

An inquiry into the historicity of the Tabernacle in ancient Israel

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Abstract

The historicity of the passage that narrates the construction of the tabernacle, also called the tabernacle account, has been highly debated. Was there a tabernacle in ancient Israel? What are the evidences that validate the historicity of the tabernacle? This paper attempts to answer these questions by employing the historical-descriptive method, following the procedural steps proposed by V. Philips Long for the historical exploration of biblical texts. Hence, the study concludes that the tabernacle account makes a truth claim based on a closer investigation of its content and context. Also, the truth value of this claim is affirmed by examining the internal as well as the external consistency of the account.

Keywords: Tabernacle account, truth claim, truth value, historicity, Old Testament.

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Exodus presents in greater detail the instructions for building the tabernacle (chaps. 25-31) and the actual construction (chaps. 35-40).¹ In fact, the tabernacle was in some sense the pinnacle in the structure of the Israelite camp and, as Peter Enns rightly puts it, “a piece of heaven on earth.”² Needless to say, it was the focal point in the life of the Israelites until it was replaced by the First Temple, during the time of King Solomon, some three hundred years later.

¹ Gordon Wenham writes, “A good third of the book of Exodus is concerned with the tabernacle. ... the sheer space and detail devoted to the tabernacle show its importance for the writer.” Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 2003), 74.

²Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 506.

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However, the historicity of the passage that narrates the construction of the tabernacle, also called the tabernacle account, has been highly debated. J. H. Wellhausen, with his documentary hypothesis,³ spearheaded a model of the history of ancient Israel in which “the Tabernacle never really existed, that it was a pious fraud conceived by the authors of the priestly (P) sections of the five books of Moses to represent the Second Temple.”⁴ Frank M. Cross follows Wellhausen’s documentary hypothesis and accepts the Priestly tradition as the source of the Tabernacle account. He, however, rejects the conclusion of Wellhausen, that the Tabernacle account is pious fraud. His view is as follows:

We cannot take the Priestly materials uncritically. Priestly tradition in its present form is dogmatic and late; nevertheless, it is a valuable historical witness, often more reliable in detail than the older oral sources. In the last analysis, it can in no way represent pious fraud, but rather the best efforts of priestly scholars who tried to piece together the golden past from materials available to them.⁵

Was there a tabernacle in ancient Israel? What are the evidences that validate the historicity of the tabernacle?

The tabernacle is foundational to the religious life of ancient Israel and its absence would create a vacuum in the history of God’s salvific act, as recorded in the Pentateuch. This article will attempt to argue against the claims of those theories that disqualify the historicity of this monumental institution in the plan of redemption. Consequently, this discussion will

³According to this hypothesis the Pentateuch is composed of four basic sources: the Yahwist source (J), the Elohist source (E), the Priestly source (P), and the Deuteronomist source (D). See T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promise Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 43-63.

⁴Richard Elliott Friedman, “Tabernacle,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6: 294.

⁵Frank Cross, “The Tabernacle: A Study from an Archaeological and Historical Approach,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 10, no. 3 (1947):59.

lead to the finding of historical anchor points to trust more in the reliability of the biblical data.

This research employs the historical-descriptive method, following the procedural steps proposed by Philips Long for the historical exploration of biblical texts.⁶ This procedure arranges itself around the twin issues of truth claim and truth value as it seeks: 1) To discover the truth claim of the text by studying the content and context of the passage; and 3) To test the reliability of these claims by subjecting them to the check of internal and external consistency.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE HISTORICAL VALIDITY OF THE TABERNACLE

The main arguments presented by those who do not accept, or at least question, the historical validity of the Tabernacle, as described in Exod. 25-40 can be summarized in the following ten points.

1. The Mosaic authorship cannot be accepted, for Moses lived in a primitive society. Wellhausen set forth this argument, believing that Moses had no literary skills. “The basic presuppositions of this view are that religion developed gradually in Israel and that nothing as complex as the Mosaic legislation could have existed in the 2nd millennium BC; and that writing was not in widespread use until the 9th century BC, so that anything purporting to be from an earlier period is suspect.”⁷
2. The account of the Tabernacle portrays an impractical structure for construction as well as mobility. It is argued that the heavy weight of the curtains could not be borne by the wooden supports. And regarding the plan of making the Tabernacle mobile and the assignment of the clan of Merari to carry it with four wagons, another question of practicality arises.

⁶V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 176-200.

⁷John N. Oswalt, “Tabernacle, Temple,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 1031.

Consequently, comparing the heavy weight of the Tabernacle and its furniture with the transportation plan portrayed in the passages, critics argue against the historicity of such a tabernacle.

3. The required quantity of the materials, as presented in the Tabernacle account, is costly and beyond the means of people who were recently freed from slavery.
4. The construction skills needed to put together the structure, as presented in the account of the Tabernacle, were unlikely to be found among Israelites in the wilderness period. Here, a comparison is made between the constructions of the Tabernacle and the Temple of Solomon, where the latter was done with the assistance of professionals outside of the Israelites (the Phoenicians, 1 Kgs 7:13-14, 40-45).
5. The form of the Tabernacle service was not suitable for desert conditions.
6. The account of the Tabernacle is incomplete and obscure. Lack of specifications of both the Tabernacle and its furniture have led critics to doubt its historical validity. “For example, the shape of the cherubim, the nature of the *qerashim* and their thickness, the material of the lamps, and the size of the outer coverings are unknown.”⁸
7. Though the Tabernacle had a key place in the wilderness, the historical books do not mention it after the settlement of the Israelites in Canaan. “A typical argument from silence against the historicity of the tabernacle described in priestly literature observes that, while Josh 3-4 elaborately describes the Levites’ transportation of the ark across the Jordan, it says nothing about the tabernacle. Judges contains no explicit reference to the

⁸Abraham Isaac, “Tabernacle,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1971), 9:421.

tabernacle/tent, though 18: 31 does speak of a sanctuary at Shiloh.”⁹

8. There appear to be two descriptions of the Tabernacle. The first is found in Ex 25-31; 36-40 and the second in Exodus 33: 7-11. Critical scholars view these two passages as coming from two different sources (P and E, respectively) and try to solve this inconsistency by simply dismissing the Tabernacle account as a postexilic, priestly concept that retrojects “its own ideal of worship into the Sinai context to provide Mosaic authorization for it.”¹⁰
9. The LXX Greek text of chaps. 35-40 differs from that of chaps. 25-31.
10. There is a notion of late post-exilic priestly theology in the tabernacle chapters. Critics presume that pre-exilic prophets do not know about the Levitical system. They cite Amos and Jeremiah from the pre-exilic prophets and present them as ignorant of sacrificial Tabernacle ritual in the wilderness (Amos 5: 25, 26; Jer. 7:21-23).

The arguments presented above can be analysed in the light of the two dominant theories of truth: the correspondence theory and the coherence theory. According to the correspondence theory, everything has to correspond to the facts or to the way things are, whereas coherence theory “places its trust in the consistency or harmony of all one’s judgments.”¹¹ On the one hand, some of the arguments deal with the issue of correspondence. Critics find the Mosaic authorship not corresponding to what they believe as fact that that he had no literary skills. They also reject the historicity of the Tabernacle account, since it does not correspond to the correct structure that can be movable and fitting for a desert condition. Furthermore, according to the critics, the presentation of the Tabernacle

⁹S. Westerholm, “Tabernacle,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:704.

¹⁰Waldemar Janzen, “Tabernacle,” *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 456.

¹¹George R. Knight, *Philosophy and Education*, 4th ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2006), 26.

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account does not correspond to the fact that the people could supply the required materials and construction skills.

On the other hand, some arguments focus on the test of coherence and question the historicity of the Tabernacle account of Exod. 25-40. The incompleteness of the account, the presumed inconsistencies between the portrayal of the Tabernacle and the tent of meeting of Exod. 33, lack of reference to it in the later writings, and incorporation of presumable later thoughts and practices are used to show that the Tabernacle account fails the test of coherence.

However, these arguments are highly affected by undergirding presuppositions that according to Longs should also be examined.¹² Though every individual has the right to believe anything, the rightness of belief is a different thing. Thus one has to scrutinize one's presuppositions before accepting them and believing in them. We shall now consider the analysis of the worldviews or presuppositions of those who reject the historicity of the Tabernacle and also my own beliefs.

The following presuppositions can be deduced from the arguments mentioned above. First, the divine inspiration of the Bible and particularly the Mosaic authorship of the Tabernacle account are not accepted. Second, the concept of religious evolution, i.e., the thought that religion had a primitive shape in the beginning and evolved to a more sophisticated one over the course of time, seems to permeate most of the arguments. This concept leaves no room for supernatural manifestations and heavily leans on the naturalistic scientific method.

Regarding the presupposition that deals with the inspiration of the Bible, I concur with what Philips Long writes:

The worldview and basic assumption embraced by the present writer are founded on the belief that there is one true God who not only acts in history (through both primary and secondary causes) but also speaks (through both the Incarnate Word and the

¹²Philips Long, 173.

written word, the Bible; cf. Heb. 12: 25). The Bible, as the word of God written- and in keeping with the very character of God- is assumed to present truth and to be authoritative.¹³

Furthermore, one can rightly accept the Mosaic authorship of the Tabernacle account and assume the correctness of its literal reading. Wellhausen's argument pertaining to Moses' inability to write is disproved by facts secured from later archeological discoveries. While discussing the topic of literacy and its origins, James K. Hoffmeier shows how the alphabets were in use during the Bronze Age or the second millennium B.C. and draws the following conclusion:

Those who deny a role to Moses in the recording of the Torah have to dismiss cavalierly the Bible's own testimony, as well as the available and unambiguous evidence for the early development of the Semitic alphabet. Instead they adhere to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theoretical literary reconstructions of the Torah that were spawned in the dark age of biblical scholarship, when little was known of the Near Eastern context of the Bible, and were built upon the flawed foundation of belief that writing was not sufficiently developed in Moses's day to account for the writing of the Torah.¹⁴

After analysing the second presupposition, the concept of religious evolution, Longman and Dillard present their conclusion as follows:

Virtually no one today accepts Wellhausen's idea that in the pages of the Old Testament one could trace a religious evolution from animism to henotheism to monotheism. His Hegelian presuppositions are all too well recognized and rejected by contemporary criticism. Furthermore, Wellhausen was

¹³Philips Long, 175.

¹⁴James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 181.

motivated by the Romantic desire to recover the ideal, primitive past, and he applied this concept to his study of the Bible.¹⁵

THE TRUTH CLAIM OF THE TABERNACLE ACCOUNT

After considering the presuppositions held by the interpreters who argue for or against the historicity of the Tabernacle, the next step is “to listen as carefully and competently as possible to the biblical witness, to use every available means to discover its truth claims by approaching the text as fairly as possible on its own terms and in view of its context.”¹⁶ Thus, the study of the content and context of the Tabernacle account is in order.

The Content of the Tabernacle Account

Among the reasons God gave through Moses regarding the need for the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt were for them to “offer sacrifices” (Exodus 3:18), “hold a festival” to the Lord (Exodus 5:1), and “worship” the Lord (Exodus 7:16). In order to carry out these divine purposes, the Lord not only freed His people, but also instructed Moses to construct a tabernacle where He could abide in their midst and accept their sacrifices and worship. A detailed discussion of the content of the Tabernacle account is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a brief survey of the chapters shows the truth claim of the passage. Thirteen chapters of the Book of Exodus (25-31 and 35-40) portray the instruction given to build the Tabernacle and the actual construction of the Tabernacle. The juxtaposed incident of rebellion in the camp of Israel (32-34) also furnishes the Tabernacle account with more meaning. Peter Enns observes: “This is not just a story of any sort of rebellion, but of the Israelites attempting to set up an *alternate* cultic system to the one given in chapter 25-40.”¹⁷

¹⁵Temper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 49.

¹⁶Philips Long, 185.

¹⁷Enns, 507.

In the part of the account that gives instructions, each chapter introduces new elements. God gave instructions to Moses pertaining to the materials from which the ark, table, and lampstand were to be made (Exodus 25), the making of the tent of meeting (Exodus 26), the altar, the courtyard, the oil for the lamp (Exodus 27), the priestly garments (Exodus 28), Aaron's consecration, the consecration of the altar, and the daily sacrifices (Exodus 29), the altar of incense, the tax money, the washing in the water of the bronze basin, the anointing oil, and incense (Exodus 30), the appointment of Bezalel and the keeping of the Sabbath (Exodus 31).

John Durham divides the construction story of the Tabernacle in Exodus into eight sections: the offering of the materials and the recognition of the artisans (35: 1-36:7); the construction of the Tabernacle (36:8-38); the construction of the ark, the table, the lampstand, and the altar of incense (37:1-29); the construction of the altar of burnt offerings, the laver, and the Tabernacle court (38:1-20); a summary of the metal used in the Tabernacle and its courtyard (38:21-31); the making of the sacred vestments (39:1-31); a summary of the fulfilment of Yahweh's instructions (39:32-43); and the setting up of the Tabernacle, the cleansing of the Priests, and the coming of the glory of Yahweh (40:1-38).¹⁸

The use of different terminologies to refer to the wilderness shrine is also noteworthy. Carol Meyers states that this provides "a window into its functions."¹⁹ The word "tabernacle," which appears in Exodus 25:9 for the first time, indicates a moving dynamic presence of God rather than one tied to a fixed location. The second name is "tent or tent of meeting," which first appears in Exodus 27:21 and "indicates the oracular function of the structure, as a place where God's will is communicated to humans."²⁰

¹⁸John Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary 3 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 470-497.

¹⁹Carol Meyers, *Exodus*, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 222-223.

²⁰Ibid.

According to this brief survey of the content of the Tabernacle account, there is no apparent reason for an *ahistorical* reading of it. However, the full discovery of its truth claim awaits the contextual consideration.

The Context of the Tabernacle Account in the Book of Exodus

According to Long, the key to determine the truth claim of a biblical narrative is “to discern the narrative’s overall sense of purpose.”²¹ Hence, the study of the context helps to discover this sense of purpose by “observing the narrative’s placement within its larger narrative continuum.”²²

Norman Geisler asserts that redemption is the overall theme of the book of Exodus . “It tells how God buys back His people from the slavery of sin and brings them into His presence.”²³ The first part of the book narrates the deliverance of Israel from bondage (chaps. 1-18) and the second is about the covenant God made with His people (chaps. 19-40). Focusing more on the second part of the book, since the Tabernacle account is found there, the people on the move encamp at Mount Sinai and stay there over eleven months. The purpose of God in redeeming the people of Israel was that they might live in His presence in a covenantal relationship. Thus, at Sinai, God prepared them for His divine appearance (chap. 19), gave them the foundation of the covenant, i.e., the Ten Commandments (chap. 20: 1-17), and the Book of the Covenant (chaps. 21-23). Afterwards, He entered into a covenant with them (chap. 24), and gave them instructions for building the tent of the covenant, which would be a dwelling place for Him (chaps. 25-31). Finally, the Book of Exodus ends with the construction and installation of the Tabernacle.

The purpose of the Tabernacle account, as may be observed from its context in the book of Exodus , is to show the main intent of the deliverance of the people of Israel, i.e., that they should make a home for

²¹Philips Long, 180.

²²Ibid.

²³Norman Geisler, *The Popular Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 54.

God and “then locate their houses/tents around his house/tent and join him regularly at his courtyard for covenant meals, confirming their ongoing relationship and receiving the blessings inherent therein.”²⁴ The Tabernacle account intensifies the nearness of God and gives a glimpse of the life God will give at the completion of the cosmic salvific work (Rev. 22). Fretheim confirms this:

Israel’s journey, beyond liberation, is one of being personally borne by God to the special place of God’s presence. Mt. Sinai has been that special place, but God is about to initiate a change of address, namely, the tabernacle. Rather than a fixed place, God will now reside in (and not only appear at) a portable Sinai, a dwelling place in the midst of an on-the-move people, a “mobile home” for God! No longer are the people—or their mediator—asked to “come up” to God; God “comes down” to them.²⁵

Hence, this purpose of the Tabernacle account reveals its truth claim. If the deliverance and the exodus of Israel that led them to Mt. Sinai argue for historical truthfulness, the same thing applies for the Tabernacle account that presents the plan of God for the delivered nation.

To summarize, an attempt was made in this section to uncover the truth claim of the Tabernacle account by studying its content and context. The content indicates that the account is to be read as historical. Besides, the context clearly shows the purpose of the Tabernacle account is to fulfil one of the goals of the Exodus . Thus, the account makes a truth claim. The next step, then, has to test the veracity of this claim.

²⁴Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary 2 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 256.

²⁵Terence E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch*, Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 112.

THE TRUTH VALUE OF THE TABERNACLE ACCOUNT

The truth claim of the Tabernacle account is attested in the previous section, but that by itself will not settle the issue of its historicity. The reliability of the claim must be tested by asking the following two questions. First, is the passage internally consistent? And second, do its claims agree with what other sources and evidences lead us to believe is true?²⁶ Answering these questions affirmatively affirms the truth value of the truth claim.

Internal Consistency and Coherence

The internal consistency will be discussed by considering the arguments presented in the section on the coherence of the Tabernacle account. There are three arguments classified under this category: the incompleteness of the account, the variation in the LXX, and the problem of the two tents.

Incompleteness of the Account

The Tabernacle account may seem incomplete, as it does not furnish the reader with all the details. But can this discredit its historical validity? Israel Abrahams explains why it cannot when he writes, “Against these arguments it should be noted that the biblical text does not purport to be a detailed blueprint. This is clearly indicated by the recurring phrase ‘according to the manner of it that you were shown on the mountain.’ Many specifications were omitted because they were already well known; others were probably not considered essential.”²⁷

Variation in the LXX

Can the variation that exists in the LXX between the instruction passages (chaps. 25-31) and the construction passages (chaps. 35-40) serve as an evidence of different authors or disprove the truth claim of the Tabernacle

²⁶Philips Long, 185.

²⁷Isaac, 421.

account? William H. C. Propp quotes from M. L. Wade in explaining the cause for this variation: “In LXX chaps. 35-40, we have a different Greek writer from LXX chaps. 1-34. The author of LXX chaps. 35-40 was no translator at all, for he was not working from a Hebrew manuscript. Rather, he was summarizing LXX chaps. 25-31.”²⁸ Thus, the subtle variation should not disturb the reader to the extent of doubting the historicity of the Tabernacle account.

The Problem of the Two Tents

The strongest argument forwarded by the critics who attribute the Tabernacle account to different sources and disregard its historicity is based on the existence of another tent of meeting in Exodus 33: 7-11. Again the question is: Does the existence of the tent of meeting that Moses pitched outside of the camp invalidate the historicity of the Tabernacle?

A careful study of the Tabernacle account, without reading into it any other hypothesis, reveals that the “tent . . . outside the camp” (v. 7) was different from the Tabernacle or “Tent of Meeting.” The tabernacle had the ark and other furniture and was the place where the Lord dwelt permanently. On the other hand, the “tent of the meeting” was outside the camp and a temporary structure used until the Tabernacle was constructed (cf. 27: 21). However, the “source hypothesis fails to see that the tent of 33: 7-11 is different from the tabernacle and was only a temporary structure.”²⁹ Likewise, Feinberg observes, “Much of the difficulty in the critical position stems from the fact that it has tried to equate the tent of meeting and the Tabernacle, and then has complained of the resultant discrepancies.”³⁰

²⁸ William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, Anchor Bible 2A (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 636.

²⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, *Exodus*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 2:451.

³⁰ C. L. Feinberg, “Tabernacle,” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 5:581.

Although the passage that depicts the tent of meeting (33:7-11) is viewed as disrupting the flow of the narrative, a harmonious understanding of it is also plausible. As the immediate context clearly shows, God was displeased with the people because of their drift to idol worship. Consequently, Moses had to move outside of the camp and those who wanted to repent from their wrong worship and wanted to seek the Lord had to come there as well. Thus, “Moses’ original tent, and the relationship it represented, rescued them in this crisis through the conversation it afforded. The tabernacle tent, made after this crisis, would sustain the people throughout their history, even when they sinned, by its existence at the center of the community worship.”³¹

In summary, the coherence of the Tabernacle account has been shown by dealing with some questions of completeness and consistency. The account is fairly complete and the alleged problems of consistency stem from unattested presuppositions. Thus, the truth claim of the Tabernacle account cannot be eclipsed due to lack of internal consistency or coherence. Philips Long’s caution is worth mentioning here: “It is vitally important that appropriate standards of coherence and consistency be applied-viz., standards appropriate to the ancient genre under inspection.”³²

External Consistency or Correspondence

Affirming the internal consistency of the Tabernacle account is important, but not complete to prove the validity of the truth claim of the account, i.e., its historicity. Further evidence is needed and that comes from the external consistency of the passage. Here, the issue of correspondence will be discussed. In order to test the biblical account for historical validity, other biblical literature, extra-biblical literature, material remains, or some combination of these three can be employed. In the following paragraphs

³¹James K. Bruckner, *Exodus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 294.

³²Philips Long, 186.

an attempt will be made to address the arguments which reject the correspondence of the Tabernacle account to reality.

Other Biblical Literature

Some of the arguments forwarded against the historical validity of the Tabernacle account are related to other biblical literature. A brief evaluation of these arguments is presented below.

Availability of Resources. The argument that questions the availability of required materials and construction skills depicted in the Tabernacle account should be evaluated in correspondence with other Biblical literature that inform the reader's understanding of the setting.

Exodus 38:21-31 gives a summary of the metals used in the construction of the Tabernacle. Brevard Childs converts the measuring units to their modern approximate value and gives the following figure: 1,900 lbs. of gold, 6,437 lbs. of silver, and 4,522 lbs. of bronze.³³ Did the Israelites have these resources? A study of other biblical literature, outside of the Tabernacle account, gives an affirmative answer to this question. Exodus 12:35-36 (also 3:21, 22; 11:2-3) narrates that Israelites did not leave Egypt empty-handed, but carried a great deal of resources provided by their Egyptian slave masters.

The objection to their construction skills should also be evaluated in light of the fact of the Israelites' stay in Egypt for over 400 years, working as slaves in constructing the famous works of Egypt (Exodus 3). Thus, it is difficult to conclude that they had not learned something of the mechanical arts for which Egypt was famous.

Alleged Silence of the Historical Books. Another line of argument presented against the historicity of the Tabernacle, which is related to other biblical literature, stems from the alleged silence of the historical books

³³Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus : A Critical, Theological Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 637.

about the Tabernacle. C. L. Feinberg makes the following comment in regard to this argument from silence:

Arguments from silence are notoriously precarious. The only way a silence of the historical books can be made out is to delete all such reference passages relative to the Mosaic Tabernacle as the work of a late redactor who allegedly inserted them to support his view that the Mosaic Tabernacle originated in the wilderness. No external evidence has been produced by any critic to sustain this position. If the evidence of the OT is heeded, it reveals a number of clear evidences.³⁴

The following are evidences cited from other biblical literature in support of the mention of the Tabernacle in the historical books of the bible.

After the crossing of the Jordan River, the Tabernacle was located near Jericho at Gilgal (Josh 4:19; 5:10; 9:6; 10:6, 43). However, this site was not permanent and later the Tabernacle was moved to Shiloh in Ephraim (1 Sam 1:3, 9, 19, 24; 2:11, 12 and 3:3). Although the Tabernacle at Shiloh was also called a “temple” (1 Sam 1:9; 3:15), this should not lead to dismiss its Mosaic form.³⁵ Psalm 78:60 provides a better picture: “And he forsook the Tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent that he placed among humans.” This text agrees with the identification of the Shiloh structure as a tent.³⁶ Furthermore, the Tabernacle at Shiloh had the Ark of the Covenant, priesthood, sacrifices, burning of incense, the wearing of an ephod, and implicit reference to the law of the annual feasts.

³⁴Feinberg, 579.

³⁵“But since the tent of meeting is not mentioned in 4QSam^a or the LXX version of the text, it is probably a postexilic addition, which may have been inserted to establish a parallel between the actions of Eli’s sons and those of Israel at Peor (Numbers 25: 1-9).” Craig R. Koester, *The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental, Jewish Literature, and the Old Testament* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1989), 12.

³⁶See John Goldingay, *Psalms Volume 2: Psalms 42-89* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 509.

The next reference to the Tabernacle is at Nob (1 Sam 21: 1-6). The record informs of the existence of a high priest and eighty-five ordinary priests; a priest's ephod is also mentioned. The table of showbread and its administration in line with the ceremonial regulations, as indicated for the Mosaic Tabernacle (Lev 15: 18), is also evident. Lastly, the Urim and Thummim were also in use by the priest.

The last mention of the Mosaic Tabernacle before the emergence of Solomon's Temple is at Gibeon (1 Chr 16:39; 21: 29). After Saul had killed all the priests of Nob except Abiathar (1 Sam 22:11ff.), the Tabernacle was moved to this location. At the completion of Solomon's Temple, the tent of meeting, with all its equipment, was transferred to the Temple (1 Kgs 8:4).

To conclude, the biblical literature outside of the Tabernacle account is not as silent as the argument presumes.

A Notion of Late Post-Exilic Priestly Theology. Another argument that requires an external consistency check claims that the Tabernacle account has marks of late post-exilic priestly theology. Here, supporting documents are taken from Amos and Jeremiah, who were prophets in 8th and 7th century B.C. (Amos 5:25, 26; Jer 7:21-23). However, a careful reading of the context of both passages leads to a different conclusion. "Amos 5:21, 22 would be meaningless unless God had accepted their sacrifices at one time and would do so no longer when the worship was heartless, and idolatry was indulged in at the same time (Numbers 16:18)."³⁷

Scholars do not agree on the interpretation of Jeremiah 7:21-23.³⁸ F. B. Huey summarizes three major interpretations. First, sacrifice was not part of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. Second, there was no opportunity in the wilderness to sacrifice. Third, the sacrifice was not the central and

³⁷Feinberg, 581.

³⁸The NIV makes the issue simpler by inserting the word "just," which is not found in the Hebrew.

foremost aspect of worship but rather obedience. He then ascribes the third as the most plausible interpretation.³⁹ Besides, reading the text with its historical context in mind helps to understand its real intent. In Jeremiah's time, Judah had made sacrifices and ritual central but had ignored the moral laws of God. David also makes a similar statement when repenting from his sins. First he said to the Lord: "Thou delightest not in burning offering." (Ps 51:16) Then in v. 19 he seems to contradict himself when he writes "shalt thou be pleased with . . . burnt offering and whole burnt offering?" But again the issue is about what accompanies the ritual, is it done heartlessly or wholeheartedly?

To summarize, biblical literature other than the Tabernacle account clarify and testify to its historical claim, provided that they are read in their context and interpreted correctly.

Extra-biblical Sources

In an attempt to attest to the external consistency of the Tabernacle account, it is important to give proper consideration to its correspondence with what extra-biblical sources present. In fact, some of the arguments that are posed to invalidate the historicity of the Tabernacle have to do with this test of external consistency. For instance, the claim that the structure of the Tabernacle was impractical to construct and its form of service was not suitable for a desert condition can be evaluated based on what extra-biblical sources inform the reader. So, here the question would be: Were there other tent shrines during the time of the Tabernacle? If there were, what were their similarities and differences?

Frank M. Cross, Jr., observed very well one of the deficiencies with biblical criticism that questions the possibility of the existence of the Mosaic Tabernacle. That is its lack of information about some important archaeological discoveries, which shed great light on Old Testament accounts. "While the basic outlines of biblical criticism were drawn in the nineteenth century, archaeological research has established itself as a

³⁹F. B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentation*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 109.

Table 1. A Comparison between the Tabernacle and Other Ancient Tent Shrines

	Tents	Similarities	Differences
1	Bedouin and Pre-Islamic Tent Shrines (' <i>utfah</i> , the <i>mahmal</i> , and the <i>qubba</i> had tent covering.)	The <i>utfah</i> had the following similarities with the ark: blood from the sacrifices was sprinkled on its corners(cf. Lev 16:15); it served as an oracular device (cf. Numbers 7:89); horrible things were said to happen if it was captured by enemies (1 Sam. 4-7) ⁴⁰	The biblical tent was massive. It required six carts and twelve oxen to transport it (Numbers 7:3), whereas the <i>qubba</i> tent was carried on the back of a single camel.
2	<i>Portable Shrines of Phoenicia and Carthage</i> ⁴¹	Like the Tabernacle, these tent shrines were drawn by oxen ((Numbers 7:3; and 1 Sam 6:7)); the portable shrine conveyed an image of a gold.	The Tabernacle was much larger than the Phoenician abode.
3	Egyptian Funeral Tents	Like the Tabernacle the funeral tents were ritually purified before use.	The Tabernacle had no connection with dead bodies.
		The Tent of Min shows that, like Yahweh, the earliest Egyptian god originally inhabited a tent sanctuary.	The phallic form of Min's tent does not resemble the Tabernacle.
4	A Midianite Tent Shrine in the Negev	A red tent, likely supported by acacia wood poles, and covering a sacred area. A large number of animal bones, mostly goat, were found.	The shrine was short-lived.
5.	Arad Temple	The entrance is on the east. It had an altar the exact size of the Tabernacle's altar.	Arad's temple is a broad-room structure with no partitions.

⁴⁰Michael M. Homan, *To Your Tents O Israel! The Terminology, Function, Form, and Symbolism of Tents in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 90-92.

⁴¹Homan, 101.

scientific tool in the hand of the Old Testament student only in the twentieth century. Only in our generation have archaeological data reached such proportion as to affect seriously the conclusions of literary and historical research.”⁴²

In his book *To Your Tents, O Israel!*, Michel Homan wrote a chapter on the Tabernacle parallels in the Near Eastern portable shrines. A tabular presentation of these tent shrines is given below, except for the tents in Ugaritic and Hittite Mythology and the Egyptian’s Rameses II camp. These are dealt separately in the following subtitles.

Besides the above-mentioned tent-like shrines, the Ugaritic materials, the Mari texts, and the Egyptian data are considered to have a closer parallel to the biblical Tabernacle. Thus, these three should be considered in the study of the historicity of the Tabernacle.

Ugaritic Material. Richard Clifford argues that the domed Arabic tents, carried by camels, according to him, only traceable to the first century BC, may tell of ancient customs, but are still far away in time and culture from the early Israelites. For him, the second-millennium texts from Ugarit are nearer in time and culture to the Israelite Tent of Meeting. Following that line of thought, he discusses the nature of the Tent of El and the Tabernacle. The following similarities between the Tent of El and the Tabernacle are noteworthy.

1. The Structure of a Tent. “El lives in a tent at the source of the cosmic waters and, according to one text, the tent is on a mountain.”⁴³ Unlike Baal, who had his house and temple, El had only a dwelling or a shelter. That could be the reason why no monument of an El shrine has been discovered so far.

⁴²Frank Cross, “The Tabernacle,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 10 (1947):47.

⁴³Richard J. Clifford, “The Tent of El and the Israelite Tent of Meeting,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33 (1971):222.

2. A Place of Oracles. “Besides being a dwelling, the tent of El is a place of authoritative decree or oracle.”⁴⁴ In early Israel, the Tent of Meeting was also a place of oracles. (Exodus 33:7-11; Numbers 11:16-30; 12: 4-10).
3. The Earthly-heavenly Typology. In Canaanite religion, the earthly shrine could be considered as the copy of a heavenly prototype. Moses was also told to make the Tabernacle and its equipment according to the pattern which was shown him on the mountain (Exodus 26:30; cf. Exodus 25:9, 40; 27:8, and Numbers 8:4).
4. Similar Terminologies. “The appellations *mskn*, *ahl*, and the wooden *qrs* supports”⁴⁵ are among the similar titles used referring to El's tent and the Tabernacle.
5. The Furnishing of the Tent. “El's tent is furnished with fittings cast . . . from gold and silver, as well as a throne . . . , footstool . . . , couch . . . , and table”⁴⁶ Especially the use of gold and silver and the presence of a table can be traced as points of similarity in this case.
6. The Skirts of the Priest. “At Ras Shamra, a circular pedestal of bronze has been found, under the rim of which were decorations shaped like pomegranates. They are suspended like the pomegranates of Ex. 28.”⁴⁷ Ex. 28:33-34 explains this dress code and the similarity is remarkable.
7. Divine Craftsmanship. El's tent is built by the divine craftsman Kothar.⁴⁸ In Exodus 35:30-36:1, Yahweh appoints Bezalel and Oholiab to construct similar furnishings for the Tabernacle.

⁴⁴Ibid., 223.

⁴⁵Homan, 96.

⁴⁶Homan, 97.

⁴⁷Clifford, 226.

⁴⁸Homan, 97

After analysing the above mentioned similarities, Richard Clifford draws the following conclusion: “It appears likely, then, that the Israelite Tent of Meeting is one more instance of the Israelites confronting and appropriating the religious and cultural institution of Canaan.”⁴⁹ However, this conclusion is a farfetched attempt for it does not also give attention to the significant differences between the two. While the tent-like structure is a point of similarity, El’s tent has more rooms than the Tabernacle. Besides, the Tabernacle does not have a couch or a footstool.

Mari’s Large Public Tent. Another important extra-biblical description in connection with the Tabernacle comes from the Mari text (M. 6873) that talks about a large tent. The major connection between the two lies on the usage of the word *qersu* by Mari and *qersh* by the biblical Hebrew (Exodus 26:15), “both represent the largest wooden component of a tent structure.”⁵⁰ There is also an important difference between the Mari’s *qersu* and the Tabernacle’s *qrash*. While the *qersu* at Mari were erected for a donkey sacrifice, after which the gods departed from them, no such cultic system was carried out in the services of the Tabernacle.

Daniel E. Fleming draws the following conclusion after a close investigation of the similarity between the Mari tents and the Tabernacle: “The priestly tent sanctuary should not be viewed as a literary creation from two visible biblical traditions, the unadorned ‘tent of meeting’ and the first Jerusalem temple. The native tradition that carried the *qeres* terminology contributed an old heritage of large public tents to this vision of early Israelite worship of Yahweh.”⁵¹

Egyptian Tents and Other Elements. In search of extra-biblical sources to support the historicity of the wilderness Tabernacle, Egyptian tents and some Egyptian elements can be studied. Though the funeral tents and Tent of Min have some similarities with the Tabernacle, the plan of Ramesses II’s camp, “which unquestionably dates to the mid-thirteenth century, is

⁴⁹Clifford, 227.

⁵⁰ Daniel E. Fleming, “Mari’s Large Public Tent and the Priestly Tent Sanctuary,” *Vetus Testamentum* 50, no. 4 (2000): 490.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 498.

the closest analogue to the wilderness tabernacle as described in Exodus 25ff.”⁵²

Among the similarities between Rameses II’s camp and the Tabernacle, the following can be stated:

- 1) The design of the camp and the Tabernacle were similar.
- 2) The heights of both tents corresponded to the widths. (Ex. 25-27).
- 3) Both tents were oriented eastward.
- 4) Pharaoh’s golden throne was flanked by falcon wings, just as the ark is flanked by winged cherubim.
- 5) The campaigning Egyptian army was divided into four units, just as Israel encamped and marched by four standards according to Numbers 2.⁵³

This is a crucial understanding, as it attests to the fact that the rectangular design of the Tabernacle was more in line with the Egyptian tent camp than the military camps of Assyrian kings, such as Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal. Seventh-century B.C. reliefs depict the Assyrian military camp arrangement in a circular or elliptical configuration. So the question will be: How can the Priestly writer fabricate the Tabernacle structure without knowing the most obvious early Egyptian influences?

Michel Homan tries to answer this question when he writes, “P is not basing the tabernacle’s disposition on an Egyptian model knowingly. Rather, P is reconstructing based on historical records in his possession that pictorially or verbally describes an earlier Israelite tent-shrine.”⁵⁴ However, Hoffmeier disagrees with this stance and argues that Homan did not take into account other Egyptian elements associated with the tabernacle and associated terminology of Egyptian etymology. He continues to argue: “Methodologically, I maintain that one should

⁵²Hoffmeier, 208.

⁵³Ibid., 112-113.

⁵⁴Homan, 114.

determine the date and origin of a text on the basis of the internal elements rather than being influenced by a theory about the date, origin, and setting of the text that was developed prior to the availability of the comparative materials.”⁵⁵ Thus, it is important to look at some Egyptian elements in the Tabernacle. The following few paragraphs will give a brief review of these elements.

The word used for the acacia tree, which is *šittîm* is a loan word from Egypt and the prominence of these trees in Sinai was also evident. This explains why the acacia is the principal word used in the construction of the tabernacle (Exodus 26:15, 26, 32). And all the furniture made of acacia was overlaid with gold foil (Exodus 25: 11, 13, 24; 26:32). “The Egyptians were highly skilled in covering wooden objects with gold foil, as in the case of the burial and cultic shrines of King Tutankhamun.”⁵⁶ Among the materials used in the construction of the tabernacle, linen (Exodus 26:1, 31, 36; 27:9, 16, 18) and the third layer covering the tabernacle, made of leather, are also of Egyptian origin.⁵⁷

Among the articles in the Tabernacle, some similarities with Egyptian items also exist. The portable structure of the Ark of the Covenant (Exod. 25: 10-13), the priest’s role to take care of its transportation, and the use of wing as a sign of protection are also found in Egypt. The terms used to refer to the seven-branch lamp (Exodus 25: 31-39), and the altar (Exodus 27: 1-4) are also associated with Egyptian words. Furthermore, the silver trumpets in Numbers 10:2 have parallels in the New Kingdom of Egypt, in which “copper and silver trumpets were used in religious ceremonies and in military settings.”⁵⁸ Ox carts were also used in Egypt and in Sinai.

In summary, though one need not come to a conclusion that Israel copied its Tabernacle from what was common in those days, the possibility of a historic portable tent can be attested.

⁵⁵Hoffmeier, 208.

⁵⁶Ibid., 212.

⁵⁷Ibid., 212, 213.

⁵⁸Ibid., 22.

CONCLUSION

The Tabernacle with its cultic system was foundational to the religious life of Israel. Feinberg writes, “The historicity of the Tabernacle is of vital significance for the entire validity of the Scriptures.”⁵⁹ Hence, this paper inquired into the historicity of the Tabernacle. The internal consistency of the Tabernacle account can be proved from its content and contextual study, as well as its external consistency. It can be seen corresponding with other biblical literature, as well as extra-biblical sources which attest the factuality of its truth claim.

Thus, it is possible to draw the following conclusions from this study:

1. The Tabernacle account, as found in Exodus 25-30, claims historicity. This is concluded, based on the study of the content and context of this account. The content shows no element of ahistorical genre, such as a parable. The context of the passage in the book of Exodus clearly shows the continuation and the progression of God’s plan for the delivered nation of Israel, as they were led into a deeper experience with God through the existence and service of the Tabernacle.
2. Special consideration should be given to extra-biblical sources in attesting the historicity of the Tabernacle, since the historical impulse of the Tabernacle account in the Bible is denied by scholars who employ source criticism. With a wealth of information from materials of archaeological excavations, the historicity of the Tabernacle account has received a strong backing. However, a word of caution is in order. Though the similarities drawn between the Israelite Tabernacle and the contemporary tent shrines help see a correspondence to what is believed a reality, the differences must not be overlooked. It is important to see the uniqueness

⁵⁹Feinberg, 579.

of God’s design, despite the similarities, and appreciate its purpose

3. Given the data that the Tabernacle passage presents internally and also externally consistent document of history, so, presumably, since a statement is truthful when it coheres with other truthful statements and corresponds with reality, on account of theories of truth, the Tabernacle account should be read as having historical value. This is so unless 1) there are valid indications in the passage that the Tabernacle account is to be treated differently from the others, 2) the historicity of the book of Exodus is denied, and 3) sufficient contrary evidence emerges to discredit warrant and/or backing. This conclusion is composed based on Toulmin’s approach as stated in Philips Longman’s book.⁶⁰

Table 2. A Conclusion presented based on Toulmin’s approach

A	B	C
Given Data	So, (Qualifier)	presumably, the Tabernacle account should be read as having historical value
That the Tabernacle passage presents internally and also externally consistent account of history	<p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <i>Since</i> (Warrant) a statement is truthful when it coheres with other truthful statements and corresponds with reality, <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <i>on account of</i> (Backing) theories coherence and correspondence of truth	<p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <i>Unless</i> (Rebuttal) 1)there are valid indications in the passage that the Tabernacle account is to be treated differently from the others, 2) the historicity of the book of Exodus is denied, and 3)sufficient contrary evidence emerges to discredit warrant and/or backing.

⁶⁰Philips Long, 196-197.