

II. Sacred Spaces: Eden & Altars

June 11, 2017 Chapters 1 & 2

Purpose: To understand the typology of sacred spaces in the Garden of Eden and through altars.

Key Verses: ²⁴An **altar of earth** you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. ²⁵If you make me an **altar of stone**, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. ²⁶And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it (Exodus 20:24-26).

Longman: God, the King, created sacred space for His presence on earth. The following section explores this idea of sacred space in the Old Testament. This concept should strike us, living after the death and resurrection of Jesus, as a strange idea. After all, today we can meet with God anywhere and anytime. However, this generous access to God was not the case during the time between the expulsion from Eden and the accomplishment of Christ's great redemptive acts (p. 1).

DSB: The concept of "sacred space" has to do with the idea of access to God, fellowship with God, communion with God, worship of God in His presence. A "sacred space" is where God and man meet, where God comes down to interact with humanity. In the beginning, the Garden of Eden was a holy sanctuary where man was in communion with God. Following humanity's expulsion from the garden, worship of God was conducted at altars. Later on in the Mosaic covenant, the altar is incorporated into the Tabernacle, which is a whole complex, patterned on heaven, to represent God's presence in the midst of His people. Under the Davidic covenant, that Tabernacle grows into a Temple, but the typology remains very similar. Ultimately, in the New Covenant Jesus Christ comes and "tabernacles among us" (cp. Jn. 1:14). Jesus is the ultimate expression of the Immanuel Principle – "God with us" – and He abolishes in His body the restrictions of the Old Covenant with respect to sacred space. Now, in the New Covenant, we can "boldly approach the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). The concept of sacred space is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

A. The Garden of Eden

1. Sacred Space Introduction

- a) God created Adam from the dust of the ground; in other words, he was connected with creation
- b) God created Eve from the side of Adam, showing her equal status with the man as his 'helper'
- c) Adam and Eve were created in the image of God
 - (1) Moral and rational attributes (WCF 4.2 – "...with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own

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image; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it....”).

(2) God’s Representatives

Longman: In antiquity, kings would create images of themselves and set them up all around their kingdom to remind the people of their authority and presence. God created human beings in such a way that they too represented God’s presence on earth. Human beings reflect God’s glory in a way that no other part of God’s creation does (p. 5).

2. Sacred Space Created

a) The Garden of Eden

(1) Physical benefits: Paradise/Utopia; lush garden; watered with four rivers; located on a mountain; picture of a holy place

(2) Spiritual benefits: perfect relationship between God and man – harmonious, personal and intimate

b) Institutions of Work, Marriage, and Sabbath established

c) Two Trees – Tree of Life; Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (which represents moral autonomy)

d) “No special holy spaces”

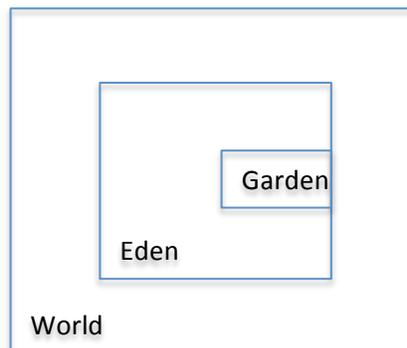
Longman: In the garden of God, Adam and Eve moved easily in the presence of their Maker. There were no special holy places—there was no need for such. Every place was holy and Adam and Eve themselves were holy. The whole garden was God’s sanctuary (p. 7).

DSB: Note, while Longman says there are “no special holy places,” it should be noted that the garden as a whole was a special, holy place, “God’s sanctuary.” This is in contrast with the rest of creation outside the Garden. The Garden was a special place within the land of Eden in the eastern part of that land (cp. Gen. 2:8). Ultimately, Adam and Eve are banished from this special holy place, so a more accurate assessment would be that the Garden functions as the prototype of the sanctuary of heaven, the meeting place between God and man. Once banished from the Garden, mankind no longer has access to God’s holy space.

3. A Model of the World from Creation (from Jordan, pp. 143-163)

a) Triple-Decker Universe (Firmament-Heaven/Land/Sea)

b) Eden has three environments (Garden/Land/World)



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Jordan: Let us consider the three environments. The land of Eden would be Adam's initial home. It would be the place where he slept, where his children were reared, and so forth. Home is where man returns when his work is done. The outlying lands ... would be the place of man's labors.... And then there was the Garden. This was the sanctuary, the place where Adam would meet with God at the times of His appointment. Adam was created on the sixth day, and the next day was God's Sabbath (pp. 152-153).

Jordan: These three environments correspond to the three-decker world of Genesis 1, but on a lateral plane. The Garden-sanctuary is the contact-point with heaven. The homeland is to be related to the earth, and thus God's people Israel were given *land*. The outlying lands, reached by *rivers*, are to be associated with the sea, and thus the Gentile nations are pictured as the sea. Each of these environments was to be patterned after heaven. Heaven is not only the pattern for the sanctuary and worship, it is also the pattern for home and homeland, and also for work in the world (p. 153).

4. Sacred Space Lost

- a) Fellowship with God is lost in the Fall; alienation settles into human relationships
- b) Humanity divided into two parts, a City of Man (following Satan) and the City of God
- c) God graciously provides a gracious blessing in the midst of the curse

Longman: In Genesis 3:15, we already observe that even in the midst of curse for sin, God provides a way of salvation. This passage has appropriately been called the *protoevangelium*. We will, in a sense, be following this story throughout this book as we seek how God provides a place of worship for the residents of the City of God, a provision that ultimately will lead to Jesus, the serpent crusher (p. 10).

- d) Humanity was ejected from the Garden of Eden and no longer had easy access to the divine presence

Longman: In Eden, there were no special places no places set apart from communion with God. Rather, the whole of Eden was holy, a sanctuary, if you will. Adam and Eve walked in the garden with God. We are given the impression that there was free and easy access to the presence of God. Human rebellion destroyed the harmony of the garden. After the Fall, Adam and Eve experienced alienation from each other, from creation, and from themselves. Most foundationally, they experienced alienation from God. They were removed from the garden (p. 12).

Jordan: Because of his sin, Adam was excluded from the Garden-sanctuary. It would not be until the Mosaic Covenant that men would be readmitted to the Garden, and then there were restrictions on who might enter.... In the New Covenant, men have immediate and full access to God in heaven. There are no longer any symbolic restrictions (pp. 153, 155).

5. Sacred Space Promised

Longman: Even in the midst of judgment, God provided a note of hope to them. The enmity that the serpent, Adam, and Eve introduced will one day be resolved (Gen. 3:15). Genesis 3 does not yet formulate it quite this way, but the hope is that one day perhaps Eden will be restored. Paul very poignantly speaks about hope in a fallen world in Romans 8:18-25. As we will see, this

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longing for a return to Eden will not be satisfied until the very end of time. Nonetheless, God will give His people glimpse of Eden, right from the start. As soon as they leave Eden, God makes His presence known to them. This is the story of the family of God and the altars where they find fellowship with Him (pp. 12-13).

B. Altars

1. God's Presence and Altar Building

- a) The altar is the name given to the place of worship between the Fall and the Exodus (Gen. 8:20; cp. 4:3-5)
- b) What is an altar?
 - (1) "Altar" – Hebrew *mizbeah* from root *zabah*, which means 'sacrifice'; the heart of the altar is the idea of sacrifice
 - (2) Simple structure built of earth or stone marking the place where God meets His people
 - (3) Location typically where God makes His presence known and/or commands an altar to be built
 - (4) Altars are later incorporated into the larger sanctuaries (tabernacle and temple)
- c) Altar Principles (Ex. 20:24-26)
 - (1) Multiple altars were allowed (until construction of the temple)
 - (2) Altars were simple, not ornate; distinguished from more ornate altars of the pagan Canaanites
 - (3) Altars were places of sacrifice
 - (4) Altars were holy places, set-apart places, places where God chose to meet with His people

2. Altars as Holy Mountains

Jordan: It remains to note that altars were also holy mountains, ladders to heaven.... Abraham's altars were probably just pillars made up of stone and earth, but what they symbolized is set out for us in an important vision in Ezekiel 43. Ezekiel describes an altar in the form of a stepped pyramid. The top section is called "the Mountain of God," and the platform on top for the fire is called the "hearth." A literal translation of Ezekiel 43:15 is: "And the Mountain of God: four cubits (high); and from the hearth four horns extend upwards." While the altar in the Tabernacle did not have this shape, the statement in Ezekiel clearly expresses the *theology* of the altar. When God appeared on Mount Sinai, the top was covered with fire and smoke (Ex. 19:18). We can hardly fail to see the visual association of this with the burning sacrifices on the bronze altar, and the incense on the golden altar. Moreover, altars for sacrifice were generally built on the tops of mountains before the Tabernacle was set up (cp. Gen. 22:9), and during the interregnum between the dissolution of the Tabernacle and the building of the Temple (cp. 1 Sam. 9:12). Thus, the association of altar with holy mountain is fairly pervasive (pp. 158-159).

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3. Noah's Altar

- a) The first altar mentioned in Scripture is that of Noah after the flood (Gen. 8:20); not likely the first altar, however (cp. Gen. 4:3-5)
- b) Noah's immediate reaction after disembarking the ark was gratitude as a recipient of God's grace
 - (1) Noah built an altar, which created a holy place, a sanctuary, where he could come into the presence of God
 - (2) Noah offered burnt offering sacrifices to God
 - (3) Noah's building the altar was the first step in his act of worship by which he began the new phase of his life after the flood

4. The Altars of the Patriarchs

- a) When Abraham arrived in the Promised Land, he worshiped God by building altars as he traveled through the land
 - (1) Shechem (Gen. 12:6-7)
 - (2) Between Bethel and Ai (Gen. 12:8; cp. 13:4)
 - (3) Hebron (Gen. 13:18)
 - (4) Mount Moriah (Gen. 22:9)
- b) Jacob built an altar at Bethel (Gen. 35:1-7)

Longman: The result of all this building was that the landscape of the Promised Land was dotted with altars. These altars indicated places where God appeared to His people, who would ultimately inherit the land. In a sense, it was like planting a flag and claiming the land in the name of Yahweh (p. 20).

Longman: Two times Abraham's altars are said to be built next to trees (Gen. 12:6; 13:18). ... It is conceivable ... that it was Abraham's common practice to build the altar near a prominent tree or grove of trees.... What is the significance of the connection between the places of worship and trees?... The tree next to the place where God meets His human servants reminds us of the Garden of Eden. It is not the garden, but it evokes the garden. It is a little bit of Eden in a fallen world (pp. 20-21).

Jordan: Abraham conducted his ministry by erecting altars, which were ... models of the holy mountain, ladders to heaven. At these altar sites, Abraham and his descendants led their converts in worship, and taught them the ways of God (Gen. 12:7, 8; 13:4, 18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1, 3, 7). Abraham pitched his altars in connection with special trees, also ladders to heaven (Gen. 12:6; 13:18; 14:13; 18:4, 8; 21:33; 23:17; 35:4, 8). The association of trees with altars, holy mountains, reminds us of the Garden of Eden. Edenic imagery is reinforced by the attention given to wells of water in connection with the patriarchal ministry (Gen. 16:14; 21:19, 25, 30; 26:15, 18-32).... The altars spoke of the coming sacrifice of Jesus Christ on God's holy mountain. The trees spoke of God's glory and shade, ladders to heaven. The springs spoke of spiritual nourishment (pp. 189-190).

Jordan: The patriarchs dug wells, built altars, and planted trees (Gen. 21:33); and everything suggests that these things were done together in grove settings. They created open-air sanctuary-

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gardens. They did not build a house for God.... The house structure is an appropriate analogue for a nation. The Hebrews were not an organized nation in the age of the patriarchs, however. Thus, neither a portable tent-house nor a permanent temple would have been appropriate. Once the people progressed from glory to glory, into a full-fledged nation, then the altar-tree-spring-garden would progress into glory of Tabernacle and Temple (p. 190).

5. Excursus: The Presence of God
 - a) God is omnipresent (Ps. 139:7-12)
 - b) God also has a special presence

Longman: Even though God is omnipresent, the Bible also teaches that God is present in a special way in certain locations. There is a sense in which we can say that God is present in heaven but absent from hell. He is present with Christians but absent from nonbelievers. Some theologians call this latter sense the special presence of God. God is not only present in being, but His presence is perceived in a definite way. This presence may be to judge or to bless.... We understand the Bible to say that God makes His presence known in a special way at sanctuaries, whether the sanctuary is an altar as during the period of time until Moses, or the tabernacle/temple during the rest of the Old Testament era (pp. 22-23).

- c) Should our worship auditorium be called a “sanctuary”?

DSB: Many churches call the room in which they gather for weekly worship their “sanctuary.” In the Old Testament, the only “sanctuaries” were the Garden of Eden, altars, the Tabernacle, and the Temple. Those were the special sacred spaces where God met with man and was worshipped by them. In the New Covenant, Christ is ever present with His people. Wherever “two or three are gathered” He is present with them. Are there “sanctuaries” today in the New Covenant? Is it appropriate to call a worship auditorium a “sanctuary”?

C. Selected Questions for Further Reflection

1. Reflect on your own unfulfilled and frustrated desires. Can they be seen as a “longing” for a return to Eden?
2. Is there any place quite like Eden today?
3. Are there special holy places today?
4. Are there any modern analogies to an Old Testament altar? Does your church have an altar? Why?

Next Week: Read Longman chapters 3&4