

# Worship in the Garden of Eden

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## Introduction

Worship is a subject that can engender passion. Many are aware of the so-called “worship wars” of the past few decades in which congregations struggled to forge their way between the apparently opposing styles of “traditional” and “contemporary” worship music. Historically, aspects of the Protestant Reformation focused on worship, with Martin Luther rejecting some and accepting other aspects of the Roman Catholic worship of his time. Other reformers such as John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli and their followers differed from Luther on matters of worship, ranging from the type of music and instruments used in services to sometimes intense disagreements over the mode and timing of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.



Scripture, not surprisingly, has much to say about worship. One thinks of passages such as Isaiah 6, in which the prophet Isaiah has a vision of entering into heavenly worship amidst the singing of “holy, holy, holy” by the winged angels (seraphim), or of Jesus’ words to the Samaritan woman at the well that the Father is seeking those who worship in “spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24). Jesus set the stage for the central symbolic acts of Christian worship with his baptism (Matthew 3; Luke 3) and his institution of the Lord’s Supper (e.g., Matthew 26:26-29). And the Apostle Paul taught about and even criticized the church in Corinth for their abuse of the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-34) and the proper use of the gift of tongues in corporate worship (1 Corinthians 14).

## Worship in the Bible

When we examine the Bible’s teaching on worship, we see that language for worship in Scripture centers on three primary ideas. The first is *honoring* God, the second is *serving* God, and the third is *respecting* or *revering* God.<sup>1</sup> Consideration of these three ideas takes us beyond a typical Sunday morning worship service, though they should all be a part of such a service. Clearly, one can honor, serve, and revere God outside of a formal worship service, that is, as part of one’s daily life. In the Old Testament, Israel was invited to respond to God with honor, service, and reverence both formally (through its tabernacle and later Temple-centered worship practices) and informally (through its way of life). The Old Testament prophets, in fact, often critique the people of Israel for going through the motions of formal worship without living out in their daily lives what that worship implied (e.g., Isaiah 1:11-17). In the New Testament, we have much less information about the specific ways the first Christians worshiped, though we

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<sup>1</sup> David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 55-79.

know that their worship recognized that Jesus Christ was to be honored, served, and revered as God, and that he was understood to have fulfilled in himself Israel's worship in the Temple.<sup>2</sup>

Since our focus in this essay is the Story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3, and since that story is connected especially to Israel's worship in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, it is important to discuss further what Israel's worship looked like. One aspect of the worship practice that God gave to Israel was that it was centered on a *place*. This place was first Mt. Horeb, also called Sinai, where Moses received the ten commandments and other laws from the Lord, and then in the tabernacle, an elaborate and symbolic tent in which the Lord told Israel his presence would dwell. This tent was to move place to place as Israel moved through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, and God promised his presence would go with this "tent of meeting." Of course, eventually under King Solomon Israel constructed a permanent structure, the Temple in Jerusalem.

Another aspect of Israel's worship was that it included appointed *leaders* who represented God to the people and vice versa. These leaders were the priests, descended from Moses' brother Aaron and the most important of which was the high priest, and the Levites, who helped the priests carry out their worship duties. In addition to appointed leaders, Israel's worship also included specified *objects* and *actions*. Among the objects were items found inside the tabernacle, such as the altar, lampstand, and ark of the covenant. Among the actions were various types of sacrifices, each of which had a specific purpose and method, and the various festivals that God gave to Israel as part of their regular worship. These festivals included the Day of Atonement and the Passover, to name just a few.

So, Israel's formal worship life was bound up with places, appointed leaders, objects, and actions, and its informal worship life was to reflect the same honor, service, and reverence that its formal worship implied. What does all of this have to do with the Story of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3? Actually, quite a lot. The reason for this will require some explanation as we consider how we are meant to read these chapters.

### **The Story of the Garden of Eden**

Genesis 2 and 3 include the story of Adam and Eve's formation, God's commandment regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and Adam and Eve's choice to disobey God. These stories are familiar enough to most of us. What is important to consider, however, is when these stories were written and by whom. Jewish and Christian tradition hold that Moses was the author of the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah or Pentateuch. At the very least, we can say there is an implied author of Genesis 2 and 3 who wrote these chapters when much of what we read later in the Torah had already taken place (for example, the crossing of the Red Sea, giving of the Ten Commandments, construction of the ark of the covenant and tabernacle, etc.). When the author, whom we shall refer to as Moses, composed Genesis 2 and 3, therefore, he was aware of Israel's worship, including its places, leaders, objects, and actions. We should not be surprised, then, that the author refers to these things when he composes the Story of Eden.

We can consider an example from an even earlier section of the book of Genesis, chapter 1. In verse 14 of this chapter, God says, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate

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<sup>2</sup> See Peterson, *Engaging*, 80-107.

the day from the night. And let them be for *signs* and for *seasons*, and for days and years . . .”<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew words for “signs” and “seasons” that Moses’ has chosen to use in this passage are significant. The word “signs” is the plural form of a Hebrew word that refers to something that reveals God’s glory. For example, in Exodus 4 God tells Moses that he will do “signs” to show Pharaoh, king of Egypt, that he is the true God:

<sup>8</sup> “If they will not believe you,” God said, “or listen to the first *sign*, they may believe the latter *sign*. <sup>9</sup> If they will not believe even these two *signs* or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.”

The fact that the lights God places in the heavens in Genesis 1 are to serve as “signs” would have significance to Moses’ first audience.

In the same way, the Hebrew word translated “seasons” in Genesis 1:14 is regularly used to refer to worship. While we think of four seasons (winter, spring, summer, and fall), the Israelites were called by God to build the rhythms of their lives around worship celebrations or “feasts.” For example, in Leviticus 23:2, the Israelites are reminded that they are to keep various feasts as a way of obeying the Lord: “These are the appointed *feasts* of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are my appointed *feasts*.” The word translated into English as “feasts” is the same word translated as “seasons” in Genesis 1:14. Looking back at that verse, then, it appears that in Genesis 1:14 Moses associates the signs and seasons (feasts) of Day Four of creation with Israel’s worship practice. It is not surprising that Moses would make such a reference in order to show his audience (Israelites wandering in the wilderness) that God actually created the world in a way that reflects their worship practices. The same can be said for God’s rest on the seventh day of creation, which became the basis of the fourth of the Ten Commandments.<sup>4</sup>

### **Worship in the Garden of Eden**

Our purpose in this essay, then, is to explore a small but familiar section of Scripture, the Story of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2-3), to see how it introduces biblical teaching on worship. This passage is not usually listed as a central or even secondary passage on the Bible’s teaching on worship. Surprisingly, however, it is rich in worship language and imagery, setting the stage for much of what comes later in the Bible.

A first important observation about the inspired author’s description of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3 is that it is meant to allude the *place* of Israel’s worship, which is the tabernacle described later in the Pentateuch.<sup>5</sup> While this allusion might be unfamiliar to 21<sup>st</sup> century readers, it was quite obvious to Moses’ first audience. For example, the tabernacle was entered from the

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 20:8-11.

<sup>5</sup> See 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, and T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 131-32.

east.<sup>6</sup> This meant that to move towards God’s presence in the tabernacle, Moses or the high priest would move from east to west. In the same way, the entrance to the Garden of Eden was on the east, guarded after the fall of the first humans by angelic cherubim with a flaming sword.<sup>7</sup> Important also is that the entrance to the holiest place in the tabernacle (the “holy of holies”) required one to pass through a curtain, on which were embroidered cherubim.<sup>8</sup> And the ark of covenant, which was kept in the holiest place, had cherubim on its lid.<sup>9</sup>

These allusions include both specific or “key” words that are shared between the Story of Eden and passages later in the Pentateuch (“East,” “Cherubim”), and also the broader imagery that the tabernacle was presumably built on the model of the Garden of Eden. There is much other evidence to support this observation. For example, one of the rare words used in Genesis 3:8 is a Hebrew verb form meaning that Adam and Eve heard God “walking” in the garden. The form of the word implies this walking was a habitual practice, not a one-time occurrence. Interestingly, the verb in this form is used only two other times in the Pentateuch. One is in Leviticus 23:12, in which God tells the Israelites: “And I will *walk* among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.” In the same way that God habitually walked with Adam and Eve in the garden, so here he promises Israel he will walk with them.<sup>10</sup> Also, the among the worship *objects* in the tabernacle were a lampstand that is described as being like a tree, having branches and clusters of fruit (almond) blossoms on it, reminiscent of the trees that play such an important role in the Story of the Garden of Eden (e.g., Genesis 2:9).<sup>11</sup>

As noted above, there are three primary meanings of the biblical words associated with worship. One of these is the broad meaning of service. Israel’s worship is often described as service in the first five books of the Bible. For example, in Exodus 3:12, God tells Moses that Israel will “worship” (literally, “serve”; the Hebrew word translated here is *abad*) God on Mt. Horeb: “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall *serve* (*abad*) God on this mountain.” The New International Version (NIV) translates the word *abad* as “worship” – Israel will “worship” God on this mountain (Horeb).<sup>12</sup>

The Story of Eden contains other words that hearken to Aaron and the high priests’ *leadership* of Israel’s worship in the tabernacle. For example, the Story somewhat surprisingly mentions “gold” in one of the lands through which a river of Eden flows (2:11-12; the Pishon flows through the land of Havilah where there is good gold). Israel’s worship *objects*, as detailed in Exodus 25-40, were often made with gold (for example, the ark of the covenant; the table; the lampstand). Gold was also used for the priestly vestments that Israel’s priests wore when they entered the tabernacle. These vestments included a precious stone, “onyx,” which is also mentioned in the Story of Eden (Genesis 2:12).<sup>13</sup> It is significant, also, that God clothes Adam

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Exodus 38:9-20, especially verse 13.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 3:24.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 26:31-37.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 25:18-22.

<sup>10</sup> See also Deuteronomy 23:14.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 25:31-40

<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy that the Garden of Eden is pictured as a raised place from which various rivers flow out. The book of Exodus pictures Israel’s worship on a mountain in Exodus 3:12 and 15:17.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 25:7; Exodus 28

and Eve with “garments of skins” (Genesis 3:21), which parallel the garments that Israelite priests were required to wear when they ministered in the tabernacle (Exodus 28:4).<sup>14</sup>

There are also *action* words in the Story of Eden that connect it to Israel’s later worship. One of these is the word “to command” (2:16). Even a cursory reading of the Pentateuch shows how common this word is, including in its noun form (“commandment”). Just as Adam and then Eve were given a commandment by God, so Israel is given various commandments as part of their covenant relationship with the Lord (e.g., Exodus 20:6). Likewise, the word for “rest” occurs in Genesis 2:15: “The Lord God took the man and put (literally, “rested”) him in the garden of Eden.” The same Hebrew word is used in Exodus 20:11 and 33:14. For example, in the former, God “rests” after the six days of creation, and in the latter, God tells Israel that he will give them “rest.”

The *action* word “serve” plays an important though somewhat hidden role in the Story of Eden. We meet the word first in Genesis 2:15, where it is typically translated as “work”:  
“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to *work* (*‘abad*) it and keep (*shamar*) it.”<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, these same words are used in chapter 3, after the “fall” of Adam and Eve. In Genesis 3:23, the Lord sends Adam forth from the garden of Eden “to work (*‘abad*) the ground from which he was taken.” Cain “works” the ground in the same way (Genesis 4:2; 12), and Joseph (Genesis 39:17) and Israel (Exodus 1:13-14) both *‘abad* (serve, as slaves) in Egypt. Later, after the crossing of the Red Sea, the Levites are appointed by God to serve (*‘abad*) in the tabernacle (Numbers 3:5-10). And the word “keep” is used in Genesis 3:24 of the role of the cherubim, namely, to “keep” (guard) the way to the Tree of Life in the garden. Significantly, these words (serve and keep) are used together elsewhere in the Pentateuch only with regard to the duties of the Levites in the Temple.<sup>16</sup> Moses, therefore, portrays Adam’s duty to “work and keep” as a type of priestly role.

Other *action* words that connect the Story of Eden to Israel’s later worship include “to dwell,” “to listen to the voice,” and “to touch.” The verb “to dwell” is used in Genesis 3:24, where we are told that the Lord “caused to dwell” the cherubim to guard the way back into the garden. The word “to dwell” is the root of the familiar word “shekinah,” which refers to the glorious presence of God (e.g., Exodus 24:16). In Hebrew, “to listen to the voice” is a way of speaking of obedience. For example, in Exodus 15:26, the Lord says to Israel,

If you will diligently *listen to the voice* of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer.

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<sup>14</sup> The same word for garments is used in both Genesis 3:21 and Exodus 28:4. See also Leviticus 8:7,13. The Israelites were also commanded not to approach an altar naked (Exodus 20:26), connecting a key theme of the Story of the Garden of Eden to later commands regarding Israel’s worship.

<sup>15</sup> While “it” is typically taken to be the “garden,” there is a disagreement in gender between the words; “garden” is masculine while “it” is feminine. An ancient Jewish commentary known as Targum Neofiti solved the apparent grammatical problem by translating the phrase “to toil in the Law and to observe its commandments” (Martin McNamara, trans., *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis in The Aramaic Bible, Vol. 1A* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 58).

<sup>16</sup> Alexander, *Paradise*, 21. See Numbers 3:7-8; 8:26; 18:5-6.

We read the same phrase in Genesis 3:8, where Adam and Eve “heard the sound” of the Lord God walking in the garden. Finally, the serpent’s deceitful words to Adam and Eve regarding how they were not “to touch” the tree of life are echoed in Leviticus, where Moses gives the Israelites commands about what they should not touch (e.g., Leviticus 5:2-3).

### **Conclusion**

The Story of the Garden of Eden has been written with Israel’s worship in view. Israel’s worship was characterized by specific places, appointed leaders, actions, and objects. Moses, the implied author of the Pentateuch, portrays the Garden of Eden as a prototype of the tabernacle, with Adam the first priest. God dwells in the Garden in the same way he would later dwell in the tabernacle.

These observations show us that God’s plans from the beginning included worship. Before the fall of humans, God created an environment in which worship was possible, and gave to humans the task of offering worship. After the fall, when God constituted Israel as a nation and made his covenant with them, he established their worship based on the Garden of Eden. Israel would worship in the tabernacle, built on the prototype of the Garden, with Adam serving as the first worship leader (priest). Israel’s worship, then was a means of overcoming the fall and restoring them to Eden.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore Jesus’ and the early Christians relationship to Israel’s worship. Suffice it to say that in Jesus Christ all of Israel’s worship practices found their fulfillment. Early Christians recognized Christ as this fulfillment and ordered their own gatherings with him at the center. For example, not only was Jesus the fulfillment of Israel’s tabernacle and Temple (John 2:18-22), but his disciples, the church, took on that role as well (1 Corinthians 3:16-17), and served as a kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2:9). God would dwell with his people through his Holy Spirit, who brought union of believers with Jesus Christ, the true temple. In the same way, Jesus fulfilled the sacrificial actions and feasts and festivals that Old Testament worship, and worship in the Garden, foreshadowed (1 Corinthians 5:7).

In light of this fulfillment, it is not surprising that the Garden of Eden is alluded to in the last chapters of the Bible. In Revelation 21-22, the New Jerusalem is filled with gold and precious stones, with no need for a temple because the Lord God and the Lamb dwell in it. The river of the water of life flows from it and the tree of life is there. “No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.”<sup>17</sup> May we, like Adam and Eve before the fall, recognize the presence of God among us and learn to worship him in spirit and truth.

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<sup>17</sup> Revelation 22:3; see also 7:15.