

## Problems with the Cosmic Temple

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### **Introduction**

This short paper is designed to be further information on my rejection of the concept of the cosmic temple, especially in Eden, that I advanced without much room for argument in my recent book *Plundering Egypt*. This is perhaps the beginning of a more developed project. Please ask for permission before reproduction.

The concept of Eden as a cosmic temple has gained fairly wide acceptance, and for what appear to be good reasons. But I want to offer some challenges to this perspective. I will first summarise the arguments for Eden as a cosmic temple and then explain a number of reasons why I believe this is a well intentioned, but misguided concept.

### **Reasons for considering the Cosmos as a Temple**

- I. ANE equivalents. There are a large number of sources that clearly describe the cosmos as a temple and the presence of a temple makes the cosmos complete and functional.
- II. Gardens were standard features of ANE temples.
- III. The iconography of a river flowing from the temple, giving life to the world is widespread.
- IV. Imagery in Solomon's Temple has clear connection back to Eden.<sup>1</sup>

The main counterpoint to these arguments is the same counterpoint that has been made to the Genesis 1 story itself. The very fact that a temple might be assumed but seems purposefully avoided aligns with the clear aversion to naming the sun and the moon. They are not named because to name them would seemingly be to grant them too much status as gods. Simply naming a temple would be to acknowledge that the Jewish creation story is fulfilling the same function of installing humans as the servants of the gods in their houses. Because Genesis is telling a very different story of the relationship between God and people, it would be important to both play on the accepted imagery but also challenge it in specific ways.

### **Meaning of temples and sacred spaces in ancient world**

In the ancient world, and not just the Ancient Near East, a temple or sacred space represented the place where two realms meet: heaven and earth. What place is more clearly this

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1. See Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*.

than Eden? But because these perspectives are not unique to an ANE context we are afforded the ability to look at them from a broader religious studies perspective. When we do that we can come to an understanding of what a temple, any temple of any religion, means. This comparative religious approach offers a perspective that few in Old Testament studies usually consider. While it is vital to recognise that the OT is an ANE text, it also belongs to a particular way of thinking about the world that is not at all unique to the ANE, but is fairly universal, even to this day, though the forms of this thought shift.

Let's begin with sacred space, as a temple is merely one example of a locus of sacred space. In less centralised and prehistoric communities temples often did not exist. Even in the OT the Israelites had a tent where the high priest would meet God, a moveable sacred space. This is because sacred space belongs to what a people group most highly value. The sacred is whatever most brings life, and most threatens of death. It is what a people most value positively and negatively. It is a binary opposition.<sup>2</sup> Anthropologists have understood that many or most communities are organised physically or topographically in relation to a sacred centre,<sup>3</sup> whether this is a pole, like a totem pole, an Asherah pole, a tabernacle, or a temple. This is the place where the sacred is most strong. Like the Oracle of Delphi, it is considered the navel of the world, that around which all things revolve, that also symbolises the birth of a people, that place which symbolises the umbilical connection to the divinity from which human life has sprung. It is a place to receive the guidance of the god(s), to hear their will for the future, to receive direction for life.

Because the sacred is that which both provides life and is also the greatest threat, it is the ultimate value of a people. Temples symbolise ultimate value in their architecture and ornamentation, and it is therefore not surprising that they often became storehouses for a community's wealth. This seems little different for ancient Israel than it was for the removable gold plates that make up the armour of Athena in Pericles' Athens.

Because the temple was the place where heaven and earth met, it was designed as a microcosm. We see this quite clearly in the intricate description of Solomon's temple in Chronicles and elsewhere in ANE cosmologies. The temple architecture reflects the cosmology of a people. In many ways it symbolises the cosmos and its stability. This fits with what many have seen as the social function of much religious ritual: participating in the cosmogony. Indeed, no small number of ancient religions had annual festivals, often at the new year, when the cosmos descended once more into chaos and it was the job of the people to help the gods bring cosmos out of this situation, although not before participating joyfully in the radical freedom of disorder with the inversion of social relations, purposeful sexual violations, burning of effigies, theatrical representation of monstrosities, etc. The modern Mardi Gras/Carnival as well as the New Year touches on some of these ancient themes. The temple is, as microcosm, intimately bound up with this perspective. Some, like Roger Caillois, have suggested that the space and

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2. Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, 57.

3. Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 22.

time, the universe and the year, were so deeply connected that the end of one meant the end of another. Hence time was circular.

Interestingly, there is no evidence that the Ancient Israelites had such festivals, nor did they consider time to be cyclical. This is important, because it begins to show how the Jewish tabernacle/temple begins to hold a rather different, perhaps even critical, role for the Jewish people.

Many scholars like Jacques Ellul,<sup>4</sup> Tom Greggs<sup>5</sup>, and myself, have worked to show how the Bible is descralising. It is quite unique as a religious text in criticising the concept of the sacred. Ellul argues there is a real distinction between the sacred and the holy, and that the ancient Hebrew people were critical of the former by pursuing the latter.<sup>6</sup> The holy is something that God has chosen as set apart, rather than something recognised by the people as inherited with power. The whole point of the Mosaic covenant, that God would make the Jews a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, did not mean that they would be the most powerful, the most kinglike, the most untouchable nation, but a nation for others, interceding for others. This is where the distinction of the holy and the sacred comes to the fore. The sacred empowers a people with divine right and will to dominate. The holy sets a people apart for service, not to the gods, but to others on behalf of God.

Because of these things we see that the Jewish temple is, on the one hand, very similar to the temples of its surrounding people. But on the other hand, it is distinct. Rather than the place from which power flows to a people, it is the place that where the holiness of God separates the people for a purpose of service. The river of life flowing out of the garden/temple is meant to be an image of the task of the image of God. The Jewish temple does not merge space and time, the Jews having no new years festival. The connection of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to pagan New Years festivals is tenuous at best. Instead of participating in the cosmogony, these holidays require Sabbath rest. As I described in *Plundering Egypt*, the Sabbath is quite unique. It does not represent participation in creation. Humans have no participation in creation, and creation in Genesis is most certainly finished. Sabbath is entering into God's rest, joining God in the fruit of his labour after it is finished. This is similar to the Jewish conquest of the Promised Land and the emphasis on their inhabiting a land they did not build, eating crops they did not produce. YHWH is nothing like the other gods who require human aid.

All this to say in an all too brief way that the Jewish temple is unique. Because of this it is dangerous to draw on the superficial similarities with other ANE temples and read their importance into Genesis.

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4. Ellul, *Subversion*.

5. Greggs, *Theology Against Religion*.

6. Ellul, *Subversion*, 57.

## Textual evidence in Genesis

Genesis itself provides little evidence that it is about a cosmic temple. It is argued that the notion of the walled garden implies that this is a place set apart from the rest of the chaotic world from whence the rule of God is supposed to go forth. And certainly the command of God to the man and woman to fill the earth and rule over it might seem to have this cosmological import, it implies yet again that the work of God in creation remains unfinished, a concept that comes from two places, I think, one ancient and one very modern. The ancient influence for this is clear, many pagan people participate in cosmogony through religious ritual, the battle between chaos and cosmos is ongoing. To read this into the Hebrew Scriptures is completely illegitimate. The modern influence for this concept of an ongoing work of creation against the enemy of chaos is rooted in an Enlightenment perspective, honed to a razor point with the combination of the sacred value of technology and economics. Modern people believe that human ontology consists, perhaps primarily, in making progress through creative technological advancement. Christians read this myth back into the Bible and project this onto the *imago dei*. Once again, this is not justifiable on a close reading of the creation story in Genesis. It is finished. Humans are not creators, and those that do create are nearly all of the line of Cain and rebellion, as I discuss in *Plundering Egypt*. The idea of spreading creation from Eden to the rest of the world is deeply rooted in capitalism, a belief system that requires us to "civilise" the third-world by forcing them into a capitalist system as well. It demands that we use resources. All of this, I argued in my book, belongs to the logic of the Estrangement and is sinful.

Eden does not represent a bastion of God's creation in the midst of a chaotic world. Genesis 1 certainly presents the creation as fully completed. And I discussed that it is far better to understand the walled garden as the garden of a palace, which is what the Persian word *paradise* means, not that Eden is influenced by this word, but that it demonstrates the connection of the ideas. Furthermore this walled garden, a very common feature of palaces from ancient times to this day, would tie into the kingdom imagery so prevalent in the whole Bible. Writers like NT Wright, with his strong focus on the kingdom, would have far more material to tie in if he understood Eden as God's palatial paradise, instead of a cosmic temple. Few think that the image of God represents a priestly role, but many are happy to understand it, as I have done, as a vicegerency. A temple priest usually has no rulership function, although there are, of course, exceptions. ANE societies tended to have a distinct priestly caste from the emperor or king, even if the king often plays a religious role on occasion (again often at the New Years). The idea of the *imago dei* as a royal concept should clue us into the shortcomings of the cosmic temple.

Furthermore, there is a complete absence of religious terms or imagery in Genesis 1–2. The first real religious concept we get in the Bible is the sacrifice of Cain and Abel, which, fitting well with a Girardian approach, of course involves mimetic rivalry ending in violence. Eden has no prayer, no priesthood, no sacrifice, no ritual, no vestments. Adam and Eve did not need purification or sanctification, and so these are meaningless in Eden. Consider its stance on clothing versus that of religious vestments. Naked and unashamed could not contrast more sharply with an ephod or a cassock. As I have said in *Plundering Egypt*, in a text that is

supposedly the foundation of two or three great world religions, there is no religion. What is portrayed as life with God in shameless communion requires no religion.

### **Uncritical acceptance of comparative evidence.**

I imagine in the rush of critical biblical studies since the Enlightenment, there was a strong impetus to find evidence of the non-unique nature of the Bible. It was fashionable, and still is to some extent, to try and prove the religious superstitions of a lot of people unfounded. It makes one feel like a liberator. The same could be said of myself. Nonetheless, in this great move to make a name for oneself by destroying trust in the Bible, comparative studies in religion has proven a great ally. But because the motive was so strong to show the similarities to its ANE contexts, scholars missed, ignored, or hid the profound differences. My hypothesis is that the OT uses ANE forms to criticise its content. It uses its genres, its architecture, its religious forms and imagery to undermine the meaning of ANE religions. I'm not the only one to have seen this in Genesis 1 at least.<sup>7</sup> So why, then, do we not notice how different Genesis 2 is from other ANE stories of initial relations between the people and gods? And because this is so different, why would we imagine that Eden would be viewed as a proto-temple?

### **Temples as part of a specific social organisation**

Temples are not universally part of the human religious experience. Greek religion in Homeric society required no priesthood or temple to offer sacrifices. Even in later Hellenistic and Roman society the importance of the hearth and household shrines with household gods retains some of this decentralised religion. The temple becomes far more important as society begins to centralise and build city-states. This is certainly true in the Bible. The temple is built by Solomon, after power has been concentrated in Jerusalem. The temple is a symbol that the king has God on his side, that God lives near the king and supports his reign. The temple becomes a storehouse of wealth, and taxation is mediated through the temple.

Herding people and nomads would not have temples, for obvious reasons. Plains Indians of Northern America did not build permanent structures. By contrast, the Aztec, Inca, and Mayan people of South America had massive temple complexes. Empires and growing kingdoms build temples, nomadic people do not. The temple is a paradigmatic expression of imperial power and might. In the ancient world one cannot disentangle religion and politics as we try to do (always unsuccessfully) in the modern world. Centralised powers build temples had have castes of priests because this reflects their social organisation, and they project their imperial ambitions into the heavens through temples. Decentralised powers do not tend to do this. Eden does not fit this social organisation. Nor does any of the Pentateuch, hence the need for the tabernacle.

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7. See for example Wenham, *Genesis 1-11*.

## **The meaning of a temple theologically**

Perhaps most importantly is that Eden serves an entirely different theological purpose than a temple. A temple exists to unite heaven and earth. Its existence is predicated on a division and separation between heaven and earth. As a portal to heaven (or Hades), it implies that mundane reality is not full of the divine. Indeed, the whole concept of the sacred rests upon the complete difference between mundane or profane reality and sacred reality. The sacred is contagious and it infects mundane reality.<sup>8</sup> It must be kept quarantined in a temple and released in controlled ways. But if the eschatological vision of the Bible is for a reunification of heaven and earth, why then would a temple be necessary prior to the introduction of sin? Isn't the point of the garden the opposite, that God dwelled with or at least often visited people on earth? God even talks to Cain outside the garden without the mediation of the religious forms of later Judaism. He is not thrust to the ground with the knowledge of his sin, like an Isaiah. He does not see visions of God's chariot-throne like Ezekiel. He has a conversation with God as though it were a common thing to do. In later temple religion this would be impossible without the mediation of angels. It is only when we get to Moses that conversation with God begins to require special meeting places, mediation of some kind, secrecy, and the transfer of glory. So on that count, at least, we can see that reading a temple like image in early Genesis is a back-projection.

Eden does not exist to unite heaven and earth, it exists to explain that the two have not yet been severed. Eden is heavenly earth. Their expulsion from the garden is the separation of heaven from earth, because God bars the way to his presence.

Temples require a notion of sin, uncleanness, guilt, or debt for them to make any sense. Only by having an estranged relation with the gods does one need to make deals with them, to be cleansed, to be released from guilt. Prior to breaking their relationship with God, there is no sin, no guilt, no uncleanness, no debt. A temple would have no purpose in such a situation.

From a canonical perspective, advancing to Revelation we see the image of the heavenly Jerusalem coming down where God will dwell with his people face to face. It is specifically said that there is no temple, for God is the temple (21:22). Reconciliation with God means the new creation of a new heavens and a new earth and the two are reunited without a temple. There is no mediation. This doesn't mean everything is a temple as many have told me. It doesn't mean everything is sacred or holy. Such a concept is meaningless because the sacred gets its meaning by being in a binary relationship with the profane. The sacred is a concept of differentiation, of valuation. Value requires inequality or difference. I have resisted making too many connections with Revelation because Eden and the heavenly Jerusalem are importantly very different concepts. Nonetheless it does reveal that Christians understood, with Jesus, that to have true communion with God is to have no temple. This is why Jesus talks about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in himself. He isn't really a temple, he is the end of temples because in him

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8. See Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, 20-22.

temples lose their meaning.

In a state prior to sin, temples are meaningless. So for the theological plot of Genesis and the remainder of the canon of Scripture to make sense, we must abandon the concept of Eden as a cosmic temple.

## Conclusion

These are a few reasons for my rejection of the idea of the comic temple in Eden, as interesting as the concept is. I think it is a dangerous concept because it harms the narrative thrust and theology of Genesis. It misses the great distinctive narrative of Genesis in its critical glory. It rests on a poor theology of creation as unfinished, uncritically accepted from other ANE religions. It supports a modern capitalist ideology. And it offers less to our understanding of creation and the image of God than considering it a palatial *paradise* would.

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