

The Creation Story and the Erection of the Tabernacle

Introduction

“Solomon’s kingdom was surrounded by cultures which linked the story of the creation to the erection of temples, and there are canonical texts which could be explained in this way. Various attempts have been made to relate the commands given to Moses and the account of the seven days in Genesis 1” (Barker, *The Great High Priest*, 2003, pp. 193-4).

Exodus 40:17-34 describes how the tabernacle of the Lord was set up. It clearly mirrors the six days of creation:

“Like God at creation, the people began to build the tabernacle on the first day of the year. On Day One was created the basic structure of heaven and earth, waters, abyss, light, darkness and heavenly powers; on the first day of building, the frame and covering of the tabernacle were set up, establishing the basic structure. On the second day, the firmament was created and in the tabernacle the ark was screened from view by the veil. By implication, the ark and the veil represented heaven, just as Cosmas said several centuries later. On the third day, God created the dry land and its vegetation (Gen. 1.9-13; Jub. 2.7 says he created the Garden of Eden), and in the tabernacle a table was set up in the outer area where bread, the fruit of the earth, was offered. On the fourth day, the LORD created the sun, moon and stars (Gen. 1.14-19), and the seven-branched lampstand was set in the tabernacle which the people knew was a symbol of the sun, moon and planets (Philo, *On Gen.* 1.10). After this point the pattern is not so clear, but there can be little doubt that the whole creation had a heavenly archetype and that both were represented in microcosm in the temple and tabernacle. The human, Adam, created on the sixth day, was the high priest.” (Barker, *Revelation*, 2000, p. 20)

Indeed, that there was a link between the two accounts was known long ago. For example, Jewish tradition relates the following:

“... the Tabernacle in its separate parts also corresponded to the heaven and the earth, that had been created on the first day. As the firmament had been created on the second day to divide the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above, so there was a curtain in the Tabernacle to divide between the Sanctuary and the Holy of Holies. As God created the great sea on the third say, so did He appoint the laver [basin] in the sanctuary to symbolize it, and as He had on that day destined the plant kingdom as nourishment for man, so did He now require a table with bread in the Tabernacle. The lampstand Menorah in the Tabernacle corresponded to the two luminous bodies, the sun and the moon, created on the fourth day; and the seven branches of the lampstand corresponded to the seven planets, the Sun, Venus, Mercury, the Moon, Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars. Corresponding to the birds created on the fifth day, the Tabernacle contained the Cherubim, that had wings like birds. On the sixth, the last day of creation, man had been created in the image of God to glorify his Creator, and likewise was the high priest anointed to minister in the Tabernacle before the Lord and Creator.”

(Ginzberg, 1909, vol. 3, ch. 2, 'The Erection Of The Tabernacle Commanded'; 2003, p. 639)¹

However, some parts of the order seem mismatched. The cherubim (being on the Ark of the Covenant) were placed first and not fifth (corresponding to the fifth day), and the laver/basin was placed last and not third (corresponding to the third day). Yet if we take this account of how the Tabernacle was furnished and apply it to the description of the larger Temple of Solomon then a fuller picture appears, and specific details of the creation narrative can be explained.

The Creation Narrative Explained

In the beginning (Genesis 1:1-2)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

“So Moses raised up the tabernacle ... And he spread out the tent over the tabernacle and put the covering of the tent on top of it” (Exodus 40:18-19).

The earth was without form, and void;

The Tabernacle was empty, without any furnishings inside.

and darkness was

It was dark inside: the Holy of Holies “must have been without light” (1906 Jewish Encyclopedia, ‘Holy of Holies’ – ‘In the Tabernacle and the Temple’), although other parts of the Temple had windows (1 Kings 6:4).

on the face of the deep.

Josephus, a first century CE writer, “said that the tabernacle on which it [the Temple] was modelled, was divided into three parts: ‘and giving up two of them to the priests, as a place approachable and open to all, Moses signifies the earth and the sea since these too are accessible to all; but the third portion he reserved for God alone because heaven also is inaccessible to men’ ” (Barker, *The Gate of Heaven*, 2008, p. 65, quoting Josephus, *Antiquities*, 3.6.4). So the entrance (vestibule in the temple) represented the sea, the middle Sanctuary represented the earth, and the Holy of Holies represented heaven. With this understanding, we can see how the Bible can say elsewhere, “To Him who laid out the earth above the waters” (Psalm 136:6).

However, there was more water symbolism with gold, “And the floor of the house [Temple] he [Solomon] overlaid with gold” (1 Kings 6:30). How can gold symbolise water? It shines. A vision of the end of time describes a heavenly city (a symbol for the temple²) whose street “was pure gold, like transparent glass” (Revelation 21:21). ‘Glass’ was a symbol of water, “Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal” (Revelation 4:6). Additionally, there is a Jewish/Arab legend about when the Queen of Sheba met Solomon, that Solomon desired to see her legs³, so he made her enter his palace where there was a floor of glass, “She was asked to enter the lofty Palace: but when she saw it, she thought it was a lake of water, and

¹ The terms ‘the holy’, ‘the most holy’, and ‘candlestick’ have been replaced with ‘the Sanctuary’, ‘the Holy of Holies’, and ‘lampstand Menorah’ respectively.

² “The heavenly city, however, is both city and temple” (Barker, *Revelation*, 2000, p. 323).

³ The demons – wishing to stop him from marrying her – told him that “her legs and feet resembled the shanks of a mule” (Tafsir, al-Jalalayn on 27:44). See also (Ginzberg, 1909, vol. 4, ch. 5, ‘The Queen of Sheba’; 2003, p. 959).

she [tucked up her skirts], uncovering her legs. He said: ‘This is but a palace paved smooth with slabs of glass.’ ” (Quran 27:44).

So ‘the deep’ could be either the Vestibule at the Temple’s entrance or its golden floor, or both.

And the Spirit of God was hovering⁴ over the face of the waters.

A mediaeval Jewish writer known as Rashi (=‘Rabbi SHlomo Itzhaki’) comments on the phrase, “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters”, by writing, “The Throne of Glory was suspended in the air and hovered over the face of the water with the breath [spirit] of the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He and with His word, like a dove, which hovers over the nest” (Rashi, d. 1105 on Genesis 1:2). Yet the Throne of Glory was symbolised by the Ark of the Covenant, “The Ark was an image of the celestial Throne” (Ginzberg, 1909, vol. 3, ch. 3, ‘The Ark With The Cherubim’; 2003, p. 643), and the Tabernacle is described as towering high “like a dove-cote” (Ginzberg, 1909, vol. 3, ch. 3, ‘Bezalel’; 2003, p. 642).

So the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters merely refers to the Ark of the Covenant, on which were the winged Cherubim, being held up (‘hovering’) in front of the Tabernacle, for the Vestibule/front of the Tabernacle was described as being the deep, the sea, as described previously.

Day 1 – Light (Genesis 1:3-5)

Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.

Next Moses “brought the ark into the tabernacle” and placed it in the Holy of Holies (Exodus 40:21). However, the Ark and the cherubim on it were covered in gold (Exodus 25:10-11, 18). Further, the Dead Sea Scrolls talk of “fine gold making light” (Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, 2012, p. 295; see also Barker, *The Great High Priest*, 2003, p. 218). Gold is linked to light, but not just any light. Traditional Christian icons usually have golden backgrounds where “the radiance of gold symbolizes the divine glory” (Ouspensky, 1992, 2:496).

That the light of Day One is not normal light is confirmed by Jewish tradition, the “light created⁵ at the very beginning is not the same as the light emitted by the sun, the moon, and the stars, which appeared only on the fourth day. The light of the first day was of a sort that would have enabled man to see the world at a glance from one end to the other” (Ginzberg, 1909, vol. 1, ch. 1, ‘The First Day’; 2003, p. 5), i.e. this Light was all-knowing, divine. Indeed, the heavenly city-temple “had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it” (Revelation 21:23).

Finally, it should be noted that Solomon brought the Ark into his temple last but had initially two huge cherubim in the Holy of Holies (2 Chronicles 3:10; 5:7). Therefore presumably it was the cherubim on top of the Ark which represented the light, not the ark/box itself or any of its contents.

⁴ Some translations have ‘moved’ instead of ‘was hovering’. However, the Hebrew word used here (Strong’s Concordance, H7363 - rachaph) is only used in two other places, once referring to bones ‘shaking’ and the other to an eagle ‘hovering’ (Jeremiah 23:9 and Deuteronomy 32:11 respectively).

⁵ Note that the ‘creation’ of this light is not the same as the creation of everything else. All creation, both heavenly and earthly, was created from nothing whereas “the primordial light was made of God’s splendour, in Hebrew ‘light from light’ ” (Ginzberg, 2003, p. 8 note 18; in the 1909 edition, Vol. 1, ch. 1, ‘The First Day’).

Day 2 – Firmament of heaven (Genesis 1:6-8)

Then God said, 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.' Thus God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven.

Afterwards, Moses “hung up the veil of the covering, and partitioned off the ark” (Exodus 40:21). In Solomon’s temple the veil was similarly hung after the two large cherubim statues had been made (2 Chronicles 3:10, 14). Given that the floor represented water, this veil did indeed separate the two. Solomon’s Temple also had a solid wall with doors in front of the veil (1 Kings 6:33), i.e. something ‘firm’ as in ‘firmament’.

The colours used in the Veil

The two veils mentioned for the Tabernacle are described being “woven of blue, purple, and scarlet (i.e. red) thread, and fine woven linen” (Exodus 26:31, 36); the linen would have been white. These four colours are described as symbolising the traditional ‘four elements’, “the red was fire, the blue was air, the white was earth and the purple was the sea (Josephus, War 5. 212-13, Philo, Questions on Exodus 2 85)” (Barker, The Great High Priest, 2003, p. 137). Blue represented air because it was the colour of the sky, white represented the earth because the linen was made from plants, and the purple dye was made from sea creatures, hence the colour purple represented water.

So I have shown the colours in the veils in this order, purple for the sea/water at the bottom, then above this white for the earth, then on top of this blue for the air/sky. The fire is at the top because it represented the divine glory, the fire of the divinity. Gold thread was also used⁶, and so I have the cherubim made with gold.

Day 3 – Land and Plants (Genesis 1:9-13)

Then God said, 'Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear'; and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering together of the waters He called Seas. ...

Moses “put the table in the tabernacle of meeting, on the north side of the tabernacle, outside the veil” (Exodus 40:22); if the floor symbolised sea then the table symbolised the land.

Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb that yields seed, and the fruit tree that yields fruit according to its kind, whose seed is in itself, on the earth'; and it was so. ...

Moses “set the bread in order upon it before the LORD” (Exodus 40:23). The lampstand represented a tree, Moses “put the lampstand in the tabernacle of meeting, across from the table, on the south side of the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:24). There were also palm trees engraved in Solomon’s Temple (1 Kings 6:29).

⁶ “Parshah Summary & Commentary”, section “Pekudei: The Audit”, page 1 (labelled page 9 in the pdf), <http://www.chabad.org/media/pdf/13179.pdf> (accessed 13 September 2016).

Day 4 – Sun, Moon, and Stars (Genesis 1:14-19)

Then God said, 'Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth'; and it was so. Then God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. He made the stars also. ...

Moses “lit the lamps before the LORD” (Exodus 40:25).

Signs

Above, when discussing Day 1 we mentioned that the light which then appeared was divine and different from that of the sun created on this day. However, there is another opinion:

“The fourth day of creation produced the sun, the moon, and the stars. These heavenly spheres were not actually fashioned on this day; they were created on the first day, and merely were assigned their places in the heavens on the fourth.” (Ginzberg, 1909, vol. 1, ch. 1, ‘The Fourth Day’; 2003, p. 23)

“The view that the light created on the first day is identical with that of the heavenly bodies is given as that of the majority of scholars. But there are some who maintain that the light of the first day is entirely different from all the other lights.” (Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, 2003, p. 23 note 98)

In other words, the sun, moon and stars also were representing the divine Light. If they actually were the lamps in the Temple then this would make sense. It would also mean that reading ‘signs’ from them has nothing to do with astrology, but is a coded reference to divinely-given visions in the Temple.

Seasons and Years

In addition to the lampstand Menorah, in Solomon’s Temple there were also ten other similar lampstands (2 Chronicles 4:7).

Also, the bronze serpent which Moses set upon a pole was destroyed in a later temple purge (Numbers 21:8; 2 Kings 18:4). This implies that it “stood in the Temple at Jerusalem” (1906 Jewish Encyclopedia, ‘Seraphim’ – ‘Babylonian Origin’). Also, the 6th century Cosmas Indicopleustes, in the drawings for his ‘Christian Topography’, shows the serpent inside the Tabernacle (McCrinkle, 1897, pp. 390-391, ‘Explanation of the plates’ for plates 12 and 19). It seems fitting that it should have been opposite the Menorah, because they would then both be in the middle of Eden (the temple) and symbolise the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge with its the snake (Genesis 2:9). Additionally, Moses was told to make this bronze serpent “fiery” (Numbers 21:8-9), so it would keep its parallel to the Menorah if it too had at least one lamp.

This gives us twelve lampstands in the Temple, one for each of the twelve months making one year. Further symbolism could have made the Menorah the sun, the bronze serpent the moon, and the other lamps the stars.

Day 5 – Fish and Birds (Genesis 1:20-23)

Then God said, 'Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures,

...

Moses “put the gold altar in the tabernacle of meeting in front of the veil; and he burned sweet incense on it, as the LORD had commanded Moses” (Exodus 40:26-27). However,

what has burning incense got to do with fish and sea creatures? The answer is that the holy incense used in the Tabernacle and Temple included onycha (Exodus 30:34):

“Nowadays the most universally accepted definition of onycha is that it was obtained from the claw-like operculum, or from the shell of a mollusk belonging to the genus Strombus, which is indigenous to the Red Sea. ...

“This wide-spread interpretation is based on the original Greek term ‘onyx’ of the Septuagint. It means fingernail or animal claw. In this sense it is also a medical term, onycha meaning inflammation of the nail matrix. The term onyx relating to a fragrant substance is found in the Ecclesiasticus book 24:15 of the Apocrypha, where wisdom is being compared with the pleasant odor of galbanum, onyx, and storax.

“It should be pointed out here that nail or claw is actually an extended connotation of onyx, derived from the translucent and sometimes veined appearance of the gemstone onyx, its familiar meaning.” (Abrahams, 1979, pp. 233-234)⁷

Additionally the incense was to be salted (Exodus 30:35; some translations interpret the word here as ‘tempered’ or ‘mixed’). The salt was the “salt of Sodom, as Aben Ezra interprets it” (Gill, 1746-1763, on Exodus 30:35). This salt is explained as follows, “The hill Jebel Usdum, situated at the southern extremity of the Dead Sea, and having a length of ten miles, is composed almost entirely of rock salt; and from it was probably procured the ‘Sodom salt’ mentioned in the Talmud” (1906 Jewish Encyclopedia, ‘Salt’ – ‘Biblical Data’). This would give another symbolic link to the sea.

The altar of incense is described by Philo, a 1st century Jewish writer, who comments on it as representing the four elements, “receiving wood from the earth, and the spices which are burnt from the water; for, being first of all liquefied, they are dissolved into drops of moisture, and vapour from the air, and for⁸ the fire the spark which kindles the whole” (Philo, On Who Is The Heir Of Divine Things §46, Yonge, 1854-1855, 2:138). That the spices liquefied before being burnt would be confirmed by the Jewish legend which states that the “fishes of the sea” were made from “fire and water” (Ginzberg, 1909, vol. 1, ch. 1, ‘The Fifth Day’; 2003, p. 28).

and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens.’

We further read about Jewish legends that “Fish are fashioned out of water, and birds out of marshy ground saturated with water” (Ginzberg, 1909, vol. 1, ch. 1, ‘The Fifth Day’; 2003, p. 29). The liquefied spices could easily be symbolised as “marshy ground saturated with water”. Additionally, we have that “clouds fly out like birds” (Apocrypha, Sirach/Ecclesiasticus 43:14), and the burning incense would have produced clouds of smoke. Additionally, Moses “hung up the screen at the door of the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:28), which would have had winged cherubim on it, as for the doors of the later temple (1 Kings 6:34-35). However, the account in Exodus only mentions cherubim for the veil separating the Holy of Holies, not the entrance screen (Exodus 26:31, 36). Perhaps the cherubim were only on the inside of the screen?

⁷ Note that he personally disagrees with this interpretation.

⁸ There is a typo in the translation, having ‘form’ in place of ‘for’.

Day 6 – Animals and Humans (Genesis 1:24-31)

Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth the living creature according to its kind: cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth, each according to its kind'; and it was so. ...

Moses “put the altar of burnt offering before the door of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting” (Exodus 40:29); on this altar animal sacrifices were offered.

(The creation of humanity will be covered in the next presentation.)

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