

Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story

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[[19]] On first hearing, the Garden of Eden story seems to be a simple, straightforward narrative just right for children or indeed adults in a non-literary culture. But a more careful re-reading poses certain intractable problems. Who was right, the LORD God who warned that if man ate of the tree he would die or the snake who denied it? Inherently one expects God's words to be vindicated, but the narrative apparently shows man escaping the threatened penalty at least for 930 years! Another problem concerns the stationing of the cherubim to guard the eastern end of the garden: could not the expelled couple re-enter the garden from some other direction? Again the details of the geography of Eden, with its mention of the four rivers and the gold, seem quite irrelevant to the story. Why were these verses, 2:10-14, included? Do they perhaps betray the hand of scholastic interpolator or redactor interested in ancient geography?

I wish to argue here that these difficulties in the story may be explained if we see it not as a naive myth but as a highly symbolic narrative. The garden of Eden is not viewed by the author of Genesis simply as a piece of Mesopotamian farmland, but as an archetypal sanctuary, that is a place where God dwells and where man should worship him. Many of the features of the garden may also be found in later sanctuaries particularly the tabernacle or Jerusalem temple. These parallels suggest that the garden itself is understood as a sort of sanctuary.

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Earlier writers have occasionally made suggestions along similar lines. Genesis Rabbah 16.5 comments on the phrase *le'obdâ ûlêšomrâ* 'to till and keep it' as follows. "Another interpretation is an allusion to sacrifices." On the basis of Exod 3:12 and Num 28:2 it equates man's work in the garden with the offering of sacrifice. Later 21:8 compares the expulsion of man from the garden to the destruction of the temple. Both examples suggest that some [20] early commentators saw the garden as a type of sanctuary, but they did not work out the idea systematically.

Somewhat closer to the interpretation I am proposing is the view of the phenomenologist Mircea Eliade¹ who holds that every sanctuary is in some way a replica of the divine heavenly abode, and that in worship man seeks to reenact creation. Thus he suggests that the Garden of Eden story with its tree of life at the centre may be a type of later Israelite sanctuary which was regarded too as the source of life. Eliade however has not attempted to demonstrate his views exegetically; they simply form a part of his wider theory.

Most recently David Chilton in *Paradise Restored* (1985) had adumbrated some of the points that occurred to me independently. He noted that the Garden of Eden was apparently entered from the east like later sanctuaries.² He also drew connections between the jewels and gold of Eden and the materials used to decorate the tabernacle and priestly vestments that are described in the book of Exodus.³ He noted also the parallel between the tabernacle menorah and the trees of the garden.⁴ Yet though this book is full of remarkable insight into the symbolism of Eden, his ideas are affirmed rather than proved and his symbolic interpretations are by no means comprehensive. He leaves many features in the garden unexplained. I hope closer attention to the actual descriptions and greater comprehensiveness will make a symbolic interpretation more plausible.

To establish that Genesis 2-3 is using sanctuary symbolism, I first propose to list the large number of items in the garden that find parallels in later sanctuaries. Then I shall note some of the features in adjacent chapters that also seem to relate to the theme of worship, and which therefore make a cultic interpretation of Genesis 2-3 more likely. Finally, I shall note some of the implications of a symbolic interpretation for understanding Genesis as a whole, and for views of biblical theology.

First the verbal hints that suggest that the garden should be viewed as an archetypal or ideal sanctuary. The first of these is the verb *hithallêk*

1. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958) 367-408.

2. D. Chilton, *Paradise Restored* (Tyler: Reconstruction Press, 1985) 29.

3. *Ibid.*, 32-36.

4. *Ibid.*, 44.

'to walk to and fro' (Gen 3:8). The same term is used to describe the divine presence in the later tent sanctuaries in Lev 26:12, Deut 23:15, 2 Sam 7:6-7. The LORD walked in Eden as he subsequently walked in the tabernacle.

[21] The second phrase to attract attention is the mention of the *kêrûbîm* ['cherubim'] stationed east of the garden to guard the way to the tree of life. As Cassuto noted the *kêrûbîm* must have been stationed here because the garden was entered from the east.⁵ He did not however observe that the tabernacle and Jerusalem temple were also entered from the east. That the entrance of the garden was guarded by *kêrûbîm* is another indication that it is viewed as a sanctuary, for *kêrûbîm*, Akkadian *kuribu*, were the traditional guardians of holy places in the ancient Near East. In Solomon's temple two *kêrûbîm* guarded the inner sanctuary (1 Kgs 6:23-28). Two others on top of the ark formed the throne of God in the inner sanctuary (Exod 25:18-22) and pictures of *kêrûbîm* decorated the curtains of the tabernacle and walls of the temple (Exod 26:31, 1 Kgs 6:29).

The third feature that suggests the garden should be viewed as an archetypal sanctuary is the tree of life, whose fruit gives eternal life. The idea that fulness of life is to be found in the sanctuary is of course a basic principle of the sacrificial law and a recurrent theme of the Psalms. Trees were sometimes planted by the patriarchs at places where they worshipped (Gen 21:33), and were a regular feature of Canaanite and later shrines. More interesting still is the observation of Carol Meyers⁶ that the tabernacle menorah was a stylised tree of life, a conclusion she reached on the basis of archaeology and its description in Exod 25:31-35.

Fourthly, the description of Adam's job in Eden, also suggests it is a sanctuary. He was told 'to till it and keep it' *le'obdâ ûlêšomrâ*. The midrash drew attention to passages where these terms were used separately. It did not note though that the only other passages in the Pentateuch where these verbs are used together are to be found in Num 3:7-8, 8:26, 18:5-6, of the Levites' duties in guarding and ministering in the sanctuary. If Eden is seen then as an ideal sanctuary, then perhaps Adam should be described as an archetypal Levite.

The quasi-priestly role of Adam is perhaps suggested by another remark in the narrative. "The LORD God made tunics of skin for them and clothed them" (Gen 3:21). Several times the accounts of the ordination of the priests mention Moses clothing them (Hiphil of *lābaš*) in their tunics [22] (*kêlōmet*) (Exod 28:41, 29:8, 40:14; Lev 8:13). So once again

5. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis I* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961) 174.

6. C. L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976).

vocabulary associated with worship in the sanctuary is being used in Genesis. Certainly the law is very insistent that priests approaching the altar must have their privy parts decently covered (Exod 20:23, 28:42), unlike Sumerian priests who officiated naked. Even lay Israelites are urged to exercise discretion in relieving themselves "for the LORD God walks (*mithallēk*) in the midst of your camp" (Deut 23:13–15).

The brief account of the geography of the garden in 2:10–14 also makes many links with later sanctuary design. "A river flows out of Eden to water the garden." Water is of course a powerful symbol of life throughout Scripture, so it is not surprising to have it mentioned in connection with divine sanctuaries. More specifically Ps 46:5 speaks of "a river whose streams make glad the city of God" and Ezekiel 47 describes a great river flowing out of the new Jerusalem temple to sweeten the Dead Sea. Of course one of the rivers of Eden is called Gihon, the name of Jerusalem's spring, but it is doubtful whether the two are identical.⁷

Special mention is made of the "good gold" of Havilah (2:12). If Eden is seen as a super sanctuary, this reference to gold can hardly be accidental for the most sacred items of tabernacle furniture were made of or covered with "pure gold."⁸ Furthermore the precious stones, *bēdōlah* and *sōham*, also suggest associations with later Israelite sanctuaries. The only other biblical reference to *bēdōlah* is Num 11:7, where manna is compared to it. Exod 16:4 describes the manna as "bread from heaven" and some of it was stored in or beside the ark (16:33). Even more important in the sanctuary were *sōham* stones, whatever their identity may be. They were widely used in decorating the tabernacle and temple and high priestly vestments (Exod 25:7; 28:9, 20; 1 Chr 29:2). In particular two *sōham* stones engraved with the names of the twelve tribes were inset into the high priest's ephod. He then presented them to God when he carried out his duties (Exod 28:9–14).

Finally, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil also evokes associations with later sanctuaries. Here it is irrelevant exactly what is meant by "the knowledge of good and evil."⁹ It is sufficient to note that the description of this tree given in 2:9, 3:6 was "pleasant to the sight, good for food and to be desired to make one wise" seems to be echoed in Ps 19:8–9 where the law is described as [[23]] "making wise the simple,

7. Cf. C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974) 296, and other commentaries *ad loc.*

8. E.g., Exod 25:11, 17, 24, 29, 36.

9. See the commentaries for full discussion. W. M. Clark's suggestion *JBL* 88 (1969) 266–78 that it refers to moral autonomy, i.e., deciding what is right without reference to God's revealed will, fits in with the symbolic interpretation we advocate. To eat this tree is to disregard the law.

rejoicing the heart and enlightening the eyes."¹⁰ The law was of course kept in the holy of holies: the decalogue inside the ark and the book of the law beside it (Exod 25:16, Deut 31:26). Furthermore Israel knew that touching the ark or even seeing it uncovered brought death, just as eating from the tree of knowledge did (2 Sam 6:7, Num 4:20).

These then are the features I have noted within Genesis 2–3 that suggest that the Garden of Eden is seen as an archetypal sanctuary. The surrounding material supports this interpretation. 1:1–2:3 tells of the creation of the world in six days. The parallels in phraseology between the conclusion of the creation account in 1:1–2:3 and the tabernacle building account in Exodus 25–40 have long been noted.¹¹ Kearney¹² argued that the six commands in the instructions for building the tabernacle corresponded to the six days' creation. More recently Weinfeld¹³ argued that God's rest on the first sabbath (2:1–3) corresponds to his resting, i.e., dwelling in the tabernacle. Further that the completion of the "universe parallels the completion of the tabernacle." On this interpretation of Genesis 1 there is a very smooth transition to chapters 2–3. Admittedly there are changes in the symbols used, but all three chapters look forward to the construction of the tabernacle.

Concern with cultic issues¹⁴ is also evident in the stories after Genesis 3. The Cain and Abel story treats the issue of the acceptability of sacrifice. Gen 6:1–4 may well be condemning cult prostitution and sacred marriage rites. Noah is portrayed as an exemplary keeper of the covenant law, observing the sabbath, distinguishing between clean and unclean, and offering a sacrifice effective for all mankind. Finally the tower of Babel is a powerful polemic against the religious claims of Babylon. If then the adjacent sections of Genesis are making points about man's proper approach to worship, it seems likely that Genesis 2–3 should be interpreted in similar fashion.

Further support for such a view arises from the overall purpose of Genesis. The main weight of Genesis falls on the patriarchs: Genesis 1–11 is merely a prologue to the story of redemption beginning in

10. So D. J. A. Clines, "The Tree of Knowledge and the Law of Yahweh," *VT* 24 (1974) 8–14, and P. C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Waco: Word, 1983) 182.

11. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967) 476.

12. P. J. Kearney, "Creation and Liturgy: The P Redaction of Exod 25–40," *ZAW* 89 (1977) 375–87.

13. M. Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple and the Enthronement of the Lord—The Problem of the Sitz im Leben of Gen 1:1–2:3," *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de H. Cazelles* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981) 501–12.

14. For further discussion see G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco: Word, forthcoming) [Word Biblical Commentary, 1987].

chapter 12. But as Clines¹⁵ has observed the promises to the patriarchs are essentially a reaffirmation of the divine ideals for all mankind expressed in Genesis 1–2. The promise of many descendants, for example, enables the patriarchs to fulfil man's primal duty to be fruitful and multiply. Looked at in this light [[24]] the opening chapters of Genesis describe what human life should be like. According to the rest of the Pentateuch worship is of the greatest importance (consider the great bulk of cultic legislation), so it is not surprising to find such interests reflected in Genesis 2–3.

If the Garden of Eden story is meant to be interpreted symbolically in terms of later cultic legislation two conclusions follow. One, the divine threat "in the day that you eat of it you shall die" should also be interpreted symbolically. According to later cultic ritual the sanctuary was the centre of life, because there God was present. To be excluded from the camp of Israel, like the *meşora*^c, the skin diseased, was to enter the realm of death.¹⁶ And those so afflicted behaved as though mourning someone's death (Lev 13:45–46). Thus the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden was in the narrator's view the real fulfilment of the divine sentence. He regarded their alienation from the divine presence as death. But the serpent was a literalist who believed death meant physical death and so he denied that eating the fruit would result in their demise. Though many commentators imply that the serpent was right after all, because God relented and acted more leniently than he had threatened, I suggest this is unlikely. The narrator and his audience must surely have believed that God was in the right and the serpent in the wrong, and this further confirms that the story should be read symbolically. Two, it is usually held that Genesis 2–3 came from the Yahwistic source (J) whereas 1:1–2:3 and the sanctuary regulations in Exodus that explain the symbolism came from the priestly source (P). Whatever the stylistic differences between the sources, our interpretation suggests that ideologically the J and P sources are much closer to each other than is usually held.

15. D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978) 78–79.

16. G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 177, 201. *Idem*, ZAW 95 (1983) 432–34.