

The Golden Calf and the Tabernacle

1. Structure and Themes of Exodus 19-40

- The first half of Exodus (1-18) tells the story of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt, while the second half (19-40), explores the implications of that act of deliverance for Israel's identity and its evolving relationship with God, outlining its responsibilities in the covenantal partnership with God.
- At the heart of the description of the establishment of the Sinaitic covenant is the combination of material from E, which focuses on the covenant, with material from P, which focuses on the **Tabernacle**, the precursor of the Temple. This is interspersed with *traditional material* shared by J, E, and P.

Exodus 19-40 according to the Documentary Hypothesis

19: *Theophany on Mt. Sinai/Horev* (J + E + P)

20-23: Law and Covenant (20-23; E)

20:1-17: Decalogue (E, possibly with P redaction)

20:18-23:33: "Book of the Covenant" (E)

24: Covenant confirmation (description, vv. 1-15a = E; conclusion, vv. 15b-18 = P)

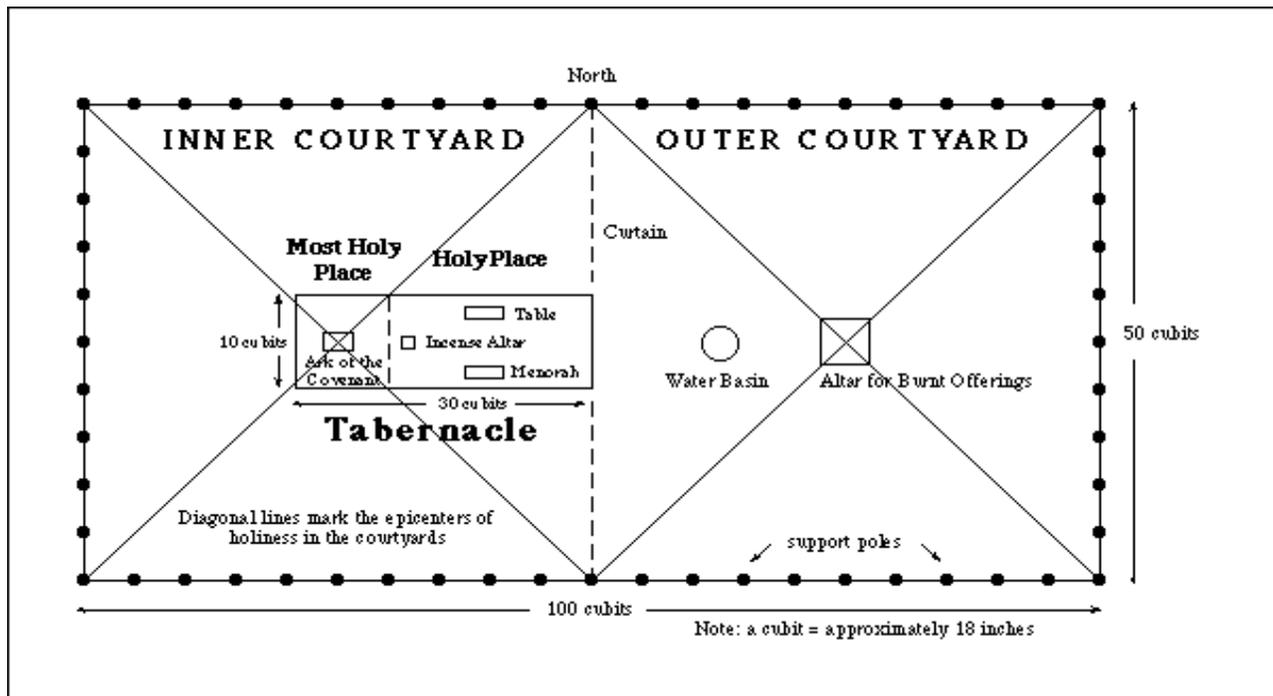
25-31: God instructs Moses on the Tabernacle's construction and use (P)

32: Covenant Breaking: Golden Calf (E)

33-34: Covenant Renewal (J + E + P)

35-40: The construction of the Tabernacle (P)

3. Exodus 25-31: Divine instructions for the Tabernacle



Significance within the redacted form of Exodus:

- Covenant confirmation ceremonies in Ex 24 culminate with God promising to give to Moses "the stone tablets with the teachings and commandments which I have inscribed to instruct them"; Moses ascends up the mountain to receive them and remains there 40 nights and 40 days. While on the mountain, God gives detailed instructions to Moses about the construction of the Tabernacle ("Let them make me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among them; exactly as I show you... so shall you make it") and the inauguration of the priesthood. The instructions end with God giving Moses "two tablets of the Pact, stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God" (31:18).

- The Tabernacle (Hebrew *mishkan*, lit. “abode”) is a portable sanctuary, depicted as the place where God will abide when accompanying Israel on its journey; it functions as a “portable Sinai” of sorts as well as a precursor to the Temple that will be built once Israel enters the Promised Land.
- In the redacted form of Exodus, the account of the Tabernacle has been split into two parts, plan (25-31) and construction (35-40); both seem to come from the P source, in which they appear to have been more unified. By splitting them and inserting an account of covenant breaking and remaking between them, the redactors convey a movement from ideal to actuality: in other words, the divine instructions for the Tabernacle are framed as God’s plan for the ideal functioning of His covenantal relationship with Israel, which will soon be foiled by human weakness, but then reestablished again due to Moses’ intercession and God’s mercy.

Significance within the Documentary Hypothesis:

- The account of the divine revelation of the plan for the structure and functioning of the Tabernacle (25-31) and the account of the Tabernacle’s construction (35-40) are both attributed to P and together convey the heart of P’s vision of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel.
- For P, this relationship should be mediated by the priesthood (as per P’s priestly concerns; e.g., P features no angels or other mediators; P uses the term “prophet” only in terms of Aaron; and P tells of no sacrifices prior to the consecration of Aaron as high priest in Ex 40:13)
- Moreover, it should have a single geographical focus (as per P’s interest in the centralization of Israelite worship, possibly due to its creation at the time of King Hezekiah [715-687 BCE])
- The Tabernacle is closely connected to the Temple, likely because P wrote in the First Temple period and possibly because the Tabernacle formed a part of the First Temple (so Friedman pp. 174-84). In Ex 25:8-27:19, God gives Moses detailed instructions for the construction of the Tabernacle; as with the First Temple in Jerusalem during the period of the monarchy (and later the Second Temple), it is structured in terms of concentric, delimited zones of increased holiness and restricted access—in this case three:

	<i>Where</i>	<i>Humans who can enter</i>
Holy Space	“Holy of Holies,” which houses the Ark and Tablets of the Covenant	The High Priest (the first of which is Aaron), provided that he is in a proper state of ritual purity, but only on the Day of Atonement
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↓		
↓	“The Holy Place,” antechamber of the Holy of Holies inside the Tabernacle	Priests and Moses, provided that they are in a proper state of ritual purity
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↓	Courtyard surrounding the Tabernacle	Non-priests, provided that they are in a proper state of ritual purity
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Ordinary Space	The world at large	Anyone in any state of ritual purity

2. Exodus 32: The Golden Calf

Significance within the redacted form of Exodus:

- Within the Pentateuch, the story of the Golden Calf is the paradigmatic story of human doubt that leads to human disobedience but is resolved by divine mercy (cf. Israel’s various doubts when leaving Egypt): just when Israel has seen God in a theophany, just when the Sinaitic covenant had been confirmed, and just when Moses is receiving stone tablets with the commandments covering Israel’s responsibility in the covenant, Israel engages in disobedience to God’s first commandments (“You may not have any other gods before me; you may not make for yourself a sculpted image, or any representation of anything that is in heaven above, or on the earth below, or in the water under the earth; you may not bow down to them or serve them”; Ex 20:3-5) by constructing and worshipping a golden calf!
- When Moses is on the mountain, the people approach Moses’ brother Aaron and ask him to “make gods [Hebrew *elohim*] for us” because they do not know what happened to “this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt” (32:1). Aaron asks for the jewelry (i.e., spoils from Egyptians) and uses it to mold a calf, which they worship saying: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” Aaron builds an altar and proclaims a festival, and they offer burnt offerings and celebrate.
- This prompts God to send Moses down the mountain since “your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely.” God is angry and wants to make a nation of Moses alone (“Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation”; 32:10).

- Moses intercedes (cf. Abraham speaking on behalf of Sodom), arguing [1] that He brought these people out of Egypt “with great power and with a mighty hand,” [2] that if He destroyed the people, the Egyptians would think that God “it was with evil intent that He brought them out to kill them in the mountains,” and [3] God should “remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” This causes God to “change his mind” (32:14).
- Moses goes down the mountain, carrying the tablets (which, it is stressed “were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God”), but the sight of the revelry makes him angry, such that he “threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.” Then he destroys the calf, gets angry at Aaron (who blames the people and makes up an excuse – “I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off’; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”; cf. the passing of blame in the story of Adam and Eve in Gen 2-3). The Levites come to Moses’ side and kill those involved. Moses makes atonement on their behalf, and God sends a plague -- laying the foundation for the restoration of the covenant in the next two chapters.

Significance within the Documentary Hypothesis:

- Attributed to E, this story is anti-Aaron and pro-Moses.
- The choice of a golden calf may be rooted in a polemic against the use of such calves/bulls in worship in the time of Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:28: “So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people: ‘You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt’; see Friedman pp. 70ff), concurrent with the succession of the Northern Kingdom, from which E seems to hail.

3. Exodus 33-34: Restoration of the Covenant

- Because of Moses, God spares the people (33:17ff; E); God stresses that “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name”; Moses is allowed to glimpse God’s back.
- New tablets are made by Moses (not God)
- Mercy and grace of God stressed, and covenant remade (esp. 34:10).
- Ten more commandments (J), stressing proper worship:
 1. You may not worship any other god, because YHWH, whose name is Jealous One, is a jealous God. (14a)
 2. You may not make molten gods for yourselves. (17)
 3. Every firstborn human or animal belongs to God. (19a)
 4. No one may appear before God without an offering. (20c)
 5. You can work six days, but on the seventh day you may not work. (21a) [i.e., Sabbath observance]
 6. You must observe the feast of weeks, the first fruits of the wheat harvest, and the feast of ingathering. (23)
 7. You may not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened. (25a)
 8. The Passover sacrifice must not remain until the morning. (25b)
 9. You must bring the best of the first fruits of the soil to the house of YHWH. (26a)
 10. You may not boil a kid in its mother’s milk. (26b; also 23:19 and Deut 14:21) [i.e., basis for dietary laws about separation of milk and meat]

4. Exodus 35-40: Construction of the Tabernacle