

II. Sacred Space in the First Creation

The reality of sacred space is an eternal conception in the sense that it speaks to God's intention regarding His relationship with His creation, and particularly His image-bearers. All that has been "playing out" on the stage of history since the creation of the universe constitutes the outworking of God's eternal counsel (Ephesians 1:3-12), and sacred space – with all that encompasses and implies – is at the heart of that determination.

It is often asserted that God's ultimate intention in all things is the display and exaltation of His own glory. Assuming that assertion to be true, it follows that God's goal of self-glorification lies behind His determination to create. But that, in turn, raises the question as to *how* the creation brings glory to God, and few seem to give any real consideration to that issue.

- Is God glorified as He intends simply by virtue of the *fact* of creation – that by bringing the universe into existence He displays His limitless power and creative wisdom?
- Even if that's the extent of God's purpose in creating, the question remains: Who does God display His work to so as to be glorified by it? Is He glorified simply by the recognition this creative act receives among the members of the *Godhead*, or is God glorified in the acknowledgment that comes from the *creation* itself? If it is primarily the latter, how does the creation make this acknowledgment? The inanimate and non-rational creation testifies to God and His nature and power by the mere fact of its existence (Romans 1:20), and in this sense it "glorifies" God. But even this existential testimony must be received by someone or something else. In other words, to whom does the creation testify of God – to God Himself or some other entity or being?
- Obviously God is aware of and receives the testimony provided by the creation, but from eternity He has discerned the fullness of His own essential glory. Why, then, does He need the creation to affirm what He already knows? One might conclude that the creation glorifies God by testifying to the angelic hosts. But did God have to create a material universe in order for these immaterial beings – creatures that stand in His very presence – to discern and acknowledge His glory?
- The answer the Bible provides is that God is glorified in the creation, not simply by reflection, but, more importantly, by *redemption*. That is, the created order does glorify God by bearing witness to its Creator; the glory of the creation reflects the glory of the One who brought it forth. It's impossible to consider God's works in creation without being overwhelmed by His greatness, power, wisdom, and understanding.

But God's purpose for the creation goes beyond that existential testimony. In biblical terms, God is glorified when something other than Himself discerns and acknowledges Him as He is. He is glorified not just when His works are known, but when *He* is known. And while it is true that the creation makes God known at some level, that knowledge falls far short of the biblical concept of knowledge. The reason is that the creational witness speaks of God's existence and certain of His attributes, but it says nothing of His personhood; beyond that, it cannot make Him known in a relational way.

God is glorified when He is known, and such knowledge is personal and relational. The obvious implication is that God's eternal purpose of self-glorification in creation necessitates the creation of a personal being capable of a relationship with Him. And to accomplish this goal God must communicate something of Himself to that being; He must create "person *from* person" in order to be able to interact "person *to* person."

Thus the centrality of **man** in the purpose and scheme of creation. God's design to be glorified in His creation was to be realized by creating a being in His own image and likeness – a being suitable for God to communicate a true (albeit creaturely) knowledge of Himself. And because all authentic knowledge is relational, God's self-glorification – realized in self-communication – has its focal point in His relationship with man.

But relationship implies intimacy; God must be present with His image-bearers to fulfill His purpose in and for them. He must dwell among them if they are to know Him; *hence the necessity for and centrality of sacred space*. From its opening words the Bible leaves no doubt that this is its focus (as indeed it must be if this religious text is the revelation of the personal Creator God). No sooner does the Scripture introduce the fact of the creation than it moves to the core concerns in creation, all of which speak to God's intention to dwell with His image-sons – his intention with regard to sacred space.

A. **Essence of Sacred Space**

At the outset the Bible introduces the motif of sacred space, and from that point forward it serves as its core and unifying theme. (Many would argue that the kingdom of God is the preeminent theme in the Scripture, but even this grand theme has its focus in sacred space.) The text begins with an account of the creation, with God's creative work culminating in His planting of a garden in Eden. The man and woman were to reside there and, from that central place, fulfill their creational mandate (Genesis 1:1-2:15). More importantly, this garden was created as a *sanctuary*: the appointed place where God would meet with His image-bearers. As the location where God first dwelled in relation to His creation, Eden was the first expression of sacred space.

Eden's status as God's dwelling place is evident less from the creation narrative itself than from the way the rest of the Bible interprets and interacts with it. In particular, the Scripture assigns two titles to Eden that identify it as the divine habitation: It is called both the **mountain of God** and the **garden of God**. These titles, while referring to the physical Eden of the first creation, serve importantly to connect it with other manifestations of sacred space. *In this way the Bible shows that Eden provides a foundational prototype of sacred space, one that will be drawn upon and developed throughout the balance of biblical revelation.*

1. **Eden as the Mountain of God**

The title, "mountain of God," is most often associated with *Mount Horeb* (Mount Sinai) where Moses first encountered God in the burning bush and later received the covenant on behalf of the sons of Israel (Exodus 3:1-2, 24:1-13; cf. 1 Kings 19:1-8). In this usage the emphasis isn't on God's habitation as such, but rather the place where God meets with men; the place where the divine and human are brought together (cf. Genesis 22:14).

This same connotation is carried forward and further developed in the Bible's treatment of *Mount Zion* as the site of the temple in Jerusalem. It was there that the sons of Israel met with Yahweh, and the prophets spoke of the day when all the nations would join them. The point of that imagery is not that the whole world would literally journey to Jerusalem, but that, in the fulfillment to come, all the nations would become worshippers of the true and living God (Isaiah 66:20; Jeremiah 3:17; Micah 4:1-2). Jerusalem is so closely linked with the "mount of God" that the terms are sometimes used synonymously (ref. Isaiah 37:32, 66:20; Daniel 9:16; Joel 2:32, 3:17; Zechariah 8:3).

But within Ezekiel's prophecy, the phrase "mountain of God" is used in relation to *Eden* (ref. 28:11-16). This particular passage is set in a larger context in which God, through His prophet, was proclaiming a lament over the king of Tyre in view of his city's coming destruction (26:1-28:19). God had determined to destroy this important Phoenician port city because of its arrogant presumption that Jerusalem's downfall at the hand of Babylon (24:1-27) would serve its own profit (ref. 26:1-2).

- a. The lament of chapter 28 is directed toward the king of Tyre, but many see in this historical account a symbolic representation of Adam's (or Satan's) fall. It is said of the king that he had been in Eden and that he had borne the "seal of perfection" as the "anointed cherub who covers." It was only when arrogance and rebellion welled up in him that he was cast off the holy "mountain of God" (ref. 28:14-16). Thus the prophet's description and condemnation of the king of Tyre – while perfectly applicable to the historical figure identified in the lament, is also suggestive of the dynamics of Adam's fall in Eden (applying this passage to Satan is much more problematic).
- b. But the point here is to note the correlation of Eden with the "mountain of God." Assuming a legitimate symbolic aspect to Ezekiel 28, when compared with the corresponding Exodus passages it spotlights what is indirectly evident from the creation narrative, namely that Eden – as sacred space – represented the place of divine/human encounter. Exodus calls Horeb the "mountain of God," and it was there that God met with Moses, the sons of Israel, and later Ezekiel. But this concept is also associated with Eden, implying that, in the initial creation, it was the place of divine/human interaction. This conclusion is supported by details within the first three chapters of Genesis, as will be seen.

The theme of the "mountain of God" – however limited and indirect may be its association with Eden within the creation account – is hugely significant in the Bible's larger interaction with the concept of God's dwelling place. Because mountains are high places on the surface of the earth, they are appropriate symbols for God's exalted habitation. But they are also accessible to human ascent, and so are equally appropriate for representing the idea of the divine/human encounter. Thus mountains and other "high places" have historically played an important role in human religion, including in the ancient Near East. This was as true of Israel and its worship of God as it was the other nations of the Middle East (cf. Genesis 11:1-4, 12:8, 22:1-2; Exodus 3:1-12; Numbers 22:39-41, 33:51-52; 2 Chronicles 33:11-15; Ezekiel 6:13; etc.; cf. also John 4:19-20).

Though God dwells in a “high and holy place,” He is not remote from men, but “descends” to encounter them in the reality of their world and existence (Isaiah 57:15). So He did on Mount Ararat (Genesis 8:1-22), on the mount in the land of Moriah (Genesis 22:1ff), on Mount Sinai (Horeb) with Moses and the sons of Israel, and later on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. So also the prophets spoke of the day of the Lord’s coming when He would descend on the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:1-4) and, as the result of His work of purging and renewal, His holy mountain would encompass the entire earth (Daniel 2:24-35). In that day, Jerusalem – the mount of God – was to be the habitation of all the nations (cf. Isaiah 11:9-10, 25:1-10, 56:1-8, 66:20 with Revelation 21:1ff).

2. Eden as the Garden of God

As the “mount of God” speaks to the place where God and men are brought together, the imagery of Eden as the “garden of God” complements that signification by introducing the ideas of profusion, perfection, beauty, blessing, and satisfaction.

- a. The creation narrative describes Eden – and more narrowly, the garden that God “planted” in Eden – as a place of fullness and all-sufficient provision; a place where every human need is supplied with limitless and effortless abundance. It is suggestive of *life* at its absolute fullest. Furthermore, the Garden is presented as the habitation appointed for man and the center of the world. By fulfilling God’s mandate – “Be fruitful, multiply, fill and subdue the earth,” the text implies that mankind’s caretaking (2:15) would serve to extend the bounds of the garden domain to the ends of the earth. And because man bears the divine image, his numerical expansion would also serve to extend God’s presence in the earth.
- b. This imagery of perfection and fullness becomes more significant when the Garden of Eden is recognized as a *sanctuary* – as the garden of God. Ezekiel’s prophecy is again helpful (28:11-19), for in this passage the prophet specifically refers to Eden under this title (cf. also 31:1-9; Isaiah 51:3). The phrase, “garden of God,” could mean simply the garden planted by God, but other considerations indicate that it should be taken to mean the garden that is God’s dwelling place.

First of all, the creation narrative has God walking back and forth in the Garden, and the grammar suggests His familiar presence there. This sense is reinforced by Adam’s and Eve’s ejection from Eden. Their disobedience brought estrangement, and the text spotlights their spiritual separation from God by noting their expulsion from God’s garden, enforced by His attending cherubim (Genesis 3:8, 22-24, cf. 4:16; also Isaiah 2:2-3; 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10; Revelation 22:14-15).

Furthermore, the language and imagery of Eden are employed and developed throughout the Scripture in reference to appointed places where God dwells with His people. So it was with *Canaan* (cf. Exodus 3:8 and Joel 2:1-3 with Exodus 15:11-17, 25:1-8) and the *temple* (1 Kings 6:18ff; 7:18ff), and so it is with the *new creation* (Isaiah 4:2-6, 51:3, 65:13-25, 66:18ff; Jeremiah 31:1-12; Ezekiel 36:33-36; Hosea 2:14-23; Amos 9:11-15; cf. Revelation 21:1-3 with 22:1-19).