

LDS Perspectives Podcast

Episode 53: Learning from the Jewish Tabernacle

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This is not a verbatim transcript.

Wording and grammar has been modified for clarity.

Laura Hales: Hello. This is Laura Harris Hales. I'm here today with Daniel Smith as part of our Young Scholars Series. Daniel has a master's degree in Public Administration, but his true passion is the visualization of biblical history. Daniel is the creator of the popular "Messages of Christ" YouTube channel and blogs at RedeemerofIsrael.org, as well as making videos for Book of Mormon Central and assisting with the Virtual Scriptures project.

Last year he gave his first academic speech, and it was quite a debut. He was the keynote speaker at the Temple on Mount Zion Conference for the Interpreter Foundation. Today we're going to talk about the practices in the ancient Israelite tabernacle, and how they intersect with current Christian beliefs. Welcome, Daniel.

Daniel Smith: Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Laura Hales: As I mentioned in the introduction, you've made a number of videos that you've posted on your YouTube channel called Messages of Christ. One of them is about the ancient tabernacle. Another one shows you making high priests' clothing. Why would you decide to make as authentic a replica as you could of what the high priests' wore?

Daniel Smith: I, for many years, have been a Sunday School teacher. Because I am a visual person, I love to be able to bring in visual content to my classes. Many, many years ago I started making some of my first replicas. Most of them are pretty small, simple, and basic things. As I started learning about the clothing of the high priest, I became fascinated with the symbolism as it relates to Jesus Christ and the beauty that is within the clothing. I thought it would be cool to see what other people have done, so I started looking online. I was surprised at how few people had actually replicated it in an authentic way.

One of the reasons that it's so difficult is because of the fact it has to have red, blue, purple, gold, and white all intermixed into one piece of fabric — for both the ephod and the breastplate. Well, you don't just go to JoAnn's Fabric store and request "high priest fabric" for an outfit like this. I actually had to come up with a way to make it myself. I first started to make thread on a rope block on this huge, long thing where I was spinning on different ends. That took way too long, so I actually created a Lego machine, which I have a YouTube video on, that spins all of the thread together into one single thread, which I then loomed.

Episode 53: Learning from the Jewish Tabernacle

As I put this together, I've been able to use this in many situations where I can teach the youth about the clothing of the high priest, and I have seen the impact that it has. First off, it just clicks where when you read it in the text, it just doesn't make sense. It's hard to understand, especially in the way the King James Version is written, but all of a sudden when you can put the clothing on, then it just makes sense. That's kind of how I got started into it.

Laura Hales: Why a Lego machine?

Daniel Smith: I loved Legos as a kid. That was just about the only toy that my parents bought for me. I thought through the whole process of how can I make thread, and that was just the most logical thing because my brain thinks many times in Lego forms. So it just not only made sense, but you can make a lot of changes to it. As I was working on it, I made probably ten iterations of the machine, so that all the gear ratios and everything would be correct. You have to get the spinning at the correct speed and everything so that the thread perfectly fits together and doesn't fall apart or get too twisted and things like that. Legos just made sense.

Laura Hales: It is mesmerizing. It does run like a professional piece of machinery. It's incredible.

Daniel Smith: I have to say that every time I present, especially to kids, they could care less that the high priest outfit took two years to construct. The thing they want to see is the Lego machine. Originally I was going to break it down because I had all the thread I needed. I've now realized that it's just a permanent part of the experience any time I teach about it.

Laura Hales: Why should we care about what went on in the ancient Israelite temple and the clothing of the high priest?

Daniel Smith: I would say first off and foremost is the focus it has on the Savior, and the incredible teachings that come out from the tabernacle and the clothing of the high priest. When you begin to understand the ancient tabernacle, in many ways the scriptures just open up in regards to the Atonement, the sacrifice of Jesus, even the way that things happened in relationship to the events of Holy Week, the Last Supper, and all of these different aspects. They just open up. We worship in modern-day temples, and I wouldn't say that we have a tabernacle experience, because it is different, but there's this aspect that there are symbols, special clothing that we wear, and rituals that we go through.

To me, I've found that one of the best ways to be able to learn, or one of the ways — there are many ways — but one of the best ways for me to learn about the endowment and about the temple itself is to first understand the tabernacle. As you understand the tabernacle, a lot of the things in the temple just click and they just make sense. I've also found it's an incredible resource to use to teach youth and adults where you can talk about the tabernacle. It allows you to be able to give kind of a structure, and for those who have been to the temple, it just clicks. "Oh

Episode 53: Learning from the Jewish Tabernacle

okay, I get what you're talking about." I don't even have to teach about the temple, but it's because I can almost use it as a floor plan or a blueprint for what we do today.

Laura Hales:

I have to tell you, when I was watching your video that was describing the vestments of the high priest, I stopped the video, went to my closet, opened my temple bag, and looked at my temple clothes.

Let's start with the clothing of the high priest. You mentioned earlier in the interview that each aspect of it can be seen as part of a call to Christ, His Atonement, and His redeeming power as viewed through Christian eyes. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Daniel Smith:

Sure. First off you have to understand, for those who may not be familiar with the role of the high priest, the high priest is taking the place of Israel. The Israelites built the golden calf. They sinned. God wanted them in His presence, but because they had sinned, and they were afraid to even enter His presence after seeing the lightning and thundering on Mount Zion, God said in essence, "Okay I will have somebody that will go on your behalf. The high priest will be the one that represents you. You don't want to come into my presence. You have sinned. You can't come in because you're unworthy. Because of that the high priest will go in your stead." So the high priest would symbolically, every year, on the Day of Atonement, go through the tabernacle and go all the way back into the Holy of Holies where he would be symbolically representing this process of returning back to the presence of God.

The clothing pointed to this aspect: that he is the representative, or the one that is representing, Israel. The high priest is wearing clothing that represents this aspect of symbolically being the representative of Israel. He first has the breastplate. That would be probably one of the first things you would notice. On the breastplate are twelve stones with the twelve tribes of Israel. There's also two stones on the shoulders, and on each stone are six names of each total of twelve tribes. The twelve tribes are symbolically carried on the shoulders of the high priest and also against the heart.

I remember when I was at one of these tabernacle camps, and I asked the kids what they thought that represented. I loved what one of the kids said. This is where I think the power of using symbols and visual aids for youth comes, because it clicked for them. He said, "It shows us that Jesus Christ not only cares about us or loves us — we are against His heart, but He also carries our weight." I think a lot of times we think just about the fact that the Lord carries our sins. Sure He loves us, but it's not something that we think about. To me, it's dual. His Atonement is both that he carries our weight — the weight of our sins, the weight of our transgressions, the weight of sorrows — but also, He loves us. This is powerful symbolism right off the bat with those two aspects.

Episode 53: Learning from the Jewish Tabernacle

Laura Hales: What was surprising to me is that when I think “breastplate,” I think the breastplate that Joseph Smith got from Moroni, but that was made out of a metal. This is the fabric that you were talking about that you recreated with your specially twisted yard, so it is not a hard breastplate.

Daniel Smith: Yes, correct. It really is a symbolic breastplate. A *ritual* breastplate, you could say. It is just fabric. To kind of get an understanding of it, it’s actually a double piece of fabric that’s folded in half. In that fold is the Urim and Thummim. It’s stored inside there.

Laura Hales: What else do we find on the garments of the high priest?

Daniel Smith: The fabric is another really interesting thing, which is why I wanted it to be as authentic as possible. Many of the people that have tried to replicate the fabric, as I mentioned before, just go to Joann’s and buy a piece of fabric that kind of has some colors in it, but it doesn’t have all of the colors in it. Well, each of the colors is extremely significant. For example, you first have red, which can represent mortality or death. You have blue, which represents Heaven. You have purple, which represents royalty. You have gold, which represents divinity, and you have white, which represents purity. All of these different colors represent attributes of Christ.

I find it interesting that as the stones, which are the most expensive part — and trust me, it was the most expensive part to not only purchase but also the most difficult to find. It took me probably a year and a half just to find a stone cutter that would cut the stones for me. So the fact that these stones are fastened — the most expensive part to this beautiful fabric — that represents the attributes of Christ to me again. It is another aspect of that symbolism where they are fastened.

We’re not perfect because of our works or because of the things that we do. We don’t really deserve that location, but that’s where Christ wants to place us. He sees our value. He sees us as precious gemstones, and He places us, or fastens us, to these symbolic attributes of Him. To me, this symbolism of the clothing of the high priest shows how we can symbolically become one with Christ — fastened to His attributes — and then gaining His perfection and attributes.

Laura Hales: The high priest didn’t walk around quietly in the tabernacle, did he?

Daniel Smith: No, he also had bells on the bottom of the hem. There was a blue robe that he also wore underneath the ephod and the breastplate. These bells would make noise everywhere he went. I love the fact that you visually see the high priest; you hear him. He is stunning in the colors because in ancient times, these colors would not be common. Today we have all these colors and we don’t think twice. In ancient times, these would be expensive, rare colors. He stands out in many ways.

Laura Hales: Especially if you’re in the Sinai desert for 40 years.

Daniel Smith: Yes.

Episode 53: Learning from the Jewish Tabernacle

Laura Hales: Can you briefly describe the layout of the tabernacle and the kind of things that went on in different parts of the building or structure?

Daniel Smith: Yeah. The first thing that you would come to is the gate. The gate would be this fabric that interestingly enough is made of the same colors as the clothing of the high priest, possibly even the same type of fabric. We don't know for sure. The Bible doesn't give us all the details. It's red, blue, purple, and white, but not the gold. That's the one color that's missing from the gate and also the veils. As you go through the gate, you would come into a wide-open court that would be 75 feet by 150 feet. This was basically an outer structure; a white fabric fence that would surround the entire tabernacle. The outside part would be where the altar of sacrifice would be placed and also the laver of water. Obviously this would be where the Israelites would be able to come into this area, but not any further.

This was the area designed for the sacrifices. You would bring your animal and then place your hands on the head of the animal, which transfers your sins symbolically to that animal. Then you kill the animal, and then the priest would burn various parts of the animal as part of the sacrifice.

Laura Hales: Would they have to be ritually pure to enter this area?

Daniel Smith: Yes.

Laura Hales: They would do that by bathing in a mikveh before?

Daniel Smith: Correct.

Laura Hales: After that, we have the priest area. That was called the holy place?

Daniel Smith: Well, you'd have the laver, which would technically be part of that priest area, and that would be where the Levites, priest, and high priest could be. It's still part of the outer court. The laver is outside, so we haven't entered the tabernacle as of yet, but the laver is only used for the priest. It's a ritual washing that they would be doing here. They didn't actually wash the animals, or blood, or things like that. This was a place where they would be ritually washed, and also anointed, before being prepared to be clothed, and also before entering the temple or the tabernacle. Also, even just as simple as before being prepared to be able to officiate in sacrifices. They would be ritually washed before each of these different aspects to be prepared. The way — there's a couple of different ways — but the main way on a daily basis would be that they would wash their hands and their feet. Their hands representing their actions and their feet the path that they are taking.

Laura Hales: Then comes the holy place. Am I correct?

Daniel Smith: Correct. We would go into the holy place. As you would go through, you would go into a structure. This structure would be 45 feet long by 15 feet wide and 15 feet tall. That would be the full structure. The actual holy place would be less than that. It would be 30 feet long. You would go

Episode 53: Learning from the Jewish Tabernacle

through another gate that would be the same type of fabric as the gate on the outside. When you go into this, there would be three items. You have the table of showbread, the menorah, and the altar of incense.

Laura Hales: Is this the same menorah that we see on Hanukkah tables?

Daniel Smith: No. It's an interesting thing because we call them menorahs, but it actually would be a hanukkiah. A hanukkiah is the lamp stand used for Hanukkah, and a menorah is actually what would be in the temple. The menorah has seven branches. The hanukkiah has nine branches.

Laura Hales: The menorah is quite large too, is it not?

Daniel Smith: Yeah. We don't know the exact size. The Bible tells us the weight, but it doesn't tell us the size. It's believed to be around five to six feet. It could have been smaller. Again, depending on how they used that weight, basically. Again, we just know the weight, but not the actual height; but it is still very large.

Laura Hales: Then there's the place that just the high priest can go on the Day of Atonement: the Holy of Holies.

Daniel Smith: Correct.

Laura Hales: What happens there, Daniel?

Daniel Smith: The Holy of Holies has no light. To step back one step further, the menorah is the only light in the tabernacle. You could say there are two rooms really in the tabernacle, the holy place, which is where the priest can go. Not Levites, but the priest can go there. Then the high priest can go into the Holy of Holies. The menorah is in the holy place, not the Holy of Holies. There's no physical light in the Holy of Holies, and the only piece of furniture that is actually in the Holy of Holies is the Ark of the Covenant. The high priest only could go into this room on one day of the year, on the Day of Atonement, which is in fall — generally about October-ish time period. He can go into the Holy of Holies on that day of year. Interestingly enough, when he went in, he only wore white. He didn't wear all of the fancy, what they call the "Golden Vestments." He would only be wearing white.

He would go in, and he would have blood in a bowl and some incense. There were different rituals, but in essence, he took and he sprinkled the blood on the Ark. Interestingly enough, that's where, if you understand the word atonement in the original Hebrew, it means to cover. *Kaphar* is to cover. This is an aspect of the Day of Atonement: he's taking blood and covering the Ark with blood. It's only by the blood of this sacrifice that he is able to enter the Holy of Holies because even he as the high priest, who yes, is authorized, but even he is unworthy to enter, so he must enter in by blood.

Laura Hales: He probably wanted to keep his nice clothes clean. Maybe?

Daniel Smith: I would imagine.

Episode 53: Learning from the Jewish Tabernacle

- Laura Hales:** I heard there's a lot of blood on the Day of Atonement.
- Daniel Smith:** There's a lot of blood period —
- Laura Hales:** Yes.
- Daniel Smith:** — in all of the rituals. On the Day of Atonement, there also is a lot of blood. The entire time, he would put blood on the horns of the Altar of Incense. He would sprinkle blood on the veil that —
- Laura Hales:** Separated the holy place and the Holy of Holies.
- Daniel Smith:** Correct. The veil that separates the holy place from the Holy of Holies. He would sprinkle blood on that and then on the Ark as well, so there would be sprinkling of blood.
- Laura Hales:** We talked about the different elements in the tabernacle. What are some of the Christian symbolisms that have been attributed to these different elements? For instance, the gate.
- Daniel Smith:** You think about it: these colors again representing the attributes of Christ. In the gospel of John, He actually calls Himself the gate, or the door in some translations. So we must go through Jesus Christ, the Gate; that He is the one that is standing, you could say almost at each different part. Again, because He is represented in these colors, we must go through Him to go into the outer court. We must go through Him as we go into the holy place, and once again into the Holy of Holies.
- Laura Hales:** The menorah.
- Daniel Smith:** The menorah was designed to almost look like a tree in a way. It had what the Bible describes as almond blossoms and other types of blossoms and flowers. The almond tree is very symbolic in that it is the first tree that blossoms in the springtime. It can be a symbol of Christ as He is the first fruits of those that rose from the dead. One of the things that I find really beautiful about it is that you would burn olive oil, and it would be the purest and the best olive oil. In fact, it's the first pressing so to speak of. When you would be making olive oil, that first pressing would be used for the temple. Again, olive oil, the Garden of Gethsemane. Gethsemane, which means "olive press" in Hebrew.
- You have this symbolism that from the Garden of Gethsemane, or the Atonement — the place where part of the Atonement took place — light comes forth and it lights our path. It lights everything that we do. It can also represent the Holy Ghost. As we enter into the holy place, we now receive this light that illuminates our path; that allows us to be able to go throughout our day, go throughout our lives, and have direction and guidance.
- Laura Hales:** Obviously if I were to approach a Rabbi and asked him, "So tell me what the symbolism of the tabernacle is," it would be a little bit different than what we've been talking about today. The New Testament authors, when they preached, they put new meanings onto the Old Testament scriptures.

Episode 53: Learning from the Jewish Tabernacle

In Hebrew 10:19 it says, “Having therefore brethren boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He hath consecrated for us through the veil, that is to say His flesh.” Talk to me a little bit about the relationship between the veil, the high priest, and the flesh of Jesus Christ as articulated by the early Christian teachers.

Daniel Smith:

Yeah, so one of the things that I love about the clothing of the high priest is the relationship that it appears to have to the veil and also to Jesus Christ. It seems to tie all of these different aspects together. First off, again the fabric of the veil that separates the Holy of Holies from the holy place is the same colors: red, purple, blue, and white, but not the gold. You have these attributes, again representing the attributes of Christ. The writer of the book of Hebrews, when he is teaching, talks about how the veil represents the flesh of Christ and that we must go through the veil obviously to be able to go into the Holy of Holies. He’s saying that we must go through the flesh that’s represented by it. You think about it that if the high priest is wearing in essence the same fabric — or very similar, minus the gold — of the veil, it’s almost as if the high priest is kind of standing there at the veil, and we must go through him.

Then if you think about it in the aspect of the sacrament, each Sabbath we partake of bread that is torn and we think about what happens to the veil at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is rent and twain from top to bottom. When Christ was being crucified, or in particular when he was whipped and scourged, the whip would actually tear pieces of flesh from His body. His flesh is being torn apart. The symbolism is that we must go through the torn flesh of Christ, or the torn veil, to be able to enter into the Holy of Holies.

Not only is the high priest representing Jesus Christ, who is the great High Priest who enters into the Holy of Holies and is a symbolically carrying all Israel with him, taking us back to God. He’s also the very blood that is brought in, to be allowed to come in, and He’s also the veil that separates us. We must go through all. He’s in every aspect. He is the high priest. He is the veil, and he is the blood of the sacrifice. All of those things are intricate parts of the Day of Atonement on which separates us from entering back into the presence of God.

Laura Hales:

We’ve teased a bit about these tabernacle camps. Can you tell us a little bit about the tabernacle camps, how they were started, and how you got involved?

Daniel Smith:

I got involved with the tabernacle camps originally because I was working on the clothing of the high priest. A stake in Idaho had been building a full scale replica of the tabernacle of Moses, and they had contacted Professor Don Perry at BYU and had been asking him for advice on the layout, materials, colors, all those type of things. He had been helping out quite extensively with the classes. I had contacted Brother Perry separately to ask him some questions about the Hebrew that is written on the crown of

Episode 53: Learning from the Jewish Tabernacle

the high priest, which says “Holiness to the Lord”. I wanted to make sure that I got the Hebrew right, so I emailed him.

I had emailed other professors, but Brother Perry was the first to respond. It was within about 24 hours, and he had CC'd me the email with another guy; I had no idea who it was. His name was Jason Cotter. It all kind of snowballed from there. Jason called me and was kind of teasing, so to speak, in the aspect that he said, “Okay we have this really cool project.” He didn't invite me directly. At the end of the conversation, I said, “Do you want me to come to your tabernacle camp?” He said, “Yes, we would love it.” I, of course, was thrilled to go. They taught the young men about the ancient Aaronic priesthood and how it related to today.

That was the first tabernacle camp, and since then there has been the California one that was last year, and that was two stakes. They've also had one in Florida. They had another additional one. I think it was about eight months ago or six months ago in California again, another one. They've also had a Michigan open house, which I just got back from a couple of weeks ago with the tabernacle.

Laura Hales: Those were open to all genders, correct?

Daniel Smith: Correct.

Laura Hales: You have a funny story related to some of the difficulties in recreating a genuine Israelite tabernacle. One of them involves getting an appropriate-sized menorah. Do you want to share that story?

Daniel Smith: So in Idaho, when they were trying to figure out all these different details, [the director] had seen that I obviously have interest in the tabernacle and the clothing of the high priest. Jason asked, “So where can we buy a menorah?” I said, “Well you're not going to find a menorah that's a five-foot menorah,” because he wanted a tall menorah. He's like, “Well there's got to be some online.” I said, “No, you're not going to find one.” He actually said, “Well, what would we do?” I said, “I can build it for you if you want.” I went home to my dad, and my dad had a friend who helped me build it, and we built a menorah for the Idaho stake.

Laura Hales: He also has a video of the process of doing that as well. Not an easy undertaking for sure.

Daniel Smith: No, it was not.

Laura Hales: Daniel, you are involved in an exciting project of building a full-sized tabernacle at BYU. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Daniel Smith: Yes. It will be the same tabernacle that is in California. It actually was transported to Michigan, and then on its way back is being left here at BYU. It will be the same one that is in my videos and that was at the camp. I'm not actually a part in the aspect of setting up or running the event. I'll probably help out with a few tours, but my clothing will most likely be there. What they've done is they have opened it up for teachers,

Episode 53: Learning from the Jewish Tabernacle

professors, and classes; that you can actually bring your class into the tabernacle and learn about the tabernacle first-hand right there.

I have to say, it is an incredible experience. It's one of the reasons I love going to these events. You just can't compare it. To be able to stand there and not just talk about the tabernacle, but actually physically see it and see the size. So that's what they'll have the opportunity to do — the students at BYU.

Laura Hales: When will the wonderful Daniel Smith video of the BYU tabernacle be available?

Daniel Smith: I have several videos that I hope to be working on in the next two months that will be released hopefully in coordination with the event. Depending on how much time I have, because I do this volunteer, I should hopefully have quite a few videos that will talk about either each of the different pieces of the furniture or the tabernacle as a whole. I do have one video right now that's almost ready that talks about the full tabernacle, but there will be quite a few videos. There will be many more videos coming in the future.

Laura Hales: Thank you, Daniel. It's been a pleasure talking to you today.

Daniel Smith: Thank you.

Laura Hales: I'm excited to see what pops up next on Messages of Christ on YouTube.

Daniel Smith: Thank you for having me.

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