



# BREAD AND LIGHT: SYMBOLS OF PRESENCE

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

Exodus 25:23-40

Fourth Message

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I grew up in a land of temples: Thailand where there are over 40,000 Buddhist temples. Every village has one. In Bangkok the top tourist attractions are all temples. Most of the temples are in a distinctive Thai design, but there are also Chinese Buddhist temples and Hindu temples. And, as I mentioned two weeks ago, nearly every property has a spirit house.

The West has many church buildings, and the cathedrals of Western Europe are major tourist attractions. But a cathedral is quite different from a Buddhist or Hindu temple or a spirit house. A cathedral is built for a congregation to gather together to meet with God. A temple is built as a house for a god. This is certainly true of a Hindu temple; it is a shrine for a particular god. It is also somewhat true of a Buddhist temple. Though Buddhism has no gods, every temple has a statue of the Buddha. The most famous temples in Bangkok are famous because of the Buddha that they house: Wat Phra Kheo, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (this being the most sacred object in Thailand); Wat Pho with its reclining Buddha; Wat Traimit with its golden Buddha.

These Thai temples make beautiful photos, but Westerners see them as little more than tourist attractions. We don't share the mindset of Hindus or animists who build houses for their gods, and bring food because their gods need feeding. We are not like the Buddhists who devote enormous resources to making an image and building a house for it. Instead, we spend billions on building Levi Stadium or the new Apple campus. We sang, "Here I am to worship, here I am to bow down," but we didn't come here to bow before a statue or an idol.

These are the sights of my childhood. This familiarity with temples perhaps makes it a bit easier for me to understand the tabernacle; it doesn't seem quite so strange. But it does raise questions. Does God need a house in which to dwell? Does God need to be brought food? Was the tabernacle just an Israelite version of the temples and shrines of surrounding cultures? Though the tabernacle is to be built according to a divinely-revealed pattern, its form is similar to items in surrounding cultures, but the theology is different.

The tabernacle is indeed a dwelling place for God, where he puts his presence in the midst of his people. It is a holy place, separated by three curtains into three zones of increasing holiness: the courtyard, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies. In these three zones are seven pieces of furniture. Last week we looked at the two items of furniture to be made for the Most Holy Place: the ark and its cover. The Most Holy Place is God's earthly throne room. But unlike all other temples, here there was no image, idol or statue of God. Furthermore, access to this innermost chamber was very limited. Only the high priest had access to this chamber, and he only once a year, and then only waving a censer of incense so that the ark and its cover symbolizing the Lord's presence would be hidden within the cloud. He couldn't see the space where God was described as being present with his people.

Today we move outside the veil into the Holy Place with its three pieces of furniture: the table, the lampstand and the incense altar. The lampstand is to be of solid gold; the table and the altar are to be of acacia wood covered in gold. Though this chamber is less holy than the Most Holy Place, gold is still the metal appropriate to its level of sanctity. Into this chamber the priests can enter to attend to the furniture, to enable their cultic role.

## I. The Table (25:23-30)

**"You shall make a table of acacia wood. Two cubits shall be its length, a cubit its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. You shall overlay it with pure gold and make a molding of gold around it. And you shall make a rim around it a handbreadth wide, and a molding of gold around the rim. And you shall make for it four rings of gold, and fasten the rings to the four corners at its four legs. Close to the frame the rings shall lie, as holders for the poles to carry the table. You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold, and the table shall be carried with these. And you shall make its plates and dishes for incense, and its flagons and bowls with which to pour drink offerings; you shall make them of pure gold. And you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me regularly." (Exod 25:23-30 ESV)**

Moses is to make a table of acacia wood and cover it with gold. It is to be two cubits long, a cubit wide, and a cubit and a half tall, so  $3 \times 1\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$  ft. Similar to the ark, it is to have four rings, and wooden poles covered in gold placed through those rings for carrying the table. Since this is a dining table, it needs dishes. Four types are mentioned, seemingly in two pairs: probably two types of dishes for solids and two types of pitchers for liquid (English versions differ in how these words are translated). As befits the sanctity of the place these are to be of pure gold.

Finally Moses is told what food to put on this dining table: "you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me regularly" (25:30). William Tyndale (1530) translated the term as "shewbread," again influenced, as with the "mercy seat," by Luther's translation *schaubrot*. This is bread that is put on public display, that is shown. It is shown before the Lord: he is the sole audience. The instructions for the bread are given in Leviticus:

**"You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before the LORD. And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the LORD. Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the LORD's food offerings, a perpetual due." (Lev 24:5-9)**

There are to be twelve loaves, suggesting that they represent the twelve tribes of Israel. These are a memorial and a food offering to the Lord. Each of the twelve tribes is present at the table, represented and remembered before the Lord, under his gaze. Each Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange the twelve loaves before the Lord; this evidently does not conflict with Sabbath being a day of rest. There they remain in the Lord's presence for a full week. For a full week Israel is present before the Lord, is shown before the Lord. The following Sabbath new loaves are placed, and the priests eat the old ones. Since the loaves have been sanctified by being in the Lord's presence, they can be eaten only by the holy priests in a holy place; indeed the loaves are most holy, they are holy of holies.

What is the significance of the table and its bread? They surely speak of God's provision and of dining at the Lord's table in his presence. Though it is a food offering from the people, the Lord does not need food. Instead, his presence sanctifies the food so it can be eaten by the priests. It is a weekly reenactment of the meal that Moses and the seventy elders had in the Lord's presence after the covenant was sealed with blood (Exod 24:11).

Each Sabbath the priests ate the bread in the holy place. Each Sabbath, outside the tent the people ate the manna which the Lord provided for them six days of the week. On the Sabbath they had to trust that the double portion of the previous day would be enough. The table and the bread were a symbol of the Lord's presence with his people and of the people present before the Lord continually. And they were a symbol of the Lord's provision at his table.

## 2. The Lampstand (25:31-40)

**“You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. The lampstand shall be made of hammered work: its base, its stem, its cups, its calyxes, and its flowers shall be of one piece with it. And 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; three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on one branch, and three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on the other branch—so for the six branches going out of the lampstand. And on the lampstand itself there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms, with their calyxes and flowers, and a calyx of one piece with it under each pair of the six branches going out from the lampstand. Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it a single piece of hammered work of pure gold. You shall make seven lamps for it. And the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it. Its tongs and their trays shall be of pure gold. It shall be made, with all these utensils, out of a talent of pure gold. And see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.”** (Exod 25:31-40)

These instructions are given in intricate detail. The lampstand or *menorah* is fashioned after a botanical object, a small tree or bush. Verse 31 lists five components: a base, a single stem or shaft, then multiple cups, calyxes and flowers. A central stem puts forth three branches on each side. Each of these branches has three cups fashioned like almond blossoms, each with calyx and petals. The central shaft has four of these, for a total of 22 stylized flowers. The whole thing is shaped like a flowering almond tree. The almond is the first tree to flower, a herald of the new life of spring. The whole thing is to be made of one piece of gold. But this beautiful object is just the lampstand, an elaborate stand to support the lamps themselves.

There are seven lamps, one for the top of each branch and the central stem. Long before the development of candles, light was provided by oil lamps: a pottery bowl of olive oil with a wick dipped in it. The bowl would be pinched at one side to provide a support for the wick. These lamps are special: they are of gold. Two utensils are required for servicing these lamps: tongs for pulling out the spent wicks, and trays on which to place these spent wicks. Everything, the stand, the seven lamps, and the utensils, are to be of pure gold—one talent, about 75 pounds.

The purpose of the lampstand is obviously “to give light on the space in front of it.” But is there more to this lampstand? Why is it shaped like a tree? Remember that the tabernacle is a microcosm of the cosmos; it is a new creation, a restoration of order to the world. The lampstand is a representation of the tree of life from the garden of Eden, the tree which mediated life to mortal humans. Some see the lampstand as also a representation of the burning bush: the stand is ablaze but is not consumed. It stands on holy ground.

It is the lamps that provide the light, burning olive oil provided by the people, and tended by the priests:

**“You shall command the people of Israel that they bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may regularly be set up to burn. In the tent of meeting, outside the veil that is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening to morning before the Lord. It shall be a statute forever to be observed throughout their generations by the people of Israel.”** (Exod 27:20-21)

The people are to bring pure beaten olive oil, that is oil of the highest quality. The seven lamps produce a singular light. The only other use of this word “light” is for the lights that God made on the fourth day of creation: the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night, that is, the sun and the moon. Here we have another echo of creation in the tabernacle. The Lord brought order by speaking light into darkness on the first day, and by making the lights on the fourth day to regulate that order. In the tabernacle he was again bringing order through light, filling the holy place with light. Aaron and his sons, the first priests, are to arrange the light from evening to morning, perhaps a further echo of Genesis 1.

Here and elsewhere the Lord commands Aaron and his sons, that is the priests, to arrange the lamps and the light “before the Lord regularly” or continually. Both the bread and the light are to be before the Lord continually. They are perpetually in his presence. They are symbols of presence. Today the phrase “perpetual lamp” (*ner tamid*) designates a light that is permanently lit in every synagogue, in front of the ark containing the Torah scrolls; it is a reminder of both the light of the menorah and the flames of the altar of burnt offering. In Catholic and some other churches, a sanctuary light or chancel light is kept permanently lit in front of the tabernacle in which the blessed sacrament is reserved. The perpetual lamp in the tabernacle, though seen by the priests, is primarily for the Lord; it is before him regularly.

These two pieces of furniture will be placed either side of the Holy Place: the table on the north side, the lampstand on the south. As the priest enters the Holy Place, he sees on his right the table with the bread of Presence before the Lord continually, and on his left the lampstand and the light which is before the Lord continually. Straight ahead of him is a third piece of furniture: the golden incense altar. But instructions for this altar are not given here. They are delayed until after the instructions for the priests' garments and their

consecration. The incense altar is then treated as part of the divine service which the priests perform.

### 3. Light and Lampstands as Metaphors

The tabernacle was eventually replaced by the larger, more permanent temple. In the Holy Place were the golden incense altar, the golden table for the bread of the presence, and not one but ten lampstands of pure gold (1 Kgs 7:48-49). Some 350 years later the temple was destroyed and all its riches hauled off as booty. After the return from exile, a small temple was built in Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel. But it was not much compared to Solomon's temple.

But Zechariah, a prophet in Jerusalem at the time, was given a vision. He saw a golden lampstand, on which were seven lamps, each with not one but seven lips for wicks, for a total of 49 wicks. On either side of the lampstand was an olive tree, providing an inexhaustible supply of oil to the bowl on top of the lampstand. Zechariah was told the significance of what he saw: "This is the word of the Lord...: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts" (Zech 4:6). A familiar verse but in an unfamiliar context. The seven lamps are "the eyes of the Lord which range through the whole earth." The two trees are "the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth," probably referring to Zerubbabel, the governor of Jerusalem and grandson of Judah's last king, and Joshua the high priest; these were the political and religious leaders of the small community. Jerusalem and its little temple may not have been much to look at in comparison with the grandeur of the Persian Empire or even the past grandeur of Jerusalem. But the secret to greatness lay not in human might or power, but in the Lord's Spirit. Where the Lord's Spirit was at work there the light would shine.

The menorah continues to be a potent symbol within Judaism, a symbol of joy, of despair and of hope.

The menorah is a symbol of joy, commemorated at Hanukkah. In 167 BC the Syrian king, Antiochus IV, desecrated the temple in his bid to eradicate the distinctive identity of the Jews. One faithful Jewish priest resisted; his sons rose up in revolt, launching what would become known as the Maccabean Revolt. Three years later they had recaptured Jerusalem and its temple. They purified and rededicated the temple. There was enough oil for only one day, but the lamps on the menorah miraculously burned for eight days. This has been commemorated ever since in Hanukkah (meaning Dedication), the eight-day Festival of lights.

The menorah is a symbol of sadness. In AD 70 the Romans, under the leadership of Titus, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, brutally suppressing the First Jewish Revolt (66-73). They hauled away the temple treasures to Rome, commemorating this on the Arch of Titus, which is still in Rome today. This depicts the menorah and the table complete with its dishes.

The menorah is a symbol of hope. The emblem of the state of Israel is a menorah patterned on the one depicted on the Arch of Titus. A large bronze menorah stands outside the Knesset, Israel's parliament building. A solid gold menorah has already been made, in strict accordance with the instructions to Moses, in preparation for building a new temple.

But this is not the direction of the Bible. We're not awaiting another temple in which to put up a golden lampstand. The New Testament gives a different understanding of the significance of both the bread and the light. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35,

48), "the living bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:51). He is the heavenly manna, the eating of which gives eternal life. In the Lord's Prayer we petition our Father: "Give us this day our daily bread," trusting in his provision, just as Israel trusted in his provision in the wilderness.

Jesus also said "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). In Jesus God was tabernacling among his people. When Jesus spoke of being bread and light these were not empty metaphors; they had deep significance for the Jews. With Jesus declaring himself to be the bread of life and the light of the world, the bread and light in the temple no longer had meaning. Jesus was now the symbol of presence.

It is hard for us to imagine the significance of light. We flip a switch and the light comes on. At home we have some older LED lights (only four years old!) that take a second to come on; that's a frustrating delay. But in the ancient world, the coming of darkness was a fearful reality, and it took forethought and preparation to be ready. Oil lamps brought light to that darkness, and the lighting of these lamps was a significant moment. The early church took the opportunity of the evening lamplighting to praise God for the gift of light. One of the earliest hymns, dating to 200, is *Phos hilaron*, joyous light, rendered into modern English hymnody as "Hail, gladdening light," or "O, gladsome light." This attitude to light is reflected in the Book of Common Prayer, in the collect said daily at evening prayer: "Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night."

Light is a powerful metaphor. The lampstand supporting lamps that illuminate the darkness is a powerful Biblical metaphor. In the opening vision of Revelation, the vision that serves as John's call to prophetic ministry, he sees seven golden lampstands, in the midst of whom stands the risen and glorified Christ, holding seven stars. Jesus explains "the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches" (Rev 1:20). John's Revelation draws extensively from Zechariah's vision. The seven churches to whom John is to write are seven lampstands. Though they are small and most of them are beset with problems, they are light-bearers into the darkness of the Roman empire. They are present before God, and the risen Christ is present among them. The seven spirits who are before the very throne of God are sent out into all the earth; they are also eyes. They are sent to the churches, to whom they speak. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 2-3), which is the same as what Jesus, the risen Christ, is saying to the churches.

Understanding these churches as lampstands in the presence of God, we see that the axis between heaven and earth did not run through the throne room of the Caesar in Rome, who titled himself *pontifex maximus*, chief bridge-builder, that is the bridge between heaven and earth. No, the axis between heaven and earth ran through these seven little churches of the province of Asia, seven because representative of all churches. They may seem insignificant in Rome's eyes, but they are glorious in God's eyes. They are light shining into the darkness. But there is a warning: being a light-bearer is a responsibility. Jesus warned that if a church forgot that it was the church of the risen Christ, he would remove its lampstand. To the church that remains faithful Jesus promises "to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Rev 2:7).

There is no need of a golden lampstand today. The church is God's light in the world, before the Lord continually. We are continually in his presence, under his watchful gaze. Jesus walks among us, in solidarity with his people, his church. God's Spirit is his empowering presence among us, for it is not by power, nor by might, but by my Spirit, says the Lord. When the Spirit fills us our light will shine. We are a lampstand set here in Cupertino. We don't shine out of our own brilliance. We shine when Jesus is among us and we are filled with the Spirit. Such light cannot be put out.

There awaits a yet more glorious day. The sun and the moon, the greater and lesser lights, are temporary measures of order. The end of Revelation provides a vision of the world fully ordered, as John is shown the New Jerusalem:

**And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. (Rev 21:22-25)**

And again,

**And night will be no more. They [the servants of God and the Lamb] will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light. (Rev 22:5)**

Light is a powerful Biblical metaphor. God began to bring order to the world by saying, "Let there be light" on the first day of creation. He regulated this light with the greater and lesser lights made on the fourth day. But these are ultimately only temporary regulators. Ultimately it is God himself who will be the radiance of the world, who will fill this world with his glory. Until that time it is the church through whom he is bringing order to the world, through whom he is shining light into darkness, speaking life into a hungry world. May God through his Spirit grant us grace and empowering to be a lampstand here in the midst of Cupertino, shining with his radiance.

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