BELIEFS AND INTERPRETATIONS
Towards a Theology of the Tabernacle and Its Furniture

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It has long been noted that the priestly instructions about the construction of the Tabernacle exceed the bounds of what would be expected. The sheer volume of textual detail that is lavished on this structure is not the common way of proceeding for the priestly writer. Generally he is prolix only when a theme is being introduced for the first time; should the occasion warrant a return, the priestly writer is more than capable of abbreviation. This general pattern of composition is not followed in regard to the Tabernacle. Especially striking is the tendency to repeat the list of appurtenances that are found within the Tabernacle whenever there is occasion to do so (Exod 30:26–30; 31:7–11; 35:11–19; 39:33–41; 40:2–15; and 40:18–33). No fewer than six times are these items listed; the last three are perhaps the most striking, as they occur one right after the other. Indeed, one could say that the account of the Tabernacle ends with a concatenation of three lists of the materials for the Tabernacle, with only enough extraneous text to keep the thread of a narrative from disappearing altogether.

As Haran remarked, “The priestly writers find [this] subject so fascinating that…[they are] prompted to recapitulate the list of its appurtenances time and again. Their tendency to indulge in technicalities and stereotyped repetitions has here reached its furthest limits.” I would suggest that the furniture of the Tabernacle possessed something of the very being of the God of Israel. As such it bears careful repetition

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2 Compare, for example, the law regarding how to offer the sin and holocaust offerings in Lev 5:8–9 and 10a; the former law is long and detailed because none of the previous chapters have dealt with this type of offering; the latter is abbreviated because a law already exists to which it can refer (Lev 1:14–17).