



Symbolism

The tabernacle and its enclosure are made up of several elements. As we so often find with God, the arrangement on construction of these elements is not casual or arbitrary – each part of the tabernacle complex reveals something to us. This is more than a tent in the desert; it is a detailed picture of God and his relationship with us. Let's have a closer look.

The Courtyard (Ex 27:9-19, Ex 38:9-20)

- Separated from the campsite by a white linen fence, 100 cubits along the north and south sides, 50 cubits east and west.
- The height of the curtain (5 cubits, 7.5' or 2.5m) prevented those on the outside seeing anything except the tabernacle tent itself – the direct dwelling place of God.
- The curtain represented purity, and reminds us that our lack of purity creates a barrier between us and God.

The Gate (Ex 27:16, Ex 38:18-19)

- The only access through the outer fence was via the gate – this was 20 cubits wide (30', 10m). This meant that men could only come to worship God in one way, rather than however they pleased. Notice that Jesus says "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved" and, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me" (John 10:9 and 14:6). For us, the gate represents Christ, the only way to enter into relationship with God, and to worship him.
- The gate is the first example of the use of blue, purple and scarlet. These colours are obtained from shellfish and worm eggs, and so are difficult to make (and are expensive, too). As a consequence, they were the colours of royalty. Additionally, red represents blood, reminding us of sacrifice.
- The gate is brightly coloured, in contrast to the white linen fence – it is easy to see. Made of linen, it would also have been easy to lift, providing easy access to everyone in the camp.

The Altar of Burnt Offerings (Ex 27:1-8, Ex 38:1-7)

- In Hebrew, the altar was known as the 'slaughter place'.
- In Latin, the word '*alta*' means 'high place' (a term that appears in various bible translations when talking about places of worship).
- The altar was made of acacia wood, overlaid with bronze. The utensils were also made of bronze. Bronze usually represents judgement on sin in the bible (see the bronze snake, Numbers 21:9) – as an alloy it was neither pure nor precious.
- The altar stood inside the gate – it was the first thing that anyone entering the courtyard would see. Without sacrifice, no further progress towards God could be made. We are able to approach God so freely now because Jesus has taken the place of the altar – his sacrifice has already been made.

Basin for Washing (Ex 30:17-21, Ex 38:8)

- Made of bronze (see the note on the altar), the basin stood between the altar and the tent. The bronze for the basin came from the mirrors (highly polished bronze, not glass) of the women who served at the entrance.



- Although the sacrifice had already been made, the priests were still required to wash their hands and feet before approaching God. For us, although Jesus' sacrifice covers our sin, we still need to prepare ourselves to meet with God, treating him with the respect and deference he deserves. At the last supper, Jesus washes his disciples feet, reminding them of their ongoing need for cleansing (John 13:10).

The Table (Ex 25:23-29, Ex 37:10-16)

- As it was situated inside the tent (the holy place), the table was covered in gold, not bronze – this is true for all of the objects found inside the tabernacle structure. Gold symbolises purity, and is associated with things that are holy to God.
- On the table were 12 loaves of bread, representing the tribes of Israel (and also, as in Revelation, representing the 12 disciples and the new covenant with God through Jesus).

The Lampstand (Ex 25:31-39, Ex 37:17-24)

- The lampstand ('menorah') consisted of a central shaft, with three branches extending out on either side. It would hold 7 lamps – seven is the number of completeness in the bible.
- Jesus described himself as 'the light', saying, "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). The lampstand in the tabernacle was to be constantly lit (Leviticus 24:2), representing God's continuous presence with Israel, and Jesus continuous presence with us, through the Holy Spirit.
- The lampstand was made from pure gold (and not plated, like the other objects) – it can be seen to represent Jesus, being both pure and complete. John's Revelation opens with Jesus standing among seven lampstands (Revelation 1:12-13)
- When Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches" he may also be referencing the lampstand (John 15:5).

The Altar of Incense (Ex 30:1-5, Ex 37:25-28)

- The third of the golden items inside the tabernacle. As with the table, the altar was acacia wood covered in gold. It was positioned before the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the tent.
- Incense is representative of prayer and praise (see psalm 141:2, and Revelation 5:8 and 8:3) – it is through these that we are able to draw near to God.
- The altar itself also reminds us that it is Jesus who stands between us and God as mediator, allowing our prayers to be heard.

The Tabernacle (Ex 26:1-37, Ex 36:8-38)

- The walls of the tabernacle were made of panels of acacia wood, overlaid with gold. Each panel was 10 cubits high and 1.5 cubits wide (that's 15' by 2'3", or 5m by 0.75m). They were held together by five crossbars on each side.
- The walls rested on silver footings. These were made from the silver collected from the Israelites (Ex 30:11-16) as atonement money. Notice that, symbolically, the pure walls of the tabernacle rest on the

