

B. Form of Sacred Space

Though the concept of sacred space has to do with God's dwelling place, it is a creational reality; it is the realm in which God is present in relation to His creation. Given the time-space constraints of the created order, sacred space refers to a place of encounter between the Creator and the creation – a “place” in time and space in which God makes Himself comprehensible and accessible to His creatures. As seen, this idea is the heart of the “mountain of God” imagery, which itself highlights the fact that it's God's presence that makes sacred space “holy ground.” But this mountain imagery also points to the centrality of man in the notion of sacred space; in every one of its expressions, the mountain of God is the place where men encounter God.

The creation account in the first two chapters of Genesis affirms that man is the focal point of the Creator-creature encounter, God having created humans as personal beings in His own image and likeness for the purpose of person-to-person relationship. All things were created by God and bear the stamp of their Creator, and in that sense everything finds its identity and significance in relation to Him. But this is uniquely and preeminently true of man.

Man is not simply a uniquely rational being created by a Creator God; he bears the image of his divine Creator. And this means more than that human beings possess certain of God's qualities: Man is the *image-son* (Luke 3:38), enjoying a creational identity and relational status shared by no other created thing, not even the angelic hosts.

Being created as a son, human beings find their identity and significance in relation to God in a way that transcends the rest of the creation. Only man relates to the Creator as *Father*. The most profound implication of these truths is that man's sense of himself depends absolutely on his sense of God; since he is the image-son, to know himself he must know God.

- No human being can arrive at an accurate self-knowledge by making himself the point of reference, though this is precisely what every person does by nature and default.
- Self-knowledge (and therefore self-realization) is the by-product of knowing God – knowing Him not in a speculative or informational way, but in a relational way.

What this means is that sacred space is “man-ward” as much as “God-ward.” *In the divine-human encounter, relationship is established and nurtured, and in the context of that relationship man realizes his own humanity, both objectively and experientially.* As it pertains to human beings, this dynamic is the heart of the reality the Bible calls “shalom.”

1. Shalom

In the creation account, the biblical text is careful to attach God's imprimatur to every stage of His creative activity. Moving through the process of creation, God repeatedly pronounced the fruit of His labor to be “good.” And that divine stamp of approval reaches its apex with the completion of the creation: As God stood back and considered what He had accomplished, He pronounced it all to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31). This goodness signifies more than the absence of fault or “badness”; it speaks to the principle of *shalom*.

- a. The Hebrew term *shalom* is most often translated by the English noun “peace,” but it means much more than the usual connotation attached to that idea. In a world defined in every respect by enmity, the biblical concept of “shalom” is both foreign and elusive. At the personal and communal level people speak of and work for peace, but the peace they envision is essentially the cessation of open conflict. Nations are said to be “at peace” when they are not threatened with or engaged in armed conflicts, and individual persons “live in peace” with others when they coexist in a friendly or civil manner. But civility, tolerance, and mutuality have nothing per se to do with peace. The reason is that all “peaceful” human relations are set in the context of fundamental human *estrangement*.

As noted previously, there is no self-knowledge or authentic human existence apart from relational connection to God, and every person comes into this world estranged from Him. Being estranged from the One whose image they bear, people are hopelessly estranged from themselves. Being unable to discern what it means to be human, they know neither themselves nor anyone else: *Self-alienation insures mutual alienation*. What this means is that all human relationships – at all levels – are dysfunctional and perverse. This is made worse by the fact that the underlying cause is imperceptible to the natural mind. People cannot diagnose the true problem and therefore have no hope for a genuine cure.

And so, while the relational virtues of civility, tolerance, deference, respect, etc. are attainable in human relationships, estrangement and enmity continue to define and dominate the human heart. What presents itself on the surface belies and distracts from the reality that resides within. For creatures defined by estrangement, “peace” can only be realized in terms of unexpressed discord.

But shalom is much more than suppressed conflict; fundamentally it connotes integrity or *wholeness*, and when considered in relation to the created order, it refers to the perfection and blessedness of creational harmony. Viewed comprehensively, shalom is the condition in which every created thing finds itself in perfect conformity to itself and its created function. In turn, this full and faultless self-conformity expresses itself in inter-creational harmony: When a given thing is perfectly conformed to its own created nature and function, it equally exists in perfect harmony with everything else. This is because of the inherent interrelation and interdependence God designed into the created order. Every created thing exists and functions in relation to all other things, and most especially to God Himself. This all-encompassing creational harmony is the very essence of shalom.

*“The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call **shalom**... In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight... In a shalomic state each entity would have its own integrity or structured wholeness, and each would also possess many edifying relations to other entities.”*

(Cornelius Plantinga, Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be)

- b. Given its biblical significance, it's no surprise that shalom was the defining characteristic of the first creation. The "shalomic" character of the created order is succinctly expressed in God's assessment that, in its totality, His creation was "very good." At that time everything existed as it was created to be, both in itself and in relation to every other thing. Shalom described the character of the entire creation, but much more narrowly the sacred space of Eden. In a preeminent way, *sacred space is shalomic space*. Two considerations prove this out:
- 1) First, the creation account reveals that God's intention was to mediate His lordship over His creation through man, His image-son. That is to say, man was created to be the point of interface between God and the rest of His creation. As the "son of God," man is also *vice-regent*, commissioned at the outset to administer his Creator/Father's rule over His creatures. (Importantly, the Fall didn't abrogate this commission, even as it didn't bring the end of man as man – cf. Genesis 1:26-28 and 9:1-3.) This creational charge reflects the comprehensive relational structure between God, man, and the created order, and this structure, in turn, indicates the shalomic character of the original creation. All was harmonious and perfectly ordered, and this blessedness had its focal point in Eden – the place where God and Adam dwelled together as Father and son and from which mankind was to exercise the Creator's lordship over His creation.
 - 2) Secondly, the shalomic quality of sacred space is evident in the Bible's description of Eden as the "garden of God." Being the place where God resided with man in the perfect intimacy of a Father and son, its relational (and creational) perfection is expressed in the garden imagery of beauty, abundance, blessing, and full satisfaction. Within the garden all was harmonious. If the essence of sacred space is the divine-human encounter, the all-encompassing perfection of that encounter is the essence of shalom.

2. Shabbat

"Shabbat" is the English transliteration of the Hebrew word most often rendered *sabbath*. The basic idea embodied in this term is *cessation*, either in sense of severing or truncating something or desisting from a course of action. It occurs first in the Bible as a verb having reference to God's completion of His work of creation (Genesis 2:2-3). Two things, in particular, are important about this first occurrence of the sabbath idea.

- a. The first is the association of shabbat with the *seventh day*. The creation sequence is partitioned into six panels followed by a seventh that is characterized by completion (cessation). God had fully accomplished His work of creation and the seventh day serves in the text to mark the introduction of a new reality. The seventh day doesn't commemorate the six days of creation, but testifies to a new state of things defined by completion. In response to this new reality God pronounced His blessing upon it and *sanctified* it. Notably – and contrary to the conviction of many – God doesn't here command the man to sanctify (set apart) the seventh day; rather, the whole of the creation simply enters into it.

- b. The significance of the seventh day is made more evident by its *perpetuity*. The conspicuous absence of the transitional “evening and morning” formula in relation to the seventh day strongly suggests that the reader is to view the seventh day as unending. The implication is that the sabbatical nature of the seventh day defined the creational structure and order God had put in place. **As completed by God, the creation was to exist, and so also be recognized, as a sabbath reality.**

“The end of God’s creative work brought about a new type of time, blessed and set aside [sanctified], presumably in order that what was created could now be. The Seventh Day was to be a day for fruitfulness, for dominion, for relationship.”
(New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, emphasis in original)

This understanding of the seventh day may at first appear foreign or strained, especially to those accustomed to thinking in terms of literal days and the notion of a weekly Sabbath observance. But it is clear that this text doesn’t establish a Sabbath ordinance; it simply defines the seventh day as “post-creation” time characterized by cessation arising from completion and perfection (ref. again Genesis 1:31-2:3). In the Bible, the number seven indicates fullness, completion, and perfection; as such, it is the number of shalom. Thus God commended and sanctified the seventh day: *He set apart for Himself and the praise of His glory the shalomic perfection He had so marvelously brought about.*

3. Shalom and Shabbat in Sacred Space

When considered together in relation to the creation account, the following relationship emerges between the concepts of “shalom” and “shabbat”: **Shabbat serves to testify to shalom.** *The greatest attestation God could give to the absolute and harmonious perfection of His creation was the cessation of all further creative activity.* Shalom signifies that “it is finished,” and this completion is proclaimed through shabbat. One day these words would be uttered again – this time with regard to a shalomic reality that would endure forever with nothing more to be done (cf. John 19:30; Revelation 21:1-7).

The fact that God sanctified a perpetual “day” defined by cessation clearly shows the sabbatical nature of His shalomic creation. But this understanding is further reinforced by the way these ideas develop in the progress of salvation history.

- a. The first thing to note in this regard is *Israel’s sabbatical existence in Canaan*. It was seen previously that Canaan serves as a type of Eden. It was portrayed to the Israelites as a land of unparalleled abundance, well-being, and divine provision (cf. Exodus 3:8; Numbers 13:17-27; Deuteronomy 6:10-12, 8:7-9; etc.). Most importantly it was to be God’s sanctuary – the place where He would dwell with His people as their covenant Father/Husband (cf. Exodus 15:17, 25:1-8; also Ezekiel 16:1-14 and Hosea 11:1). Yahweh’s “son” Israel was to possess Canaan as a garden-sanctuary, and the son’s existence there was to be distinguished by the principle of *shabbat*: Not only did the Lord appoint the weekly Sabbath ordinance for Israel, He ordered their entire relationship with Him around “sabbath.”

- 1) God drew upon His own creational sabbath in establishing Israel's weekly Sabbath, and they were to regard it as a day of rest to provide **refreshment from labor**. For this reason it pertained to beast and man alike, both the sons of Israel and the sojourner among them (cf. Exodus 20:8-11, 23:12, 31:12-17; Deuteronomy 5:12-14).
- 2) But Israel's sabbath institution also introduced the notion of rest as a consequence of redemption (Deuteronomy 5:15). Israel was to sanctify the seventh day as a sabbath in recognition that God's redemption had given them **rest from their laborious bondage**. The principle of sabbath as redemptive rest was further expressed in the ordinance of *Jubilee*. Every seventh year the land was to be given a sabbath rest in which it would lie fallow (Leviticus 25:1-7). After seven such seventh-year sabbaths had elapsed, the fiftieth year was to be a year of complete release in Israel – a kind of “sabbath of sabbaths” in which everything and everyone was released from its encumbrance (Leviticus 25:8-17).
- 3) The Old Covenant sabbatical principle extended beyond the weekly observance to a whole host of ceremonial sabbaths associated with Israel's feasts and sacrifices (ref. Leviticus 16:29-31, 23:4-8, 24-25, 35-39), and beyond that to sabbaths pertaining to the land and all its inhabitants. But at the heart of all sabbath observance was the principle of **sanctification** (Ezekiel 20:12, 20). “Shabbat” as sanctification defined Israel's life in Canaan for the simple reason that Canaan was God's sanctuary; Israel's presence there testified that Yahweh had set them apart to Himself.

Israel's sabbatical ordinances were interwoven with various themes and attested to various related principles, but together they called God's creation – man, beast, and land, to live in a sabbath reality of devotion and worship. If Israel's existence in Canaan was intended by God to represent a prototypical return of man to His garden-sanctuary – and it was – then Israel's sabbatical life there represented a prototypical restoration of the sabbatical character of Eden and the first creation.

- b. The second thing that confirms the shalomic and sabbatical form of sacred space is the *typological nature of the first creation*. Adam's and Eve's quest for autonomy brought the devastation of shalom and, with it, the end of man's participation in God's shabbat. They were expelled from Eden and consigned to an existence characterized by discord, hardship, and agonizing labor (Genesis 3:16-19). But in the midst of the curse God had also promised restoration, and from that point forward the biblical account is single-minded and relentless in setting the stage for that fulfillment. With ever-increasing clarity and eagerness the Old Testament continues to reiterate the promise of a sabbath day to come. In that day the entire creation would be brought into the shalomic perfection that the first creation merely portrayed and provided a foretaste of. And in the brightness of its rising, the New Jerusalem – the all-encompassing holy mountain and garden-sanctuary – would at last enjoy God's everlasting rest (Isaiah 60:1-22).