

Consecration of the Tent of Meeting

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[0 : 00] So, we move on then to this description of the consecration of the tent of meeting, particularly of the altar and then of the Levites.

So have it open in front of you please. You might, if you have a spare bookmark or something, you might stick a bookmark in Revelation chapter 1 as well because we'll be referring to that a bit later on.

Now, when you get into these chapters, sometimes it can seem a bit odd the way they're organized. They sometimes seem to jump perhaps from one subject to another. And we need to understand why. And I think structure in these first ten chapters of the book of Numbers is actually quite important.

The people, remember, are camping in the wilderness, in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Sinai Peninsula. Don't know exactly where.

[1 : 08] I wouldn't regard that arrow as being definitive of exactly where they were. But we're just told they were somewhere in the Sinai wilderness. And they were getting ready to march.

Chapter 10 describes the actual start of the march. And the camp is arranged, as we saw a few weeks ago, with the tent of meeting, the tabernacle, in the middle.

And reflecting this, this whole description of the preparation for marching has at its center the spiritual life of the people. And in chapters 5 and 6, we covered what we might think perhaps of the civil law.

It's perhaps not quite that. But certainly the laws that govern relationships between the people. That was what chapters 5 and 6 were about. And then we had Aaron's blessing at the end of that.

It's in these relationships that Aaron's blessing is found. But now in chapters 7 to 9, we consider the spiritual life of the people. And in particular, in chapters 7 and 8, we discuss the tent of meeting and the things associated with it as itself.

[2 : 26] There is some doubt, actually, as to the exact chronology. Numbers 1.1 says that the census took place in year 2, month 2. And it is possible to fit these 12 days or so into that month.

But other passages, such as Exodus 40, chapter 2, suggest that these events might have taken place, in fact, before the census, in year 1. Sorry, I said year 1, month 1, but that's not what I meant. In year 2, month 1. In other words, in the month before the census. That's possible. The first Passover is in chapter 9, verse 1.

Of course, was the first month of the second year. But it certainly all took place in a very short space of time, within a month or two. And if it is the case that actually this dedication of the tent of meeting was actually before the census, that's all the more reason to understand why the material is presented here at this point.

Because of the structure of the text. And so we need to look for structural clues when we come to understand why this material is presented in the way it is.

[3 : 47] And if we do that, we can see that, in fact, the basic structure of these two chapters is a chiasm, that sandwich structure that is very common in Hebrew literature.

And so in chapter 7, we have the offerings of the tribes. Sorry, chapter 7, verses 1 to 9, we have, first of all, practical help in terms of transport for the Levites to do their job.

And then we have the offerings of the tribes to dedicate the altar. Explained and set out at great length. And in the center, we have this passage, what was in the center of the tent of meeting.

We have the ark there and the sevenfold lamp. And then, chapter 8, we have the cleansing of the Levites. Matching, as it were, the offerings and the dedication of the tribes.

That's chapter 8, verses 5 to 23. And then it finishes with more practical help for the Levites. In this case, talking about their retirement plan. But actually, the structure is cleverer than that, because

there's also a linear structure.

[5 : 06] Because all of chapter 7 is about offerings, contributions of the tribes. And all of chapter 8, from verse 5 onwards, is about the contributions and activities of the Levites.

And both those discussions are quite long. Lots of words, particularly the offerings of the tribes. And then in the middle, we have this almost cryptic central section.

Just from five or six verses. From chapter 7, verse 89, through to chapter 8, verse 4. After all these words, we have just this very brief, sparse description.

And it's almost as if the central mystery here defies verbal description. So, we won't go through the passage linearly.

We'll translate the Hebrew chaotic structure into our tendency. Not see to things, see things in a more linear way. So, we'll look, first of all, at the offerings.

[6 : 28] Well, the practical stuff. And then we'll look at the offerings. And then we'll conclude by looking at what is actually going on in the central sanctuary. So, that's the order we're going to go about it.

And so, we see, first of all, that there are practical issues here, issues of logistics.

Spiritual realities have to be realized in the physical world. We don't actually gather literally in the heavenly Zion.

Because we have no way of us getting there. We gather instead here. And what is being described here in these passages, of course, is basically a mobile temple.

A place to meet with the living God, but also a place that can move as the people march on. And that means certain practical constraints.

[7 : 35] And, of course, all this religious paraphernalia needs to be transported. Tents are heavy. Poles are heavy. If you've ever tried to put up or take down a marquee, which I did do, have done many years ago, you realize it's not an easy thing to do.

And if it's windy, it can be well-nigh impossible. Great strength is required. And there's a lot of stuff to carry and to transport about.

And so we have some practical issues here. Ox carts are needed to carry the tent itself. And all that humping of canvas is going to require men in the prime of life, isn't it?

And I think that's what's the point about this age restriction, this age limit of 50 in 826. It's not that the Levites would retire entirely at the age of 50, but they'll be past their greatest strength.

And so they won't be doing the heavy lifting. It says they'll be assisting. So there are practical considerations. We sometimes think of this kind of practical planning as somehow unspiritual.

[8 : 53] It's very easy, isn't it, when we meet for elders and deacons meetings or when we meet as members. Sometimes we're discussing issues of a practical, logistical nature, how to organize things.

And it's easy to think of that as unspiritual. But actually it isn't unspiritual. This is the work of the kingdom. Without the ox carts, that tent was not going to go anywhere.

There's no way it was going to be possible to carry it across a desert. Without sufficient organization, the church is stuck.

It can't move. We need organization in order to move, in order to progress. And yet there is another side to this.

It's true, isn't it, that this isn't just a matter of logistics. There are other considerations. And the first thing we notice, of course, is human resources, health and safety.

[9 : 56] There is provision for the welfare of the workers. In fact, there's even provision for the animals. They're not to be worked to death.

The ox cart that we had this morning had just one ox. But there are two oxen per cart. I don't know whether it meant they pulled together or whether they had a shift on and a shift off.

I don't know. But even the oxen are given relief. They're not to be worked to death. Another scripture says, do not muzzle an ox when he's trampling out the grain.

But if even the oxen are not to be worked to death, certainly the Levites are not to be worked to death either. They're not expendable. Those who labor in the gospel are not cannon fodder.

They're not to be regarded as expendable or to work for nothing. I think somebody once asked Spurgeon to recommend somebody for a pastorate and explain what the remuneration was going to be.

[11 : 05] And Spurgeon said, well, you better employ the angel Gabriel because he can come down from heaven at weekends and you won't have to live for the rest of the week. If we value the word, we should actually be prepared to pay for it, shouldn't we?

And we shouldn't drive people, drive those who labor in the word into the ground, as it were, to an early grave because they might find not just an early grave, but an early spiritual grave as well.

How many pastors, as we've noted of late, have not finished well because they've not kept themselves, well, not kept themselves as they should have done.

And of course, those who labor in the word have the stresses of everyday working and timekeeping, just as everybody else does. And we need to allow for that.

And the second thing to notice is that these logistics are subject to spiritual laws. The rules of holiness must be observed. That's what chapter 7, verse 9 says.

[12 : 20] The Korathites must carry the holy things. We had that very well illustrated this morning, didn't we, with David's little play. And what went wrong when David did it wrong?

What went wrong when he had the ark transported by ox cart? Well, the result was a disaster and led to the death of one of the Levites who was not observing these laws properly.

And not only was it a disaster for that particular person, but it meant there was a long delay before the ark finally made it to Jerusalem. If the proper spiritual laws are not obeyed, if we do not use the proper weapons, as Paul says, not carnal weapons, but declaring the word honestly and faithfully, if we do not do that, then it's not going to enable the church to progress.

It's going to have exactly the opposite effect. The work of the gospel will be delayed. The ark will not make it, as it were, into the holy city.

Even in our practical dealings, we do have practical dealings in this world, don't we? As Christians, we need to observe standards of integrity and behavior.

[13 : 51] In fact, if the point of all this organization and all this planning has any purpose other than spiritual progress, and if the methods employed are not consonant with the aim in mind, then the journey will be faulty and disaster-prone.

We won't make the progress we should. In fact, any apparent progress will actually be illusory. In Christian service, the end never justifies the means.

So we do need practical organization. It needs to be practical organization on spiritual principles and with a care for those who work and labor in the word.

Now, what about the offerings themselves? Let me just first of all point out one interesting fact is that the tribes in chapter 7 bring their offerings, but in chapter 8, the Levites are the offerings.

And that distinction is worth noting, and I'll say a little bit more about it. And this, as the commentators point out, this description in chapter 7 of the offerings of the tribes are unusually verbose.

[15 : 14] They're spread out in time over 12 days. They're presented, actually, by the military leaders of the camp. They're the same leaders as are the leaders that are described in the map of the camp, the military commanders of each tribe.

Some of them are the same as the census takers in chapter 1, but they're not all the same there, but they are all the same as the military commanders of the camp. The order of the offerings, the order which the tribes bring their offerings reflects also the military structure of the camp.

Leaders of each sub-camp, remember there's a... Let me just go back briefly. Remember there are four sub-camps, east, south, west, and, well, north.

And the way it's organized is that each... Each... The commander, the lead tribe of each sub-camp brings the offering first, and then their two companion tribes.

Each tribe brings the same offering. We didn't read them all, but you can go through and check.

They're all exactly the same. They must have cut and pasted, I think.

[16 : 42] Probably whoever had... Poor scribe who had to write all this out, actually, probably rather regretted that it didn't have cut and paste in those days. He would have had to copy it all 12 times. But they are all exactly the same.

Each tribe formally declares its participation in the life of the tent of meeting and brings a suitable offering.

Each tribe brings the same offering. That indicates that each tribe has the same value. I think that's the point. That's why it's recorded they all bring exactly the same offering.

Because each tribe has the same value and has the same investment. Each of the people of God has the same investment in the people of God. It's possible, it's quite common nowadays, perhaps to be overcritical of formality and ceremony in the life of the church.

We Protestants, we Baptists particularly, tend to be a little suspicious of ceremony. And sometimes ceremony can just be going through the motion, going through the words of a ritual.

[17:54] But when the ritual actually genuinely points towards a spiritual reality, as it did here, then that formal acknowledgement of that spiritual reality could be an important thing, as long as it genuinely points towards that reality.

And that's why we do have certain things, certain formal meetings, such as our members' meeting, for instance, when we go through a form of words to make that commitment formal.

A marriage is much the same, isn't it? It should be formal. If it's informal, it's not doing the job properly. And this is a formal gathering of the tribes, one at a time, to present their offerings.

Of course, the problem arises if the ritual replaces the reality, as it so often does. But when the ritual points towards a true reality, spiritual reality, then it's worth doing.

The actual offerings, you may have noticed, are quite modest. A couple of kilos of silver. 130 shekels is roughly 1.4 kilos.

[19:07] Solid silver. Just to give you an idea, I brought this with me. I'm sorry, I forgot to clean it. I hope their offerings were rather cleaner than this one. But this is a dish made of solid silver.

It's the only dish I've got, I think, that is made of solid silver, but we happen to have one in it. It's a kind of family heirloom. And that weighs 1.1 kilos. I don't know, because I weighed it myself.

So think of the larger silver dish as being a little bit bigger than that. The smaller one as being somewhat smaller than that. And then what must have been a quite small golden bowl, some translations describe it as a spoon, which is probably not far off.

Because gold, of course, is heavy. So they wouldn't have been very big. That's all that's required from each tribe, apart from some animals.

That, perhaps, is a further indication that the census numbers might have been misunderstood, because from a tribe of 60,000, that would not have been a very big offering, but be that as it may, it's interesting to contrast, really, the quite sparse offerings that these tribes bring here with the extravagance of the dedication of Solomon's temple.

[20:30] We won't look it up now, but if you look in 2 Chronicles, chapters 4 to 7, you find, you know, they're knee-deep in gold, and it says there were sheep and bulls being sacrificed that were too many to count.

The whole thing was, you know, the greatest show on earth, almost, in some ways, the dedication of Solomon's temple. Yet this dedication is quite sparse. It's quite almost, you could almost say, it's austere.

We know they brought some treasures out of Egypt, so they probably didn't have, it wasn't very difficult for them to find the gold and silver for the dishes. They might have had more struggle, it occurs to me, actually, to provide the flour and the oil, given that they'd already been in the desert for a year.

It says it's olive oil and fine flour. One wonders where they managed to find that in the desert. But anyway, they did. And I think there was a lesson here also, that it isn't the quantity of service, in a sense, that God requires, but it's the quality and the honesty of it.

And you remember Jesus commented when he was watching people drinking offerings in the temple. You know, the rich came and chucked in their gold coins or whatever it was.

[21:52] They weren't really sacrificing much. But then a poor widow put in a penny and Jesus commented, that was all she had to live on.

She's given her whole life to the work of the temple. That's a far greater offering than these rich people who had given out of their riches. It's the quality and the honesty of the offering that is what God requires.

It's not the quantity. But if the tribes make their offerings, the Levites are an offering.

They're described actually twice here in chapter 8, verse 13 and chapter 8, verse 21 as wave offerings. You might wonder what that means. I don't think Aaron literally picked them up and waved them.

But why are they described as wave offerings? Well, the idea of a wave offering is found in the law and for instance in Exodus 29, 27 and most offerings that were made at the temple, in the altar

were somehow destroyed.

[23 : 07] They were either killed or they were burnt or they were, sometimes the scapegoat was passed out of the camp but they weren't made available.

But the thing about a wave offering was that it was corn or whatever it was was waved in front of the altar and then it was given as a gift to the priests so it wasn't destroyed.

Instead, it was meant for the, it was dedicated, yes, but it was dedicated for the use of the priests.

And so it was in this sense that the Levites were a wave offering.

They were made available for the priests to use. And actually, these two verses, these two references to the wave offering in chapter 13 and chapter 21 actually bracket another chiasm but I won't go into it in detail.

But the center of it is in chapter 8, verses 17 and 18 where it talks about God's redemptive work in bringing the people out of Israel and dedicating the firstborn, consecrating the firstborn for himself.

[24 : 20] But then he goes on to say that in place of the firstborn of the, of each, well, the firstborn of each woman, Israelite woman, it says, in place of that, he's consecrated the Levites to his service.

So he takes the Levites instead of the firstborn of each family. And again, it's important to see the order here.

Those who are especially set apart for the work of the kingdom are first of all, aren't they, those who have been chosen by God himself. they are not so much our gift to God as God's gift to the church.

Those are the ones that he himself has set aside for the work of the gospel. And yet, it's also important that the wave offering is made.

that the people participate in that consecration and say, yes, this is, this is our offering. They won't then begrudge the cost and the time and the resources that have to be put into the work of the gospel and in particular in paying those who are work full time in the gospel because it is their offering for the work of the kingdom.

[26 : 04] So, while it is true that firstly, those who are set apart especially for the work are the gift of God to the church, it is also true that they are the offering of the church to God in place, as it were, of the service that all of us should perhaps be giving and all of us do give of course but it is true because we can't give all our time to the work of the kingdom, most of us cannot and so, we make that wave offering of those who are particularly set aside to work for the kingdom full time and that reminds us doesn't it that these people are actually making a contribution that is really required of us all those who labour in teaching the word or as evangelists or otherwise labour full time or those who are worthy of double honour and in a sense we are contributing that service and saying in a sense we should all be doing that but in a sense we can't and so we put our resources behind them and our encouragement behind them and they in a sense serve in place of us that's what the message is there so there are the the offerings for the temple and the offerings of the Levites to the priests for the work of the temple and as we said at the beginning these bracket this central focus at the centre of the passage is what is at the centre of the camp it's what is at the centre of all this activity it's what's at the centre even of all this these words and at the centre of the camp is the tent of meeting and in particular of course the sanctuary the holy place in the middle of the tent and what's in that tent well actually if you look at the other descriptions in Exodus and Leviticus you find all sorts of things but here we're just told two things we were told a bit about the altar with the offerings but even the altar doesn't get a mention in this central place just the two things the ark of the covenant or as it's described here the ark of the testimony and the seven fold lampstands and after all this great long list we find that the description here is very sparing of words and commentators point out it's actually a kind of visual representation of Aaron's blessing because the word that's described for shining the light is the same as the word that's described for the light shining on the people the same word is used in chapter 8 verse 2 as in chapter 6 verse 25 but what's at the center of all this activity and we find then there's a change of direction all we've looked at so far has been about the provision of the people for the tent bringing their offerings bringing their service bringing their practical organization to the tent but the central truth is not so much that's what's brought into the tent but what comes out of it what the occupant of the tent the king in the center of the camp has to say it's what comes out of the tent that is the most

important for the people not what goes into it the words are few and the personnel is pretty sparse as well there are only two two people but it's all packed with meaning the ark here is called specifically the ark of the testimony the place where God's word is to be found and we read the Lord

spoke to Moses from the mercy seat the space between the two cherubs on the cherubim on the top of the ark itself the Lord spoke to Moses from the mercy seat and what he spoke is a message one of grace of favour for the people and he speaks through the prophet prophet here is Moses Moses is the one who sees the Lord as it were face to face in the mercy seat and passes on the words of God to the people but even this is just a picture of the true sanctuary in heaven who is the one who truly brings the word from the presence of God well that's why

I said it's worth having your finger open in Revelation chapter 1 because there it tells us Revelation chapter 1 verses 17 to 19 says the following when I saw him here being the risen Christ and I of course being the apostle John when I saw him I fell at his feet as though dead this was a person John had known well in life has been described as the one whom Jesus loved and yet when he saw the risen Christ he fell on his feet as though dead but he placed his right hand on me and said do not be afraid I am the first and the last I am the living one I was dead and behold I am alive forever and ever and I hold the keys of death and Hades write therefore what you have seen what is now and what will take place later it is not

Moses who meets with God with the father in the true sanctuary but there is in Christ he is the one who brings the words of God to the people he is the one who brings the gospel who brings the true word of God to the people it is Christ who is the true prophet Moses was a type as we say of the true prophet just as the sanctuary on earth was a type of the true sanctuary in heaven but the true prophet is the Lord Jesus Christ and what are we to make of the sevenfold lamp we think of it perhaps as representing the spirit of God it borrows no light from the outside one thing about the tent of meeting and later the sanctuary in the temple is it's got no windows it doesn't borrow its light from outside rather it glows from the inside out the light shines out from the lampstand from the holy place out towards the front we're told notice that's the only thing we're told about it here that it should be set up so that the lamp shines forward well if you look actually at the plan of the temple you realise that what it falls on in that case is the table of the showbread and the showbread was a table where well the table was the bread the showbread was placed on a table and those were placed there each week and they represented those loaves were contributed by and represented the twelve tribes so symbolically the light shines on the people and just as in the blessing was promised in chapter 6 verse 2 was the light the face of the

Lord would shine on the people so the light of the menorah the sevenfold lamp shines on the people and the lamp stand is solid gold even the ark is gold plated wood if you look at the plan for it and well I mean again the practical point of view it had to be a solid gold ark would have been impossible to carry of course but the ark is gold plated wood but the lamp stand itself is pure beaten gold that's what we're told about it isn't it it's hammered gold the work of a craftsman the work of a master craftsman it's solid gold the most precious metal available the most precious best craftsmanship available and it symbolizes the best that can be made on earth I think of the true perfection of God of course it is not perfect there must have been flaws in its manufacture but it was the best that could be made to show the true perfection of God and the completeness of God the seven fold spirit which of course implies spiritual completeness the whole of the book of Revelation is organized in sevens and it's organized around the seven lamps who is it who tends the light well it's Aaron the priest isn't it and what's his job well of course he had various functions as a priest particularly to oversee the sacrifices and bring the blood into the holiest place but we're not told that here what we're told the job of Aaron the priest here is to keep the light burning and to keep it pointing in the right direction make sure when he sets it up he sets it up facing in the right direction and again

[36 : 45] Revelation gives us a glimpse into the true sanctuary of which this tent is just a copy and who is the one who tends the lamp who is the one who wears the priestly robes as he tends the lamp Revelation 1 chapter 12 and 13 we read the following I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me and when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands and among the lampstands was someone like the son of man dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest this is a picture of Jesus the true priest about his business of tending the lampstands so what are these lampstands what are these lamps and here it's quite surprising if we were asked to guess we might have thought well perhaps it's the spirit of God or something like that or something that exists as it were in the sanctuary showing the perfection of God but actually that's not what Revelation tells us because if you look at

Revelation chapter 1 verse 20 it says the following the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands is this the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches it's not just the lamps here shine on the people of God symbolically as they did in the sanctuary here the lamps are the people of God and what does that tell us it tells us that Jesus is at work isn't he tending the lamps keeping them burning brightly shining the light of gospel out into the world and as the next few couple of chapters in Revelation tells us that's not an easy job there's a lot of trimming and polishing and correcting that is needed in the church to keep it burning brightly and shining the light out into the world they do need tending and trimming and as we read those descriptions of the early churches in Revelation 2 and 3 that's very clear but we're told that God has provided a prophet and a priest just as in the sanctuary he provided a prophet in Moses and a priest in Aaron now in the true sanctuary the prophet and the priest are one and that prophet and priest is indeed the king at the center of the camp and that prophet and priest is on the case he's busy about the work of the kingdom he's busy tending the lamps he's busy bringing the word from the mercy seat to the people and out into the world there was a substantial flow of gifts into the sanctuary and that's right we should bring the best that we have the best that we can into the sanctuary we should bring the best people that we have for the work of the gospel the firstborn as it were but even more significant than that is the flow of grace out from the sanctuary into the world at the heart of the camp and directed outwards is the word and the light and the lampstand is the church and there is a prophet and a priest there to make sure it all happens and as I say the priest is on the case polishing the lamps the prophet is on the case bringing the word to the people so as we close let's sing a hymn song about