

IMMANUEL
— I N —
OUR PLACE



T H E G O S P E L A C C O R D I N G T O
T H E O L D T E S T A M E N T



A series of studies on the lives
of Old Testament characters, written for
laypeople and pastors, and designed to
encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching,
and preaching of the Old Testament.

TREMPER LONGMAN III
J. ALAN GROVES

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IMMANUEL
IN
OUR PLACE

SEEING CHRIST IN
ISRAEL'S WORSHIP

TREMPER LONGMAN III


P U B L I S H I N G
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FOREWORD



*The New Testament is in the Old concealed;
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.*
—Augustine

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:10–12 NIV)

“In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter

his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:22–27 NIV)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn't understand. But Moses, the prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending for which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament, not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah but by means of the stories of all of the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament Series is committed to the proposition that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God, and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. The individual books of the Old Testament exhibit diverse genres, styles, and individual theologies, but tying them all together is the constant foreshadowing of, and pointing forward to, Christ. Believing in the fundamentally Christocentric nature of the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament,

we offer this series of studies in the Old Testament with the following aims:

- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament
- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

To this end, the volumes in this series are written for pastors and laypeople, not scholars.

While such a series could take a number of different shapes, we have decided, in most cases, to focus individual volumes on Old Testament figures—people—rather than books or themes. Some books, of course, will receive major attention in connection with their authors or main characters (e.g., Daniel or Isaiah). Also, themes will be emphasized in connection with particular figures.

It is our hope and prayer that this series will revive interest in and study of the Old Testament as readers recognize that the Old Testament points forward to Jesus Christ.

TREMPER LONGMAN III
J. ALAN GROVES



P R E F A C E



The Old Testament is hard for Christians to understand and appreciate. While the New Testament presents the words and actions of Christ, the Old Testament seems to offer a harsh and bloody religion. Elsewhere I have dealt with this perception of a radical difference between the two testaments in general terms,¹ but our present topic, the priestly theology of the Old Testament, brings it to the fore once again.

The priestly theology of the Old Testament appears to us at first glance as elitist and violent. Our worship experience is quite distant from the blood of numerous sacrifices performed by ornately dressed priests in a specifically designated holy place on certain consecrated days. On closer examination, though, we will gain profound theological insight and practical wisdom by studying these ancient priestly texts. Indeed, among many other things, we will come to a deeper appreciation and comprehension of the most important redemptive act of all, Jesus' death on the cross. After all, even a cursory reading of the Gospels and Epistles reveals that the significance of Jesus' death is painted in the colors of the tabernacle, priesthood, festivals, and sacrifices of the Old Testament.

But even before we explore the christological dimensions of the priestly theology of the Old Testament, we will learn more about the nature of God and our relationship with him. We will see that God is our heavenly King who establishes his rulership in the midst of his

people. As King, he consecrates space, people, certain acts, and times that are especially dedicated to his service. We now turn our attention to these important though difficult and not infrequently neglected concepts from the Old Testament. We look first at sacred space, then sacred actions, then sacred people, and finally sacred time.

This book is part of a series that began with a book by Raymond B. Dillard. The series itself commemorates his life and work. I wish to dedicate this book to him. My career began with his encouragement, and he mentored me in my writing and teaching. We are now nearing the eighth anniversary of his death, but his influence is still very much felt by me and countless others.

I also want to thank my good friend and former colleague Alan Groves, chairman of the Old Testament department at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Al gave me much good advice in the writing of this book, and I deeply appreciate it.

Thom Notaro of P&R Publishing gave the manuscript a very thorough reading at the final editorial stage and offered excellent advice on style and substance.

However, I did not accept all of my readers' suggestions, and thus, not surprisingly, they do not share all of my conclusions. I am, for good or ill, the one responsible for the final content.

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.



I

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 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 him-

self 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 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 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 consensus 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 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 hu-

man 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 provided 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?

2

ALTARS: OCCASIONAL
TESTIMONIES
TO SACRED SPACE

After Genesis 3, Adam and Eve's easy access to the presence of God was denied. Sin had entered the picture, and God hates sin. We have seen in the previous chapter that Adam and Eve were ejected from Eden, where they walked freely with God. Nonetheless, God in his grace did provide a way for his people to come to worship and commune with him. In later chapters, we will examine the contents of this worship, but for now we will focus on the question of location. In what kind of place did God's people worship him right after the Fall?

GOD'S PRESENCE AND ALTAR BUILDING

The name given to the place of worship between the Fall and the Exodus is the altar. The first express mention of an altar is Genesis 8:20, which tells of an object built by Noah after the flood waters receded, where he offered sacrifices to the Lord. However, we should not assume that this is the very first altar. From their actions in Genesis 4:3–5, we may assume that Cain and Abel brought their sacrifices to an altar.

But what is an altar? An altar is a simple structure built of earth or stone marking the place where God meets people. Typically, God made his presence known at a location and then commanded his people to build an altar there. We will later see that altars were incorporated into the larger sanctuaries, the tabernacle and the temple, but before Moses the altar was the only architectural feature marking a place as holy.

The Hebrew word translated “altar” is *mizbeah*, formed from the verbal root *zabah*, which means “sacrifice” or “slaughter.” Though it is dangerous to rely exclusively on the etymology of a word for its meaning, the idea of sacrifice is supported by the use of the word in biblical contexts. It appears that the altar was a place where sacrifice could and did take place. The altar was where the worshiper came into the presence of God, and God, as we have seen, hates sin. Therefore, sin had to be accounted for before a person entered the holy place. We will later look at this in more detail, but the most obvious function of sacrifice was to atone for sin. Thus, it is not at all surprising that at the heart of the altar was the idea of sacrifice.

We may further appeal to other Scripture passages to help us understand the nature of altars. Though written much later, the so-called altar law in Exodus 20:24–26 appears to reflect earlier times as well as later times.

The altars you make for me must be simple altars of earth. Offer on such altars your sacrifices to me—your burnt offerings and peace offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Build altars in the places where I remind you who I am, and I will come and bless you there. If you build altars from stone, use only uncut stones. Do not chip or shape the stones with a tool, for that would make them unfit for holy use. And you may not approach my altar by steps. If you do, someone may

look up under the skirts of your clothing and see your nakedness.

This passage deserves lengthy commentary, but for our purpose we will only point out a few relevant points. In the first place, this law implies the construction of multiple altars. Indeed, it would not be until the building of the temple that worship would be restricted to a single altar located in that structure.

Second, the altar was to be simple, not ornate. This feature was probably to distinguish it from more ornate altars of the pagan Canaanites. Other aspects of this law also distance the worship of the Israelites from the Canaanites, most notably the prohibition of steps so that not even a hint of the sexual rituals of the Canaanites may occur at the Israelite altar.

We can also observe that the altar was a place of sacrifice. Animals were to be slaughtered on the altar. After all, those individuals who would come into the presence of God at an altar were sinners who themselves deserved death (see especially chap. 7).

But most importantly, the altar was a holy place, a set-apart place, because that was where God chose to meet with his people and bring them his blessings.

NOAH'S ALTAR

That the altar was a place of sacrifice as well as a place where God made his presence known to his people may be seen in the very first mentioned altar, that of Noah after the flood (Gen. 8:20). Again, it is important to remember that, though this passage is the first explicit mention of an altar, it is highly improbable that it was the first altar. An altar is presupposed by the action of Genesis 4:3–4 describing the sacrifices that Cain and Abel brought to God. However, we can get a clear view of the

role of an altar by looking at the occasion on which Noah built one.

The context of the building of Noah's altar is the flood story. Due to the excessive sin of humans, God determined to judge them by means of a flood. Always gracious, even in the context of judgment, God extended his grace to Noah (Gen. 8:1) and told him to build an ark. After the waters receded, Noah disembarked from his ark, and his very first action was to build the altar and offer sacrifices on it.

Noah, after all, had just survived an incredible ordeal. All of humanity had just been destroyed in God's judgment and only he and his immediate family survived among the creatures God created in his image. Noah's immediate reaction was what we would expect from a man who had been the recipient of God's grace—gratitude. Noah built an altar, which created a holy place, a sanctuary, where he could come into the presence of God. He then offered sacrifices to God. The specific type of sacrifice that he offered was burnt offerings (*'olah*). We will later see that this particular kind of sacrifice was the foundational sacrifice that both made atonement for one's sin and provided a gift from the worshiper to God (see chap. 7). In short, Noah's building an altar was the first step in his act of worship by which he began the new phase of his life after the horrible flood waters.

THE ALTARS OF THE PATRIARCHS

The patriarchs were men whom God chose to provide the foundation for Israel, his chosen people. Genesis 1–11, the primeval history, has a worldwide focus. After the Fall, the history of humanity is marked by continual sin, followed by God's judgment and continuing grace. In Genesis 12, the narrative focus narrows on one individual, Abram, who would later receive the name Abraham.

God chose him to be the foundation of a new people. He desired now to reach humanity through this man and his descendants. As such, God placed a demand on him: “Leave your country, your relatives, and your father’s house, and go to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). In return, God gave him a manifold promise:

I will cause you to become the father of a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and I will make you a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will be blessed through you. (vv. 2–3)

These great promises reverberate not only through Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch, but through the entirety of Scripture.¹ Because he was the recipient of the promises and the foundation of the nation of Israel, Abraham is called a patriarch, a father. The narrative that describes his life flows naturally into the narrative about his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob. They too are called patriarchs in tradition and are often linked together in later Old Testament tradition.

When Abraham arrived in the promised land, he worshiped God. Not surprisingly, he built altars as he traveled through the land. As a matter of fact, his first recorded act after entering the promised land was to build an altar. Shechem in the northern hill country was his first recorded stopping point. At that place, according to Genesis 12:7, God appeared to him and reiterated the promise that he would give Abraham the land. In response, Abraham “built an altar there to commemorate the LORD’s visit.” The altar is built at a place where God made his special presence known.

Abraham received the promise, but not the land. In response to Abraham’s wavering faith in the fulfillment of the promise, God assured him that the land would

come to his descendants but many years would pass before that would actually happen:

You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, and they will be oppressed as slaves for four hundred years. But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth. (But you will die in peace, at a ripe old age.) After four generations your descendants will return here to this land, when the sin of the Amorites has run its course. (Gen. 15:13–16)

Abraham, though a powerful man, was also a resident alien in the land. He moved from place to place. As he did, he constructed altars wherever he was in order to worship the Lord and commemorate the Lord's presence at that place. As we follow the narrative, we see that he built altars not only at Shechem but also between Bethel and Ai (Gen. 12:8; also 13:4), in Hebron (13:18), and on a mountain in the region of Moriah (22:9). His grandson Jacob is also described as building an altar at Bethel (35:1–7).

The result of all this building was that the landscape of the promised land was dotted with altars. These altars indicated places where God appeared to his people, who would ultimately inherit the land. In a sense, it was like planting a flag and claiming the land in the name of Yahweh.

Before we leave the subject of the patriarchal altars, we need to point out an important characteristic of their description. Two times Abraham's altars are said to be built next to trees. First of all, Genesis 12:6 reports, "Traveling through Canaan, they came to a place near Shechem and set up camp beside the oak of Moreh." Then in connection with the altar in Hebron we read, "Then Abram moved his camp to the oak grove owned by

Mamre, which is at Hebron. There he built an altar to the LORD” (Gen. 13:18).

The narratives are selective in their description, so we need to be careful about how far we press this evidence. It is conceivable, though, that it was Abraham’s common practice to build the altar near a prominent tree or grove of trees.

In the first place, we should record that this practice was potentially dangerous in that it might lead to a false form of worship. After all, the Canaanites had a fertility religion and often constructed their ritual places near trees. However, the assumption of the biblical narrative is that God directed Abraham to build his altars in these locations.

We thus need to ask, What is the significance of the connection between places of worship and trees? The answer, though not explicit in the text, is fairly obvious, I believe, and will become more so as we continue our discussion of the place of worship. The tree next to the place where God meets his human servants reminds us of the garden of Eden. It is not the garden, but it evokes the garden. It is a little bit of Eden in a fallen world.

EXCURSUS: THE SPECIAL PRESENCE OF GOD

The Bible makes it very clear that God is everywhere. Unlike human beings, he is not restricted to one location. Psalm 139 expresses this thought very powerfully:

I can never escape from your spirit!
 I can never get away from your presence!
 If I go up to heaven, you are there;
 if I go down to the place of the dead, you are
 there.
 If I ride the wings of the morning,
 if I dwell by the farthest oceans,

even there your hand will guide me,
 and your strength will support me.
 I could ask the darkness to hide me
 and the light around me to become night—
 but even in darkness I cannot hide from you.
 To you the night shines as bright as day.
 Darkness and light are both alike to you.
 (Ps. 139:7–12)

Theologians use the term “omnipresence” to refer to this biblical truth. God is everywhere in his creation, as Jeremiah reminds us: “ ‘Am I a God who is only in one place?’ asks the LORD. ‘Do they think I cannot see what they are doing? Can anyone hide from me? Am I not everywhere in all the heavens and earth?’ asks the LORD” (Jer. 23:23–24).

God’s omnipresence is closely related to the biblical teaching that God is a spirit. In answer to the woman at the well, Jesus teaches that “God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). As Spirit, he does not have a body that would restrict his location to one place. Not surprisingly, the Bible teaches that God is invisible, as in 1 Timothy 1:17: “Glory and honor to God forever and ever. He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen.”

Even though God is omnipresent, the Bible also teaches that God is present in a special way in certain locations. There is a sense in which we can say that God is present in heaven but absent from hell. He is present with Christians but absent from nonbelievers. Some theologians call this latter sense the special presence of God. God is not only present in being, but his presence is perceived in a definite way. This presence may be to judge or to bless.

We can immediately understand how the teaching about God’s presence is crucial for the issue we are discussing. We understand the Bible to say that God makes

his presence known in a special way at sanctuaries, whether the sanctuary is an altar as during the period of time until Moses, or the tabernacle/temple during the rest of the Old Testament era. Of course, this question will take on new significance when we consider the presence of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How would you describe to a friend in your own language the idea of God's special presence?
2. Can you describe in your own language the basic form of an Old Testament altar?
3. Are there special holy places today?
4. Are there any modern analogies to an Old Testament altar? Does your church have an altar? Why?
5. Do you have special places where you go to pray or meditate? If not, why not? If yes, then why do you seek them out?

