

Temple

by T. D. Alexander

The concept of temple permeates the whole Bible. The temple functions as the palace of the divine King, where God is present in a unique way. It is associated with various earthly locations throughout the Bible's story: the Garden of Eden, the tabernacle, the Jerusalem temple, Jesus Christ, the church, and the new Jerusalem. Shared features connect these different "temple" manifestations, with the movement from one to another being related closely to the outworking of God's redemption of humanity. There is also a heavenly temple, upon which some of these other temples are modeled (Heb 8:5).

In the overall scheme of biblical history, God creates the earth in order to dwell there with those he creates. At the outset God commissions Adam and Eve to begin populating the earth with people who will build and inhabit a holy city. What begins in the Garden of Eden will eventually result in the new Jerusalem. Although Adam and Eve's betrayal of God delays (with tragic consequences) the project, through various phases God will eventually bring it to completion. Throughout this whole process the concept of temple figures prominently.

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

While it may not appear immediately obvious, the Garden of Eden exhibits features in keeping with a divine sanctuary. Placed within this sacred location, Adam is instructed to serve and guard it (Gen 2:15; the NIV translation "to work it and take care of it" might more helpfully be rendered "to serve it and guard it"), just as the Levites and priests are later required to "serve" and "guard" the tabernacle sanctuary (Num 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:4–7). Tragically, however, when confronted by the scheming serpent, Adam and Eve fail to fulfill this duty. Consequently, God expels the human couple from Eden and hands their role as guardians over to the cherubim stationed at the garden's entrance (Gen 3:24).

One important consequence of Adam and Eve's exile from Eden is their loss of intimacy with God. Defiled by their sin, they can no longer serve within a holy sanctuary. Against this background the rest of the Bible's story centers on restoring holy status to sinful people and repairing the fractured relationship between God and humanity. Later earthly sanctuaries provide, to differing degrees, an opportunity for God and people to come together.

From Adam and Eve's expulsion through to the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, no earthly sanctuary exists. As Jacob's dream at Bethel reveals, God dwells in heaven (Gen 28:12–13), occasionally coming down to the earth to make himself known (e.g. Gen 18:1, 20–21). During the

period of the patriarchs, altars function as temporary “sanctuaries,” anticipating a time when God will reside permanently on the earth (e.g., Gen 22:1–19).

THE TABERNACLE

After rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, God enters into a special covenant relationship with them at Mount Sinai. This prepares the way for constructing a portable sanctuary where God resides among the people. Although God chooses to live in a tent like the Israelites, his abode differs significantly. To reflect the royal nature of its occupant, it is made extensively of gold and richly colored fabrics. Consistent with its use as a dwelling, the tabernacle is furnished with household items: a chest, a table for food, and a lampstand. God’s presence, however, is not confined to the tabernacle, for he is viewed as sitting on his heavenly throne. The “ark of the covenant,” which sat within the Most Holy Place, functioned as the footstool of the heavenly throne (1 Chr 28:2). Heaven and earth were joined within the tabernacle.

The tabernacle was known as the “tent of meeting” because Moses conversed with God there (e.g., Exod 27:21; 28:43; 29:4; 40:1; Lev 1:1; 3:2; Num 1:1; 2:2), replacing an earlier tent that temporarily fulfilled a similar purpose (Exod 33:7–11). The tabernacle was also called the “sanctuary” or holy place (e.g., Exod 25:8; Lev 12:4)—with the inner room of the tent being “the Most Holy Place” (e.g., Exod 26:33–34; Lev 16:2). God’s presence made it holy. Only the high priest was permitted to enter the Most Holy Place—and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

THE JERUSALEM TEMPLE

Eventually the tabernacle was replaced by a magnificent temple, built by King Solomon in Jerusalem. After Solomon’s dedicatory prayer, the glory of the Lord filled the new sanctuary (1 Kgs 8:10–11; 2 Chr 7:1–2) as it had previously filled the tabernacle (Exod 40:34–35). Due to God’s special relationship with King David, David’s dynasty is closely associated with future developments regarding God’s earthly temple. For centuries to follow, the Jerusalem temple became the principal location for worshiping God as pilgrims journeyed there to sing for joy to the living God (Ps 84:1–4; cf. Ps 122:1–9).

Since temples in the ancient Near East were often viewed as miniatures of the cosmos, the Jerusalem temple (and the tabernacle before it) may well have influenced Israelite ideas regarding cosmology (e.g., Job 38:4–7; Pss 75:3; 104:2–3). Moreover, as models of the earth, the tabernacle and temple probably signaled a future time when the whole world would become God’s dwelling place.

God’s presence within the temple distinguished Jerusalem from all other cities (see “The City of God,” p. 2666). Eventually, however, the corruption of its rulers and citizens caused God to punish them by having the Babylonians sack Jerusalem and destroy the temple in 587/586 BC. The prophet Ezekiel gives particular attention to how God abandons his dwelling place (Ezek 9:3; 11:23),

highlighting how the sins of the people defiled the temple. Although God's reluctant departure from the Jerusalem sanctuary is clearly explicable, Ezekiel looks beyond this to a time when God will live in a transformed city (Ezek 40–48). While the subsequent overthrow of the Babylonians by the Persians in 539 BC eventually results in the temple being rebuilt in Jerusalem, the outcome falls short of all that the prophets anticipated. Something greater was yet to occur, which would also involve the restoration of the Davidic monarchy.

JESUS CHRIST

As heir to the Davidic dynasty, Jesus' coming inaugurates a new stage in the outworking of God's redemptive plan. When John writes, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14), he compares Jesus' body to the OT tabernacle. When Jesus remarks, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days," John interprets this as referring to Jesus' body (John 2:19–21). The idea that Jesus' body was a temple fits well with the belief that "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col 2:9).

Apart from Jesus being a temple himself, the Gospels also present him as both cleansing the Jerusalem temple as the heir to the Davidic dynasty and predicting its future destruction. Through the sacrificial atonement achieved by his death on the cross, Jesus restores to a holy status those who trust in him (Heb 10:10), without which they would not be able to serve within God's temple. Furthermore, as a perfect high priest, Jesus enters the heavenly temple (Heb 4:14; 9:24).

THE CHURCH

Anticipated by the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the church becomes the new temple of God, extending God's presence throughout the earth (1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:16). Beginning with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, God's dwelling place on earth becomes a multiethnic community of people. The Jerusalem temple is replaced by a very different kind of divine sanctuary made of living stones (1 Pet 2:4–5), Jesus Christ himself being both the prototype and the cornerstone of this temple (Eph 2:20–21). The church is a temple that is both in use and under construction (Eph 2:21), the followers of Jesus Christ being variously equipped by the Holy Spirit as temple builders (1 Cor 3:10). While the majority of NT references to the Holy Spirit dwelling within believers refer to believers corporately as God's temple, 1 Cor 6:19–20 is usually interpreted as implying that each individual Christian is a temple.

THE NEW JERUSALEM

While the creation of the church is important in expanding God's reign throughout the earth, fulfilling God's plans for the whole earth involves creating the new Jerusalem (Rev 21–22). The new Jerusalem brings to fulfillment what began in Eden; both share common features (e.g., the tree of life). John's vision reveals a city of enormous dimensions that is shaped as a golden cube, reminiscent of the Most Holy Place within the Jerusalem temple, also shaped as a cube and plated with gold. Although John explicitly states that there is no temple within the city, he goes on to say, "The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (Rev 21:22). This suggests that the whole

city is a Most Holy Place. In this holy city no barriers exist between God and the human population; as priestly royals, every human inhabitant is able to see God's face (Rev 22:4–5).

CONCLUSION

The concept of temple binds together the different phases that occur as events move from the Garden of Eden to the anticipated creation of the new Jerusalem. While the temple's form changes dramatically as God's presence and ⁵glory gradually fill the whole earth, a consistent pattern runs throughout, creating a sense of unity.

⁵ T. D. Alexander, "Temple," in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 2652–2653.