

PART ONE

SACRED SPACE

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. What does it mean that a particular location was set aside as holy? How does this concept develop throughout the Old Testament? These are the questions that occupy our attention in the following pages.

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PARADISE GAINED AND LOST: SACRED SPACE FROM THE BEGINNING

Genesis 2¹ narrates the creation story a second time. It does not contradict the first but rather retells the account of creation with a new focus. [Genesis 1](#) describes the creation of the cosmos; [Genesis 2](#) focuses on the creation of humanity, the apex of God's good work.

The manner of creation of Adam, the male, illustrates his special place in God's universe. He was created from the dust of the ground. In other words, he connected with the creation. Like the animals and the earth itself, he was a creature. But there

¹ Specifically, [Genesis 2:4b–25](#).

is more. He came to life when God breathed breath into his nostrils. He had a special relationship with the Creator! The creation process itself emphasizes humanity's glory as the very climax of God's work of creation. God's method for creating Eve shows that her special place in creation was the equal of Adam's. She was formed, not from his head or from his feet, but from his side—her very creation showing her equal status with the man. She was to be his “helper.” In the Hebrew Bible, this is not a term of subservience, but one indicating that she was his “ally.” After all, God himself is called the “helper” of humanity (Pss. 30:10; 54:4; Heb. 13:6).

This point is doubly highlighted when we contrast the creation of the first man according to [Genesis 2](#) with the creation of the first human beings according to Mesopotamian tradition. True, in both the recipe starts with dust or clay, the very earth itself, but it is with the second ingredient that the difference is clearly seen. And here we have variation in Mesopotamian tradition. In the *Enuma Elish*,² humanity's dust is mixed with the blood of a demon god killed for his treachery against the second generation of gods. Humans are demons from their creation. According to *Atrahasis*,³ the second ingredient is the spit of the gods, a far cry from the glorious breath of the Creator! The creation process according to Mesopotamian tradition fits well with the overall low view of humanity professed by that culture. After all, according again to *Atrahasis*, humans were created with the express purpose of relieving the lesser gods from the arduous labor of digging irrigation ditches. On the other hand, the Genesis account conforms well to the high view of Scripture concerning humanity. Human beings, male and female, were created in the image of God ([Gen. 1:26–27](#)).

What does it mean to be created in the image of God? Theologians have alternatively scratched their heads and fought viciously over that question. Often the answer boils down to what the theologian believes separates us as human beings from the rest of creation. Such an approach has often resulted in a focus on human

² A translation of this may be found in J. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1969), [60–72](#).

³ *Ibid.*, [104–6](#).

rationality: it is our reason that reflects God. But that approach is dangerous on a number of levels. Perhaps most worrisome is the tendency to promote the interests of reason over other important aspects of personality, such as emotions and imagination. With such a view, we also put too much trust in human reason.

A better approach is to ask how images functioned in the ancient Near East. In a word, images represented their objects. The best example comes from the realm of royalty. 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.

To summarize, human beings are the apex of God's creation according to [Genesis 1–2](#). They were the climax of the creation process; they were created in the image of God.

SACRED SPACE CREATED

These special creatures, Adam and Eve, were placed in a very special location, the garden of Eden.⁴ The garden was a perfect place for humankind to live; it supplied every need. It was lush with plants, including fruits. It was well watered, with four rivers running from it. The garden was truly a paradise, though the Hebrew word related to paradise (*pardes*, which means “park” or “forest” or “orchard”) is never used in the Bible in connection with Eden. “Eden” itself most likely means “abundance,” again showing its luxurious character.⁵ Indeed, Eden was the “garden

⁴ An illuminating and full study of [Genesis 2–3](#) may be found in H. Wallace, *The Eden Narrative* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1985), though this reference should not be taken as an endorsement of all the author's methods or conclusions.

⁵ *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. W. A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:555. This meaning suggests itself on the basis of an Aramaic cognate. Note also the important article by A. Millard, “[The Etymology of Eden](#),” *Vetus Testamentum* 34 (1984), 103–6.

of God,” according to [Ezekiel 31:8](#). Ezekiel also describes Eden as a mountain ([28:14](#)). Whether we are to read back into Genesis this description of Ezekiel is a matter of debate. It could be a later theological/literary image rather than a physical description. Nonetheless, the connection of garden and mountain will prove an important one for the development of the biblical theme of holy place.

Eden’s utopian nature, however, was not primarily a function of its physical benefits. Perfect relationship filled that function. In the first place, the relationship between God and his human creatures was harmonious, personal, and intimate. God walked in the garden ([Gen. 3:8](#)); the impression of the text is that God could make his presence known throughout the garden.

As a result of the strong relationship between God and his human creatures, Adam and Eve related well together. This is symbolized by their being naked and feeling no shame in each other’s presence. They could be completely vulnerable with each other in the garden—psychologically and spiritually, I would suggest, as well as physically.

The garden was the place where what we know today as the institutions of work and marriage found their origin. The garden would not tend itself, but Adam and Eve were charged with its care. We are led to understand that this work was not arduous, but rather a joy. Nature responded well to Adam and Eve’s efforts to tend it. Furthermore, the intimacy between Adam and Eve was formalized in a ritual of leaving-weaving-cleaving that today we would recognize as marriage ([Gen. 2:23–25](#)).

Everything was fine in the garden. At its center stood two trees. The first was the tree of life. We are not told much about this tree, and if we wish to say anything, we are left to speculate. But we might argue that Adam and Eve ate from this tree as long as they were in the garden and that it was the fruit of this tree that kept them from dying.

The real focus of attention is on a second tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God gave Adam and Eve the delicious fruit of many trees, but he prohibited them, on pain of death, from eating the fruit of this tree—no explanation given. What was this tree? This question has vexed interpreters over the years, but a con-

sensus of sorts may be seen between the three leading recent evangelical interpreters of Genesis.⁶ In short, this tree represents moral autonomy. Eating of it would mean seeking wisdom apart from a relationship with God, who himself is wisdom. Thus, the name of the tree describes the nature of their rebellious act, their effort to acquire moral autonomy.

Before narrating the events of [Genesis 3](#), however, let me finish this section by emphasizing the theological significance of Eden. 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. But this was soon to change.

THE FALL’S IMPACT: SACRED SPACE LOST

The serpent makes his appearance suddenly at the beginning of [Genesis 3](#) after a brief description of his craftiness. Hebrew narrative is normally sparing in its descriptions of its characters, only introducing character traits that are important to the story. Nonetheless, we cannot help but be left with questions. Where did the serpent come from? Who is he? Why is he God’s enemy or at least working against God’s purposes?

The book of Genesis provides us with few answers to these questions, but if we expand our purview, as is appropriate considering the organic unity of the Bible (after all, God is the ultimate author of the whole thing), then we can at least recognize the serpent as the Devil himself ([Rom. 16:20](#); [Rev. 12:9](#)). The Devil begins his evil work by approaching the woman Eve with a leading question: “Did God really say you must not eat any of the fruit in the garden?” ([Gen. 3:1](#)).

We get an immediate example of his craftiness. He knew very well that this is not what God said, and the woman is quick to defend God’s command: “Of course we

⁶ G. Wenham, [Genesis 1–15](#) (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), 62–64; V. P. Hamilton, [Genesis 1–17](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 162–66; K. A. Matthews, [Genesis 1–11:26](#) (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 201–7.

may eat it.... It's only the fruit from the tree at the center of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God says we must not eat of it or even touch it, or we will die" ([Gen. 3:3](#)).

Notice, though, that in her zeal to defend God's character she stretches the truth. God did not prohibit touching the tree; only eating its fruit. She, in essence, provides us the first example of "fencing the law"—that is, making human rules that guard us from breaking the divine rule. "If God doesn't want us to get drop-down drunk (compare [Prov. 23:29–35](#)), then I won't even have a glass of wine with dinner." This, in spite of the fact that the Bible celebrates wine as God's good gift to his people ([Ps. 104:15](#)). The woman, on the brink of her rebellion, shows herself to be the first legalist.

The serpent sees the opening and then attacks God's credibility. "You won't die!... God knows that your eyes will be opened when you eat it. You will become just like God, knowing everything, both good and evil" ([Gen. 3:4](#)).

This argument convinces Eve, and she eats the fruit. While some think that this makes Eve especially culpable, it should be pointed out how easily Adam follows her lead. At least it took the crafty serpent himself to break down Eve's resistance to eating the fruit. Adam doesn't even question Eve's offer but readily takes a big bite.

The effects are drastic and immediate. Their sin ruptures their relationship. They eat, and they look at each other and notice for the first time that they are naked, and so they cover themselves with fig leaves. In other words, for the first time Adam and Eve feel vulnerable before the gaze of the other person. They feel—indeed they know—that they are inadequate, physically, morally, spiritually. Not wanting to endure the shame and the guilt, they have only one recourse—seek cover. They want to hide from the gaze of the other person. At this moment, alienation settles into human relationships. This account explains why we can feel loneliness even in the closest of human relationships.

As bad as the alienation between Adam and Eve must have been, even worse is the effect on the divine-human relationship. In this case, more than cover is needed. God's presence brings simple flight. When God finally confronts Adam, he admits, "I heard you, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked" ([Gen. 3:10](#)). At this

point, the blame shifting starts in earnest. God charges Adam by asking the question: “Have you eaten the fruit I commanded you not to eat?” (v. 11). Adam admits to eating the fruit, but blames Eve. Eve also admits that she ate the fruit but points to Satan.

All three are thus culpable, and so all three receive their punishment, beginning with the serpent, then the woman, and finally the man. The order is the same by which they are introduced into the narrative at the beginning of the chapter.

As for the serpent, the first aspect of its curse is that it will now be reduced to “eating the dust.” What is the relationship between a snake and Satan? Does this mean that the primordial snake had legs? If so, what did it look like? **These are questions that the Bible does not address and we should be hesitant to answer.** Certainly, as later Israelites (and we today) observe a snake slithering along the ground, they (and we) are reminded of Satan’s role in the Fall. The most significant part of the curse on the serpent, however, is the resulting enmity between its offspring with the descendants of the woman. This vicious rivalry begins right away as we read the chapters that follow the account of the Fall.

In [Genesis 4](#), we observe how Cain (a descendant of the serpent) mercilessly kills Abel (a descendant of the woman). At the end of [Genesis 4](#) (vv. 17–26), we see a genealogy of the descendants of Cain, followed by a lengthier genealogy of Adam through Seth (the descendants of the woman). As Saint Augustine would state it, from the time of the Fall on, humankind is divided into two parts, a City of Man (following Satan) and the City of God.

In the curse on the serpent, not only is the conflict predicted, but so is the conclusion of the conflict: “He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” ([Gen. 3:15](#)). Here the descendants of the woman are crystallized in one descendant who will destroy the serpent, but at some cost. Though contemporary doubt has clouded the scene, the traditional interpretation that asserts the fulfillment of this promise in the Messiah, Jesus Christ, is surely right. Already, we observe that even in the midst of curse for sin, God provides a way of salvation. This passage has appropriately been called the *protoevangelium* (the gospel before the gospel). We will, in a sense, be following this story throughout this book as we see 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.

However, judgment does not end with the serpent. Eve is next, and her curse focuses on the fact that Eve is the mother of relationship. Her womb gives and nourishes life. After the Fall, however, this life-giving role will be fulfilled only with pain and suffering. Furthermore, the relationship that she has with her husband will suffer. She will desire her husband, but he will be her master, according to [Genesis 3:16](#).

Some debate attends the question of what her desire entails. Is it a legitimate desire to be in a relationship that will fail, or is her desire to control her husband and be dominant in the relationship? The rare Hebrew word “desire” (*teshuqah*) is used again in [Genesis 4:7](#), where it is sin that seeks to control Cain, and this use lends strong support to the second interpretive option. In either case, the point is that there will now be a power struggle in a relationship that was divinely intended to be a truly equal partnership.

Lastly, Adam receives his judgment. That judgment focuses on Adam’s work. He was charged in [Genesis 1:28–31](#) with the task of maintaining the garden. Now that work will be fraught with futility. He will succeed, as the woman will succeed in having children, but not without sweat, blood, and sorrow. Even his success will be fleeting.

While recognizing the curse on each of the three perpetrators of the crime, we should not lose sight that at heart the very act itself created a situation of great tragedy. Adam and Eve’s intimate relationship with God was now broken. They were ejected from the garden, no longer able to have easy access to the divine presence. After all, God is holy and he does not tolerate the presence of sin. However, it is a sign of God’s continuing grace that he did not completely sever his relationship with his rebellious human creatures.

GOD’S GRACE: SACRED SPACE PROMISED

Indeed, at this time God could have justly eradicated human beings from existence. After all, he had earlier announced concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “If you eat of its fruit, you will surely die” ([Gen. 2:17](#)). They had eaten

the fruit, and God could have immediately exercised his prerogative of executing his creatures. However, in the first of many examples of God's gracious patience, he did not kill them. Certainly, death entered the human experience for the first time. They were ejected from the garden and from access to the tree of life. They were now doomed to die someday, but not before they had children and the human race multiplied.

Indeed, a close study of the major narratives of [Genesis 3–11](#) shows a recurrent pattern that resembles what we have seen in the account of the Fall. Humans sin and God gives a judgment speech, which is followed by a token of God's grace, and then the execution of God's judgment.⁷ The token of God's grace in [Genesis 3](#) is his provision of clothes made from animal skins to the human couple (v. 21). This gift acknowledges a continuing alienation in relationship, but along with that it shows God's continuing care for his creatures.

Eden! The garden of God! The mountain garden where God first placed his human creatures. God was there with Adam and Eve, and God's presence made paradise sacred space.

Eden truly was a paradise. Adam and Eve lived in harmony with each other, with creation, and with themselves. Foundationally, they lived in perfect harmony and relationship with God, their Creator. Indeed, the harmony of the garden flowed from their harmony with God. In Eden, there were no special places, no places set apart for 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.

However, God was not done with them. Even in the midst of judgment, God pro-

⁷ See the summary description of this theme in T. Longman III and R. B. Dillard, [An Introduction to the Old Testament](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 52–53.

vided 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](#):

Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will give us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, everything on earth was subjected to God’s curse. All creation anticipates the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And even we Christians, although we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, also groan to be released from pain and suffering. We, too, wait anxiously for that day when God will give us our full rights as his children, including the new bodies he has promised us. Now that we are saved, we eagerly look forward to this freedom. For if you already have something, you don’t need to hope for it. But if we look forward to something we don’t have yet, we must wait patiently and confidently.

As we will see, this longing for a return to Eden will not be satisfied until the very end of time. Nonetheless, God will give his people glimpses 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.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Can we still be said to bear the divine image after the Fall?
2. Reflect on your own unfulfilled and frustrated desires. Can they be seen as a “longing” for a return to Eden?

3. Reflect on the times in your life when you feel lonely or have a sense of isolation. How are these thoughts and feelings related to the Fall?
4. Is there any place quite like Eden today?
5. What does it mean that you were created from the dust?
6. What does it mean that you are created in the image of God? How should you treat others created in God's image?