

ויאמר משה אל בני ישראל ראו קרא יהוה
בשם בצלאל בן אורי בן חור למטה יהודה:

“And Moses said to the Israelites: See, the Lord has singled out by name Bezalel, son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah.” —Exodus 35:30

VA-YAK·HEL (“*And he assembled*”)

EXODUS 35:1–38:20



BUILDING BY COMMITTEE: MOSES ASSEMBLES

the entire Israelite community, and lectures them as God has commanded. He demands they keep the Sabbath, describes the gifts—from gold to dolphin skins—that God desires, and invites skilled craftsmen to volunteer to build the Tabernacle.

The Israelites donate their finery, making a collection of the gold, earrings, pendants, yarns, linens, and even dolphin skins. Moses then announces the elevation of Bezalel, who has been endowed with a divine mastery of every craft. He is to oversee every Tabernacle detail, from construction to clothing design.

The Tabernacle begins as a tent covered with ram and dolphin skins;

then acacia-wood planks are crafted to form the Tabernacle, which is overlaid with gold.

Curtains of blue, purple, and crimson yarns are cut and hooked onto gold and silver sockets.

Bezalel is at the center of it all: carving tables; forging lamp stands; shaping cups, moldings, and altars; and constructing a huge enclosure cloaked in ornate hanging.

ROSS MARTIN

EARLY REPORT CARD OFFERS INSIGHTS INTO ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

ST. LOUIS, Missouri (AP) A professor of archaeology at Washington University yesterday announced the discovery of a small stone tablet that he says originates from 1440 B.C. If his claim is true, the tablet dates from a time when biblical tradition says Moses received the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai, in Egypt.

According to Stuart Newman, Ph.D., whose team of students made the discovery, the stone block contains text that may cast light on early Jewish attitudes toward artistic creation.

The size of a notebook, it has an inscription chiseled in a dialect of ancient Hebrew. Although some of

the inscription has been obscured by the passage of millennia, the majority of the text is still visible, preserved by the Sinai desert. According to Dr. Newman, the text appears to be an academic review of a craftsman named Bezalel. It is an ancient version of a contemporary report card.

If authenticated, the tablet may be the first physical evidence ever of a character mentioned in the Bible. In Exodus, God selects Bezalel—along with another laborer, Oholiab—to create the first Tabernacle, to house the Ark of the Covenant. The text follows: “I have endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of

craft.” After his selection, Bezalel came to represent the prototypical artist in Jewish tradition (a popular school of art in Israel now bears his name).

According to Dr. Newman, the tablet proves that Bezalel was a poor student who was given his talent by the Lord. “Bezalel was marked as a ‘goat’ in every single subject, signifying his unimpressive academic performance, yet God hired him for the job anyway,” Dr. Newman said. “God can endow even the least talented person with divine skill.”

However, Professor Herman Fleur of Brandeis University, author of the book *Bob Dylan & Jonah Lehrer: The Origin of Poetic*

Licence, disagrees with Dr. Newman's interpretation. "In biblical times, the goat was the preferred form of sacrifice to God," Professor Fleur said. "To be marked as a 'goat' shows Bezalel was already a gifted student. God was making a choice that any employer today would make: hiring the best for his construction crew."

The disagreement raises serious questions about the nature of artistic inspiration. Does artistic ability come from within? Or is it divinely bestowed?

It's a question that scholars, artists, and, for that matter, scientists may never answer.

In ancient Rome, a *genius* was regarded as an external, guiding spirit. By the time of Augustus, however, the word had come to be associated with the creative vision of talented artists themselves.

That debate has continued through modern times. Romantic poets imagined their inspiration coming from outside. Their model was the aeolian harp—a musical instrument that is played by the wind. Conversely, Sigmund Freud and the psychoanalysts believed artistic

ability was derived from the subconscious.

"If we accept that the goat image is a sign of success, we know that artistic ability is innate, and not external," said Professor Fleur. "It allows us to begin to understand and quantify ability."

Dr. Newman disagrees. "Culture holds that a goat is a sign of failure," he said. "Bezalel's abilities were clearly God given. Now that we know artistic creation comes from God, we can treat that divine gift with the humility and respect it deserves."

Other experts disagree that the image is of a goat at all. "It looks like a man with large ears," Roger Butterfield, director of the Institute for Judaic Art, wrote in an email. "Maybe Bezalel was just a really good listener?"

Controversy surrounding the selection of Bezalel and Oholiab has plagued the two for centuries. Talmudic scholars have long debated whether or not God's hiring decisions for the Tabernacle accord with best practices for contemporary human resources. It's widely believed, for example, that artists and craftsmen of the

time who were *not* chosen challenged Moses, arguing that no craftsmen of their impoverished backgrounds could possibly be expert in materials as diverse as wood, gold, and copper.

Allegations of cronyism persist. Bezalel, critics claim, was chosen as a way of rewarding his grandfather Hur, who laid down his life to sanctify the name of the Lord, rather than join in worshipping a golden calf.

Others have wondered why two craftsmen of such diverse backgrounds—Oholiab is said to be the descendant of prostitutes—could be expected to collaborate.

Although Dr. Newman's discovery holds out tantalizing possibilities for understanding our most inscrutable skills, scholarly agreement seems unlikely.

"Think about it. The Tabernacle wasn't designed or built by either of these guys," added Mr. Butterfield, a former Judaica fabricator. "Given what we know about the social culture of the Israelites, this was a community effort. The Tabernacle was crowd-sourced."