
The Temple Motif: Tracing God's Dwelling Presence Through Scripture

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1. Introduction

The temple motif constitutes a central paradigm within biblical theology, encapsulating the divine intent to dwell among humanity. This motif, which unfolds from Genesis through Revelation, serves as a theological nexus that integrates the overarching redemptive narrative of Scripture. The temple is not merely a physical structure but a theological symbol that manifests the intersection of divine presence and human experience. This study critically examines the temple motif across the biblical corpus, demonstrating its function as a hermeneutical key for understanding divine immanence, covenantal fidelity, and eschatological fulfilment. This analysis employs a biblical-theological methodology that synthesises the temple motif's historical, literary, and theological dimensions of the temple motif. The research engages primary biblical texts alongside scholarly exegesis. By tracing the motif's development across salvation history, this study argues that the temple functions as a theological construct that signifies God's abiding presence and redemptive mission. Furthermore, it examines the implications of this motif for contemporary Christian thought, worship, and ecclesiology, demonstrating its continued relevance in theological discourse.

2. The Temple in the Old Testament

a. Eden as a Proto-Temple

Biblical scholarship has increasingly recognised the Garden of Eden as the archetypal temple, prefiguring the later sanctuaries

of Israel. G.K. Beale contends that Eden embodies the essential characteristics of a temple, serving as the primordial locus of divine-human communion.⁸¹ The presence of rivers (Gen. 2:10–14), cherubim (Gen. 3:24), and Adam’s priestly role (Gen. 2:15) align with the sacred architecture and liturgical functions of later sanctuaries. John Walton situates this imagery within the ancient Near Eastern conceptual world, arguing that Eden conforms to the temple typology prevalent in Mesopotamian thought.⁸²

The lexical parallels between Adam’s commission to “work” (עָבַד) and “keep” (שָׁמַר) the garden (Gen. 2:15) and the Levitical responsibilities in the Tabernacle (Num. 3:7–8) further substantiate Eden’s sacerdotal significance.⁸³ This priestly mandate implies that humanity was originally initially tasked with mediating divine presence within creation, a role that would later be localised in the Israelite priesthood. This concept is critical to understanding the later temple structures, which, rather than being human inventions, are divine accommodations to restore the broken relationship initiated in Eden.

b. The Tabernacle and the Solomonic Temple

Following humanity’s expulsion from Eden, the Tabernacle emerges as a tangible manifestation of divine presence among the covenant community. The meticulous architectural prescriptions in Exodus 25–40 underscore the Tabernacle’s role as a microcosm of divine order. Richard Elliott Friedman argues that the cloud and fire that descended upon the Tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–38) function as theophanic markers, affirming

⁸¹ G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 66–71.

⁸² John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 78–85.

⁸³ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 121–129.

Yahweh's immanence.⁸⁴ The Tabernacle is not merely a ritual space but a theological statement affirming God's continued willingness to dwell with His people despite their fallen state.

The construction of the Solomonic Temple (1 Kgs. 6–8) represents a significant theological development in Israel's understanding of sacred space. The temple's tripartite structure, the outer court, holy place, and holy of holies mirrors the cosmic order, reinforcing its status as a spatial embodiment of divine sovereignty. Michael Fishbane highlights the temple's celestial symbolism, asserting that its architectural elements correspond to ancient cosmological frameworks.⁸⁵ The dedication ceremony in 1 Kings 8, wherein Yahweh's glory fills the temple, reinforces the temple's function as the epicenterepicentre of divine-human interaction. The temple is not simply a location of worship but an affirmation of the covenant, where Israel experiences the unique presence of God in a localised form.

c. The Exile and the Loss of the Temple

The Babylonian destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 586 BCE precipitates a theological crisis, raising profound questions regarding divine presence and covenantal continuity. The prophetic literature responds to this crisis by envisioning a restored temple. Ezekiel's elaborate temple vision (Ezek. 40–48) has elicited diverse interpretations, ranging from literal eschatological expectation to symbolic representation of divine restoration. James M. Hamilton contends that Ezekiel's temple signifies a typological anticipation of the messianic age, wherein God's presence will be fully realised.⁸⁶ This longing for a future

⁸⁴ Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: HarperOne, 1997), 201–207.

⁸⁵ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 89–95.

⁸⁶ James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 315–322.

temple reflects a persistent biblical theme pointing to the eschatological fulfilment found in Christ and the New Creation.

3. The Temple in the New Testament

a. Jesus as the True Temple

The Johannine corpus reconfigures the temple motif around the person of Jesus Christ. The Prologue's declaration that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) employs σκηνώω (*skēnoō*), a term evocative of the Tabernacle. Jesus' pronouncement in John 2:19–21, wherein he identifies his body as the temple, marks a radical Christocentric redefinition of sacred space. N.T. Wright argues that Jesus' self-identification as the temple signifies the obsolescence of the physical sanctuary in favour of the incarnate presence of God.⁸⁷ The rending of the temple veil at Jesus' crucifixion (Matt. 27:51) further substantiates this theological transition, signalling the dissolution of the old order and the inauguration of a new covenantal reality.

b. The Church as God's Temple

Pauline's theology extends the temple motif to the ecclesial community. Paul explicitly designates the Church as the new temple (1 Cor. 3:16–17; Eph. 2:19–22), wherein God's Spirit indwells believers. Peter Leithart emphasises the participatory nature of this new temple, arguing that the Church functions as a living extension of divine presence.⁸⁸ This ecclesiological transformation decentralises sacred space, situating divine habitation within the communal body of believers. The new temple is no longer bound to a physical location but is manifested through a people called to embody the presence of God.

⁸⁷ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 504–510.

⁸⁸ Peter Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs: A Theology of Baptism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 144–149.

4. Theological Implications of the Temple Motif

God's Desire for Relationship

The temple motif is a critical theological theme, underscoring God's desire for intimate communion with humanity. Rather than supporting a deistic framework in which God remains detached from creation, the temple motif affirms divine immanence. Throughout redemptive history, the temple, in its various iterations, Eden, the Tabernacle, Solomon's Temple, the Second Temple, and ultimately Christ, serves as a tangible expression of God's presence among His people. Prominent scholars such as G.K. Beale and N.T. Wright contends that the temple is not merely an architectural construct but a sacramental reality where divine-human interaction is facilitated.⁸⁹ This concept reaches its culmination and culminates in the eschatological vision of the New Jerusalem, where God's presence is permanently established among His redeemed people (Rev. 21:3).⁹⁰

The shift from the physical temple to Christ as the ultimate temple (John 2:19–21) signifies a theological transition in sacred space. In the New Testament, Paul advances this motif further by identifying believers as the dwelling place of God (1 Cor. 6:19–20), reinforcing the ethical and ecclesiological implications of divine indwelling.⁹¹ The parallel between the Shekinah glory that filled the Old Testament temple and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life strengthens this theological trajectory. The temple is thus not only a place of worship but an existential reality that shapes Christian identity and ethical responsibility.

⁸⁹ Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 25-28.

⁹⁰ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 224-227.

⁹¹ M.B. Jie, "Missionary Communion of God in the Midst of Diversity: Insights for the Church's Mission in Indonesia," *Mysterium Fidei: Journal of Asian Empirical Theology* (2024): 18–21, <http://jaemth.org/index.php/JAEmTh/article/view/18>.

Moreover, the temple motif highlights worship as an avenue for divine encounters. Encounters. The Psalms repeatedly emphasise the temple as a site of joyful communion with God (Ps. 84:1–4). This theme extends into New Testament theology, where worship is no longer confined to a single location but permeates all aspects of life.⁹² This transformation reflects the expanding nature of divine presence, which is no longer restricted to a geographic temple but embodied in the gathered Church and individual believers.

Continuity and Fulfillment

The temple motif is central to the coherence of the biblical metanarrative. From the prototypical temple in Eden, where God walked with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8), to the Tabernacle in the wilderness and the successive temple structures in Jerusalem, the trajectory of divine habitation unfolds progressively. Beale posits that the temple represents a microcosm of creation itself, with the ultimate divine intention being the entire cosmos as a dwelling place for God's presence.^{5,93}

The movement from localised sanctuaries to a universal eschatological reality underscores the temple's role in redemptive history. Hebrews 9:11–12 describes Christ as the High Priest who enters the heavenly temple, fulfilling and transcending the old covenantal structures.^{6,94} This continuity disrupts supersessionist readings, creating a stark dichotomy between Old and New Testament theology. Instead, it affirms a progressive revelation culminating in the new creation, where

⁹² T. Ma, "God at Work in the World: Theology and Mission in the Global Church," *SAGE Journals* (2024): 14–16, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/02653788241280407>

⁹³ R. Osei, "Insights on Leadership Succession from the Bible: A Guide for Ghanaian Churches," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* (2024): 55–58 <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/erats/article/view/288435>.

⁹⁴ M.S. Pajunen, "The Reception of the Books of Kings in Second Temple Judaism," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Books of Kings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 374–377.

the necessity of a physical temple is superseded by the unmediated presence of God (Rev. 21:22).⁷.⁹⁵

This theological trajectory is further reinforced by eschatological visions such as Ezekiel's prophecy of a future temple (Ezek. 40–48), which has been subject to extensive interpretative debate. Some scholars argue for a literal temple in a millennial kingdom, while others suggest a symbolic representation of God's presence among His people. Regardless of one's hermeneutical position, the text contributes to the overarching theme of divine dwelling and its eschatological fulfilment.

Additionally, fulfilment. Christ's identification as the ultimate temple also invites further theological exploration into sacramental theology. The Eucharist, as a participation in Christ's body and blood, represents an ongoing encounter with the divine presence, reinforcing the idea that access to God is no longer restricted to a singular sacred space.⁸.⁹⁶ This understanding positions the temple motif as integral to biblical theology and Christian praxis.

Practical Implications for Believers

The identification of believers as God's temple carries profound ethical and missional ramifications. Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 highlights the necessity of holiness, as those indwelt by God must reflect His character.⁹.⁹⁷ This call extends beyond personal morality to encompass broader social and communal transformation. The Old Testament temple was intended to be a house of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:7), a

⁹⁵ M. Bruening, "Calvin, Exile, and Religious Refugees: Papers of the Thirteenth International Congress on Calvin Research," *Books Google* (2024): 142–145, <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=iYIFEQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA2>.

⁹⁶ Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 405–408.

⁹⁷ P.B. Smit et al., "Public Theology in the Midst of Conflict," 463–466.

vision that finds its fulfilment in fulfilling the Church's missional mandate.

The ecclesiological implications of the temple motif necessitate a corporate vision of sacred community. The New Testament portrays the Church as a collective temple (Eph. 2:19–22), emphasising its role in embodying the kingdom of God.¹⁰ Theological voices such as⁹⁸ Miroslav Volf and Jürgen Moltmann stress the stresses this identity's communal and eschatological dimensions of this identity, arguing that the Church is both a present manifestation of God's kingdom and a foretaste of its ultimate fulfilment.¹¹fulfilment.⁹⁹ This perspective invites reflection on the role of liturgy and sacramental life in shaping a worshipping community that embodies divine presence.

The missional implications of the temple motif further extend to the believer's role in society. Just as the Old Testament temple functioned as a beacon to the nations (Isa. 56:7), so must the Church operate as a transformative presence in the world.¹²,¹⁰⁰ The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20) reflects this vision, as the knowledge of God's presence is carried to all nations.¹³ The ethical dimensions of this mission include a commitment to hospitality, peacemaking, and justice, reflecting the inclusive nature of the temple as a place for all people.

Furthermore, the eschatological dimensions of the temple motif challenge believers to live with a forward-looking faith. The promise of the New Jerusalem, where God dwells among His people unmediated (Rev. 21:3), serves as both a hope and an ethical imperative. This reality compels believers to align their lives with God's ultimate redemptive plan, fostering a spiritual orientation that integrates theology, ethics, and mission. By

⁹⁸ Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 437–441.

⁹⁹ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 45.

¹⁰⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 86.

anticipating the full realisation of divine presence, Christians are called to embody that presence in the present age.

5. Conclusion

The temple motif constitutes a foundational theological framework that integrates divine presence, redemptive continuity, and eschatological fulfilment. From Edenic origins to the consummate reality of the New Jerusalem, the temple functions as the central locus of divine-human communion. This study has demonstrated the motif's significance within biblical theology, offering a lens to understand the cohesion of Scripture's salvific narrative.

The temple motif is a unifying thread throughout Scripture, illustrating God's unwavering desire to dwell among His people. From Eden as a proto-temple to the Tabernacle, Solomon's Temple, and ultimately Christ and the Church, the progression of this theme underscores the continuity of God's redemptive plan. The transition from physical sanctuaries to the indwelling presence of God within believers highlights the shift from localised worship to a communal and personal relationship with the divine. Furthermore, the New Jerusalem's eschatological vision signifies this motif's ultimate fulfilment, where God's presence will be fully realised among His redeemed people. This study affirms that the temple is not merely an architectural structure but a theological construct that encapsulates divine immanence, covenantal fidelity, and the hope of eternal communion with God.

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