

The Message of the Temple



It is with a mixture of excitement and relief that I come to the end of Greg Beale's book, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*. There is excitement because of its well-argued thesis, which I will try to summarize below. There is relief because I am done with immensely dense and heavy reading. This is one of those books that relentlessly turns every exegetical stone and pursues every relevant piece of information, exhaustively – until you have really had enough. But it is so deep and intense that you don't want to stop before the end either.

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In this respect, it reminds me of *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, a book by Gordon Fee. In it, Fee comprehensively covers every single use of "spirit" and "spiritual" in Paul's letters. That is a lot of uses; Fee's book is more than double the size of Beale's. But I was still young when I read *God's Empowering Presence*; all in all, it was a similar experience.

Interestingly, both books are available in abbreviated and simplified versions for the more "ordinary" (or wiser?) reader. If what you read in this issue leaves you wanting to read more, all four titles are included in the reference section at the end. As an aside: the two subjects (Spirit and temple) have more in common than may be obvious at first sight. According to Fee, God's Spirit is how God is present with his people and

empowers them in the present age. This turns each of us individually as well as our congregations into a temple of God. In other words, through the Holy Spirit, the church is the temple where God is present in the world.

So back to Greg Beale and the temple.

Temple and Tabernacle: A Central Subject in Scripture

The question what the Bible is about can be answered in different ways. One of these is that it is about God's aim to dwell among humans and be their God (relationship!). Of this aim, tabernacle and temple were concrete and visible expressions.

It is not surprising, then, that the Bible ends with a vision of a heavenly temple coming down to earth (Rev. 21-22). Admittedly, Revelation 21 does not say this is the temple; instead, it is referred to as the holy city Jerusalem. We are even told that John did not see a temple in the city, but this is because "its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev. 21:22) – whose presence and glory fill the whole city and effectively turn it into a temple.

The decisive giveaway is the form of the city. It is 12,000 stadia in every direction (Rev. 21:16), rendering it a perfect cube. There is only one other cube ever mentioned in the Bible: the holy of holies in Solomon's temple (1 Ki. 6:20).

The new Jerusalem, therefore, is a holy of holies of immense size and the ultimate temple, a temple that at the same time also is a city and a garden.

1. The Temple Is a Garden

This is Beale's point of departure: the Bible ends with a temple that is also a garden. Not just any garden, but the garden of Eden. The new Jerusalem is Paradise restored, complete with the tree of life and the river of life flowing out from God's presence. This is the first of four observations that together form the backbone of his book: the temple is a garden.

In fact, even in the Old Testament, temple and tabernacle incorporate multiple garden motifs, making them reminiscent of the garden of Eden. The lampstand has been understood as a tree of life; it certainly had branches, buds, and flowers (Ex. 25:31-40). The inner sanctuary of Solomon's temple was decorated with palm leaves and cherubim: "Around all the walls of the house he carved engraved figures of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, in the inner and outer rooms" (1 Ki 6:29). The two pillars at the entrance were decorated with wreaths and pomegranates (1 Ki. 7:15-22). The temple doors were decorated with palm trees and flowers (1 Ki. 6:32). The water basins were decorated with cherubim, lions, and various botanical motifs (1. Ki. 7:36).

Seen in this light, John's final vision in the book of Revelation of a garden-city-temple is not a big surprise.

2. The Garden (of Eden) Is a Temple

The second observation is: the Bible begins with a garden that was also a temple. Beale (2004: 66-80)

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argues persuasively that the garden of Eden was, in essence, the first temple. God's presence was there. Adam was called to serve or cultivate and keep the garden, Hebrew words that are also used for priestly service. Its entrance was in the east and guarded by cherubim. In Genesis 3 and Ezekiel 28, the garden is associated with gold and precious stones, just as tabernacle and temple. From Eden, the place of God's presence, flowed a river watering the garden and the world, much like the river that, according to the prophets, would one day flow from the restored temple.

The combination of garden and temple imagery in the Old Testament explains what would otherwise be a strange mixing of metaphors in 1 Corinthians 3:5-17. Paul explains his own ministry and that of Apollos first in agricultural terms of planting and watering. He then expresses the difference in terms of building.

The mixing makes sense once we recognize that Paul is not talking about building activities in general but about building the temple; this becomes clear in 1 Corinthians 3:16f. If the temple is also a garden, it makes sense to describe its further development both in terms of building and in terms of natural growth.

A similar combination of the temple being built and growing in an organic, biological sense (albeit the growing together of body parts, not plants) appears in Ephesians 2:20-22. It is also one of those passages in which the interests of Beale and Fee (temple, God's presence, Holy Spirit) convene:

[You are] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

In other words, the church is now what in an earlier age the temple and the garden of Eden were: the place of God's presence and the place where heaven touches earth.



3. The Temple Is a Model of Creation

The third observation recognizes the temple as a model. It is first of all a model of a heavenly temple as shown to Moses on Mount Sinai (e.g. Ex. 26:30). But it is also a model of creation or the cosmos as a whole. This is how temples were generally understood in the Ancient Near East outside of Israel as well. Its three-part structure (courtyard, holy place, holy of holies) symbolizes the main parts of the cosmos:

- The courtyard with the sea and the altar, accessible to all, symbolizes the earth
- The holy place with the lights (same word as in Genesis 1:14f) and the cloud of incense symbolizes the visible heaven
- The holy of holies with its use of gold, the cherubim, and the cloud of God's presence symbolizes the invisible heaven, which is God's domain

This means that the tabernacle and the temple established a point of contact between heaven and earth; it is where heaven and earth met. As a model, the temple points forward to all of creation becoming God's temple because:

4. The Temple-Garden Was (and Is) Meant to Expand

From the beginning, God intended for this temple-garden to expand and eventually to incorporate all of creation. In this way, God's presence would eventually fill all of the cosmos.

That the garden-temple was to be expanded to encompass the whole creation is implied in the mandate to fill the whole earth and subdue it (Gen. 1:28).

In the restoration after the exile, the sacred area of the temple was to be enlarged to include at least all of Jerusalem (Jer. 3:16-18, Zech. 2, 14:20f). If all the nations were to join Israel in Jerusalem, the city would have to be expanded as well. The whole land of Israel is described in terms that remind us of the fruitfulness of Eden. It is part of the prophetic vision that God's glory would even fill the whole earth (Hab. 2:14; Is. 11:9; see also Nu. 14:21), effectively turning creation into God's temple. For this to happen, the separation between the compartments of reality (heaven and earth) has to be abolished – as symbolized by the tearing of the veil at Jesus' death (Mt. 27:51).

And this takes us full circle to the end of Revelation, where heaven and earth become one and God dwells with humans on the new earth forever.

In Greg Beale's Own Words

Before I say something about the practical implications of this understanding, let me add a few quotations from the book that sum up Beale's thesis in his own words:

My purpose in this book is to explore in more depth the significance of the temple in John's Apocalypse and especially in this final vision of the book. My beginning point is a brief answer to the above question about why John equates the new creation with an arboreal city-temple in his last vision of the book. I formulated a brief answer to this in my Revelation commentary a few years ago.

In this book I will attempt to amplify the evidence produced in support of this answer in order to enhance its plausibility. My thesis is that the Old Testament Tabernacle and temples were symbolically designed to point to the cosmic eschatological reality that God's tabernacling presence, formally limited to the holy of holies, was to be extended throughout the whole earth. Against this background, the Revelation 21 vision is best understood as picturing the final end-time temple that will fill the entire cosmos ...

In attempting to substantiate this thesis, I will survey the evidence for the cosmic symbolism of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern temples. Then I will argue that the Garden of Eden was the first archetypal temple, and that it was the model for all subsequent temples. Such an understanding of Eden will enhance the notion that the Old Testament tabernacle and temples were symbolic microcosms of the whole creation. As microcosmic symbolic structures they were designed to point to a worldwide eschatological temple that perfectly reflects God's glory. It is this universally expended eschatological temple that is pictured in Revelation's last vision. (25f)

There are indications elsewhere in the Old Testament, which are developed later by Jewish commentators, that Eden and the temple signified a divine mandate to enlarge the boundaries of the temple until they formed the borders around the whole earth. Sometimes the thought may be that the entire Land of Israel, conceived as a large garden of Eden, was to be expanded. The subject matter in the present chapter is one of the strongest pieces of evidence substantiating our contention in the preceding chapter that the boundaries of the Eden garden-sanctuary and of Israel's temples were meant to be extended to encircle the entire world. (123)

The preceding study so far has contended that the various forms of the temple in the Old Testament were intended to point to the final eschatological goal of God's presence filling the entire creation in the way it had formally filled only the holy of holies. (313)

Our Mission in the World

The practical repercussions of this understanding for the church are immense. Unfortunately, Beale does not develop this as much as his book title, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, would suggest. It is worth thinking about some of the implications because they should affect the way we live:

- The church is the temple of God and therefore the place of his presence in the world.
- The church is where heaven and earth meet. In a real sense, it is heaven on earth.
- The church as the temple of God is not static (in size) but meant to expand and fill the whole earth.
- Each of us is the temple of God and called to carry his presence into the world.

The first step towards living this out more is to become more aware of God's presence in our daily life. [Brother Lawrence](#) called it [The Practice of the Presence of God](#).

A book worth reading and much shorter than either Fee or Beale!

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Vera Kratochvil, [Spring Garden](#), CC0

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