one that is suitable for his presence. The church is part of his repairing of the cosmos; we are a new creation in whom he is speaking order back into the world. Sadly when people look

at the church that's not what they see. They think of the church as being judgmental or focused on rule-keeping. But the church is where God puts his presence, where he speaks order, where he is repairing broken people into living stones, where he is repairing the cosmos. God's presence among us is not a safe presence but it is a good presence. May we live in such a way that the world is attracted to this God who puts his presence among us.

1. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), chapters 4–6.
2. Kenneth Grahame, chapter 7, “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn,” *The Wind in the Willows* (1908).
3. C. S. Lewis, chapter 8, “What Happened after Dinner,” *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950).
4. Charles Wesley, “Let Earth and Heaven Combine” (1741).

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