

WORSHIP FROM ABRAHAM TO JOSEPH

1. Sanctuaries

- Altars: The patriarchs build altars wherever they meet with God in a theophany or in places where theophanies have previously occurred.¹ Thus, these altars are sanctuaries (holy places) because they are places where God chooses to appear to meet with his people:
 - Noah (Gen 8:20)
 - Abraham (Gen 12:7–8; 13:4, 18; 22:9); Isaac (Gen 26:25); Jacob (Gen 33:20; 35:1–7)
- Trees: The patriarchs establish settlements in places with gardens or trees, which “reminds us of the garden of Eden. It is not the garden, but it evokes the garden. It is a little bit of Eden in a fallen world.”²
 - Noah’s vineyard/garden: Noah is a new Adam who plants a vineyard and enjoys wine as the fruit of his labor in his new garden sanctuary.³
 - Abraham builds altars at a tree in Shechem (Gen 12:6–7) and at Hebron (Gen 13:18).
- Bethel (“House of God” = “Gate of Heaven”): Jacob encounters God in a dream in which he saw a ladder to heaven on which angels were ascending and descending. God speaks to Jacob from heaven above the ladder to reaffirm his covenant promises to him. Because of this theophany, Jacob identifies the place as the “house of God” and the “gateway to heaven.” This provides a clue about the purpose of sanctuaries and the cosmic significance of the worship that occurs there. In worship at God’s house, God reveals himself from heaven and worshippers have access to heaven.⁴

2. Means of Worship

(1) **Word:** The patriarchs receive God’s word and talk with God

- “Calling (on) the name of Yahweh”: (Gen 4:26; 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25): Whether this is invoking the name/character of God in prayer to God or a proclamation/preaching of God’s

¹ “An altar is a simple structure built of earth or stone marking the place where God meets people. Typically, God made his presence known at a location and then commanded his people to build an altar there....It appears that the altar was a place where sacrifice could and did take place. The altar was where the worshiper came into the presence of God, and God, as we have seen, hates sin. Therefore, sin had to be accounted for before a person entered the holy place....[An altar was] a holy place, a set-apart place, because that was where God chose to meet with his people and bring them his blessings.” (Tremper Longman, *Immanuel in Our Place* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2001], 16–17).

² Longman, *Immanuel in Our Place*, 21.

³ Contrary to standard English translations, Noah does not get “drunk.” The Hebrew word usually translated “drunk” in Gen 9:21 refers to the effects of alcohol that can be either positive or negative depending on the context of its usage. In the book of Genesis, this word is used only one other time to describe Joseph and his brothers “making merry” when they drank wine at the celebratory feast that Joseph gave for them in Gen 43:34. Furthermore, the sin in Gen 9 is not Noah’s sin but rather that of his son Ham. Unlike Adam, God does not rebuke or curse Noah for any failure; rather, Ham is the object of God’s curse from the lips of Noah. Third, God gave wine to gladden the heart of man (Ps 104:15) in celebration of God’s good gifts (e.g., Deut 14; John 2), and the nearest contexts within the book of Genesis suggest that this is precisely what Noah enjoyed as he drank wine in his new garden sanctuary.

⁴ See the following lecture notes on worship at the Tabernacle and Temple for ways that this pattern reappears very explicitly in later sanctuaries in Scripture.

character (cf. the identical phrase in Exod 33:19; 34:5–8), clearly the altar-sanctuaries are not merely places of sacrificial ritual but also a place to speak to and about God.

- Prophecy and intercession: Abraham is a prophet (Gen 20:7, 9), and thus he has access to God's counsel and can intercede efficaciously with God for others (e.g., Lot and Sodom in Gen 18; Abimelech in Gen 20).
- Teaching: Part of Abraham's priestly responsibility in leading his household in worship is teaching them to worship and walk with God in righteousness and justice as Abraham himself does (Gen 18:19).

(2) Sacrament (Sacrifice): Man's relationship with God is conducted through other kinds of tangible symbols and rituals besides words. After the fall, God meets his people at altar-sanctuaries via the sacramental action of sacrifice.

- Various patriarchs in Genesis offer sacrifices to God
 - Abel brings a tribute offering (Gen 4:4).
 - Noah, Abraham, and Jethro sacrifice "burnt" offerings (Gen 8:20; 22:13; Exod 18:12).⁵ Jacob offers "sacrifices" (a more general term; Gen 31:54; 46:1).
 - Abraham eats bread and wine with Melchizedek (Gen 14:17–20).
- Sacrifice is one of the most prominent purposes of the exodus from Egypt (Exod 3:18; 5:3, 8, 17; 8:8, 25–29; 10:25). God delivers his people from Egypt so that they might become a priestly people who worship him through sacrifices.
- Meaning: While Genesis does not offer any explicit theological explanations of the meaning of sacrificial ritual, two narratives do provide important clues about its meaning:
 - The "sacrifice" of Isaac (Gen 22) provides important insight about one of the purposes of sacrifice. By God's design, Abraham builds an altar to sacrifice his son, and God provides him a ram to offer "instead of his son" (Gen 22:13). Isaac is supposed to die, but the animal dies in his place. This is a clue that animals are substitutes for people in sacrificial rituals. The penalty of sin (death) falls upon the substitute rather than the human worshipper, which creates the possibility for forgiveness and access to God.
 - The Passover sacrifice provides further development of the meaning of sacrifice:
 - Death of a substitute: The Passover repeats in a more explicit fashion the pattern of substitution in the sacrifice of Isaac. Because a lamb is killed and its blood displayed on the doorposts of Israel's houses, their firstborn do not die. Because the lamb sheds its blood, the judgment of death passes over.
 - Joyful meal: The Passover sacrifice also celebrates liberation from slavery and the peace and friendship with God. The Israelites roast and eat the sacrificed lamb (a very special meal in a society in which eating meat was not an everyday event) in celebration of the great grace that God has shown. Thus, the Passover reveals that sacrifice accomplishes more than merely freedom from the guilt and penalty of sin; it also is a sacramental means of rejoicing before/with God in celebration of God's deliverance from sin.

⁵ Called "burnt" because the whole animal was consumed in the flames on the altar. The Hebrew term itself (*olah*) means "that which ascends," and we will refer to these as "ascension offerings" in the rest of the notes. See the lecture notes on worship at the Tabernacle and Temple for the reasons for this label.