

Bite Size Bible Study

Sacred Space #124

By Pastor Lee

I find the nature of sacred space in the ancient world interesting. We are aware that the pagans had many places that they called sacred space. We can read that there were many sacred places that were set up by the people of God that lived before Israel became a nation. We also learn that sacred space in Israel's world was never to be chosen simply for convenience or preference, but only by choice of the one, true God.

The place was typically indicated by some sort of manifestation of God's presence, that is his activity, his appearance, or later by God's directive.

For the first location of Israel's central cult site, we find that God directed Israel through Moses to Mount Ebal.

And when you have crossed the Jordan, set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I command you today, and coat them with plaster. Build there an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones. Do not use any iron tool on them. Build the altar of the Lord your God with fieldstones and offer burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God. Sacrifice fellowship offerings there, eating them and rejoicing in the presence of the Lord your God. And you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up." Deut. 27:4-8

Next was Shiloh after they had conquered all of the land of Canaan.

The whole assembly of the Israelites gathered at Shiloh and set up the tent of meeting there. The country was brought under their control, but there were still seven Israelite tribes who had not yet received their inheritance. Joshua 18:1-2

Last and final location was to be in Jerusalem.

After David had constructed buildings for himself in the City of David, he prepared a place for the ark of God and pitched a tent for it. Then David said, "No one but the Levites may carry the ark of God, because the Lord chose them to carry the ark of the Lord and to minister before him forever." David assembled all Israel in Jerusalem to bring up the ark of the Lord to the place he had prepared for it. 1 Chr 15:1-4.

They brought the ark of God and set it inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and they presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before God. After David had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord. Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each Israelite man and woman. 1 Chr 16:1-3.

Deuteronomy 12:1–7 makes it expressly clear that when Israel enters Canaan they are to dismantle the cult sites of the Canaanites, and replace those multiple sites with the one and only site of Yahweh.

These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has given you to possess—as long as you live in the land. Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains, on the hills and under every spreading tree, where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places. You must not worship the Lord your God in their way. But you are to seek the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go; there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. There, in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you.

The ancient people believed that they could meet God at these sites. This place was the *omphalos* of the universe (a fancy word for "belly button") Like a "belly button" the sacred space was that spot where heaven met earth, where the umbilical cord of the cosmos ushered divine power into human space. For the Israelites, this meant that the Jerusalem temple was the one place where a worshiper could be assured of encountering the Almighty. This site was holy because God was there. If Israel destroys the cult sites of the surrounding nations, Israel will not be confused in her singular allegiance to Yahweh or tempted to worship to other gods.

Israel's sacred space did not necessarily look different from that of their neighbors. But who was there was very different. Rather than being occupied by a statue covered in gold and silver representing a god who was hungry and needed sacrifice to satisfy his cravings; the Holy of Holies was occupied by the all-powerful but invisible God. The Jerusalem temple was occupied by a God who "owned the cattle on a thousand hills" and valued obedience far more than sacrifice (Ps 50:10; 1 Sam 15:22). The worship of Yahweh and the expectations he placed on his people were dramatically different than worship practices in Canaan.

Ref. "Sacred Space and God's Character in Ancient Israel" By Sandra Richter, July 19, 2021

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