Winter 2020

Remembering Eden: A Study of Garden Imagery in Judeo-Christian Worship Spaces

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PHI310: Aesthetics

December 18, 2020

Vases of flowers, a mural of wildlife, and poetic references to a garden, these artistic elements are all commonplace in Judeo-Christian worship spaces; but why? While all of these are certainly aesthetically pleasing, there is likely much more going on than mere interior decoration. This paper will begin by examining the source of garden imagery in the poetry of the Judeo-Christian tradition, demonstrating the significance and prevalence of Eden in the memory of the Judeo-Christian memory. Following this, the paper will then furnish and analyze several examples of Edenic imagery in the worship spaces, highlighting several important artistic elements shared by the various structures. Finally, this paper will converse with and critique the use of garden images both as a response to the Creation narrative as well as an intentional tool for 'atmosphere creation' through Daniel Siedell's 'Ecological Theory of Art'. In doing the above, this paper will posit its central thesis that the Garden of Eden as described by the Hebrew Bible is one of the foremost themes in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and as such, garden imagery is both used to remind congregants of their Edenic origin as well as create an environment which transports the imagination of those who enter the space, allowing for the creation of aesthetic-spiritual experience.

Garden Imagery in Memory and Imagination

Examining the Edenic Narrative

The first task in analyzing Eden and its imagery is getting a handle on the broader description and narrative of the Garden itself. As such, this section will trace the trajectory of Eden, beginning with analyzing the Creation narrative and its usefulness in illustrating Eden and concluding with humanity's expulsion from the Garden. Surprisingly, there is little in the way of detail to be found in Genesis' description of Eden. There is, however, a more nuanced

description of the seven-day Creation narrative in the first chapter of Genesis. Therefore, if one is to understand the landscape of the Garden, they must first look to the Earth as a whole. The most relevant pericope can be found in Gen. 1:11-13, which reads:

> And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.[1]

According to Genesis's Creation narrative, the Earth was instantly and wholly covered in a vast biodiverse landscape – a planet-sized garden under the care of its Creator. Yet, such a large stage would dwarf the main characters soon to enter the narrative, so Genesis zooms into a specific location, the Garden of Eden, before introducing Adam and Eve.[2] Based on the information offered by the text, the reader is to assume that the Garden is a representative section of the wider world previously described by Gen. 1. As such the creation of Eden is described in a similar ilk to that of the Earth in the chapter previous, with the text reading: "And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."[3] It is this Garden which humanity is first introduced to the reader of the Hebrew Bible. While the text is sparse in the specific details regarding specific plants, landscaping, or size, one thing is clear – the Garden of Eden is the place to be. As unlike any other earthly place in the Judeo-

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[1] Crossway. *English Standard Version Bible*, 2018, Gen. 1:11-13.

[2] Gen. 2:7-8.

[3] Gen. 2:9.

Christian scriptures, Eden is defined by peaceful existence, diverse and productive agriculture, and true human flourishing.[4]

This paradisal setting, however, does to last long into the Biblical narrative. Adam and Eve are tempted to eat from the only prohibited plant in the Garden, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, this transgression of Humanity's sole commandment results in Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden.[5] The pilgrimage out of Eden is recorded in Genesis 3:23-24: "The Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life."[6] Thus in this lachrymose end to the Edenic narrative, humanity is forever expelled from the walls of the Garden. Yet, the conclusion of this arc by no means is the end of Eden's existence, as the Garden is a primary theme in the poetry and prose in the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament.[7]

Eden's (Re)Appearances in Scripture

Seeking to underscore the prevalence and importance of Eden in the remainder of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, this section will identify three Edenic references highlighting how the Garden narrative is used by the Biblical authors and demonstrating the ubiquity and rhetorical usefulness of calling back to humanity's original home.

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[4] "Garden of Eden." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. Accessed December 4, 2020. https://www.ancient.eu/Garden_of_Eden/#:~:text=Apparently%2C%20the%20Garden%20in%20Eden,of%20everlasting%20joy%20without%20death.&text=First%2C%20since%20the%20Eden%20narrative,behold%2C%20it%20was%20very%20good.

[5] Gen. 3:1-13.

[6] Gen. 3:23-24.

[7] Peter Thacher Lanfer. *Remembering Eden: The Reception History of Genesis 3:22-24*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

One of the most common conceptualizations of Eden in Jewish poetry is as the ideal habitation for humanity. Two examples of this understanding come from the Books of Isaiah and Ezekiel respectively, which read: "The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving, and the sound of singing."[8] "They will say, 'This desolate land has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste, desolate, and ruined cities are fortified and inhabited."[9] In these two pericopes, the deserts or gardens, symbolical places of death can chaos, are juxtaposed with Eden, a place of life and flourishing.[10] As the majority of the Ancient Israelite history is spent in the rather aired and tumultuous western shores of the Mediterranean, it is only natural to preserve this memory of lush gardens and peaceful existence. As such, Eden in the imagination of the Ancient Israelite functions as the paradigmatic environmental-residential ideal.[11]

A second key conceptualization of Eden is as humanity's final and truest home. To examine this understanding, one must turn to the final chapter of the Christian New Testament: Revelation 22. In a section tellingly subtitled "Eden Restored" by the translators of the English Standard Version Bible, the text states: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit,

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[8] Isa 51:3.

[9] Eze 36:35.

[10] Emanuel Tov. "The Significance of The Texts from the Judean Desert for the History of the Text of the Hebrew Bible: A New Synthesis" (2001), 23.

[11] Tov, "*Significance of The Texts from the Judean Desert for the History of the Text of the Hebrew Bible*, 25.

yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him."[12] In the last few lines of the Bible, the Cherubim have been removed, and humanity once again has access to the Garden alongside their Creator. The curse which drove humanity out of Eden has been lifted, and both the Garden and its inhabitants have been restored. The Garden of Eden, bookending the entire corpus of Judeo-Christian Scripture, is finally home to humanity.[13]

The Prevalence of Garden Imagery in Worship Spaces

With the scriptural significance of garden imagery properly delineated, it is then possible to examine instances where Edenic elements are utilized by specific worship spaces. This section will explore three disparate Judeo-Christian worship spaces which include garden imagery, highlighting specific elements used in their constriction and ornamentation, as well as noting the purpose and evolution of the specific aesthetic elements.

Ancient Israel's Tabernacle

One of the first instances of Edenic imagery in Judeo-Christian worship spaces can be found in the Ancient Israelite Tabernacle, a portable worship site in use between Israel's escape into the desert until the construction of the First Temple.[14] Whereas later iterations of garden

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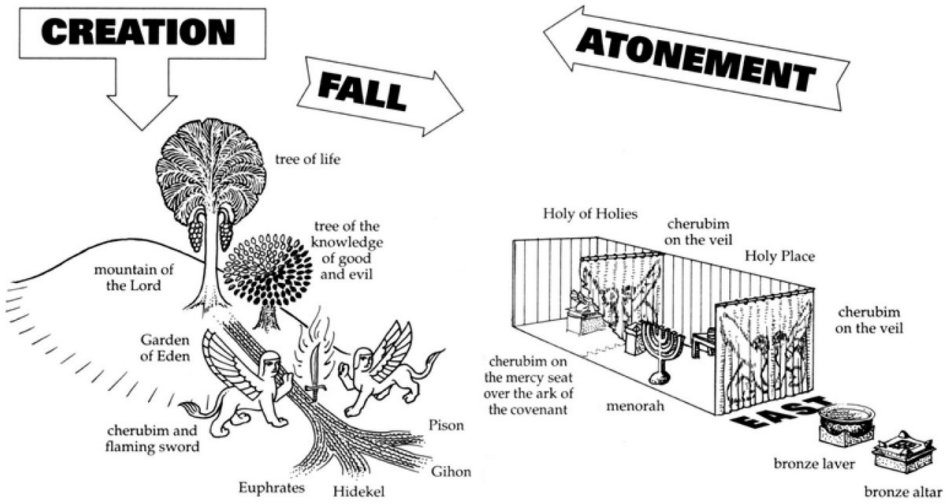
[12] Rev 22: 1-3.

[13] Karl F. Morrison. "History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition. Jean Delumeau, Matthew O'Connell." *The Journal of Religion* 77, no. 1 (1997): 126–128. Accessed December 4, 2020. 10.1086/489923.

[14] F.L. Cross. "Tabernacle." *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

elements included in religious spaces are more aesthetically-driven, the imagery of the Tabernacle served a rich theological purpose – to serve as a reminder and a road map of the Fall narrative. To unpack the above claim, it is helpful to examine the chart pictured below.[15]



In the diagram, it is demonstrated how the Jewish Tabernacle reflects the fall of humanity through carefully curated artistic elements. Guarding both the inner temple as well as the garden of Eden, both considered extremely holy places in the Jewish religious context, are the Cherubim and flaming sword. These same Cherubim also adorn the Ark of the Covenant, adding one more layer of protection to the holiest object, the very place where Yahweh resided according to the Jewish tradition. Only after passing through the initial set of these strange guardians can one enter the hallowed ground of the inner temple OF Eden.[16]

While this set of symbolic images is indeed interesting, what is possibly more fascinating is how the into the Jewish Tabernacle is arranged as a foil to the Fall narrative, with this reversal

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[15] "The Garden in the Tabernacle." Last modified 2013. Accessed December 12, 2020. https://f4.bcbits.com/img/a3427027072_10.jpg.

[16] Sandra R. Shimoff. "Gardens: From Eden To Jerusalem." *J Study Jud* 26, no. 2 (1995): 145–155. Accessed December 4, 2020. 10.1163/157006395x00031.

being indicated by the arrows above the two illustrations. In Genesis 3, humanity is made impure through sin and is thus cast out of the garden. Remembering this, the Tabernacle offers a path of atonement and reconciliation through a symbolic walk back into the garden.[17] This symbolic march towards atonement was treated with the utmost seriousness by the temple priests, with the book of Leviticus going as far as to record the death of those who carelessly entered the temple, neglecting the seriousness of the journey inward.[18] In summation, the Tabernacle uses garden imagery both to remind those who entered it of their fallen nature, and as a way to stress the seriousness of re-entering Yahweh's presence.

Solomon's Temple

The next worship space of note is the Ancient Israelites' first proper, known as either "Solomon's Temple" or the "First Temple"; with the structure being constructed in the mid-10th century BCE.[19] For the first time in the history of Ancient Israel, Solomon's Temple utilized aesthetic elements, not for didactic or symbolic purposes; but rather, the Temple utilized garden imagery to create an environment of awe and grandiosity rightfully contributed to the Divine. [20] Specific artistic elements of the First Temple that created this environment include luscious gardens surrounding the temple itself, gilded interior walls depicting plants and animals, and,

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[17] G.G. Vandagriff. "The Creation and the Garden of Eden as Models for Temple Architecture." Meridian, 2010.

[18] Lev. 10:1-7.

[19] John J. Collins and Doron Mendels. "The Land of Israel as a Political Concept in Hasmonean Literature: Recourse to History in Second Century B.C. Claims to the Holy Land." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108, no. 1 (1989): 131. Accessed December 1, 2020. 10.2307/3267487.

[20] Nasim Yazdani and Mirjana Lozanovska. "The Design Philosophy of Edenic Gardens: Tracing 'Paradise Myth' in Landscape Architecture." *Landscape History* 37, no. 2 (2016): 5–18. Accessed December 4, 2020. 10.1080/01433768.2016.1249719.

once again, a pair of cherubim guarding the entrance to the inner portions of the temple.[21] Taken together, these aesthetic elements sought to recreate the experience of Eden – a space marked by peace with nature, humanity, and Yahweh.

This is an aesthetically consequential development, whereas previous Jewish temple architecture and artistry served a plain, educational-symbolic role in the temple space, the artistry of Solomon's temple marks the first instance of the intentional creation of an aesthetic environment in the Israelite history.[22] By embracing the power of the image, the architects of the First Temple were able to use garden imagery to recapture the experience of Eden, an impressive task which would set the tone for the creation of worship spaces for centuries to come.

The Sistine Chapel

Turning to the now to the Christian tradition, the example that this section will analyze is the illustrations of the Sistine chapel. Whereas the illustrations of Ancient Israel's Tabernacle served a primarily instructional purpose, and the aesthetic elements of Solomon's Temple were utilized mostly to cultivate an Edenic atmosphere, the Sistine Chapel's frescos manage to blend both elements in a wholly unique use of garden imagery. By combining the use of garden imagery as well as the artistic rendering of the events of Genesis 1-3, the illustrations of the Sistine Chapel effectively allow congregants to ponder their shared history while at the same time being enveloped in an atmosphere of Edenic awe and reverence.[23]

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[21] Elizabeth Bloch-Smith. "Who Is the King of Glory?" Solomon's Temple and It's Symbolism." Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology, 1994, 8.

[22] Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "'Who Is the King of Glory?', 6-8.

[23] Peter Thacher Lanfer, *Remembering Eden*, 129.

The Function of Garden Imagery in Worship Spaces

Finally, with the background and prevalence of garden imagery better understood, this section will explore how Edenic elements are used both to respond and illustrate the broader Judeo-Christian narrative as well as purposely utilized in order to create a space for worship. Following this, the section will then critique and converse with the use of garden imagery and its efficacy in recapturing the Edenic atmosphere through Daniel Siedell's 'Ecological Theory of Art', along with the implications that his use of the aesthetic entail.

Edenic Imagery as a Response to the Judeo-Christian Memory

One manner in which elements of garden imagery are used by the creators of religious spaces is as a response to the collective Judeo-Christian history contained in Genesis 3. By using Edenic imagery, artists can effectively call back to the idyllic setting of humanity's beginnings. In this sense, the elements of the garden which oft-adorn the walls of churches and synagogues serve as remembrance of the pinnacle of human existence: life before the fall. To illustrate this claim, consider the modern mural. There are most certainly pieces of public art that have the primary purpose of adding aesthetic interest to an otherwise bland city street. Murals, however, are often also are created to venerate their subject, communicate a specific message, and or serve as a reminder to their viewers. Garden imagery viewed through the lens of response is no different, as these aesthetic displays seek to remind and uphold the memory of a shared, uncorrupted past.[24]

Additionally, Edenic imagery can be utilized by churches and synagogues to remind those within them of the grandiosity of the religious institution itself. Just as famous historical illustrations can be found in the hallways of government buildings as images of sports icons are

[24] Lanfer, 123-24.

taped to the walls of gyms, places of worship can use Edenic imagery to point the viewer towards the rich history and tradition of themselves as an institution. Notably, this is not to say that Judeo-Christian worship spaces are co-opting these aesthetic elements to propagandize them; rather, these spaces employ such images as a way of communicating the great historical narrative that these spaces are rooted in. As such, these churches and synagogues seek to reflect the remembered glory of Eden, hoping that this borrowed luster is enough to illuminate the imaginations of their respective congregants.

Garden Imagery as a Tool for Creating Aesthetic-Spiritual Experience

The use of garden imagery by the architects and artists of religious spaces is not only reactive, it can also be used proactively. Edenic elements are often used to create an environment conducive to religious and aesthetic experience. This environment is carefully constructed through the purposeful utilization of both symbolic and didactic images relating to the Garden, transporting the worshiper to a new emotional and spiritual plane. Describing the power of these aesthetic elements to the religiously-minded, Alexander Schmemann writes: "our entrance into the presence [the Church] is an entrance into a fourth-dimension which allows us to see the ultimate reality of life. It is not an escape from the world, rather it is the arrival at a vantage point from which we can see more deeply into the reality of the world."[25] It is this ability to shift the collective consciousness of a congregation which gives garden imagery its greatest emotional and spiritual power. Understanding this, the artists involved in the creation of worship spaces often seek to utilize these images, creating what contemporary aesthetician Daniel Siedell describes as an "artistic ecosystem", which he describes and analyzes through his "ecological

[25] Alexander Schmemann. *For the Life of the World*. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973, 27.

theory of aesthetics". Further delineating this artistic theory, Siedell writes: "Artists thus seek to create aesthetic environments, in which discrete parts of their work, such as sculpture, photographs, drawings, and paintings, fit together in relationship with one another, providing a comprehensive environment in which an overarching idea is embodied throughout."[26] As such, it is prudent for artists to utilize emotionally and spiritually resonant aesthetic elements, such as those of Edenic origin, in the creation of these spaces.

While some may see this as using art as a means to an end, which at best reduces the importance of art as a discipline and at worst can be understood as spiritually manipulative, this situation need not be evaluated through such a grim lens. To illustrate how a synagogue or church's use of garden imagery can play a positive role in its member's lives, consider a well-ordered bedroom. While a house taken holistically has a disparate variety of uses, if organized thoughtfully, the bedroom has one primary purpose: to facilitate sleep. As such, many will place an alarm clock next to the bed, source comfortable pillows and linens, and keep the room quiet and dark while they slumber. These methods of arranging the room make it easier to quickly nod off, ensuring that one will awake refreshed. Now, turn back to the role of the artist in the creation of worship spaces. Just like the prudent homeowner, the religious artist works diligently to ensure that their given space accomplishes its primary goal, which, in the cases of worship spaces, is to serve as a place for connecting with the Divine. Notably, this is not to force a religious experience, just as one cannot force sleep; all one can do is seek to remove the friction inherent in accomplishing their given goal. As such, just like one who values their rest and orders their bedroom accordingly, the artists and architects tasked with constructing places of worship

[26] Daniel A. Siedell. *God in the Gallery*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008, 111.

use garden imagery in order to accomplish their goal of allowing for spiritual experience through the aesthetic.

In closing, the memory of Eden plays a key thematic role across the books of the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament; with garden imagery being used to evoke the memory of humanity's idyllic, pre-fall existence. The Garden's importance is also demonstrated by the use of Edenic aesthetics by the religious architects and artists tasked with the creation of places of worship, with these individuals using garden images both as didactic elements to communicate the group's history as well as tools to create an atmosphere of awe and worship. Finally, it is possible to critique and converse with this use of the aesthetic through an ecological theory of art, which emphases the creation of an environment in which one can have aesthetic and religious experiences. In summation, the use of Edenic imagery in places of worship is far more than a mere means to a decorated end; garden images in places of worship play a key role in furthering the religious imagination in the minds of congregants, continuing the story which began with: "In the beginning, God created."

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