PARADISIACAL PARALLELOMANIA: EVALUATING ALLEGED CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE GARDEN OF EDEN AND GOD’S TEMPLE

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Lately, scholars have been making much of parallels between the garden of Eden and the tabernacle or Jerusalem temple.[[1]](#footnote-1) These parallels sometimes inform their understanding of Christian mission. G. K. Beale has been most influential in this regard. His thesis about God’s tabernacling presence in the garden establishes a strong link between Adam’s purpose, Israel’s vocation, and the church’s mission:

Adam’s purpose in that first garden-temple was to expand its boundaries until it circumscribed the earth, so that the earth would be completely filled with God’s glorious presence. Adam’s failure led, in time, to the re-establishment of the tabernacle and temple in Israel. Both were patterned after the model of Eden and were constructed to symbolize the entire cosmos in order to signify that Israel’s purpose as corporate Adam was to extend its borders by faithfully obeying God and spreading his glorious presence throughout the earth. . . . *The church is to be God’s temple, so filled with his glorious presence that we expand and fill the earth with that presence until God finally accomplishes the goal completely at the end of time!* This is our common mission. May the church of the twenty-first century unite in order to attain this goal (emphasis original).[[2]](#footnote-2)

If Beale is right, then recovering the sense of divine presence once enjoyed in Eden is central to Christian mission. If he’s not, then we ought to look elsewhere if we want to ground the church’s mission in Scripture. This essay, examines his evidence and finds it lacking. Beale enumerates eleven parallels between the garden of Eden and Israel’s sanctuaries.[[3]](#footnote-3) The sheer number of parallels appears to be quite compelling—but a good number of weak points do not add up to a single strong point. At the risk of overkill, I briefly present and critique each of Beale’s alleged parallels.

1. The garden, like the tabernacle, is the unique place of God’s presence since he walked and talked with Adam there.

This claim is foundational to Beale’s thesis and it is among the weakest. To begin with, Genesis never says that God uniquely resided in the garden—not before the fall and certainly not after it. Scholars like John Walton sometimes claim that after creating the world in six days, God rested in his cosmic sanctuary[[4]](#footnote-4)—that is, his newly minted creation—but the text doesn’t even say that. It never mentions where God rested, only that he ceased from his creative labors (Gen 2:2-3). Furthermore, the text doesn’t say that God walked *with humans* in the garden. After Adam and Eve sin, they hear God walking “to and fro” in the garden, presumably looking for them since they are hiding. But he is never depicted as walking *with them*. This stands in contrasts with later passages that directly state that God walked with Enoch (Gen 5:22-24) and with Noah (Gen 6:9).

It is important for Beale that God walked “to and fro,” which is one way of rendering the Hithpael or reflexive form of *halak*, the Hebrew term for walk. It is important because Leviticus 26:12 and other passages depict God as walking “to and fro” in the tabernacle.[[5]](#footnote-5) But the meaning of this verbal form differs depending on the temporal context. It matters whether one is walking “to and fro” over a long period of time or at a specific point in time. Over a long period of time, like we find in Leviticus 26, God’s walking “to and fro” meant that he would visit his people from time to time precisely at the site of the tabernacle. God was not constantly walking around inside the tabernacle. But in Genesis 3, God’s walking “to and fro” is a punctiliar event that creates a specific sound that Adam and Eve hear, which causes them to be afraid and to hide from him because they had sinned. Indeed, some scholars suggest that Genesis 3 portrays God as pacing “back and forth” because he is coming in judgment.[[6]](#footnote-6) This parallels the flaming sword at the end of the chapter that is flashing back and forth, which is also in the Hithpael form (Gen 3:24). While this passage may fall short of presenting a full-blown judgment theophany, it hardly constitutes firm evidence that God took routine garden walks with Adam and Eve.

On the other hand, there is ample evidence that God talked with Adam and Eve in the garden, at least twice (2:16 and 3:9-19). But such conversations are not unique to paradise. God later speaks with Cain, Noah, and several of the patriarchs on multiple occasions. Thus, as far as Genesis is concerned, conversation with God is not uniquely tied to sanctuaries or limited to the garden of Eden.

1. The garden housed the first priest. Though Adam is never identified by overt priestly language, he is called to “serve” (*avad*) and “keep” (*shamar*) the garden. In Torah, priests “serve” in the tabernacle and they are repeatedly called to “keep” Torah. Sometimes they are even called to “keep” the “service” of the tabernacle (e.g., Num 3:7-8).

Yet these Hebrew terms for serving and keeping are quite generic and may be used with regard to a wide variety of occupations, including horticulture and farming. They are not technical priestly terms, and there is nothing priestly about Adam’s status or role in these chapters. It would be more accurate to say that Adam represents every man in early Genesis, not priestly men.

1. The garden is the first place we encounter cherubim, which play an important role in tabernacle and temple décor. Cherubim are placed on both ends of the mercy seat (Exod 25:18-20) and they are woven into the tabernacle curtains (Exod 26:1).

Yet cherubim are nowhere described as being *in* the garden of Eden. They only show up *after* the Fall, and they are placed *outside* the entrance to the garden in order to keep humans out. Furthermore, humans are not barred from the garden because God is there and no longer wants them to enjoy his presence. Rather, Genesis 3:22-23 explicitly states that God banished them so they would no longer have access to the tree of life and thus the ability to partake from it and live forever. Whatever function the Cherubim may have elsewhere in Scripture, no evidence suggests that they represent God’s tabernacling presence in Genesis.

1. The tree of life resembles the lampstand that we find in the tabernacle. It branches out like a tree and it contains flower-like cups and petals.

Though the lampstand is patterned after *a* tree with flowers and petals (Exod 25:31-36), nothing connects it to the tree of life in particular, except that the latter is a tree. Since the tree of life bears edible fruit, it is reasonable to assume that it grows flowers and petals, but the Genesis text does not describe it as such, and so there is no direct linguistic connection to the lampstand.

1. The temple was decorated using floral arrangements, we learn in 1 Kings 6-7, thereby drawing upon garden of Eden imagery.

Yet there is nothing specifically Eden-like about floral arrangements. Flowers aren’t even mentioned in the Eden account. The fact that floral imagery is present in later temple designs and notearly tabernacle designs suggests that the imagery may be borrowed from ANE royal gardens, where they are quite common, rather than from the Eden account.

1. Eden has a river flowing from it, just like the temple in Ezekiel 47 and just like God’s throne in Revelation 7.

Yet the river begins in the region of Eden, not in the garden of Eden (v. 10).[[7]](#footnote-7) It then waters the garden before splitting off in different directions. So if the garden is meant to signify God’s most holy presence, Genesis is the only account that does not depict the river as flowing fromGod’s most holy locale. It is thus more likely that Ezekiel associates the river with God’s presence and that Revelation 7 borrows this imagery from Ezekiel and not from Genesis.

1. The garden is a place of two precious stones that are used in relation to the tabernacle and temple: gold and onyx.

This evidence is doubly weak. First, Genesis 2 actually mentions three stones: gold, bdellium, and onyx. Whereas gold is widely used throughout the tabernacle and temple, bdellium is not used at all, and onyx is not part of the tabernacle itself, but part of the priestly vestment (Exod 25:7). Gold and onyx only appear together in one passage regarding the temple, 1 Chronicles 29:2, and there they are not grouped side by side but are numbered among ten different precious stones. Thus, the three precious stones associated with Eden are nowhere overtly grouped together in later sanctuary references. Second, and perhaps more problematic for Beale’s thesis, these precious stones aren’t even located in the garden of Eden. Rather, they are placed in the land of Havilah—a land that the river passes through only after it leaves the garden (Gen 2:10-12).

1. The garden is located on a mountain, just like the temple later is.

Yet mountain language is not used of the garden of Eden in Genesis, only in Ezekiel. At most, this furnishes evidence for a connection between Ezekiel’s Eden metaphor and the temple. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that Ezekiel’s Eden is the metaphorical abode of the king of Tyre. Far from representing God’s tabernacling presence, it signifies the bountiful wealth that a pagan king is about to lose.

1. The garden has a tree of wisdom and the tabernacle has the ark, which contains the Ten Commandments, which are Israel’s source of wisdom.

This too is a stretch. Israel’s wisdom literature associates wisdom with Torah, not the Ten Commandments, and the Ten Commandments in the ark represent God’s specific covenant with Israel, not wisdom in general. Even so, in Israel’s wisdom literature, wisdom is not associated with the tree of knowledge, but with the tree of life (Prov 3:18). Indeed, in Genesis, the tree of knowledge functions more like a tree of death as opposed to the tree of life. Furthermore, God’s people are commanded to partake of Torah, whereas Adam was forbidden from partaking of the tree of knowledge. So this parallel breaks down on multiple levels.

1. The garden has an eastern entrance (Gen 3:24), just like the temple (Ezek 40:6).

Yet in Genesis, the “east” serves as more of an exit than an entrance. God drives the humans out and blocks their way back in with the cherubim and a flaming sword to make sure that it never actually serves as an entrance. Furthermore, in the primeval prologue of Genesis, “east” serves more as a symbol of trouble. Cain builds his city east of Eden and the builders of Babel also move east.[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. The garden has a 3-part structure (garden, Eden, wider creation) just like the temple (most holy place, holy place, outer courtyard).

Yet this, too, is a stretch. To begin with, the closest thing we have to a tripartite structure in early Genesis is found in 2:8, where it mentions a garden, in Eden, in the east. If wider creation is implied here, it functions as a fourth concentric circle, which would actually leave us with a 4-part structure. Even so, the language and characteristics of the three or four parts implied in Genesis 2-3 don’t parallel the tabernacle in any clear way so as to constitute something like an intertextual echo.

In sum, the equation of Eden with a divine sanctuary does not fare well under scrutiny. It turns out to be a flimsy case of “parallelomania.” Though God’s presence is no doubt important throughout Scripture, including the church’s mission, it is not a major theme in Genesis 2. What is more, nowhere in Genesis does God grant his people responsibility for managing, promoting, or otherwise extending the reach of his palpable presence. Those wishing to make such activities central to Christian mission should look elsewhere for support. Whereas God manifests himself at numerous points throughout the Genesis narrative, he does so at his own discretion and without human assistance of any kind.

#### A Viable Alternative

If divine presence in the garden is not what this account is about, what clues does the text provide as to its meaning? A first clue is how the author sets up the creation of humans. The emphasis is on creation’s incompleteness. The ground could not produce vegetation without God providing sustaining rainfall and without humans providing hands to work the soil. From the start, Genesis 2 appears to be about interconnectedness between God, humans, and land.

Such interconnectedness continues in v. 7 with the formation of the first human from the dust of the ground and the breath of life from God. Humans would not be human without God and soil. Likewise, the soil could not serve its intended purposes without God and humans. What remains is for these interdependent creations to be brought together. So God plants a garden in Eden. He puts the human in the garden and he causes every kind of tree to grow from the ground

Before focusing on humanity, the author describes a river that flows from Eden, passes through the garden, and splits off into four distinct rivers (vv. 10-14). The first river, the otherwise unknown Pishon, flows through the equally unfamiliar region of Havilah. A second unknown river flows through the familiar land of Cush, often identified with Ethiopia, which has no such prominent river. The remaining rivers and regions are familiar: the Tigris flows east of Assyria and the Euphrates flows west of it.

The unfamiliar territory demarcated by these rivers suggests that God provides sustenance for all the lands of the world: far and near, familiar and foreign. Wherever humans end up, they inhabit land that is fertilized by the creator himself. The interconnectedness of God, humans, and soil is not simply a unique feature of Eden; it is a global phenomenon. As such, it should be considered an integral concern of Christian mission. Unfortunately, this concern goes overlooked when its prominent place in the creation account is eclipsed by an over-emphasis on God’s tabernacling presence.

\*\*\* I first developed the thesis of this essay in my commentary on Genesis 1-11, which is part of the Polis Bible Commentary Series published by Urban Loft in 2018.

1. See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 66-80, and “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission in the New Testament,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, 1 (Mar 2005): 5-31; Robert M. Hinckly Jr., “Adam, Aaron, and the Garden Sanctuary,” *Logia 4* (2013): 5-12; Lifsa Block Schachter, “The Garden of Eden as God’s First Sanctuary,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (Apr-Jun 2013): 73-77; and John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 82-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 369 . . . 402. See also, Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 334-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. He also supports his case with ancient Near Eastern parallels and by noting how Ezekiel and two Second Temple Jewish texts speak of Eden. I address the Ezekiel point under point 8 below. The Second Temple references say more about second century Judaism than they do Genesis 2-3, though not all of Beale’s prooftexts even apply. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, and “Creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3 and the Ancient Near East: Order out of Disorder after Chaoskampf,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 43 (2008): 48-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission,” 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jeffrey Niehaus, “In the Wind of the Storm,” *Vetus Testamentum* 46 (1994): 263-267. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Verse 8 specifies that the garden was a specific place that God planted in the wider region of Eden, so the two places are not identical but overlapping. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Paul J. Kissling, *Genesis*, The College Press NIV Commentary, vol. 1 (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2004), 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)