

Where is “before the LORD” and “at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting”?

A few clarifications. Peter Schmidt. 2020. Bible verses quoted by NASB.

In short, in Leviticus the two above phrases normally both refer to the front half of the court of the Tabernacle, that is to say the area between the entrance to the courtyard and the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

1. “At the entrance of the Tent of Meeting”

1.1. Occurrences

The phrase פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד *petah ’ōhel mō’ēd* ‘entrance of the Tent of Meeting’ occurs 44 times, to be precise in:

Exod. 29:4; 29:11; 29:32; 29:42; 38:8; 38:30; 40:12; Lev. 1:3; 1:5; 3:2; 4:4; 4:7; 4:18; 8:3; 8:4; 8:31; 8:33; 8:35; 10:7; 12:6; 14:11; 14:23; 15:14; 15:29; 16:7; 17:4; 17:5; 17:6; 17:9; 19:21; Num. 3:25; 4:25; 6:10; 6:13; 6:18; 10:3; 16:18; 16:19; 17:15; 20:6; 25:6; 27:2; Josh. 19:51; 1Sam. 2:22.

Sometimes the phrase *petah ’ōhel mō’ēd* comes without any preposition like “at”. It is an “accusative of local determination” (JM § 126h), which is particularly frequent with *petah*. Sometimes the phrase is preceded by לְ *el* ‘to’ (e.g. Lev. 4:4).

1.2. Definition

The “entrance of the Tent of Meeting” is **the area directly in front of the Holy Tent itself** (not the area in front of the whole Tabernacle complex, outside the courtyard).¹

This suggests itself, because

- elsewhere, usually the “**Tent of Meeting**” refers to the **Holy Tent itself**, not to the whole Tabernacle complex with its court.
- in Exod. 38:30f. and Num. 4:25f., the *petah ’ōhel mō’ēd* is **distinguished from the “gate of the court”** (see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, AB, 1991, p. 148).
- a few times there is reference to the “**altar which is at the entrance** of the Tent of Meeting (e.g. Lev. 4:7; the exact wording differs in other places), and the altar was placed in the courtyard. Compare Exod. 40:6, where the altar is set “in front of the doorway of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting” (cf. v. 29).
- in Lev 17:4, ‘entrance of the Tent of Meeting’ occurs together with לִפְנֵי מוֹשְׁבֵן הָיְהוָה *lipnē miškan YHWH* ‘**before the dwelling** of the LORD’. It is sometimes difficult to decide whether the *miškān* refers to the tent itself only, or to the whole construction including the courtyard; however, here it has to be the tent itself, because Lev. 17:1ff. is about **slaughtering animals, and that happened inside the courtyard** (note vv. 5-6).

Some see “at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” as restricted to the forecourt, i.e. the area between the entrance to the courtyard and the altar (and not including the area between the altar and the Tent). That is unlikely, because what is called “entrance/doorway of the Tent of Meeting” would then be *separated* from the actual Tent’s entrance itself by the area between the altar and the Tent’s entrance;

¹ For a diagram of the Tabernacle, consult any commentary on Leviticus.

arguably, it could then more easily be described as “behind the gate of the court”. It also does not fit Exod. 29:4: the wash basin stood between the altar and the Tent (see Exod. 40:30).²

1.3. Usage

The first case where *petah ’ohel mō’ēd* appears (Exod. 29:4) is in the instructions for the consecration of the priests; they have to be washed “at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” – where the wash basin stood.

Many sacrificial rituals are carried out in this area (e.g., the slaughtering, Lev 3:2). “At the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” is where individual worshippers meet the priests to bring their offerings, and to carry out other rites (e.g., a person healed from skin disease, Lev. 14:23; the Nazirite when his period of dedications is completed, Num. 6:18).

1.4. Gatherings

One problem in understanding the phrase arises where a large number of people are involved. Such is the case, for instance, when the people gather to witness the consecration of the priests (Lev. 8:3-4), and when the daughters of Zelophehad bring their case to the leaders (Num 27:2).

The court was roughly 50 meters long and 25 meters wide (Exod. 27:9ff.). So the half in front of the Tent of Meeting was 25 x 25 meters large. This is certainly enough for a “meeting”, but there is no way “all the people” could assemble there.

At Lev. 8:3, Milgrom discusses who “the whole community” might have included. Keil (KD, 1870) thinks of the elders. We probably have to think of representatives being present in the courtyard, and larger crowds assembling outside of it – just like would be the case during an important event in a church that is overcrowded. Anyhow, in none of the occurrences does the text show any elements that *clearly* refer to the area in front of, i.e., *outside*, the Tabernacle courtyard.

Another difficulty is to know the task of “the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting” (Exod. 38:8, 1Sam. 2:22). This is not discussed here.

1.5. Translation

With things happening “at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting”, it is not important that they happen literally “in front of the door”. The phrase refers to a wider area. The point of entrance itself and a point somewhere north of the altar are easily 15 meters apart.

The English versions almost invariably say “at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” (e.g. in Lev. 3:2). But in everyday usage, “at the entrance” is not over ten meters away. NASB has “at the doorway of the tent of meeting”, which at least suggests an area, but is ambiguous as well.³

² There were two arrangements in the Herodian temple that do not reflect earlier prescriptions. (1) In the Pentateuch, we do not read of a division between a “Priests’ Court” and an “Israelites’ Court”. Even in the later books, a “court of the priests” is mentioned only in 2Chr. 4:9, where it contrasts with a “great court”. It should be understood as the court where the priests **carried out their work**; laymen still *had* to enter it for sacrificing. (2) There is no basis for restricting the access that women had (“Women’s Court”).

³ The English word doorway is variously understood as “... a covered area just outside a door” (dictionary.cambridge.org), or “the passage or opening into a building, room, etc., ...; portal.” (dictionary.com), or “an entrance into a building or room”, or “the opening that a door closes” (merriam-webster.com), or “the space created when you open a door” (macmillandictionary.com).

I would suggest “*near* the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” (again, Hebrew has no preposition), or, probably better, “**in front of the Tent of Meeting**”. One could even consider “in the *court* of the Tent of Meeting”.⁴

Regarding the cases when the community gathered: in Lev. 8:3, for example, the English versions make no attempt to clarify the circumstances. A standard translation like “gather the entire assembly at the entrance to the tent of meeting” (NIV11R) makes one wonder: This *has* to be outside the courtyard, hasn’t it? Thus one applies “Tent of Meeting” to the whole courtyard, which somewhat confuses things. But there is no easy solution. If one were to say “gather the *representatives* of the assembly at the entrance to the tent of meeting”, one would introduce a speculative element into the text. Perhaps the ambiguity of the Hebrew has to be retained, and for many readers this will not be a problem; but translators should reflect the issue.

1.6. Quotations from commentaries

For reference, I copy some comments.

Hartley (WBC, 1992) on Lev. 1:3:

This phrase refers to the court area between the gate and the altar. The laity may enter this area. But the area between the altar and the Tent possessed a higher degree of holiness. Only the priests are permitted to enter this area (cf. M. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel*, 184–87).

Milgrom (AB, 1991) on Lev. 1:3:

The expression *petah ’ōhel mō’ēd* has been understood as a technical term for the narrow corridor within the sacred enclosure that extended between the entrance gate and the courtyard altar (see fig. 1), in other words, the forecourt (Haran 1978: 184). But the word *petah* refers either to the opening of a structure or to the space outside and in front of it [with examples]. Thus, the whole courtyard from the entrance of the courtyard to the entrance of the Tent was accessible to the layman (S. Rattray). It is there that he was directed to perform certain vital acts with his animal sacrifice in preparation for the altar ritual of the priest: presentation, hand-leaning, slaughter, flaying, and elevating. Also in the same area the people assembled both as spectators (8:2-4) and as participants (9:5).

On Lev. 8:3:

The entire assembly is gathered together before the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. This description suggests that the elders of the various tribes assembled immediately before the Tent of Meeting and others gathered behind them. The ordination of Aaron and his sons was a major event in the history of Israelite faith. Given the open, participatory nature of Israel’s cult, it was critical that the ordination be a public ceremony with all the tribes in attendance. Thereby the entire community acknowledged that God had chosen Aaron’s house to serve them as priests.

Keil (KD, 1870) says on Lev. 8:3:

Moses brought the persons to be consecrated ... to the door of the tabernacle (*i.e.* into the court, near the altar of burnt-offering), and then gathered “the whole congregation” – that is to say, the nation in the persons of its elders – there also (see my *Archäologie* ii. p. 221).

⁴ Compare the cases where the priests are required to consume holy food “in a holy place”, meaning in the court (see Lev. 6:9): some versions make that more explicit even where the Hebrew does not mention the court, as in Lev. 10:13 (NIV11R: “Eat it in the sanctuary area”, NJPS: “You shall eat it in the sacred precinct”).

2. “Before the LORD”

2.1. Explanation and occurrences

The phrase **לִפְנֵי יְהוָה** *lipnê YHWH* ‘before the LORD’ occurs 243 times, with 154 cases in the Pentateuch. As BDB says, *lipnê* is literally “*at the face or front of, the most general word for in the presence of, before*”. It can also be used of human-beings (e.g. Exod. 4:21, 2Sam. 2:14).

The focal point of the LORD’s presence is the Ark of the Covenant. Things can be closer by or further away from it, and still be “before the LORD”. A flexible use of the phrase can be observed **in Exodus**:

- In Exod. 16:33, Moses tells Aaron to “take a jar and put an omerful of manna in it, and place it before the Lord to be kept throughout your generations.” As the next verse shows, this is the same as **in front of the Ark of the Covenant**.
- In Exod. 27:21, “before the LORD” is used in connection with the lampstand, which stood in **the Holy Place**, the front room of the sanctuary.
- The expression can also be used **detached from the Ark**. Exod. 16:9 says:
Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, ‘Come near before the Lord, for He has heard your grumblings.’”
This happened before Israel arrived at Sinai, and before the Tabernacle was set up.
- Exod. 6:12, too, uses the phrase in a more **abstract sense**. This is still in Egypt:
But Moses spoke before the Lord, saying, “Behold, the sons of Israel have not listened to me; how then will Pharaoh listen to me, ...
- I suppose, a similar meaning is also found in Exod. 28:12:
You shall put the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of memorial for the sons of Israel, and Aaron shall bear their names before the Lord on his two shoulders for a memorial.

My focus here is on **Leviticus** though, and there, the dominant use is related to actions carried out **in the Tabernacle’s courtyard**, thus in the same place as is described by “at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting”.

In Leviticus, we find the phrase here:

Lev. 1:3; 1:5; 1:11; 3:1; 3:7; 3:12; 4:4; 4:4; 4:6; 4:7; 4:15; 4:15; 4:17; 4:18; 4:24; 5:26; 6:7; 6:18; 7:30; 8:26; 8:27; 8:29; 9:2; 9:4; 9:5; 9:21; 9:24; 10:1; 10:2; 10:2; 10:15; 10:17; 10:19; 12:7; 14:11; 14:12; 14:16; 14:18; 14:23; 14:24; 14:27; 14:29; 14:31; 15:14; 15:15; 15:30; 16:1; 16:7; 16:10; 16:12; 16:13; 16:18; 16:30; 19:22; 23:11; 23:20; 23:28; 23:40; 24:3; 24:4; 24:6; 24:8.

The first occurrence in Lev. 1:3 is not a typical example. The meaning there might be “*by the LORD*”.

2.2. Translation

The *Handbook* (UBS, 1990) states (on Lev. 1:5):

It should be noted that the aspect of physical location is of less importance than the fact of the presence of the LORD.

Depending on the receptor language and the audience, an equivalent for “in the Lord’s presence” might be preferable over “before the LORD”. E.g.:

Exod. 29:11 NIV11R: Slaughter it in the Lord’s presence at the entrance to the tent of meeting.

Lev. 4:4 GNTD: He shall bring the bull to the entrance of the Tent, put his hand on its head, and kill it there in the Lord’s presence.

The writers of the *Handbook* also alert to the danger that readers could mistake the phrase “at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” and “before the LORD” as referring to two different places, which should be avoided.

On the other hand, “before the LORD” should not be *replaced* by “at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting”, because (1) often both phrases occur together, and (2) the first phrase expresses a spiritual reality, not only a physical location. (This is an example for how two expressions *refer* to the same thing, but do not *mean* the same; they are not totally synonymous.)

For convenience, I list all places **where both phrases** – “at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” and “before the LORD” – **occur together** (in varying syntax):

Exod. 29:11; 29:42; Lev. 1:3; 1:5; 4:4; 4:4; 4:7; 4:18; 14:11; 14:23; 15:14; 16:7; Josh 19:51.

2.3. Quotations from commentaries

Again, for reference, see these explanations:

Hartley on Lev. 1:3:

This phrase [i.e., “at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting”] refers to the court area between the gate and the altar. The laity may enter this area. But the area between the altar and the Tent possessed a higher degree of holiness. Only the priests are permitted to enter this area (cf. M. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel*, 184–87). This area is also referred to by the phrase “before Yahweh.” This latter phrase not only refers to a specific locality, but other passages indicate that it also means that something is done in the presence of Yahweh. This phrase thus specifies both a location and the reason why the sacrifice is performed in that location.

It is, in fact, not totally clear whether with “This area ...” he refers to the one “between the gate and the altar”, or to the one “between the altar and the Tent”.

Milgrom (on “before the LORD” in Lev. 1:3):

..., that is to say, within the sacred precincts. It can also refer, in a more limited sense, to the outer court area, “the entrance to the Tent of Meeting” (cf. 1:11 with 3:8). See at v. 5.

On 1:5:

..., equivalent to *petah ’ōhel mō’ēd* ‘at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting’, the outer half of the Tabernacle court between the entrance to the enclosure and the altar (see fig. 1 and at v 3).

This seems to mismatch what he says on *petah ’ōhel mō’ēd* (see above), where he advocated a wider definition.

The verses he refers to are these:

Lev. 1:11:

He shall slay it on the side of the altar northward before the Lord, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall sprinkle its blood around on the altar.

Lev. 3:7-8:

⁷ ..., then he shall offer it before the Lord, ⁸ and he shall lay his hand on the head of his offering and slay it before the tent of meeting, and Aaron’s sons shall sprinkle its blood around on the altar.

Looking at the phrase “on the side of the altar northward”, “before the LORD” cannot be taken as “between the court gate and the altar” only.