

The Cosmic Temple and the Priesthood of Man:
A Liturgical Reading of the Genesis Creation Narrative

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Introduction

The Genesis creation narrative is one of the most hotly debated passages of Sacred Scripture. Modern theologians have spilled untold amounts of ink discussing the proper understanding of the Genesis creation week vis-à-vis the cosmology of contemporary science. Such debates, however, often prove to entirely miss the point of the text. As LeFebvre observes, “The allure of worship rather than science ought to be our focus in the study of the creation week.”¹ Following this thought, the intention of this paper is to demonstrate that the Genesis creation narrative is imbued with a liturgical tone which reveals the life-setting of the ancient Israelites, establishes a major theme for the rest of Scripture, and points to the telos of humanity itself.

Examining the Liturgical Components of the Creation Narrative

In the opening words of Genesis (indeed, the opening words of Scripture), one discovers a heptadic structure. The first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1, is composed of seven Hebrew words. The following verse, Genesis 1:2, contains fourteen words (that is, seven times two). This theme continues throughout the chapter, with the author of the text presenting certain significant words and phrases to us in multiples of seven: “God,” 35 times; “earth,” 21 times; “heavens/firmament,” 21 times; “and it was so,” 7 times; and, “God saw that it was good,” 7 times.² This emphasis on the number seven directs the reader to recognize the central importance of the seventh day of the creation week: the sabbath, the day of worship-rest. Not only does the text insistently point to liturgy as the goal of creation by consistently referring the reader to the sabbath, the text itself

¹ Michael LeFebvre, *The Liturgy of Creation: Understanding Calendars in Old Testament Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 196, Hoopla eBooks.

² Jeffrey Morrow, “Creation as Temple-Building and Work as Liturgy in Genesis 1-3,” *Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): 1, <https://works.bepress.com/jeffrey-morrow/12/>.

appears in many ways to be a liturgical document. As Weinfeld notes, the recurring formulae found in Genesis chapter 1 (e.g., “and it was evening and it was morning,” and, “he saw that it was good”) “are a type of refrain which imparts to the chapter a liturgic character,”³ a character which has led scholars to claim that the entire chapter “reads as a sort of liturgical hymn.”⁴ Moreover, the text depicts God as binding man with a type of liturgical mandate, stating that “the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). The Hebrew verbs for “till” and “keep” (עבד and שמר, respectively) “are only found together again in the Pentateuch to describe the liturgical service of the priests and Levites in the sanctuary.”⁵ Taken together, these liturgical literary components caused Weinfeld to argue that the *Sitz im Leben* of the Genesis creation narrative “is indeed cultic-liturgic.”⁶

Parallels Between the Genesis Creation Narrative and Later Scriptures

This parallel between the creation week and the cult of the ancient Israelites is found also in Scripture’s accounts of the consecration of the Tabernacle and the construction of Solomon’s Temple (the former event taking seven days, the latter seven years). Concerning the parallels between the Genesis creation week and the Mosaic consecration of the Tabernacle recounted in

³ Moshe Weinfeld, “Sabbath, Temple, and the Enthronement of the Lord: The Problem of the *Sitz im Leben* of Genesis 1:1-2:3,” *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l’honneur de M. Henri Cazelles*, ed. A. Caquot and M. Delcor (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1981): 510, https://www.academia.edu/44235765/Moshe_Weinfeld_Sabbath_Temple_and_the_Enthronement_of_the_Lord_in_Mathias_Delcor_and_Andr%C3%A9_Caquot_eds_M%C3%A9langes_bibliques_et_orientaux_en_l_honneur_de_M_Henri_Cazelles_Neukirchen_Vluyn_Neukirchner_Verlag_1981_501_512

⁴ Morrow, “Creation as Temple-Building,” 3.

⁵ Scott Hahn, “Worship in the Word: Toward a Liturgical Hermeneutic,” *Letter & Spirit: A Journal of Catholic Biblical Theology* 1 (2005): 107, <http://www.scotthahn.com/resources-1/2016/1/15/worship-in-the-word-toward-a-liturgical-hermeneutic>.

⁶ Weinfeld, “Sabbath, Temple, and the Enthronement,” 510.

Exodus chapters 39 and 40, Weinfeld notes that the two accounts are “typologically identical.”⁷ Both accounts, he says, follow a similar chronology, beginning with the of completion of a work, followed by its subsequent inspection and approval, and the consummate blessing of the project. Just as God saw all that He had created and subsequently blessed and sanctified it, so too Moses saw the completion of the Tabernacle and blessed and sanctified it.

The construction of the Temple, like the creation of the heavens and earth, follows a strictly heptadic structure. The construction, as mentioned, took seven years to complete, the seventh of which was called a Sabbath. The dedication of the Temple took place during the Feast of Tabernacles, a seven-day festival celebrated during the seventh month of the year, and Solomon’s dedication speech was composed of seven petitions. The heptadic structure of the Solomonic Temple construction account leads us, argues Morrow, to “see an association with the Temple and creation; the Temple’s construction was depicted as a new creation, and the Temple was seen as a microcosm of the world.”⁸

Delving further into the heptadic nature of creation as related to ancient Israelite liturgy, one discovers that the ordination of the Levitical priests was a seven-day process. After sprinkling the altar seven times with holy oil before anointing Aaron with the same (Lev. 8:11-12), Moses instructs Aaron and his sons that they are “not go out from the door of the tent of meeting for seven days, until the days of your ordination are completed, for it will take seven days to ordain you” (Lev. 8:33). Once again, one finds that these parallels between creation and the Israelite cult serve to help the reader “understand the author’s intention in Genesis 1: to depict creation as the

⁷ Weinfeld, “Sabbath, Temple, and the Enthronement,” 503.

⁸ Morrow, “Creation as Temple-Building,” 6.

fashioning of a cosmic temple, a house of God which, like the later tabernacle and Temple, would be a meeting place for God and the human person made in his image and likeness.”⁹

Another interesting parallel is found in the conquest of Joshua. After being banished from the paradise of Eden, the people of God are, many generations later, commissioned by God to occupy the Promised Land, which would eventually become the New Eden, the place where God would choose to dwell amongst men after the construction of the Temple. To ensure that the religious nature of this conquest was clearly recognized, God ordained that it would commence not with a strategic battle, but with a liturgical procession. In the sixth chapter of Joshua, the fall of Jericho is depicted as the result of a sort of liturgical march, during which the Israelites, led by seven priests, processed the Ark of the Covenant around the city of Jericho for seven days, after which the trumpets blew and the people shouted, and the walls of Jericho fell. In this narrative one finds a redemption of Israelite worship. Man fell when he failed to worship God properly in the Garden of Eden, valuing instead that which was offered to him by the serpent. Later, man would triumphantly conquer the Promised Land for God in an act of liturgical worship, a procession which would claim the land for Yahweh, a land where a Temple could later be built in reparation for man’s desecration of the primordial Edenic Temple.

Man’s Vocation as Priest

Upon uncovering the liturgical nature of creation, one discovers the liturgical calling of man. Human beings are called “to till and to keep” the cosmic temple of Yahweh, to serve Him alone and offer the gift of creation back to Him as a sacrificial work of sanctification (rather than

⁹ Hahn, “Worship in the Word,” 106.

falling into the often-recounted Israelite tendency to worship the creature rather than the Creator—such idolatry precisely inverts the human vocation). Remarking on this theme, Scott Hahn is convinced that the Scriptural data shows that

there is a liturgical reason and purpose for the creation of the world and the human person, and there is a liturgical “destiny” for creation and the human person. Man, as presented in the canonical text, is *homo liturgicus*, liturgical man, created to glorify God through service, expressed as a sacrifice of praise.¹⁰

The universe is a temple, and Yahweh is among us. To live well is to live in right worship of the living God. The vocation of man undoubtedly involves work, but his ultimate calling is liturgy. The sabbath serves as a constant reminder that just as creation and Scripture have a heptadic structure, so too does the life of man. The observance of the seventh day as a day offered wholly to the LORD is a perpetual reminder of God’s everlasting covenant with man. Man once defiled the primordial temple of God in his original sin, which is why he is now tasked with participating in the sanctification of creation by offering it once more to the LORD God, so that man might “bring creation to its fulfillment, to complete God’s work by making the world a home in which they dwell with him and live as his people.”¹¹

Conclusion

The ancient Israelites lived as a worshipping people, and as such wrote the Scriptures as a document of worship, a document which ultimately points to the liturgical calling of man as a priest of God’s cosmic Temple. The words of Scripture were written for a liturgical people, by a

¹⁰ Hahn, “Worship in the Word,” 106.

¹¹ Ibid, 109.

liturgical people, and in the context of a liturgical world. To argue over the compatibility of the Genesis creation narrative and modern cosmology is precisely to miss the point. The Bible is not a cosmology textbook; rather, it is a missal.

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