

Eden and the Israelite Sanctuary

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Genesis 2:4-3:24 contains terminology and concepts associated in the Old Testament with the theology of the sanctuary. This has led some to suggest that the Garden "was a type of archetypal sanctuary."¹ Although Eden was not a sanctuary in the sense in which the Israelite tabernacle was, we find in the narrative of the Garden the beginnings of the theology of the sanctuary. In what follows we will summarize important exegetical and theological studies on the subject by non-Adventist theologians and explore how their insights can contribute to a better understanding of the doctrine of the sanctuary.

1. Parallels

Eastern orientation. The Garden was located in the eastern section of Eden (Gen. 2:8) and, apparently, its entrance also faced east (Gen. 3:24).² The entrance of the Israelite sanctuary was also to the east (Ex. 27:13-16; cf. 38:13-18).³ In a sense the gate of the Garden functioned more as an exit than an entrance, while the gate of the sanctuary was an entrance, a return from the east.

Source of water. Eden was a source of abundant water (Gen. 2:10). Water was used in the sanctuary to keep it clean and for the purification of the priests. There was a laver near the entrance of the sanctuary (Ex. 38:8).

A stream of water is sometimes associated with the Israelite temple (Ps. 46:4). In Psalm 36:8-10 the sanctuary is described as "a place of refuge from the harshness of life. . . . Note the word translated 'delights' (cadnêk) is simply the plural of Eden. . . . Here, 'the stream of [God's] delights' is identified with the 'fountain of life.'⁴ Water becomes a symbol of life and God's blessings.⁵ Ezekiel takes up this image and associates it with the eschatological temple of God (47:1-12; cf. Joel 3:18; Zech. 14:8).⁶

Tree of Life (Gen. 2:9; 3:24). It is generally acknowledged that the tree of life was represented inside the sanctuary by the golden candlestick. It had seven branches and the cups on each branch had the form of almond flowers decorated with buds and blossoms (Ex. 25:31-36). "The presence of botanical terms, and the basic central shaft-plus-six-branches form, give the impression of a tree-shaped object."⁷ If this view is correct, then, the Garden and the sanctuary were places where the source of life was located.⁸

Gold and precious stones. The Eden narrative mentions gold and precious stones (2:12). The furniture of the tabernacle was covered with gold and one of the priest's vestments was decorated with precious stones (e.g. Ex. 25:13, 18, 24; 25:7). Some find here common elements shared by the Garden and the sanctuary.⁹ The term "onyx" is used in Genesis and in the sanctuary context (Ex. 27:7; 28:9-12). The terminological association is valid and supports the view that the Garden and the sanctuary do share some fundamental conceptions.

Cherubim. Cherubim are first mentioned in Genesis 3:24. Figures of cherubim were used to decorate the inner curtains of the tabernacle (Ex. 26:1, 31) and two of them were part of the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:17-22).¹⁰ They stood there, like in Eden, as servants of God. The cherubim placed at the entrance of the Garden reminded people that God was still accessible to them.

Guarding the entrance. The function of the cherubim was to "guard [*shamar*] the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24, NKJV); that is to say, they were protecting the sanctity of the Garden and access to the symbol of life. The Levites were placed around the sanctuary "to keep charge [*shamar*] of the tabernacle of the testimony" (Num. 1:53, NASB). They were responsible for protecting the tabernacle against anyone who may want to encroach upon the sancta.¹¹

Work of Adam. Humans were "to work [*cabad*]" and "to take care [*shamar*] of" the Garden (Gen. 2:15). Those verbs are again used together in Numbers 3:7-8; 8:26; 18:5-6, to describe the duties of the Levites in working, ministering, and guarding the sanctuary.¹² Adam was performing in the Garden a task that was later assigned to the Levites.

Dress of Adam and Eve. After the Fall God provided for Adam and Eve a dress of the skin of animals (3:21). In the sanctuary services the skin of the sacrificial animals, the hide, was given to the officiating priests (Lev. 7:8).

Two other terms used in the story of the Garden are also found in the context of the tabernacle. The verb *shakan*, "dwell," is used in Genesis 3:24 and in Exodus 25:8 (God wanted to dwell [*shakan*] among the Israelites).¹³ Genesis 3:8 describes the Lord as walking (*hithallek*; "to walk to and fro"; from the verb *halak*, "to walk") in the Garden. The same verb is used in Leviticus 26:12 and Deuteronomy 23:14 to describe the divine presence in the sanctuary. "The Lord walked in Eden as he subsequently walked in the tabernacle."¹⁴

2. Theological links

Meeting place of God and man. From a theological perspective the Garden of Eden was where God and humans met in a harmonious relationship. The Garden was not God's dwelling place,¹⁵ but rather a place created by God for humans in which they were to dwell (2:8, 15).¹⁶

We find similar ideas in the setting of the Israelite sanctuary. The sanctuary was where God and humans came together. But when we examine the similarities between the Garden and the sanctuary as places of encounter, the parallels with the Garden are not exact.

The Garden was created by God. Humans dwelt in it. God visited them, and there was perfect harmony between them.

The tabernacle was built by humans. God dwelt in it. Humans went there to meet with God, and the purpose of the visit was to restore or preserve the relationship between God and humans.

The reason for the difference is that the Garden pictures the relationship between God and humans in a context free from sin and death. The tabernacle pictures the same relationship in the context of sin and death. Now God was the One who dwelt with humans because humans rejected the dwelling place God created for them.

Humans are described as returning, coming back from the east. The "east" in the Bible could be a symbol of good or evil.¹⁷ It is the place of enslavement, oppression (Ezek. 25:4), and idolatry (8:16). A return from the east was a symbol of submissiveness to God. Whenever the Israelites went to the sanctuary they were returning to the original experience of harmony and unity between God and humans that prevailed in the Garden of Eden. It was indeed an act of redemption, a recreation.

Judiciary activity of God. In Eden God functioned as Judge. Scholars have found in Genesis 3:11-20 "a trial,"¹⁸ is a legal process,¹⁹ a judgment scene.²⁰ In this scene God functions as a prosecutor²¹ investigating the crime committed by the couple. The story "follows step by step the procedure of a legal action."²² There is a discovery (8-10), an interrogation and defense (11-13), and then a sentence (14-19).

God is asking questions, investigating the nature and reason for the crime committed. We have in this story an investigative judgment in which God is searching for and analyzing the evidence. The obvious question is whether God already knew about the crime and if He did, then why was the investigation needed?

Umberto Cassuto, a Jewish commentator, raised those questions and suggested that "since the subsequent narrative portrays God as omnipotent, it stands to reason that He is not depicted here as one who is unaware of what is around him."²³ He adds that "the Judge of the whole earth calls man, in order to demand from him an account of his conduct."²⁴ According to others, the purpose of the questions is (1) to establish the facts and "to make clear to the man and the woman what they have done";²⁵ or (2) to allow "the man himself to acknowledge his crime";²⁶ (3) or even better, to move the culprit "into confessing his guilt."²⁷

This is the first judgment recorded in the Scriptures and includes an investigation followed by a sentence and its execution. During the investigation Adam and Eve are questioned by the Lord but surprisingly the serpent is not questioned at all; he is not judged in the same way the couple is being judged. The enemy is only condemned; a sentence is pronounced against him.²⁸

In the Israelite sanctuary God functioned as Judge of His people and of the world. According to Deuteronomy 17:8-13 Israel's "supreme court" met in the tabernacle and it consisted of priests and a judge. God entrusted to them with His judiciary authority.

Plan of redemption revealed

God revealed Himself in the Garden not only as Judge but also as Redeemer. The death of Adam and Eve should have occurred immediately (Gen 2:17).²⁹ The death penalty was not exhausted when God said to Adam, "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (3:19, NAS). This death undoubtedly belongs to the penalty of sin; but Genesis 2:17 describes something beyond it. The divine warning "was not 'on that day you will become mortal' but rather 'you will die.' But that did not happen at all."³⁰ Their lives were extended because "God allowed grace to prevail."³¹

This expression of grace is encapsulated in Genesis 3:15 which offers assurance of a new life. The fact that the serpent is here a symbol of evil and that his head is to be "crashed" by the offspring of the woman suggests that there will be a final victory over evil and death.³² For the Christian community this victory has become a reality in Christ Jesus (cf. Rom. 16:20; Heb. 2:14; Rev. 12). The ultimate death of Adam and Eve was not put into effect because Christ is "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Rev. 13:8, NIV).

Genesis 3:21 could also be pointing, in a pictorial way, to that promise of salvation: "God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them." Nakedness and clothing are important motifs in the Creation and Fall narratives.

Before the Fall nakedness is the natural condition of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:21). They were free to approach God, interact with each other and the rest of creation without having to mediate their presence through clothing. After the Fall their nakedness becomes unnatural; it stands as a symbol of their alienation from God. They cannot approach God any longer as they were created because their nature has been altered through rebellion. A metamorphosis is required, and it is symbolized in the act of clothing them.

God rejects Adam and Eve's solution to their nakedness, i.e. a dress of leaves, and dresses them with the skin of animals. God Himself makes it possible for them to approach Him (cf. Ex. 28:42-43). Dressing someone signals in the Bible the bestowal of a new status (cf. Gen 41:42; Ex. 28:40-41; Lev. 8:7, 13; Num. 20:26)³³

The act of investiture raised Adam and Eve from a state of alienation to the status of a person who can interact with God. He was restoring to them some of their lost dignity.³⁴ Obviously the interaction is not as before but it points to a future time when it will be fully restored.

By stating that Adam and Eve were dressed with the skins of animals, the text implicitly states that at least an animal was killed. The fact that this is not clearly stated should not detract from its significance. The biblical narrative seems to be "anticipating the notion of sacrifice in the slaying of the animals."³⁵

When we place Genesis 3:21 within its theological context the implicit death of the animal becomes indeed a sacrificial act. First, Adam and Eve were expected to experience ultimate death (2:17). Surprisingly, their life was preserved. But it is precisely in that life-threatening context that the death of an animal takes place. The death penalty is not executed on them but an animal dies.

Second, the death of the animal is not an accidental detail in the narrative; it provides what Adam and Eve needed in order to restore their relationship with the Lord. Out of death comes hope and restoration for them.

Finally, the fact that God made the garments and dressed them suggests that God did for them what they were unable to do for themselves. He was graciously enabling them to approach Him. Those concepts belong to the theology of the sanctuary and its services in the Old Testament. In fact, what is embryonic or hinted at in Genesis 3 becomes a full-grown theological body of ideas in the Israelite sacrificial system.

3. Summary

The narrative of Eden provides some of the most important elements of a theology of the sanctuary and its services in the Israelite system of worship. The linguistic links as well as the usage of similar imagery point to the dear connection between the two of them. This connection is even stronger at a theological level.

The Garden and the sanctuary are a center of life because the Lord is present in both. They are places where God and humans can come together for fellowship. In both places God judges the sin of His people and promises them redemption. In fact, the Lord actually prefigures the nature of that salvation by providing it symbolically through the death of a sacrificial victim. The Israelite sanctuary seems to have pointed back to the original harmony of God and humans and forward to its full restoration.

1 Gordon J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden," *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 9 (1981):19; Idem., *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987), 86. See also John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, Frank A. Gaebelein and Richard P. Polcyn, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 43.

2 Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Genesis I-VI* 8 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), 174; Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 30.

3 See David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion* (Tyler, Texas: Reconstruction Press, 1985), 29; Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism," 20.

4 Levenson, *Sinai & Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 132.

5 Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism," 22; Idem., *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987), 65.

6 See Howard N. Wallace, *The Eden Narrative* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 77, 78.

7 Carol Meyers, "Lampstand," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 4, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 142; see also, Idem., *The Tabernacle Menorah* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars, 1976), 174-181.

- 8 Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 62; of. Frank B. Holbrook, "The Israelite Sanctuary," in *The Sanctuary the Atonement*, Frank B. Holbrook, ed. (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1989), 31.
- 9 Cassuto, *Genesis*, 119, 120; Chilton, *Paradise*, 32-34; Wenham, *Genesis 1-5*, 65.
- 10 Wenham, *Genesis*, 86.
- 11 Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 210, comments, "In such a capacity the cherubim function much like the later Levites who are posted as guards around the tabernacle, and who are to strike down any person who encroaches upon the forbidden sancta (Num. 1:51, 53)."
- 12 Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism," 21.
- 13 Wenham, *Genesis*, 86.
- 14 Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism," 20.
- 15 Contra Howard N. Wallace, *Eden Narrative*, 70-85; idem., "Garden of God," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:907.
- 16 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 78.
- 17 See Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., "East," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 225, 226.
- 18 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 91; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: Knox, 1982), 49.
- 19 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 253.
- 20 Sailhamer, "Genesis," 52.
- 21 Hamilton, *Genesis*, 194.
- 22 Westermann, *Genesis*, 252.
- 23 Cassuto, *Genesis Part 1*, 155.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 254, 255.
- 26 Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17*, 194.
- 27 Wenham, *Genesis 1-5*, 77.
- 28 See Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 255.
- 29 Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 68.
- 30 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 95.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Wenham, *Genesis 1-17*, 80.
- 33 Robert Oden, *The Bible Without Theology: The Theological Tradition and Alternatives to It* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 100, 101.
- 34 See J. Gamberoni, "Labesh," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 7, G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, (1995), 462.35.
- 35 Sailhamer, "Genesis," 58.

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