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MINISTRIES

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Was God’s Tabernacle a Circle?

In the book of Exodus, God describes the dimensions of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, which is the place where his presence dwelled and the people of Israel came to worship him. The plain language of Exodus seems to indicate that both this Tabernacle and the courtyard that surrounded it were laid out in a rectangular formation. However, there is a dissident view that has grown in popularity recently, that the Tabernacle was laid out in a circular formation instead. In this teaching, we’re going to compare this view to the Scriptures and see if it has any merit.

Before we start, we should explain why this issue is worth examining. Who cares what the shape of the Tabernacle was? Why does that matter? There’s two things we can say in response. First, God commanded his people to construct the Tabernacle in a very particular way, so it mattered to him. That alone is enough to make it worth talking about. But second, this issue is significant because it creates questions about the reliability of the Bible. The Scriptures seem to be quite clear that the Tabernacle and its courtyard were rectangular:

Exodus 26:18-22

You shall make the frames for the Tabernacle: twenty frames for the south side; and forty bases of silver you shall make under the twenty frames, two bases under one frame for its two tenons, and two bases under the next frame for its two tenons; and for the second side of the Tabernacle, on the north side twenty frames, and their forty bases of silver, two bases under one frame, and two bases under the next frame. And for the rear of the Tabernacle westward you shall make six frames.

Exodus 27:18

The length of the court shall be a hundred cubits, the breadth fifty, and the height five cubits, with hangings of fine twined linen and bases of bronze.

In fact, literally every Bible translation depicts the Tabernacle as a rectangular structure, as you can see:

Exodus 27:18a

ASV: “The length of the court shall be a hundred cubits, and the breadth fifty every where...”

ESV: “The length of the court shall be a hundred cubits, the breadth fifty...”

1599 Geneva Bible: “The length of the court shall be an hundred cubits, and the breadth fifty at either end...”

ISV: “The length of the court is to be 100 cubits, the width 50 cubits...”

JPS: “The length of the enclosure shall be a hundred cubits, and the width fifty throughout...”

KJV: “The length of the court shall be an hundred cubits, and the breadth fifty every where...”

NASB: “The length of the courtyard shall be a hundred cubits, and the width fifty throughout...”

NCV: “The courtyard must be one hundred fifty feet long and seventy-five feet wide...”

NET: “The length of the courtyard is to be 150 feet and the width 75 feet...”

NIV: “The courtyard shall be a hundred cubits long and fifty cubits wide...”

NKJV: “The length of the court shall be one hundred cubits, the width fifty throughout...”

RSV: “The length of the court shall be a hundred cubits, the breadth fifty...”

Wycliffe Bible: “The great porch shall occupy an hundred cubits in length, fifty in breadth...”

YLT: “The length of the court [is] a hundred by the cubit, and the breadth fifty by fifty...”

So, if the Tabernacle was really a circle, then every single English translation, both Jewish and Christian, has gotten it wrong, which raises some serious questions about the credibility of those English translations. On the other hand, if the translators got it right, then that raises questions about the people who claim that the Tabernacle was a circle. If they can't get that simple detail right, then people will likely question their credibility when it comes to very serious matters, like sin, repentance, and salvation. This would harm their witness as representatives of God's word. So, while it may seem like a trivial thing, this isn't an issue that we want to get wrong, and certainly not something that we want to spread around if it is false. It is worth checking into to see if it has any merit.

So, what do proponents of this theory say when they are confronted with the fact that every Bible translation says that the Tabernacle was a rectangle? Well, Andrew Hoy, the man who came up with the circular Tabernacle idea, says that translators “give preference to their preconceived notions while translating the Hebrew” (<https://project314.org/learn-about/Tabernacle-discovery>). Basically, he claims that the English translators were lazy and relied on tradition rather than carefully parsing through the Hebrew text that describes the Tabernacle.

Well, let's test that claim by looking at the Hebrew text that describes the Tabernacle. Specifically, let's look at the verse we've been citing that describes the courtyard:

Exodus 27:18

The length of the court shall be a hundred cubits, the breadth fifty, and the height five cubits, with hangings of fine twined linen and bases of bronze.

Earlier in Exodus 27, we are told that the south and north sides of this courtyard were 100 cubits long (Exodus 27:9, 11), while the west and east sides were 50 cubits broad (Exodus 27:12, 13). On the surface, it sure sounds like this is describing a rectangle with four sides, whose dimensions are 100 cubits by 50 cubits. However, Hoy claims that the Hebrew says otherwise. He says, “the dimensions for the courtyard are described as being exactly 100 cubits long (i.e., diameter), with the north and south portions each measuring 50 cubits ‘wide’ (i.e., radius).” So, according to Hoy, the 100 cubits is not the length of a rectangle, but the diameter of a circle, and the 50 cubits is not the width of a rectangle, but the radius of a circle, which is, naturally, half of its diameter. So, what does the Hebrew in this verse say?

This verse uses two key Hebrew terms: one is *orech* (Strong’s H748), which is translated “length,” but which Hoy claims should instead be translated “diameter.” The other is *rochav* (Strong’s H7337), which is translated “breadth,” but which Hoy claims should instead be translated “radius.” So, the question is, how should these words be translated in Exodus 27:18? Should they be “length” and “width,” or should they be “diameter” and “radius”? Let’s take a look at the other places that these terms are used and see if there is any reason to translate them one way or the other.

Exodus 25:10

They shall make an ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length [*orech*], a cubit and a half its breadth [*rochav*], and a cubit and a half its height.

Here we have the terms *orech* and *rochav* being used to describe the dimensions of the ark of the covenant. These same words are then used to describe the cover that was placed on top of the ark:

Exodus 25:17

You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length [*orech*], and a cubit and a half its breadth [*rochav*].

In these verses, the words *orech* and *rochav* must be referring to the dimensions of a rectangle. If we were to translate these words as “diameter” and “radius,” as Hoy does in Exodus 27:18, then we would have a spherical ark of the covenant with a spherical cover on top of it, which would be absurd. But that’s just one example, so let’s keep looking. We also see the words *orech* and *rochav* used to describe the table of showbread:

Exodus 25:23

You shall make a table of acacia wood. Two cubits shall be its length [*orech*], a cubit its breadth [*rochav*], and a cubit and a half its height.

It would be rather difficult to balance twelve loaves of bread (see Leviticus 24:5-6) on top of a spherical table, so it seems sensible to say that this was a rectangular item as well—and again, it is described using the same Hebrew words for length and width that are used to describe the courtyard. Next, we see these words used to describe the curtains that covered the Tabernacle:

Exodus 26:1-2

Moreover, you shall make the Tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet yarns; you shall make them with cherubim skillfully worked into them. The

length [*orech*] of each curtain shall be twenty-eight cubits, and the breadth [*rochav*] of each curtain four cubits; all the curtains shall be the same size

Exodus 26:7-8

You shall also make curtains of goats' hair for a tent over the Tabernacle; eleven curtains shall you make. The length [*orech*] of each curtain shall be thirty cubits, and the breadth [*rochav*] of each curtain four cubits. The eleven curtains shall be the same size.

It's clear that these curtains were large rectangular strips, not circles or ovals, and again, the words used to describe their dimensions are the same words used to describe the dimensions of the courtyard. We further see these words used to describe the wooden frames that formed the skeleton of the Tabernacle:

Exodus 26:15-16

You shall make upright frames for the Tabernacle of acacia wood. Ten cubits shall be the length [*orech*] of a frame, and a cubit and a half the breadth [*rochav*] of each frame.

These wooden frames, once again, were clearly rectangular, not circular. Finally, we see the words *orech* and *rochav* used to describe the dimensions of the altar of sacrifice and the altar of incense, which are specifically said to be squares:

Exodus 27:1

You shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long [*orech*] and five cubits broad [*rochav*]. The altar shall be square, and its height shall be three cubits.

Exodus 30:1-2

You shall make an altar on which to burn incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. A cubit shall be its length [*orech*], and a cubit its breadth [*rochav*]. It shall be square, and two cubits shall be its height. Its horns shall be of one piece with it.

So, every rectangular item in the Tabernacle is described using the terms *orech* and *rochav*, the same words that describe the length and width of the courtyard. In the context of the Tabernacle, these words are always used to describe the length and width of a rectangle, and never used to describe the diameter and radius of a circle. But that's not all; as it turns out, these Hebrew words describe the dimensions of a rectangle every place in Scripture that they are used, regardless of the context. They are used to describe Noah's ark (Genesis 6:15), king Og's bed (Deuteronomy 3:11), Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:20), Solomon's palace (1 Kings 7:2, 6), the altar to Solomon's temple (2 Chronicles 4:1), the rooms in Ezekiel's prophetic temple (Ezekiel 40:7), and the courtyard to that same temple (Ezekiel 40:47). In every case, these words are used to describe the dimensions of a rectangle, and in no case are they used to describe a circle. It stands to reason that these Hebrew words are also describing a rectangle when they are used to describe the length and width of the Tabernacle courtyard.

However, there is still more we can say. There are, in fact, Hebrew words that are consistently used to describe circles. The Hebrew word *agol* (Strong's H5696) means "round." It is used, for example, to describe some of the pedestals that held the water baths in Solomon's temple:

1 Kings 7:31

Its opening was within a crown that projected upward one cubit. Its opening was round [*agol*], as a pedestal is made, a cubit and a half deep. At its opening there were carvings, and its panels were square, not round [*agol*].

We can see that this term “round” is clearly contrasted with “square,” so Hebrew has a word to describe round things. Hebrew also has a word for “circumference,” *sovav* (Strong’s H5437) which we see describing the circular basin in Solomon’s temple:

1 Kings 7:23

Then he made the sea of cast metal. It was round, ten cubits from brim to brim, and five cubits high, and a line of thirty cubits measured its circumference [*sovav*].

These words, *agol* and *sovav*, are consistently used to describe round objects and curved paths throughout the Scriptures (see also Genesis 2:11; 37:7; Numbers 21:4; Deuteronomy 32:10; Joshua 6:4; 1 Kings 7:15, 24; 2 Kings 6:15; Job 40:22; Psalm 88:17; Ecclesiastes 1:6). What is important for our purposes is that neither of these words are used in the description of the Tabernacle. In other words, God could have simply and easily said that the Tabernacle and its courtyard were circles by using these Hebrew words. For example, he could have said that the Tabernacle courtyard was round, one hundred cubits from edge to edge, just like he says in 1 Kings describing the round metal sea, but he didn’t. Instead, he used the words *orech* and *rochav*, which are literally always used to describe rectangles.

So, the reason that every English Bible translator has consistently depicted the Tabernacle as a rectangle is not because of blind adherence to tradition, but it is because the Hebrew in Exodus says that the Tabernacle was a rectangle. Translators are human and they do sometimes get things wrong, but most of the time they are honest and they do their due diligence. They were right to depict the Tabernacle as a rectangle in Exodus.

There are two more points that we want to briefly cover. One is, the proponents of the circular Tabernacle theory have built models showing how it is possible to arrange the Tabernacle components to form a circular structure. We would like to point out that this doesn’t prove anything about how the Tabernacle was actually put together. Raw materials can be arranged in any number of configurations—think about how many different shapes of houses can be constructed out of the same quantities of concrete, lumber and plywood. Furthermore, scale models of rectangular Tabernacles have also been constructed, so it is not as if the circular model is the only practical way to arrange the materials. In the end, what matters is the blueprint, the instructions for how to put the pieces together. That blueprint is found in Exodus, and Exodus clearly describes a rectangle.

The second point is, the proponents of the circular model theory have mockingly referred to the rectangular Tabernacle in various ways, calling it a “crude shack” or a “shoebox” (<https://project314.org/learn-about/Tabernacle-engineers>). These criticisms, however, are entirely meaningless, because they are based on a person’s aesthetic preferences, not on the Scriptures. We could just as easily refer to the circular model as a “circus tent” or a “turtle shell;” again, it doesn’t matter how we feel about it, the only thing that matters is what the scriptures say. Whether we like how it looks or not, the Scriptures say that the Tabernacle was a rectangle.

So, in the end, there is no merit to the idea that the Hebrew in Exodus says that the Tabernacle was a circle. The Hebrew words used for “length” and “width” always describe a rectangle, and the Hebrew words that describe circles are not used at all. For this reason, every Bible translation has consistently portrayed the Tabernacle as a rectangle. Those who propagate this baseless circular theory are seriously harming their own credibility concerning matters of God’s word, and we would encourage you not to be fooled by it.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

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