

God's First Temple: Creation

The bookstands

In the beginning of the Biblical narrative, 'God created the heavens and the earth.'¹ And in the end, there will be 'a new heaven and a new earth'.² The Christian Holy Scriptures sandwich the whole story of humankind between these two 'bookstands' of creation at the beginning and recreation in the end. The overriding theme of this human story and the heart of the stories of creation and restoration, is the presence of God or its reverse, his absence.



In the vision of St John, we read that in the new heaven and the new earth, the holy city, the New Jerusalem, comes down out of heaven, and St John then hears a voice, saying: 'The dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'³ This is unequivocally *temple language*.

St John writes of the New Jerusalem: 'I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its

¹ Genesis 1:1

² Revelation 21:1

³ Revelation 21:3

lamp is the Lamb.’⁴ In eternity there is no need for a temple, as God himself is with the people; or to say it in other words, the whole universe has become his temple.



Beside many temple-references, St John's description of the new creation references, obviously, the Genesis-account of original creation. Later I will go deeper into this, but for now, one example will suffice. John notices the 'tree of life' beside the 'river of the water of life'.⁵ These are themes taken from the creation story of Genesis.

If the second bookstand, of the new heaven and the new earth, is presented to us with imagery from the first bookstand, the creation story, and if this new heaven and the new earth are *also* clearly presented to us

⁴ Revelation 21:22; the glory of God refers to the column of fire and the cloud above the tabernacle and the temple of Solomon; the light refers to the golden lamp stand (menorah) in the Holy Place in the tabernacle and the temple.

⁵ Revelation 22:1-2

as the temple of God, should we then not assume that the first bookstand might also present the original creation as a temple of God? I think this is the proper way to read the Genesis account.

Creation as God's resting place

The Holy Scriptures regularly compare the universe with God's temple. For instance, Isaiah writes: 'This is what the LORD says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?"⁶ The universe is God's resting place; He is not in need of another temple, the prophet argues.



One of the Psalms gives us another hint: 'For the Lord has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his dwelling, saying, "This is my resting place for ever and ever; here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it."⁷ The Temple of Solomon is portrayed here not only as God's dwelling, but also as the place where he *rests*. The terms *dwelling* and *resting place* seem to be used as synonyms.

Should we therefore also read the seventh day of creation, in which God 'rested from all his works', as an indication that he had finished the temple of creation and he now made it his dwelling?⁸ John T. Walton, professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College, defends this idea:

⁶ Isaiah 66:1

⁷ Psalm 132:12-13

⁸ Genesis 2:2-3

Any ancient reader, Israelite or otherwise, would have understood that if [Genesis] talks about God resting, it talks about the temple, because that is where God rests and where the gods rest and that is why temples were built.⁹

So, Walton argues, Near Eastern readers of the Genesis-text would have immediately understood the temple imagery: “Without hesitation the ancient reader would conclude that this is a temple text.”¹⁰ Walton gives many examples from extra-biblical texts to show how in the Ancient Near East temple and cosmos were seen as each other’s mirrors.

Any visitor to the temples and graves of Egypt is treated to spectacular, often still rather colorful, images on the ceilings, the walls and the columns. On the ceilings sun, moon and stars were depicted. On the walls we see plants, trees, animals of sea, land and sky, and human beings.

These temples served as models of the cosmos in which the floor represented the earth and the ceiling represented the sky. Columns and wall decorations represented plant life. According to German Egyptologist Jan Assmann, this temple ‘*was* the world that the omnipresent god filled to its limits.’¹¹

The Egyptian temple was the universe and the images in the temple were Egypt’s divinities; they were all part of the pantheon of gods and

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o26Ad-WdjOw> (accessed 1 March 2015)

¹⁰ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (IVP Academic, Downers Grove 2009), p. 71.

¹¹ Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 2001), p. 37.

demigods worshiped in the temples of Egypt and the rest of the Near East.¹²

Jeffrey L. Morrow, a Roman Catholic theologian at Seton Hall University, supports Walton's approach. In his article 'Creation as Temple-Building and Work as Liturgy in Genesis 1-3', he writes that temples 'throughout the ancient Near East often had cosmological connotations. The building of a temple often accompanied creation' and 'ancient Near Eastern temples [...] also served as places for divine rest.'¹³



Morrow shows also how a heptadic ['sevens'] pattern plays an important role in the creation account, far beyond the listing of the seven days.¹⁴ This links the creation account with temple building and consecration in general: 'The ancient Near East's convention of describing temple construction in terms of seven, means we should not be surprised that creation in Genesis is heptadic.'¹⁵ According to Morrow, creation unfolds as a 'cosmic liturgical celebration' culminating on the seventh day.¹⁶

¹² I do hold that Genesis 1-3 should be read in the light of the Egyptian cosmology, not the Babylonian one. A useful introductory article about this matter can be found on <https://bible.org/article/genesis-1-2-light-ancient-egyptian-creation-myths> (accessed 3 March 2015)

¹³ Jeffrey L. Morrow, "Creation as Temple-Building and Work as Liturgy in Genesis 1-3", in Journal of OCABS (Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies), found <http://www.ocabs.org/journal/index.php/jocabs/article/viewFile/43/18> [accessed 1 March 2015]

¹⁴ He shows, for instance, how many verses consist of seven words.

¹⁵ Morrow, "Creation as Temple-Building and Work as Liturgy in Genesis 1-3".

¹⁶ Ibid.

It is this careful heptadic structure of Genesis 1 that makes Morrow and Walton suggest that Genesis might in fact be a liturgical text for usage in the temple service. Was there an annual feast where Genesis 1 was used to remind Israel of the parallels between creation and the temple?

Morrow points to the tabernacle's consecration process that lasted seven days. Key verbal correspondences also exist between Moses' construction of the tabernacle in Exodus 39-40 and the creation of the world in Genesis:

- 1) Gen. 1:31 ["And God saw all that He had made, (*kāl 'ašer 'ašah*), and found it (*wəhinēh*) very good"]; Exod. 39:43 ["And when Moses saw that they had performed all the tasks (*kāl hamēlā' kāh*)—as the LORD had commanded, so they had done (*wəhinēh 'ašū 'ōtāh*)"].
- 2) Gen. 2:1 ["The heaven and the earth were completed (*wayēkulū*) and all (*wēkāl*) their array"]; Exod. 39:32 ["Thus was completed all (*watēkēl kāl*) the work of the Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting"].
- 3) Gen. 2:2 ["God finished the work which He had been doing (*wayēkāl 'elōhīm...mēla'kēto 'ašer 'āšāh*)"]; Exod. 40:33 ["When Moses had finished the work (*wayēkāl mōšeh 'et hamēlā' kāh*)"].
- 4) Gen. 2:3 ["And God blessed...(*wayēbārek*)"]; Exod. 39:43 ("And Moses blessed (*wayēbārek*) them").
- 5) Gen. 2:3 ["And sanctified it (*wayēqadaš*)"]; Exod. 40:9 ["...and to sanctify (*wēqidašētā*) it and all its furnishings"].¹⁷

Similar parallels exist between the seven days of creation and Solomon's construction of the Jerusalem temple, including evident cosmic symbolism in the temple construction. This construction was depicted as a new creation, and the temple was seen as a microcosm of world, not unlike the other temples in the Near East.¹⁸ The Jewish his-

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Fortress Press, 2013) p. 103; Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, p. 80-81.

torian Josephus says of the objects in the tabernacle: ‘every one of these objects is intended to recall and represent the universe.’¹⁹

The very reason why the tabernacle and temple were seen as allegorical microcosms of creation suggests, reversely, that the creation story contained elements that reminded the Israelites of a temple.²⁰

It is noteworthy that the many creation stories in the Near East usually culminated in a temple being constructed for the gods of creation. The very *absence* of any specific construction for a place of worship in the Biblical description of the creation of the world is remarkable and logical: in



a universe that was seen as the temple of God by itself, no other temple was needed.

The conclusion is therefore justified, I believe, that creation in Genesis ‘is described as a temple; it is constructed as an ancient Near Eastern temple would be constructed.’²¹

¹⁹ Josephus, *The Jewish War* 3, 7.7, cited by Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, p. 80.

²⁰ The primacy of either the creation story or the building of tabernacle/temple does not impact the view that creation was seen as a temple.

²¹ Cited in N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, p. 103

Creation and the presence of God

The creation story of Israel shows that there is only one God, the creator of all things. The temple of his universe is filled with the same images as the Egyptian temples, but those images, seen to represent the gods of Egypt, were created by God's powerful word. The so-called gods of the nations all dwarf in the sight of the one true God of Israel. In the temples of Egypt they are worshipped, in the temple of the universe they were made by the one word of the Creator, 'be', hence they deserve no worship.

All man-made temples and their gods are insignificant as the universe is the real temple of God. This is even true for the sacred places of Israel. Throughout the history of Israel we see tension between the importance of Israel's worship in the tabernacle and the temple, and the concept that God really does not need a house of stone. The universe is his resting place. And this universe is not made for the nation's gods, but for humanity. God gave him 'glory and honor' and he gave him 'dominion over the works of [God's] hands.'²²

Creation is the temple where God resides, and his presence in this temple is obvious in the Genesis-account. First, God is portrayed as the creator of the temple. The Trinity was present in the construction of his own temple. We read of God, of his Word, and of his Spirit.²³ God also said, 'Let us make man in our image.' This plural 'us' stands out as a strange plurality in the fiercely monotheist religion of Israel. And the humanity God created in his image, was also a plurality of men and women.²⁴

²² See Psalm 8.

²³ Genesis 1:1-3

²⁴ Genesis 1:26-27

Secondly, God saw everything that he had made, and behold, 'it was very good'.²⁵ This indicates God's personal and intimate involvement in creation. The summit of involvement is the creation of man as God 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life'.²⁶ He is not presented to us as a distant god but as one who is imminent. This involvement culminates in him taking permanent residence in creation on the seventh day, when he rested.²⁷

Thirdly, God rested on the seventh day; this does not indicate a lack of action. It indicated that some work has been done - the universe has been made a good place for humankind - and now God can engage in the normal activities that can be carried out. The Creator has now taken command and he is mounting to this throne to assume his rightful place and his proper role.²⁸



Finally, God is also presented as 'walking in the garden'.²⁹ This anthropomorphism designates the intimate presence of God in his creation, especially in his relationship with humankind. This divine walking in the garden of Eden is ex-

²⁵ Genesis 1:31

²⁶ Genesis 2:7

²⁷ Genesis 2:3

²⁸ Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, p. 74.

²⁹ Genesis 3:8

pressed with the Hebrew form of *hllk*, which is also how God's presence is described in the tabernacle in Leviticus 26:12 ('and I will walk among you') and Deuteronomy 23:14 ('the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp'). This further indicates the close link between creation and the tabernacle or temple. It is the place where God resides.

Garden of Eden and the Holy of Holies

The British evangelical Old Testament scholar Gordon J. Wenham also sees this temple imagery in the garden of Eden:

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.³⁰

Some scholars push this parallelism a bit further. If the whole universe was God's temple, then the garden of Eden was the Holy of Holies, Morrow and other Jewish and Christian biblical scholars argue. According to Morrow,

The Temple, and Mount Zion in general, are frequently associated with Eden, and in some instances actually identified with Eden. Ezekiel 28's discussion of the king of Tyre is the most famous example where Mount Zion, and the temple, are associated with Eden. Sirach also associates Eden with the Temple and tabernacle, where the Temple is the new Eden.³¹

³⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story", in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, World Union of Jewish Studies, 1986), p. 19.

³¹ Morrow, "Creation as Temple-Building and Work as Liturgy in Genesis 1-3".

The cherubim on the Ark in the Holy of Holies and on the veil that blocked anyone from entering into the Holy of holies, are a close parallel to the cherubim that blocked access to the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve.³²

Work as liturgy

N.T. Wright agrees with this view of creation as God's temple and now, 'with the construction [of the temple] complete, he can "rest" in the sense of "taking up residence"' in his temple.' God 'has finished the work of construction, which is to be seen as a prelude to all his intended work of developing it through the agency of his image-bearing human creatures.'³³

So, the universe was God's temple, and humankind was intimately close to God. Interestingly, nothing is said about a priestly role of Adam and Eve. Or rather, we should conclude, work in God's universal temple was the actual liturgy (Gr: *leitourgia*, public works) humankind was made for. There was no special cast of priests, but all of humanity had a priestly task.

In the Genesis account, the priestly task of humankind was twofold: Man was to have dominion over creation



³² We should not push the comparison between the Garden of Eden and the Holy of Holies too far. The tree of life, in the Garden of Eden, was in Israel seen as a prefiguration of the menorah in the tabernacle and the temple, and this menorah was stylized as a symbol of the tree of life. However, the menorah was not placed in the Holy of Holies, but in the Holy Place.

³³ N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, p. 102

by being fruitful and multiplying, by filling the earth and subduing it, by tilling and keeping it on the one hand, and on the other hand, to not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.³⁴ Work was man's priestly task, in loving obedience to God. Morrow argues that this task of mankind was liturgical and priestly, by doing an interesting word-study:

When we look at the Genesis account of Eden, we find other instances of people portrayed as created for worship. Adam, for example, is told to "till" (from the root *'bd*) and "keep" (from the root *šmr*). When *šmr* and *'bd* occur together in the OT (Num. 3:7-8; 8:25-26; 18:5-6; 1 Chr. 23:32; Ezek. 44:14) they refer to keeping/guarding and serving God's word and also they refer to priestly duties in the tabernacle. And, in fact, *šmr* and *'bd* only occur together again in the Pentateuch in the descriptions in Numbers for the Levites' activities in the tabernacle.³⁵

This association of Adam's task with the work of the priests in the tabernacle reinforces the understanding of Adam as a priest who maintained God's temple of creation and who served it in.

Paradise lost

What was the impact of the fall of Adam and Eve? The author of Genesis presents it in dramatic terms: mankind was banished from God, from paradise, and from eternal life. They were now hiding from God, access to the tree of life was blocked, and life on earth became short and hard. St Paul would later describe life in our world in terms of the 'suffering of the present time' and 'creation was subject to futility' and 'the whole creation has been groaning'.³⁶

³⁴ Genesis 1:28; 2:16-17

³⁵ Jeffrey L. Morrow, "Creation as Temple-Building and Work as Liturgy in Genesis 1-3"

³⁶ Romans 8:18-22

At the same time, even after the fall, mankind was able to find God. Man was driven out of paradise but Abel sacrificed to God ‘and the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering.’³⁷ Direct access to God was impossible, but through the mediation of sacrifices he could be found.



The universe was no longer one perfect temple for the Creator, but he could still be found. St Paul, when speaking to the Athenians, seems to almost overlook the fall when he says,

[God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’.³⁸

This last quote in the text of Paul is from the Cretan poet Epimenides. It seems that Paul recognizes that even though things have gone dramatically wrong with the universal temple of God, even after the fall and the dismissal of Adam and Eve from Paradise, something of the temple-like aspect of the universe still exists. God can still be found in his creation; even a pagan poet senses this.

This concept can be found throughout Holy Scriptures; especially the Psalms and the Prophets often attest to it.³⁹ Earlier I quoted Isaiah 66:1: ‘This is what the LORD says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my

³⁷ Genesis 4:4

³⁸ Acts 17:26-28

³⁹ Eg, Psalm 8, Psalm 19.

footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?'⁴⁰ So, even after the fall, Isaiah still sees creation as God's temple, even though he is very aware of the imperfections of the people of God and the problem of the seeming absence of God.

Something has gone badly wrong with the universe, but in spite of that, God is still near. Mankind no longer has access to the garden of Eden, the Holy of Holies has been blocked. But even east of Eden, in the groaning world we live in, God is still present. The universe is still God's temple, but it is a temple with restricted access to God and a temple that needs repairs.

Some Conclusions

Reading the Genesis account of creation in the first place in theological terms, frees us from the need to harmonize this with modern scientific views. Genesis 1 was never intended as an eyewitness account of the beginnings of the world. It was intended to present our world Israel as the temple of the one true God who made it a good place for mankind to live in and to serve God. This is not a denial that God is the creator of the world, but it is an effort to read Genesis 1 in line with the intentions of the author and the understanding of his contemporaries.

In the Genesis account of creation, there is a remarkable concentration of powerful symbols that begs to be interpreted in the light of later tabernacle and temple design. These features combine to suggest that the garden of Eden was an archetypal temple, or even the Holy of Holies, where God was uniquely present in all his life-giving power.

⁴⁰ Isaiah 66:1

Genesis shows that our daily work has a priestly aspect. There is no inherent contradiction between spiritual and secular. In the Jewish-Christian view of creation as God's abode, the concept of *secular* actually has no meaning as all that exists is part of God's temple.

Much has gone wrong after the fall of mankind. The fall has made free access to God impossible. God has withdrawn behind the veil as sinful humans cannot meet with him. No longer is the universe God's perfect temple. But the sanctuary-aspect of the universe has not been lost altogether. God, though hidden, can still be found as there is no place in the universe where he is not present.

Living in this God-created world, we are called to give worship to God in all works, thoughts, words, and deeds. Even after the fall, man's work still has an aspect of *liturgy*, of work for God, though it has been spoiled just as all of paradise was spoiled. God did send Adam away from paradise with work to do, not unlike his work in paradise. The difference is that this work for God, to work the ground, is hard now.⁴¹ With all of creation, mankind longs for renewal. But God is not far.

⁴¹ Genesis 3:17-19, 23