

**“BEHOLD, THE DWELLING PLACE OF GOD IS WITH MAN”:  
PROVISIONAL ACCESS TO THE PRESENCE OF GOD AS THE THEME  
OF THE PENTATEUCH**

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## INTRODUCTION

It is natural to expect that the introductory material of a well-crafted work of literature would contain either a direct statement of, or allusions (hints) to, the main themes that develop throughout the entire work. This feature is clearly evident among the tomes of classical literature. For example, the *Iliad* of Homer begins with the Greek word *menis*, which means “rage” or “wrath.” This one word functions as an immediate indication of the main theme around which Homer’s entire epic is structured. The rage of Achilles is central to the story; his glory has been impugned by another, and it awaits to be seen how his rage is avenged and thus, his glory restored. A similar feature is present in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, where in the “proem”<sup>1</sup> to his work he states directly his intention:

What is in me dark  
Illumine, what is low raise and support,  
That to the height of this great argument  
I may assert Eternal Providence  
And justify the ways of God to men.<sup>2</sup>

Just as Homer’s bard-poet appeals to the Muses to aid him in telling of the rage of Achilles, so Milton’s calls on them to help him explain God’s mysterious ways to mankind. In both cases, the opening lines function as a preface and hermeneutical (interpretive) paradigm for all that comes after it.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Peter J. Leithart, *Heroes of the City of Man: A Christian Guide to Select Ancient Literature* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 44: “Epics generally are introduced with a ‘proem,’ in which the poet announces the main character and theme of his story and calls on the Muses, goddesses of poetry and speech, to help him do justice to his theme.”

2. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 4, lines 22b-26.

3. This happens at the micro level of narrative, as well. See Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 124: “A narrator typically prepares his audience with a few set-up sentences for the plot, called the ‘exposition.’”

This early, initial establishment of thematic material in classical literature is a feature that plays prominently in biblical literature as well. The Pentateuch constitutes the first major literary portion of both the Hebrew and Christian canons. As a unity,<sup>4</sup> the Pentateuch sets the agenda for all that comes after it, and it provides an interpretive framework for understanding the unfolding history of salvation that ensues. In it we encounter, very early in the narrative—even “in the beginning”—evidence of God’s deliberate desire to dwell with humanity. *The theme of the Pentateuch centers on God’s intention to establish provisional access to his Cosmic Temple as a manifestation of his desire for intimate relationship with humanity—the pinnacle of his creative work—and the expansion of his glory throughout the world.* This theme is set up and pushed forward in the Pentateuch, but is not fully developed there, where it remains inchoate. It is not until the eschaton, as revealed in Revelation 21-22, that we see the consummation of this divine plan fully realized. Nevertheless, the Pentateuch clearly reveals the LORD to be committed to establishing his holy presence among his creation, which can be seen through the temple imagery at work.

Inasmuch as the creation account in Genesis 1-3 functions as prefatory material for the Pentateuch,<sup>5</sup>—indeed, for the entire Bible—it serves to provide the thematic trajectory that guides the subsequent narrative. The thematic content embedded there *demonstrates God’s intention to establish his cosmic temple administration on earth, whereby he will dwell with man in covenant relationship.*

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4. T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to Promise Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 113-114, argues that “in its present form the Pentateuch is clearly a unified work.”

5. Ibid., 119: “The opening chapters of Genesis are exceptionally important for understanding the rest of the Pentateuch.”

## HEAVEN AS MODEL

The creation is full of remarkable beauty and complexity, awesome forces and tiny pleasures, rational order and sublime mystery—all pointing to its Creator as an “artist with an eye toward aesthetics.”<sup>6</sup> The world that God has chosen to create is comprised of distinctive dimensions of reality, each revealing in a special way the presence of its maker and sustainer. The “highest” (invisible) heaven, existing outside the “firmament” (earth), functions as a model, or “blueprint,” for earth.<sup>7</sup> That is, the visible world is a reflection of the invisible, heavenly realm in which God himself resides. Thus, typology plays a critical role in understanding the symbolism at work in Scripture. Typology, from the Greek word *typos*, “refers to an image impressed onto something else, for instance, wax. It is the word used in Scripture for the imprint of God’s heavenly pattern on the earth.”<sup>8</sup>

The tabernacle is a case in point. In Acts 7:44, Stephen says, “Our fathers had the tent of witness [tabernacle] in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, *according to the pattern that he had seen.*” Similarly, Hebrews 8:5, quoting Exodus 25:40, reminds us that the tabernacle and the sacrificial system in operation there served as “a copy and shadow of heavenly things;” and Moses was told to “make everything *according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain*” (ESV).<sup>9</sup> Vern Poythress poses a rhetorical question about this “pattern” shown to Moses: “What else would it be than a

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6. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 393.

7. James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), Previously published by Wolgemuth & Hyatt Publishers, 1988, 42.

8. Ibid., 49.

9. Quoted in *ibid.*

*heavenly pattern*, since he received it by symbolically going up to heaven [on Mount Sinai]?”<sup>10</sup> Psalm 78:69 further indicates that God “built the sanctuary like the heights, [he built the sanctuary] like the earth which He has founded forever? (NASB).

The architecture of the cosmos is tripartite in nature, consisting of (1) the “habitable world,” (2) the “visible heavens and its light sources,” and (3) the “invisible dimension of the cosmos, where God and his heavenly hosts dwelt”<sup>11</sup> (what we normally refer to by “heaven”). James Jordan argues that wherever this structure is modeled in the visible world, it is by the work of the Spirit “proceeding from heaven” and bringing “the heavenly pattern into the cosmos.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, “the heavens declare the glory of God in the special sense that they are a copy of the archetypal Glory of God.”<sup>13</sup> This structure is reflected in the cosmos itself, in the Garden of Eden, and in the architecture and furnishings of the tabernacle/temple complex. In each of these cases, God’s presence is established with clear intention to dwell with humanity. “And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt *that I might dwell among them*. I am the LORD their God” (Exod. 29:46 ESV).

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10. Vern Sheridan Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1991), 14, emphasis mine.

11. G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 32-33.

12. Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, 43.

13. Merideth G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 20, quoted in Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, 43.

## THE COSMOS AS TEMPLE

The cosmos is God’s temple by design—his intended resting place in which he chooses to dwell, and from which he rules the universe: “Thus says the LORD: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool’” (Isa. 66:1 ESV).<sup>14</sup> T.D. Alexander states that “the creation of the earth is closely associated with the construction of God’s temple.”<sup>15</sup> Along the same lines, John Walton argues that there is a “close connection between cosmic origins and temple building.”<sup>16</sup>

There are a number of interpretive connections and “subtle allusions”<sup>17</sup> that provide clues for understanding the cosmos as a temple. The connection gets “tighter,” Walton says, when we consider that “temples in the ancient world were considered symbols of the cosmos.”<sup>18</sup> As such, they literally served as a kind of micro-cosmos that reflected the features of the cosmic temple in miniature, directly implying the intentional presence of God therein. G.K. Beale notes that this is not a novel concept, but an “ancient notion.”<sup>19</sup>

The most striking evidence for understanding the cosmos as a temple is found in the cosmic symbolism of Israel’s tabernacle/temple architecture and furnishings. It is remarkable to note that the tripartite structure of the cosmos, outlined above, is clearly modeled in the

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14. cf. Psalm 11:4; Matthew 5:34; 23:22; Acts 7:49.

15. Alexander, *From Paradise to Promise Land*, 124.

16. John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 78.

17. Alexander, *From Paradise to Promise Land*, 123.

18. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, 78.

19. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 31.

tabernacle. “The holy of holies represented the invisible heavenly dimension, the holy place represented the visible heavens, and the outer courtyard represented the visible sea and earth, where humans lived.”<sup>20</sup> What follows is a brief and very limited survey of some of the connections.

The holy of holies represented the invisible heavenly dimension by (1) the presence of cherubim on the ark and woven into the curtain that separates the holy of holies, just as cherubim guard the heavenly temple; (2) the lack of any image of God beyond the ark, representing the invisible heaven where God resides; (3) the incense cloud, which the high priest had to enter into when approaching the holy of holies.

The holy place as a representation of the visible heavens rests on a number of observations, but I will only list two here: (1) The curtains of the holy place, especially their colors and design, mimicked the visible heavens. (2) The lampstand modeled the heavenly lights. “This symbolism is enhanced by observing that the Hebrew word for ‘light’ is used ten times in the Pentateuch for the lamps on the lampstand, and the only other place in the Pentateuch where the word occurs is five times in Gen. 1:14-16, where it refers to the sun, moon, and stars.”<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the outer courtyard represented the visible sea and earth. (1) The large metal washbasin and the altar in Solomon’s temple are called, respectively, the “sea” (1 Kings 7:23-26 NASB) and the “bosom of the earth” (Ezek. 43:14 NASB).<sup>22</sup> (2) The twelve

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20. G.K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 628.

21. Ibid., 628-629.

22. Ibid., 629.

bulls “entirely circling the sea” and the “lily blossom” provide a model of the land and wildlife (2 Chron. 4:2-5 NASB). (3) The four corners of the earth are suggested by the bulls that held up the washbasins as they are facing toward the four points on the compass.

In lieu of this kind of evidence, Walton concludes that “from the idea that the [tabernacle] temple was considered a mini cosmos, it is easy to move to the idea that the cosmos could be viewed as a temple.”<sup>23</sup> Additionally—and interestingly—the creation account of Genesis 1:1-2:3 can be interpreted as a cosmic temple inauguration ceremony, wherein God establishes the “functional origins” of the cosmos.<sup>24</sup> In any case, cosmic symbolism in the design of the tabernacle/temple complex is prevalent and striking, lending support for the idea that the cosmos itself is a temple.

## **EDEN AS GARDEN-TEMPLE / ANTECHAMBER TO COSMIC TEMPLE**

In his commentary on *Genesis*, Bruce Waltke states outrightly that “the garden is a temple from which the heavenly waters flow to the rest of the earth.”<sup>25</sup> This notion of Garden as temple is an extension of the cosmic temple idea addressed above. As an “axis between heaven and earth,”<sup>26</sup> the garden of Eden functioned as an archetypal sanctuary.<sup>27</sup> G.K. Beale contends that the Garden of Eden “was the first archetypal temple in which

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23. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, 82.

24. Ibid., 33: “[W]e may deduce a functional ontology in the ancient world—that is, that they offer accounts of functional origins rather than accounts of material origins.”

25. Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 101.

26. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 255.

27. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, 82.



the first man worshipped God.”<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that as we try to understand the theology of Eden, “we must...recognize that the garden of Eden was not, strictly speaking, a garden for humans but was the garden of God (Is 51:3; Ezek 28:13),” and only secondarily a place for man to live and worship him.<sup>29</sup>

Beale notes that Eden “served as a little earthly model of God’s temple in heaven that eventually would encompass the whole earth.”<sup>30</sup> Alexander states that “the case for Eden being a divine residence rests largely on the striking parallels that exist between the garden and later Israelite sanctuaries.”<sup>31</sup> Just as we have seen in the cosmic symbolism of the tabernacle/temple, there also exists striking symbolic parallels between it and the Garden of Eden. Space does not permit a complete list of parallels; nevertheless, a sampling of examples are in order. Consider the following:<sup>32</sup>

- The Garden as the place of the first arboreal lampstand—the Tree of Life (Exod. 25:31-36).
- The Garden as the place of precious stones (Gen. 2:12; Exod. 25:7, 11-39; 28:9-12, 20; 1 Kings 6:20-22; 1 Chr. 29:2).
- The Garden as the place of the first mountain (Ezek. 28:14, 16).

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28. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 66.

29. John H. Walton, “Eden, Garden of,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, by T.D. Alexander and D.W. Baker (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2003), 204.

30. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 627.

31. T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2008), 21.

32. This list is adapted from Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 66-80; Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 21-24.

- The Garden was the first place with an eastern facing entrance, guarded by cherubim (Gen. 3:24; Exod. 25:18-22; 26:31; 36:35; 1 Kings 6:23-29; 2 Chr. 3:14; Ezek. 40:6).
- Ezekiel views the Garden of Eden as the first sanctuary. Ezekiel 47:1-12 describes a river flowing from a future Jerusalem temple, bringing life to the dead sea. Water does not flow uphill, indicating that Eden must be an elevated location, possibly a mountain. God's presence is frequently associated with mountains.

Furthermore, the imagery demonstrates that Eden served as the antechamber to the Cosmic Temple. Alexander confidently admits that “the Garden of Eden has every appearance of being a garden attached to a temple.”<sup>33</sup> The suggestion arises from the garden symbolism present in the antechamber of the Israel's tabernacle/temple, most notably, the menorah as a symbol of the Tree of Life and the table for the Bread of the Presence, indicating God's provision of plant and animals for food for the first priest, Adam.<sup>34</sup> This further suggests that Eden was created as a means of provisional access to the presence of God, a place where they could hear “the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Gen 3:8). God, by his grace, created this place for man and woman to live in harmony with the land and animals; to enjoy the blessing of harmonious marriage; to be nurtured by the fruit of the Garden; to enjoy unlimited access to the presence of their maker.

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33. Alexander, *From Paradise to Promise Land*, 123.

34. John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 182: “It is logical to understand the garden as the antechamber to the Most Holy Place...Eden is in effect the Most Holy Place, and the garden adjoins it as the antechamber.”

## THE TABERNACLE AS A SYMBOL OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Being a “replica of heaven,”<sup>35</sup> the tabernacle by its very presence illustrated the powerful truth that the God who created heaven and earth was the same God who dwelt among them in the wilderness tent-sanctuary, albeit provisionally. “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (Exod. 25:8 ESV). The tabernacle was provisional in the sense that it functioned as a mediatory instrument through which God would make gracious allowances in order to continue his relationship with his sinful covenant partners. At the same time, the tabernacle provided a symbolic confirmation of the promises already made by YHWH. “In pictorial form God was saying, as it were, ‘Look at My *provisions* for you. This is how I redeem you and bring you to *My presence*.’”<sup>36</sup>

The theme of God's presence continues through the book of Numbers where it “may be observed in the care with which the text deals with the place of the Levites...in their responsibility to transport the tabernacle and its furniture (Num. 4).”<sup>37</sup> The continued maintenance of the tabernacle complex, according to the meticulous, divinely prescribed protocols, illustrates the precarious and precise nature of mediating the presence of God through tabernacle ministry; yet at the same time, it is a reminder of the provisional nature

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35. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 405, 413, 447; Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 627: “Israel's tabernacle and temple were a miniature model of God's huge cosmic temple that was to dominate the heavens and earth at the end of time. That is, the temple was a symbolic model pointing not merely to the present cosmos but also to the new heaven and earth that would be perfectly filled with God's presence.”

36. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, 11, emphasis mine.

37. Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 100-101.

of such mediation—a reminder that God has provided access to his presence as an act of grace.

“Thus, the tabernacle as a whole is a replica of heaven. When God comes to dwell with the Israelites, He brings down to them in His wonderful condescension a little replica of heaven.”<sup>38</sup>

## CONCLUSION

C. S. Lewis once observed, “one of the rewards of reading the Old Testament regularly” is that “you keep on discovering more and more what a tissue of quotations from it the New Testament is.”<sup>39</sup> In fact, the New Testament authors “cited or alluded to the Old Testament more than 250 times.”<sup>40</sup> Given that the New Testament authors and their audiences were a people “whose identity and even their very patterns of thought were shaped by the words of the Old Testament,”<sup>41</sup> it makes sense to expect that the New Testament would be a continuation and development of the themes established by its former counterpart.<sup>42</sup>

This is certainly true with respect to the theme that is the subject of this paper. The bible is a unity, and the bonding agent is God himself. Waltke makes it clear: “The bond that unites the testaments is the sense of God’s divine activity in revelatory history in

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38. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, 15.

39. Quoted in C. John Collins, “How the New Testament Quotes and Interprets the Old Testament,” in *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2605.

40. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 16.

41. *Ibid.*, 15.

42. *Ibid.*, 45, concurs: “the writers of the New Testament understood their writings as continuing the witness of the Old Testament to Jesus Christ.”

progressively establishing his rule in heaven on earth from the creation of the cosmos (Genesis 1) to his creation of the new cosmos (Revelation 21-22).”<sup>43</sup> The “irruption of the kingship of God”<sup>44</sup> thematically continues into the New Testament, culminating in the incarnation of the Son of God, ushering in a new phase of salvation history, and establishing an inaugurated eschatology that anticipates a time of complete and total victory of the divine seed over the serpent. G.E. Ladd notes that the “Kingdom of God” in the Old Testament “always involves an *inbreaking* of God into history when God’s redemptive purpose is fully realized.”<sup>45</sup> In the Pentateuch, we see YHWH breaking into the chaotic world to establish order and function; to create man and woman and a means of relationship with them in the garden-temple of Eden; to punish their sin, yet to clothe them in grace and provide still a way of knowing him; to choose a people for his name, and though they prove rebellious and “stiff-necked,” are given provisional access to God by means of law and tabernacle. From the beginning we see YHWH actively pursuing the establishment of his presence and rule on earth to the benefit of his chosen people. This theme finds its true expression in the one who actually came and “tabernacled” among us;<sup>46</sup> he became the sin offering in our stead, so that the presence of God would not only be accessible, but now dwelling in the inner man, making us a “new creation” in Christ.<sup>47</sup>

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43. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 45.

44. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J.A. Baker, 2 vols., The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 1:338, cited in Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 68.

45. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Revised ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 58, emphasis mine.

46. John 1:14; cf. Matt. 1:23 ESV

47. 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15 ESV

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