

Bezalel

Here are some brief notes about Bezalel¹, chief artisan of the tabernacle and ark of the covenant who worked under the direction of Moses and whose name means “under the protection or shadow of God.”

Rightly is Bezalel called such, for he went about his business as an artisan under the divine shadow (*tse*l). “See, I have chosen Bezalel...and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship” [Ex 31.2]. The verb for “chosen” is *qara*’ meaning to call. The Lord makes the choice on his own and communicates it to Moses so he doesn’t have search someone out. In fact, Bezalel hadn’t a clue as to this divine summons although his skill must have been known in Egypt. He may have been in the employment of taskmasters there, living a fairly comfortable life compared with his fellow Hebrews who for the most part were enslaved.

The *Ruach* or Breath of God filled Bezalel with three gifts which he must have had in one form or another but by reason of this divine breathing, came to greater fulfilment for the task at hand. Before this choosing of Bezalel Moses received directly from the Lord detailed instructions as to the construction of the tabernacle and ark. They were so detailed that no one, even a person endowed with a photographic memory, could retain them. That’s why Moses had to remain on Sinai “forty days and forty nights” [24.18], a time symbolic of his ability to insert into his memory all the details. Immediately afterwards in Chapter 25 the Lord gets down to business with the details, no interval between being on Sinai and these instructions. Moses has to begin at once least his memory, infused with part of that “consuming fire” [24.17], suffer diminishment.

So when it finally came down to the Lord choosing Bezalel, he notes four gifts described above: “skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts.” That is to say, *chakmah*, normally translated as wisdom but applicable more to skill in fashioning things such as the women and Aaron’s priestly garments in 28.3: “And you shall speak to all who have ability, whom I have endowed with an able mind, that they make Aaron’s garments.” In fact, *chakmah* as skill isn’t used as wisdom throughout Exodus. The second gift is “ability” or *tevunah*, this being the first mention of the term in Exodus and found in 35.31 and 36.1. “To him who by understanding made the heavens, for his steadfast love endures forever” [Ps 126.5]. The third gift is

¹With the exception of three other references, Bezalal is found in Exodus 31.2, 35.20, 36.1 & 2, 37.1 and 38.22.

dahath or “knowledge.” It derives from the verbal root *yadah* which means to know intimately, and is the only use of this term in Exodus. “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it” [Ps 139.6]. The fourth and final gift given to Bezalel is “craftsmanship” or *mela’kah*, work proper to an artisan and the natural outflow of *chakmah*. *Mela’kah* is used with regard to the Lord and the work of creation, for example, Gn 2.2: “And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work which he had done.”

Chakmah or skill is preceded, if you will, by the first mention of this term in Exodus relative to the same idea, 28.3: “Tell all the skilled men to whom I have given wisdom in such matters that they are to make garments for Aaron.” Surely these men must have had some of the other three gifts bestowed upon Bezalel, but *chakmah* is singled out by reason of its importance. Skill involves a certain cunning as well as attention to details. Since it’s beyond the capacity of most people as in the examples at hand, those with *chakmah* work in a realm all their own. Whether or not this work comes out right isn’t determined until the task is complete for all to see. In other instances *chakmah* applies to wisdom, but its roots in this talent or skill-set shouldn’t be forgotten.

When the Lord’s introductory remarks, if you will, to Moses are complete, he says with regard to Bezalel and others like him, “They are to make them just as I commanded you” [vs. 11]. Obviously this hearkens back to the forty days and forty nights Moses had spent on Sinai alone with the Lord. Those endowed with *chakmah* weren’t endowed with the same one-on-one type of memory given to Moses. That means Moses had to be present constantly with the craftsmen in order to relate the content of his revelation. In other words, there was a special communication between them and Moses, not necessarily verbal, which in and by itself demanded a certain *chakmah*. To use modern parlance, there was a real-time correspondence between both parties.

“To devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting and in carving wood, for work in every craft” [vss. 4-5]. Now all four gifts bestowed upon Bezalel are to be put to use for the purposes stated in these two verses. *Chashav* is the verb for devise which means to think, invent, compose and sometimes connotes being devious. “He who winks his eyes plans perverse things, he who compresses his lips brings evil to pass” [Prov 16.30]. The object of *chashav* is artistic designs or *machasheveth* which derives from this verb and again, connotes a certain cunningness and applies to craft in vs. 5. “The Lord saw that the wickedness

of man was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” [Gn 6.5]. Undoubtedly this cunningness came from Bezalel’s training in Egypt and must have been a wonder to behold. The five gifts from the Lord just described take up his innate skill and transform it to something he had never experienced before. At the same time, his work was on a relatively small scale as well as portable compared with a massive temple as found in Egypt. This smallness did not detract from Bezalel’s workmanship; rather, the detailed and refined work that went into the tent of meeting’s construction was all the more spectacular.

Later in history King Solomon builds the Lord a temple at Jerusalem. David was precluded from doing this because of the unsettled political situation. Solomon communicates this to his friend, Hiram, king of Tyre in Chapter 5 of 1Kings. The next two chapters go into considerable detail as to the temple’s construction, adornment and all the rest. Compared with Moses and his use of Bezalel, Solomon himself is recounted as being directly responsible for every detail of his temple. That means he must have read Moses’ account given on Sinai and how Bezalel carried it out.

Parallel to the Sinai experience is the dream account of Solomon in Chapter 3 when he asked the Lord for an understanding mind or a heart (*lev*) which is inclined to hearing (*shamah*) which is how the text puts it (cf. vs. 9). The Lord was thrilled with this request and a bit later says “I give you a wise and discerning mind” or a *lev* which is *chakam*, the adjective form of *chakmah*...skill, as it were. With a heart so inclined it was easy for Solomon to carry out all the details of construction which otherwise would be impossible. So part of his wisdom for which he was renowned was his ability not to make use of other people but to do it himself.

The third and final stage is the female personification of *chakmah* in Proverbs 8 and 9. It’s as though this skill so deftly employed by Moses, Bezalel and Solomon congealed into one...one person...and extends an invitation to all that they may live in accord with what she has to offer. And that, of course, is participation in her own *chakmah* which includes the same fellowship she enjoys with the Lord as on Sinai just before being imparted to Moses. “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work” [8.22], “work” being *derek* or way as in road or path. The rest of this chapter spell out wisdom’s pre-existence and later her desire to take up residence with humans: “delighting in the sons of men” [vs. 31].

The remaining verses contain several injunctions (in italics) which must have been

the same or very similar to what Moses got on Sinai: “And now, my sons, *listen* to me: happy are those who *keep* my ways. *Hear* instruction and *be wise*, and *do not neglect* it. Happy is the man who *listens* to me, *watching* daily at my gates, *waiting* beside my doors. For he who *finds* me finds life and *obtains favor* from the Lord; but he who misses me injures himself; all who hate me love death.”

+