

The Symbolism of the Tabernacle

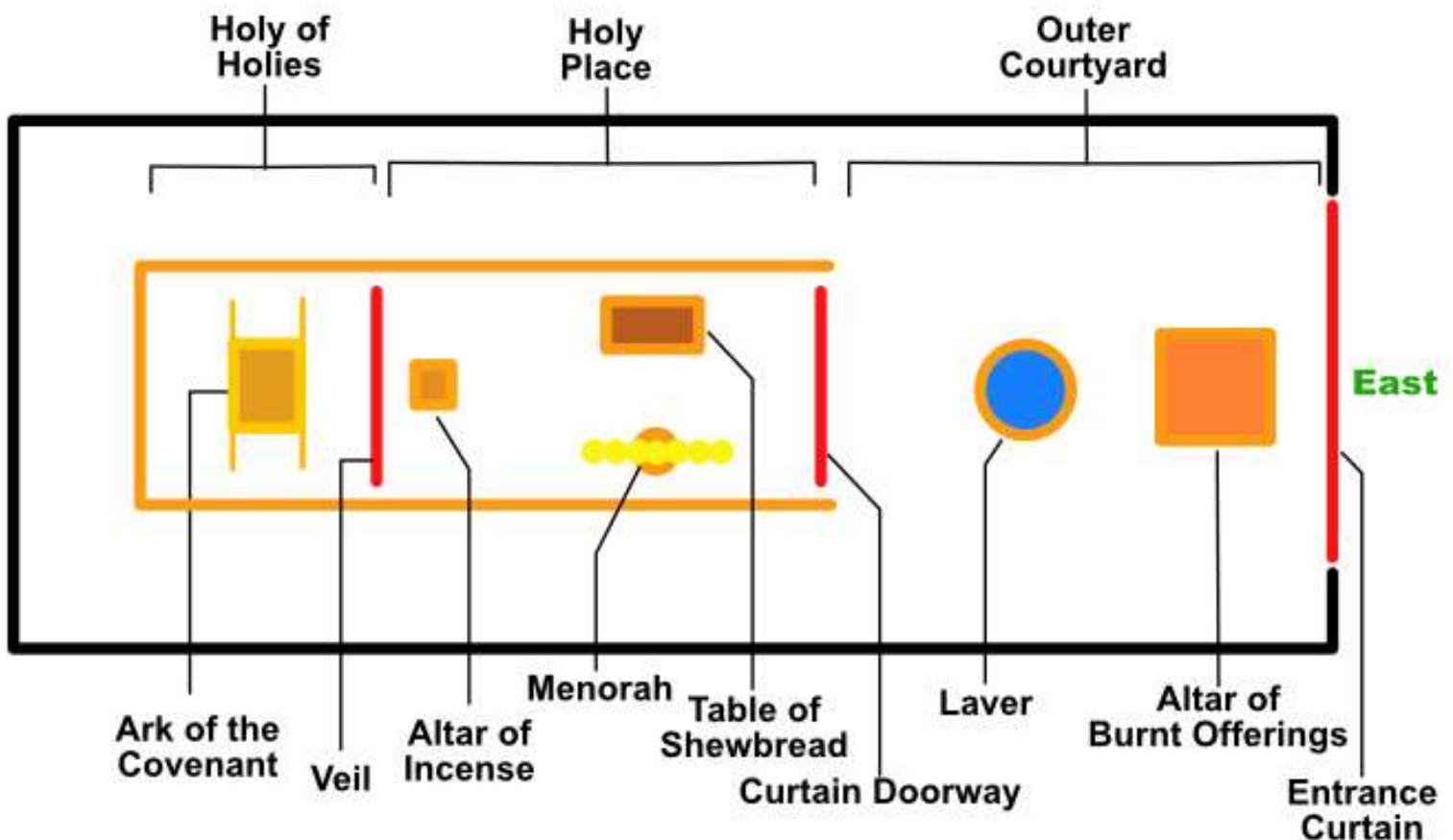
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April 2026

Introduction

The Tabernacle is more than a system of worship for the Israelites. It is a blueprint for how we are to *live* in our relationship with our creator.

I will attempt to demonstrate how the layout of the Tabernacle reveals much about our relationship with God and His righteousness, and how it illustrates those truths for us.

It is a blueprint for drawing near to God. It also illustrates the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land. Furthermore, it is a picture of our walk of faith with the Lord. Interestingly, as we look at the way the elements are laid out, it is also a type and shadow of the Cross.



The Layout of the Tabernacle

The Tabernacle tent itself was enclosed within a compound with four walls on all sides, whose purpose was to separate the Holy from the unholy. Remember, the Tabernacle was established while the Israelites were on their journey to the Promised Land, and sin had not yet been judged. God, compelled by His perfect righteousness, had to remain physically separated from sinful man. He could be approached only by those designated as priests, and then only through a series of sacrifices. The priests were especially excluded from entering the Holy of Holies, also called “the Most Holy Place.” There was one exception: the high priest, and only the high priest, could go behind the veil to seek atonement for Israel’s sins, and then only once a year on Yom Kippur.

Hebrews 9:6 the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, ⁷ but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.

Such forgiveness was valid for one year, then had to be repeated on the next Yom Kippur, and every year thereafter until the judgment of sin at the Cross. Once that was completed, the veil in the Tabernacle/Temple that separated the Holy of Holies from the outer part, the Holy Place, was torn in two from top to bottom, signifying that the barrier to God, sin, had been dealt with.

Matthew 27:51 And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

The walls surrounding the Tent of the Tabernacle had a single entrance. That entrance always faced east because the Messiah was to come from the East. The single entrance was meant to show that there was only one way to approach God.

Matthew 24:27 For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Once past the single entrance and inside, the first thing you see is the Altar of Sacrifice. Next comes the Bronze Laver for washing. Then you face another veil/doorway into the Tabernacle (tent) itself.

Inside the Tabernacle tent itself would be three items: the Table of Shewbread on one side, the Golden Menorah across from it on the other side, and the Altar of Incense in the rear, before yet another veil barrier leading to the Holy of Holies.

Once you passed through the veil and into the Holy of Holies, you would find the Ark of the Covenant, where God's presence dwells. The Ark of the Covenant contained three items: the tablets of the Law given to Moses, a pot of manna from the Israelites' wilderness journey, and Aaron's rod that budded.

Let's go back to the beginning to examine the symbolism.

What was the first thing that started the Israelites' journey to freedom from slavery in Egypt? It was the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintel of their houses, which the Death Angel passed by on that fateful night in Egypt.

Exodus 12:22 Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin. None of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. ²³ For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you.

This corresponds to the Altar of Sacrifice, located just inside the first veil. It also pictures the sacrifice of the Lamb of God required to deal with sin.

Then the Israelites traveled for three days, and what did they encounter? The Red Sea. This is represented by the water of the Bronze Laver.

As we enter the Tent of the Covenant, we encounter the light of the Golden Menorah and the smoke of the Altar of Incense. This should remind us that the pillar of smoke by day and fire by night guided the Israelites on their wilderness journey.

Across from the Menorah stood the Table of Shewbread, also called the “Bread of Presence.” God provided the Israelites with manna to eat in the wilderness.

John 6:31 Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’

The Tabernacle had a barrier to enter the Holy Place, where these three items were displayed, and another barrier to enter the Holy of Holies. The two barriers the Israelites faced in entering the Promised Land were the Red Sea and the Jordan River.

Lastly, we have the Ark of the Covenant, where God dwelt.

1 Corinthians 10:1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. ⁶ Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.

The Israelites were “baptized” in the Red Sea, and it serves as an example for us as we are baptized in Christ.

Jesus As Seen in The Tabernacle.

Hebrews 8:1 Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² a minister in the holy places, in the **true tent** that the Lord set up, not man. ³ For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴ Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵ They serve a **copy and shadow of the heavenly things**. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See

that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.” (Emphasis added)

Why should the earthly Tabernacle be made exactly as it was shown to Moses? Because it is a picture of the One in Heaven (v. 5). That One in Heaven is Jesus, and the Tabernacle was a picture of His life.

John 2:18 What sign do you show us for doing these things?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰ The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹ **But he was speaking about the temple of his body.** (Emphasis added)

The Jewish leadership did not understand that Jesus was speaking of His own body. He is the Tabernacle. Jesus is the Temple. Jesus is the Door; He is the Entrance. He is the only way to the Father.

John 10:9 I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

Jesus laid down His life on the Altar of Sacrifice. He was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptizer, as seen in the Bronze Laver. Jesus is the Light of the world, as seen in the Golden Menorah. Jesus is the Bread of Heaven, as pictured in the Table of Shewbread. Before going to the Cross, Jesus prayed the high priestly prayer, and the Altar of Incense symbolizes prayer.

The veil separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies was dyed scarlet, symbolizing the blood of Christ. After sins were judged and Christ gave up His Spirit, the veil was torn in two.

Matthew 27:50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. ⁵¹ And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom...

This signaled that the barrier between unrighteous, sinful man and righteous God had ceased to exist, allowing man to approach God.

Hebrews 4:16 Let us then **with confidence draw near to the throne of grace**, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Emphasis added)

We can “with confidence draw near to the throne of grace” because Jesus has been judged for our sins and we possess the righteousness of Christ credited to our accounts in Heaven.

Romans 4:5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, **his faith is counted (credited) as righteousness.** (Emphasis added)

Philippians 3:9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, **the righteousness from God that depends on faith.** (Emphasis added)

Lastly, inside the Holy of Holies behind the last veil, the Ark of the Covenant was filled with imagery pointing to Jesus Christ, yet there is no representation of God the Father in the Tabernacle/Temple. But we do have this:

John 14:9 ...Whoever has seen me has seen the Father....

Jesus is the exact image of the Father.

The Tabernacle and Our Faith Journey.

Just as the Israelites camped around the outer walls of the Tabernacle, indicating their separation from God, so we are outside the presence of God. The walls of the Tabernacle separate the profane from the perfect righteousness of God. To approach God, there's only one way, one door, on the east side of the Tabernacle. That one door, that one way of approach, is only through Jesus Christ.

Once inside the compound, the first thing a new believer will encounter is the Altar of Sacrifice, which represents Jesus' sacrifice of His life for us.

The Altar of Sacrifice

The altar was shaped like a large square box containing burning coals. At each corner were “horns” (Exodus 27:2) that symbolized divine power and authority, underscoring that salvation and forgiveness come from God's power. Blood from the Altar of Sacrifice was poured onto the horns of the Altar of Incense inside the Tent.

Leviticus 4:7 And the priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense before the LORD that is in the tent of meeting, and all the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁸ And all the fat of the bull of the sin offering he shall remove from it, the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails ⁹ and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys ¹⁰ (just as these are taken from the ox of the sacrifice of the peace offerings); and the priest shall burn them on the altar of burnt offering. ¹¹ But the skin of the bull and all its flesh, with its head, its legs, its entrails, and its dung— ¹² all the rest of the bull—he shall carry outside the camp to a clean place, to the ash heap, and shall burn it up on a fire of wood. On the ash heap it shall be burned up.

Certain parts of the sacrificed animal were burned on the altar. The priests were not permitted to eat any unused portions of the animal. These portions were considered ritually impure or laden with the community's sins and were discarded and burned.

Hebrews 13:11 For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² So **Jesus also suffered outside the gate** in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.
(Emphasis added)

Under the old institution, the blood from sacrifices on the Day of Atonement was brought into the most holy place, but the bodies were burned outside the camp, a place deemed unholy during the wilderness sojourn. But Jesus also suffered outside the city gate (outside Jerusalem).

The Cross was outside the city limits of Jerusalem. The effect of His sacrifice was to make the people holy.

Bronze Laver

After Jesus's sacrifice and our receiving Him as our Lord and Savior, we are commanded to be baptized. As we draw closer to the Tent, the next item we encounter is the Bronze Laver used for washing. The priests became soiled with the blood and entrails of the sacrificed animals and needed to be washed before they could enter the Tent. The washing is a picture of baptism.

Baptism represents the physical acknowledgment of our faith in the work of Christ on the Cross. As viewed in the Church Age context, Christ is the Husband of the Church, and He washes His bride to present her "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."

Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having **cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,** ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself **in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.** (Emphasis added)

"Washing of water **with the word**" points to spiritual growth leading to obedience. The washing represents a new way of living, walking by the Spirit, and the accompanying cleansing.

Interestingly, the laver was made from the mirrors that the Israelite women had taken from the Egyptians when they left Egypt. The highly polished bronze mirrors were melted and cast into a bowl.

Exodus 38:6 He made the basin of bronze and its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the ministering women who ministered in the entrance of the tent of meeting.

They were forged into the laver and its base, both of which had highly reflective polished surfaces. The ministering priests would have seen their reflections in the laver's surface and in the water it contained. It was a time

for cleansing and for reflection. This reminds us of a passage in James. The Word is like a mirror that confronts us.

James 1:22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Table of Shewbread

Inside the tent, we encounter three items: the Table of Shewbread, the Golden Lampstand, and the Altar of Incense. The bread represents the Bread of Life. This table was positioned across from the golden lampstand and along a side wall in the tent's first section, called the "Holy Place."

Matthew 26:26 Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "**Take, eat; this is my body.**" (Emphasis added)

John 6:48 (Jesus said) I am the bread of life.

We are called to partake of the bread because it represents Christ Himself, meaning we are to partake of Him and His lifestyle, which is the Fruit of the Spirit.

Matthew 4:4 "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

Here, "bread" signifies sustenance, and "live" means living the Christ Life —experiencing our Eternal Life by walking in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16). We may "live" physically through nourishment, but true "living" comes from spiritual growth through taking in the Word of God and obedience to Him. Such an obedient believer "lives" the Christ Life.

John 6:31 Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' " ³² Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from

heaven, but my Father gives you **the true bread from heaven.** ³³ **For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.** ³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” ³⁵ Jesus said to them, “**I am the bread of life**; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (Emphasis added)

Jesus differentiates the manna in the wilderness from the “true bread from heaven.” The manna provided only sustenance, whereas the true bread gives life, referring to eternal life filled with vitality both in eternity and as the Christ Life lived here on earth.

The Golden Menorah

The second item in the Holy Place is the Golden Menorah, or lampstand. It was required to be serviced continuously, never allowing it to run out of oil or the flames to go out. It was the only source of light inside the Tabernacle, just as Jesus is the only source of light in this world.

John 8:12 Jesus spoke to them, saying, “**I am the light of the world.** Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (Emphasis added)

Jesus says He is the light of the world, meaning He brings illumination, understanding, and righteousness where there is the darkness of sin. Follow Him, and you will not walk in darkness.

On Pentecost, “tongues of fire” symbolizing the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles.

Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ **And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.** ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Emphasis added)

The divided tongues of fire, likened to the Golden Menorah in the Tabernacle/Temple, are meant to light up a darkened world. That requires

“oil” within us to keep the light burning. That “oil” is the indwelling and unquenched Holy Spirit. It is our responsibility as priests to keep our lamp filled with oil.

Matthew 5:14 “**You are the light of the world.** A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, **let your light shine before others,** so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.
(Emphasis added)

Jesus also says that **believers are the light of the world.** We are not to hide our light but to reveal it to others. “Let your light shine before others” means displaying the Christ Life in our own lives as ambassadors for Christ, giving glory to the Father. Inflow, Outflow, **Overflow.**

John 1:4 In him was life, and **the life was the light of men.** ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
(Emphasis added)

The light is the Fruit of the Spirit within us, shining like a beacon on a hill. As the Golden Lampstand was required to remain burning, we must not let that light within us go out through sin.

But where did the fire come from to light the Lampstand? From the Altar of Sacrifice, of course. No sacrifice, no Spirit. The Cross comes first, then Pentecost after.

Isaiah 6:6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: “**Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.**” (Emphasis added)

The Lampstand was made of hammered gold. Jesus was “hammered” on the Cross.

Exodus 37:17 He also made the lampstand of pure gold. He made the lampstand of hammered work. Its base, its stem, its cups, its calyxes, and its flowers were of one piece with it. ¹⁸ And there were six branches

going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it; ¹⁹ three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on one branch, and three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on the other branch—so for the six branches going out of the lampstand. ²⁰ And on the lampstand itself were four cups made like almond blossoms, with their calyxes and flowers, ²¹ and a calyx of one piece with it under each pair of the six branches going out of it. ²² Their calyxes and their branches were of one piece with it. The whole of it was a single piece of hammered work of pure gold. ²³ And he made its seven lamps and its tongs and its trays of pure gold. ²⁴ He made it and all its utensils out of a talent of pure gold.

Note the mention of almond blossoms. Why almond blossoms? Almond trees bloom before all other trees, even in the dead of winter. They symbolize bringing life from death. In winter, the almond tree is the one tree that has life amid the deadness of winter.

Consider also Aaron's rod that budded, a dead stick that brought forth life, just as the Cross was a "dead stick" that brought forth life.

The oil used in the Lampstand was pure olive oil. Before His crucifixion, Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mt of Olives, where the olives were grown and pressed to extract the oil. Like the olives, Jesus was pressed by the weight of what He was about to face, and His sweat fell as drops of blood.

Altar of Incense

Next, we encounter the Altar of Incense at the rear of the Holy Place, just before the veil that separates it from the Holy of Holies. The Altar of Incense is used to burn incense, and the rising sweet smoke symbolizes our prayers carried up before God, who resides behind the veil in the Holy of Holies.

Psalm 141:2 Let my prayer be counted as incense before you

Revelation 8:4 and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

The only thing to go behind the veil daily was the smoke from the burning incense. It permeated the air inside the Tabernacle. Our prayers go behind the veil into the physical presence of God.

Where did the fire for the Altar of Incense come from? It was taken from the coals of the Altar of Sacrifice outside, where the blood of the sacrificial animals had dripped. Those coals were used to carry incense (our prayers) before God. This means our prayers are brought before God through the sacrifice of Jesus.

The Ark of the Covenant

The Ark of the Covenant is the only item behind the veil in the Holy of Holies. It is made of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold, symbolizing Christ's humanity and divinity. Inside are three objects.

Hebrews 9:4 having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was **a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant.** ⁵ Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat... (Emphasis added)

The three items represent the failures of a sinful nation and God's judgment against them. Israel failed when they worshiped the golden calf while Moses was receiving the tablets of the Ten Commandments, which he broke upon discovering their idolatry. The second failure was Israel's complaining about the manna. The third failure concerned Aaron's rod and their questioning of God's authority. These three items went into the Ark of the Covenant.

The Mercy Seat was on top, covering these three articles and sealing them inside, thereby indicating that mercy triumphs over judgment.

Just as cherubim guarded the way back into the Garden, they are embroidered on the veil that guards the way into the Holy of Holies. Death awaited anyone who went into the Holy of Holies except the High Priest and only on Yom Kippur.

Man tried to reach God, but sin stood in the way. Instead, God became man as a mediator, taking on all man's failures to allow access to God in the Heavenly Tabernacle.

1 Timothy 2:5 For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus

Hebrews 9:15 Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.

Most acacia trees have long thorns, and it is likely that the crown of thorns was made from acacia branches. The thorns represent the curse on mankind because of Adam's sin, as seen in Genesis 3. The curse fell upon Jesus.

Inside the Tabernacle, the sweet aroma of incense and the scent of fresh-baked bread stood in stark contrast to the foul odors of the sacrificed animals and the stench of decaying blood outside. The real treasure was inside.

In the outer court, the elements were made of bronze. In the inner court, they were made of gold, signifying a progression in holiness as one approaches presence.

The Layout of the Wilderness Camp

When camping in the wilderness, the Israelites were given strict instructions for the layout of the campsite. The Tabernacle was in the center, with the twelve tribes carefully arranged around it in the four cardinal directions: East, West, North, and South.

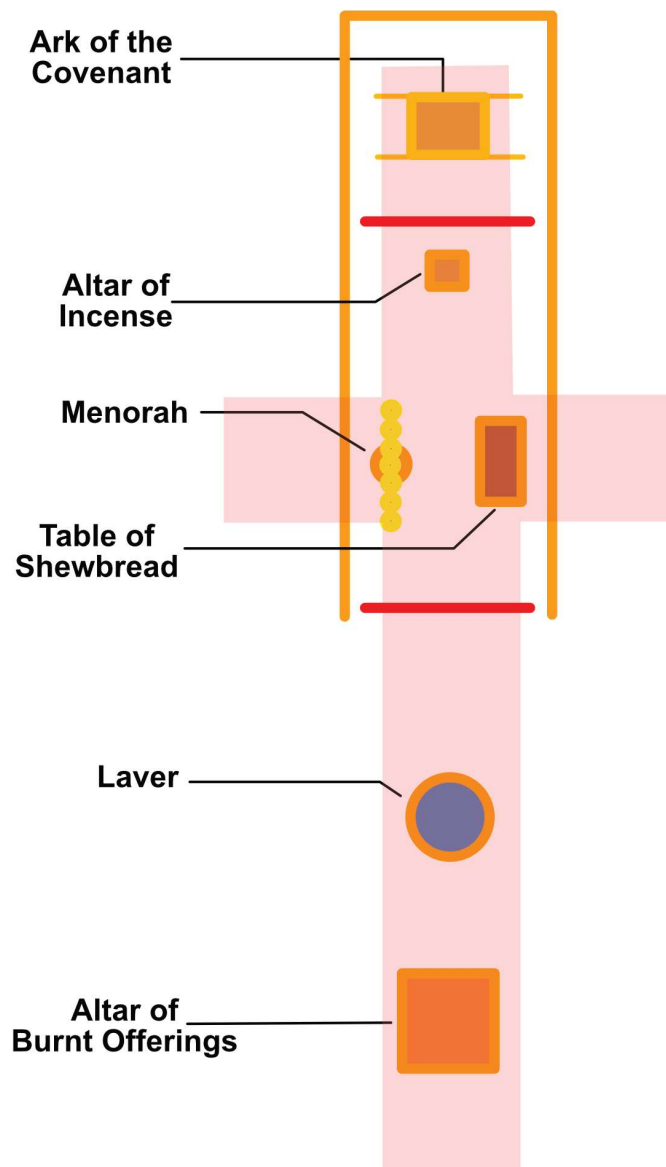
The Tabernacle's entrance faced east. The three tribes to the east were Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. To the west were Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin. To the north were Dan, Asher, and Naphtali. To the south were Reuben, Simeon, and Gad. (Numbers 2) It is suggested that, when viewed from above, the camp's layout may have resembled a cross.

The tent itself was made of goat and lamb skins and was nothing special to look at from the outside.

Isaiah 53:2 ...he (Jesus) had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.

Jesus didn't look like someone from a Hollywood casting call. Nothing about His appearance drew you to Him. The "draw" was His message and His life.

When one considers the placement of the elements in the Tabernacle, we can also see a cross.



Summary

The Tabernacle and all its associated elements pointed in some way to the ministry of Jesus Christ as the Mediator and Messiah. It should have been obvious to the Israelites that there was a need for a sacrifice to whom our sins would be imputed and who would be judged in our place. Everything about the Tabernacle/Temple pointed to this, yet they, especially the spiritual leadership, missed the point. Furthermore, Isaiah 53 spells it all out in detail that they should have been familiar with. Despite all these “hints” and “types,” they missed Him.