

THE GARDEN OF EDEN AS GOD'S FIRST SANCTUARY

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Visualization can be a powerful tool for understanding the Bible. Many people relate to the Bible as a book to be read, so that the fact that for most of its history the Bible was heard, rather than read, often comes as a surprise. Engaging with the Bible aurally relies on the listener's ability to visualize the heard words – to concretely see the pictures behind the words. These visual images, without words, convey many of the Bible's important ideas.

When I applied visualization to reading the Garden of Eden story, a dramatic and nuanced picture emerged. Attention to the story's visual setting and details described in the Bible made me aware of specific visual, concrete imagery. The new layers of meaning that emerged, some of them alluded to in later biblical texts and some in midrashim, are mostly ignored by mainstream Jewish interpretations of the Eden story.

Most of us, when asked to describe the setting of the Garden of Eden, picture the tree, the snake and the woman, sometimes with the man in the background, and little more. This changes after we pay specific attention to the visual setting.

The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. And from the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad. A river issues from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and becomes four branches . . . The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till and tend it (Gen: 2:8-10, 15).

They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden . . . and the man and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden . . . So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he was taken. He drove the man out, and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen: 3:8, 23-24).

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Putting the story's visual clues together leads to placing Eden on a mountain top, because the rivers flow downward from there. It is an enclosed space with only one entrance, for otherwise the cherubim could not have successfully guarded access to the tree in the center of the Garden. The Garden is oriented eastward. And finally, included in the picture of the Garden are cherubim and a fiery ever-turning sword.

As each detail builds on the previous one, a complex scene emerges. Eden is not only a lush garden but also a sacred space, sharing characteristics with other mountain-top shrines found throughout the ancient Near East. The parallels between the Garden of Eden, the desert Tabernacle and the later Holy Temple in Jerusalem and other Near Eastern sanctuaries are striking. The wonder is why this connection is generally not apparent to the average reader of the Bible.

When visualization first led me to these parallels, I was not aware that scholars have written about the Garden of Eden as a sacred sanctuary. Their articles are based on studies of ancient languages, exploration of archeological sites and intensive comparative textual study.¹ Amazingly, any reader can also arrive at this same understanding through the simple process of visualizing the text.

That Eden was originally understood as a sanctuary can be confirmed by examining the Bible for supporting evidence. A partial listing includes the description of the Tabernacle as God's dwelling place: *And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them* (Ex. 25:8). Implicit in the Garden story is the idea that Eden was God's dwelling place, where He dwelt in close proximity to the first man and woman. In Deuteronomy the Temple is called God's habitation (12:4). While this is not the precise language used in Genesis, the Garden is portrayed as the place where God's presence abided. When *They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day*, they recognized Him (implicitly from other encounters), *and Adam and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden* (Gen. 3:8). This point is reinforced by linguistic parallels. The Hebrew *mith-allekh* is precisely the verb used to describe both God's "walking about" in the Garden and His moving about to protect the Israelites in the desert, where they are instructed to keep their camp holy (Deut. 23:15).

Like the Tabernacle, the Garden is oriented eastward: *And those who were to pitch before the Mishkan eastward, before the Tent of Meeting toward the sunrise* (Ex. 27:16, Num. 3:38). The cherubim appear only in the context of both sanctuaries – the Tabernacle and Temple – and the Garden of Eden. The cherubim are to be placed above the ark, the space between them is the meeting place with God (Ex. 25: 17-22), and they guard the way to Eden (Gen. 3:24). In both contexts they are the guardians of the "Tree of Life": the actual tree in the Garden of Eden and the tablets, the figurative "Tree of Life", in the ark.²

Fire is a significant element in Eden, where the *fiery ever-turning sword* guards the entrance (Gen. 3:24). Fire also represents God in the desert (Ex. 12:9) and is ever present in the sanctuary (Ex. 27:20-21).

Adam's role in the Garden also alludes to the sanctuary. His task in the Garden is *to work it and guard it* (Gen. 2:15). These two verbs are precisely the ones used to describe the work of the Levites in caring for the Tabernacle, suggesting a priest-like role for Adam (Num. 3:7-8).

After Adam and his wife sin, they are thrust out of Eden, anticipating purification rites in the sanctuary. That a sanctuary must be cleansed of sin and sinners is a major theme of Leviticus: *Thus he shall purge the Shrine of the uncleanness and transgression of the Israelites* (Lev. 16:16).

Moreover, references to the Temple are filled with garden imagery: *But I am like a thriving olive tree in God's house* (Ps. 52:10); *The righteous bloom like a date-palm; they thrive like a cedar in Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord* (Ps. 92:13-14). The Menorah, the Temple's lampstand, is described as having seven branches and it is adorned with petals, almond blossoms and other botanical elements (Ex. 25:31-40). The two trees in the Garden, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil, call to mind Jachin and Boaz, the tree-like pillars that flanked the entrance to the Temple, decorated with pomegranates and topped with a lily design (I Kgs. 7: 13-22).

This selection of biblical texts makes it clear that, throughout the period of the Bible, Eden was commonly perceived as an archetype of the Temple. The Book of Psalms, as we have seen earlier, and the later prophets refer both directly and indirectly to Eden as a garden of the Lord.

Truly the Lord has comforted Zion, comforted all her ruins: He has made her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the Garden of the Lord (Isa. 51:3).

You were in Eden, the garden of God (Ezek. 28:13).

Cedars in the garden of God could not compare with it; Cypresses could not match its boughs, and plane trees could not vie with its branches; No tree in the garden of God was its peer in beauty (Ezek. 31:8).

The correspondence between Temple and Eden is found in both Talmud and Midrash. One example is a midrash that makes this point explicitly when commenting on the verse, *The Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil* (Gen. 3:23). This midrash comments: "He took him from the Garden of Eden and placed him on Mount Moriah to serve God until the day of his death" (Midrash ha-Gadol, *Bereshit*, 3:23).

Why has this image of Eden as a sanctuary all but disappeared from Jewish exegesis in favor of Eden's transformation into a celestial paradise, the eternal abode of the righteous? My intuitive assumption is that this took place because the bearers of Jewish tradition wanted to distance themselves from the Christian view of Jesus as a reincarnation of Adam, the original priest, with Eden as his sanctuary.³

It might be argued that since the correspondence of Eden and Temple is downplayed in traditional Jewish exegesis, its recovery is of little value. There is, however, something to be gained from recovering this practically lost understanding, since it helps us focus on the positive image of Eden as God's first dwelling, a place anchored in close contact and communion between God and human beings, which prompts us to think of what is needed to restore that relationship.

A visual reading of the Eden story leads to dramatic new understandings, but it has an inherent value apart from its relationship to any given story, especially for the reader who has difficulty relating to grand ideas through a verbal message alone. Visualization allows readers to connect more easily and intimately with the Hebrew Bible, facilitating direct access to the Bible's deeper themes without reliance on scholarship, whether traditional or academic. With the insights gained through visualization, readers come to appre-

ciate that the Bible is more complex and multilayered than previously realized, and they become more open to rabbinic and subsequent commentary.

NOTES

1. Lea Mazor, "The Correlation between the Garden of Eden and the Temple," *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, 13 (2002), pp. 5-42 [Hebrew]; G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Appollos; Intervarsity Press, 2004); J. Berman, *The Temple: Its Symbolism and Meaning Then and Now* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995); Lawrence E. Stager, "Jerusalem as Eden," *BAR* 26:03 (May/June 2000), pp. 36-47, 64; John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), pp.197-9.

2. Commentary of Rabbi S. R. Hirsch to Genesis 3:24.

3. B. Pizzalato, "Adam, High Priest of Humanity":

<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resource.php?n=703>.



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