

**"AUREL VLAICU" UNIVERSITY OF ARAD
INTERDISCIPLINARY DOCTORAL SCHOOL
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
DOCTORAL FIELD "THEOLOGY"**

PhD Thesis

Summary

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Prof. Univ. Dr. Habil.

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ARAD
2022

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*The Dynamics of the Old Testament Sacred Space
Analyzed Through the Divine Covenant Paradigm*

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CONTENTS OF PhD THESIS

Acknowledgements

List of figures

List of tables

1. Introduction
2. Actual stage of knowledge
 - 2.1. The dynamics of the Sacred Space and its present importance
 - 2.2. The covenant as paradigm of the sacred space
 - 2.3. The Research Plan
 - 2.4. The Research Methodology
3. The Garden of Eden
 - 3.1. The divine dimension
 - 3.2. The human dimension
 - 3.3. The spatial dimension
 - 3.4. The covenant dimension

- 3.5. Conclusions
- 4. Babel Tower
 - 4.1. The human dimension
 - 4.2. The divine dimension
 - 4.3. The spatial dimension
 - 4.4. The covenant dimension
 - 4.5. Conclusions
- 5. The Sacred Space and Abraham' Altars
 - 5.1. The divine dimension
 - 5.2. The human dimension
 - 5.3. The spatial dimension
 - 5.4. The covenant dimension
 - 5.5. Conclusions
- 6. The Tabernacle
 - 6.1. The divine dimension
 - 6.2. The human dimension
 - 6.3. The spatial dimension
 - 6.4. The covenant dimension
 - 6.5. Conclusions

7. The Sacred Space in the times of the Judges
(The Temple in Silo)
 - 7.1. The human dimension
 - 7.2. The divine dimension
 - 7.3. The spatial dimension
 - 7.4. The covenant dimension
 - 7.5. Conclusions
8. The Temple of Solomon
 - 8.1. The divine dimension
 - 8.2. The human dimension
 - 8.3. The spatial dimension
 - 8.4. The covenant dimension
 - 8.5. Conclusions
9. The Temple of Zorobabel
 - 9.1. The divine dimension
 - 9.2. The human dimension
 - 9.3. The spatial dimension
 - 9.4. The covenant dimension
 - 9.5. Conclusions

10. Final Conclusions

10.1. Final Conclusions

10.2. New research directions

Bibliography

Motivation

This research has started from the need or the necessity of a clearer articulation of the notion of sacred space in the Romanian evangelical milieu, and not only, in the context of a lack of a theology as close as possible to the biblical perspective on the topic.

Being in a continual expansion, at least numerical, the Romanian evangelical milieu, being previously under much pressure from the totalitarian regime, we think that it did not have the right and sufficient context to come up with a clear theology on the sacred space, and therefore this work brings an added value on the topic, and also invites a further development of the subject in new directions.

Magnifying the scale of reference on the subject, we notice that also on the international level, in the evangelical circles, the subject is not too often discussed according to the pattern we propose. Therefore, the sacred space remains often a concept with weak explanation according to the biblical perspective on the subject, but more on the phenomenological, cultural, historical, etc.

Articulating a right theology in this sense is a colossal task because on this largely depends the behavior of the evangelical Christian as a true worshiper of God. In this sense, the present research proposes to gain back the biblical perspective on the sacred and to integrate it in the actual forms of worship, the goal being the correct reposition of the worshiper before the divinity.

So, this research aims at being a part of a larger project of researching the concept of sacred space, this time referring to the topic as it appears in the Old Testament.

This thesis aims to survey the general concept of sacred space in the Old Testament limits, from the evangelical perspective, analyzed in its dynamics, through the perspective of the divine covenant. To start with, we will make a clear distinction between the notion of "sacred space" (a mental notion and concept that shows a relationship or a presence of the holiness of God regarding humans) and "the place" (the geographical materialization, with spatial coordinates well represented of the concept of sacred space). When necessary, these two notions will be used interchangeable in our study.

The two working hypothesis are:

1. regarding the historical moment of the formation of Israel, there is a dynamics, at least conceptually through which these sacred spaces are defined (we not aim to analyze a possible correlation between the formative stages of the nation of Israel and their sacred place centralized or not). The dynamics, even if is does not arrange itself on a given trajectory, may offer a clearer perspective on the concept.

2. the dimension of the covenant between God and man represents the final criteria to divinely validate or not a space. There are situations in the Old Testament in which the presence of YHWH among the people is indisputable, but we cannot always talk about the sacred spaces in these instances. Therefore, the fundamental reference is the dimension of the divine covenant, as a working hypothesis.

Regarding the original character of this work, we can say:

- The absence of a similar work in the Romanian evangelical filed, or even in the international one; the thesis approaches the sacred space from the

biblical, Old Testament perspective, through the *divine covenant* (not phenomenological, philosophical or geographical)

- Approaching a subject too long ignored or superficial talked about in the current evangelical context.
- The posture of the researcher — Pentecostal clerical, very much interested in building a biblical context of worshipping God for the believers.

The Objective and Importance of the Work

As for the goals of this study, we can say:

- An understanding as comprehensive as possible of the concept of the Old Testament sacred space;
- To determine, identify and describe the attendants of the Old Testament sacred space;
- The relationship between the sacred space and the divine covenant;
- To explore the dynamics of the sacred space in diverse times of formation or existence of the people of Israel;

- The risks of forming a fake sacred space;
- The actual principles that can be learned from the Old Testament examples for forming a contemporary sacred space (the hermeneutical bridge).

The Research Methodology

Given the fact that the specificity of the chosen thesis is well framed in the field of biblical theology, the data we propose to be analyzed are especially the biblical passages that are relevant to our subject. So, in what follows we will present this Old Testament text of great importance in analyzing the dynamics of sacred space viewed through the paradigm of the covenant. We will start in our approach from the research already done on the Old Testament passages by respectable biblical scholars (most of each are introduced in the previous section) and we will build on the studies done already by them, organically adapting the conclusions with the perspective of our research field.

The research methodology of this work is specific to the field of biblical theology, joining thus in an adapted form the exegesis and the hermeneutic. Therefore, to

accomplish our goals we used the following methodological elements:

- Choosing the Old Testament text;
- References to multiple translations — only where we think it is necessary and it will bring some value to our work;
- The historical context — studying the culture history, social life and diverse spatial, geographical and chronological elements;
- The context and the literary form — the literary function, the type of literature (the genus, the species), the integrity of the literary form, the details of the text;
- The structure of the passage — the outline, the identification and analyze of the structural patterns (major and minor patterns);
- Grammatical and lexical elements — orthography, morphology, and significant grammatical aspects — only when it has significance for our work;
- The biblical context — the place of the passage in the larger context of the book, where

necessary, and if the perspective changes in a fundamental way;

- The theology — articulating the biblical truth and emitting principles with general application.

In this sense, after identifying the Old Testament passages that we turned to, these will be analyzed as sacred spaces through the perspective of its *divine, human, spatial and covenant dimension*.

The Structure of the Work and the Logic of Arguments

1. The Garden of Eden

The garden of Eden represents the ideal sacred space. It is the place created by God, well delineated from the rest of the creation, therefore the only space that really counts, an authentic *axis-mundi* or "center of the world." The Bible shows the sacrality of this space through its consecration received directly from God. As YAHVE is holy, and so manifests Himself only in holiness, His presence in the garden offers sacrality to that space.

The choice to study the Garden of Eden through the key of sacred space is of vital importance especially in light of the paradigm of the covenant. It is the context of

ideals conditions to analyze our topic ("laboratory conditions") because except the last chapter in the Revelation of John, the Garden is the only place in Scripture where the space, at least for a time, was not corrupted by sin. The divine covenant made by YHWH with humans had a minimal and limitative character. "The diet limitation" (the prohibition to eat the forbidden fruit) was of such a nature that it did not affect the social life of man, therefore, he would not be "affected" in any way by remaining in the covenant.

2. *The Babel Tower*

Considering the Garden of Eden a sacred space chosen by divine "mandate," we can talk about the situation in which man wants such a medium, to connect with divinity. In this sense, we propose to analyze the story of the Babel Tower. This case is very much disputed and therefore so much interesting for us. The passage presents the condition of the religious man who seeks the relation with divinity, but in the wrong way; because the conditions are set and imposed by God only, as a superior attendant of the covenantal relation.

Therefore, on the basis of the covenant between YHWH and Noah (still valid), God ask people to fill the

earth, not to stay in a single place. By divine intervention at the Tower, they are somehow obliged to spread to all the earth, but at the same time they are free to look for the sacred space everywhere. So, the lessons that humanity can assume from this episode reflect the inevitability of building and materializing the sacred space divinely sanctioned.

3. *The Altars of the Patriarchs*

Standing in opposition with the Babel Tower, the patriarchs demonstrate that they are faithful to the covenant that entered into with YHWH. As the people of the Tower, they are too seekers of the sacred space, as an expression of the religious feeling that motivates them to lead a life of worship. The manifestation of the sacred in the geographical space (so, its real manifestation by marking holy places) is made visible by erecting altars.

What is important to emphasize in their case represents the validation that comes from God, as a response to such an initiative; therefore, in contrast with the situation at the Babel Tower, the patriarchs demonstrate a living of the divine covenant in their lives, that is, they develop a close relation with YHWH under His own terms.

4. *The Tabernacle*

The religion of the Jews built around the Tabernacle represents the first institutionalized form of worship in Israel. Being in a continuous pilgrimage to the Promised Land, the Tabernacle was a „walking temple“. To appropriate the worship ritual and the sacred spaces was not an easy task for the Jews who for some generations noticed in Egypt a whole pantheon of gods.

Life around the Tabernacle was pretty animated, organized and posing a lot of challenges. The Mosaic Covenant instituted by Moses had, among others, as objective to set up the worship of the Jews and to appropriate a certain way of life. In the center of the social life of the people there was no more place for other things besides the sacred; it was their holy ”calling” from all the other people: to make YHWH known to all people. The passages that we analyzed will take into consideration the important elements that emphasize the organization and development of the sacred space in this Mosaic Covenant.

5. *The Ark in the Times of the Judges (the Temple in Silo)*

The times of the judges represents a transition stage from the Tabernacle to the Temple. It is an

interesting historical period because the presence of the Tabernacle among the Jewish people (already settled in the Promised Land) is no longer "felt" in the canonical literature of the period, and the idea of a temple is not yet present in the people' conscience. It is a time when the sacrality of the Tabernacle is moved and it is focused only on the Ark, and the Jews thought they can manipulate as they wish.

The biblical passages that are helpful can be found in the books Judges, 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel. In this context, the covenant with YHWH and keeping it uncorrupted represents a defining desideratum for the sacrality of the space in Israel.

6. *The Temple of Solomon*

The Temple of Solomon is another reference point in our work. We notice that it becomes a reality because of David' initiative (hence, human), validated by God and materialized by Solomon. He does represent the fulfilment of a divine command, as it the case of the Tabernacle, but it is the wish of man to immortalize the relation and the worship for the Creator. God allows this, and the divine manifestation when it was consecrated clearly makes it a sacred space.

The problem with Temple is reversed as in the case of the patriarchs: they were just a few, but had many altars (hence, sacred spaces) at their disposal. For the Temple, it was only one building for the entire nation, their worship being "constrained" by the number and importance of the festivals. Analyzed through the key of the divine covenant, the can be considered also from the perspective of consolidating a sacred space consecrated in Israel.

7. *The Temple of Zorobabel*

Returning from the captivity, finding their country laid waste and the old Temple in ruins, with many hesitations in at least 20 years, the Jews decides to rebuild the Temple under Zorobabel and Joshua, the priest. Even if in the captivity the sacred manifested itself in an adapted form of worship, but very efficient (the Synagogue), after returning in the Promised Land, without giving up the concept of the Synagogue, they still build the Temple.

Their behavior thus becomes interesting and important to study. The idea of national identity that has as supreme emblem (both physical and mental) the Temple can be one of the powerful motives of their desire. So, in the post-exilic period, the religious life of the Jews gravitates around the Temple and the synagogues. As for

biblical passages that are helpful for us, these can be found in the post-exilic prophetic literature of the canon of Scripture.

The Synopsis of the Chapters

Chapter 1 of the thesis is a *introductory* one, in which I presented the motivation of such an endeavor, of what lies behind the research and I emphasized the importance of the subject for the current religious context in the Romanian evangelical circles. I briefly defined the notion of "sacred space", but I also anticipated the fact that these notions will be very much related to the dimension of the divine covenant. In that sense, I presented the two working hypothesis (that we mentioned earlier in this summary).

Chapter 2 is a general presentation of the *current stage of knowledge*. Starting from the important works of Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade (that even if they have profound phenomenological implications, are still classic works in this field), I brought into discussion most of the scholars who wrote on the subject and, more or less, I interacted with them. In this chapter I also presented the importance

of the paradigm of the divine covenant in outlining the biblical sacred space, so that after to propose the general objectives and the methodology of the research for this paper.

Chapter 3 brings into discussion the first Old Testament sacred space, *the Garden of Eden*. Analyzing this space through the four dimensions, that our methodology proposed, we bring into discussion the fullness of the divine presence in the Garden, but also the human contribution in keeping this sacred space. It all comes down for humanity to keep unaltered the divine covenant, in their case this being the prohibition to eat from the fruit from the "knowledge tree". Thus, we notice that as long as the covenant is kept, God validates the Garden and allows access to man in this sacred space.

Once this covenant is broken, the prohibition of the access in the Garden as a sacred space is automatically operational, this being the punishment for disobedience. Among the four components that build such a sacred space, the divine Covenant represents the "Glue" that makes this space to stay homogeneous, in harmony and

sacred. God is the one who initiates the covenant and He is also its guarantor. Man enters in this covenant with God with a lower status, willingly. His spiritual benefits are enormous, a fact that brings him more in his subordinate condition to God. He is a worshiper that has the opportunity to enter in communion with the divine, in a sacred space well defined, but only as long as he keeps unaltered the covenant.

We notice, thus, that the Garden of Eden represents a model for the sacred space that can be considered a reference point in all the discussions about the subject, in all the Old Testament. Being a prototype of such a space, it has the quality as an archetypal model, all the others human attempts, successful or failure, can successfully resort to it for an qualitative and spiritual evaluation.

Chapter 4 brings into discussion and somehow in antithesis the *Babel Tower*, analyzed also under the same pattern (the existence of the four dimensions in building the sacred space). If in the Garden of Eden God is the initiator of the sacred space, at the Tower man represents the dimension where the initiative takes off. Even if we do

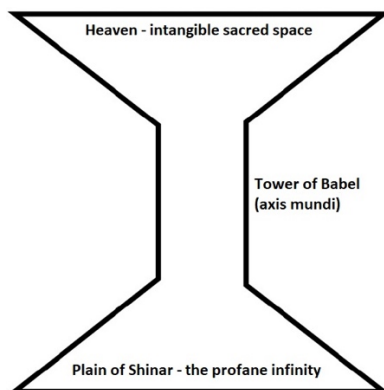
not consider defining this aspect, the fact that humanity, in its search of sacrality, chooses to ignore the divine command (which we identified in this instance as the „dimension of covenant“), invalidates the Tower as a sacred space.

At the beginning of this chapter I argued that all this construction has in essence a religious goal. At the same time, with the contribution of professor Măcelaru,¹ I moderate the per se hostility of some scholars toward the builders of the Tower, looking and analyzing the text with no prejudice, giving thus a chance to this civilization to present and justify the building of the Tower, especially because we cannot consider the end of the story a punishment from God, but more as a ”constraint” from God so the humans will fulfil His will.

The model we identified at the Babel Tower is one of a real *axis-mundi*, at least as a form (as we notice in the

¹ Marcel Valentin MĂCELARU, „Babel – From Text to Symbol: Possibilities for Reconciliation in the Hebrew Bible”, în Janez Juhant și Bojan Žalec (coord.), *Reconciliation: The Way of Healing and Growth, Theologie Ost–West: Europäische Perspektiven 16* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2012), pp. 51–58.

figure below), but one that lacks an essential component to be divinely validated as a sacred space.



Concluding, in all the aspects of building the sacred space in the story of the Tower we notice that the emphasis is on divinity and on the divine will, the sacred space being materialized only when the covenant dimension is satisfied. No building, deed, gesture etc., that aims to touch YHWH, but that do not satisfy the fulfilment of His commands, will not have any success to attain its goal, even this is a noble and commendable one.

Chapter 5 presents the *sacred space and the altars of the patriarchs*. As a subject to be analyzed, we will investigate the concept especially through the altars built by Abraham

and then we will verify these concepts in a short analyze of the altars built by Isaac.

What is important to notice in this case (which brings support to the idea of a high dynamism of the Old Testament sacred spaces) is the fact that in the case of the patriarchs we can discuss about a sacred space "on the go". Even if the form in its manifestation differs from all that we met before (namely, static sacred spaces, that will assume a pilgrimage to them), God validates all this initiatives of Abraham. The table below support our thesis.

The Altar (place)	Who chooses the location	The e explicit or implicit presence of YHWH	The concrete elements if the ritual	The preexistent sacrality, Canaanit
Genesis 12:7 (The oak tree at More)	Abraham	explicit	no	yes
Genesis 12:8 (Betel)	Abraham	implicit	no	yes
Genesis 13:18 (The oak	Abraham	implicit	no	yes

trees in Mamre)				
Genesis 22:9-10 (The Mount of Moria)	God	explicit	The wood The fire The knife The sacrifice	no

What is important to notice in the case of the altars of the patriarchs is the fact that these, anywhere they were built, were in the borders of Canaan, that shows once more that in the mind of the patriarchs the divine promise was very important. This promise validates their sacred spaces. At the same time, Sunhee Kim, quoting Augustin Pagolu, concludes that the patriarchs knew they were strangers in the country that was promised to be theirs, and because of that their altars and sacrifices were spontaneous manifestations of worship every time when YHWH entered in fellowship with them².

Chapter 6 is the transition from the decentralized sacred in the old Testament to those centralized at the same time

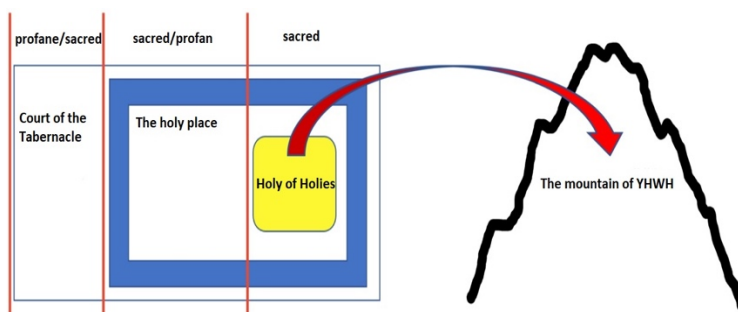
² Kim SUNHEE, *The Concepts of Sacred Space in the Hebrew Bible: Meanings, Significance and Functions*, Boston, Boston University Theses & Disertations, 2014, p. 178.

with the transition of the Jewish people from a people to a nation.

In this chapter we discuss the triad of the sacred space in the wilderness, made of:

- The Tent of Moses – made available by him as a sacred space of meeting with divinity; temporary till the Tabernacle will be built;
- The Tabernacle – the future sacred space/place of the Jews, with its rituals;
- The Holy Mountain/The Mountain of God – the sacred space intangible for man, that could be accessed only by Moses and sometimes to the Jewish elite.

In between these we will focus on the last two, as we show the interdependence relation below:



One of the conclusions of this chapter is the importance of the Tabernacle and its identity among the other sacred spaces in Scripture, this importance being given by its dynamic character as a "sacred space on the go", adapted to the existential needs of a people in the process of gaining a national identity, nomad and traveling to a promised motherland by the architect of this space, YHWH Himself.

Chapter 7 presents the *Temple at Silo*, in the times of the judges in Israel. Our analysis frames this sacred space in the time of Joshua and Samuel. Thus, we notice a national corruption of the idea of sacred space in the Jewish people, especially in the times of the judges in the next generation after Joshua, but in the times of Samuel a return to the idea of sacred.

Even if we identify other "sacred" spaces in Israel, that the Jews preferred, Silo still remains a national point of reference, especially when we see that in the times of Eli and Samuel at Silo is the tabernacle and a certain durable and static building, an extension of the Tabernacle.

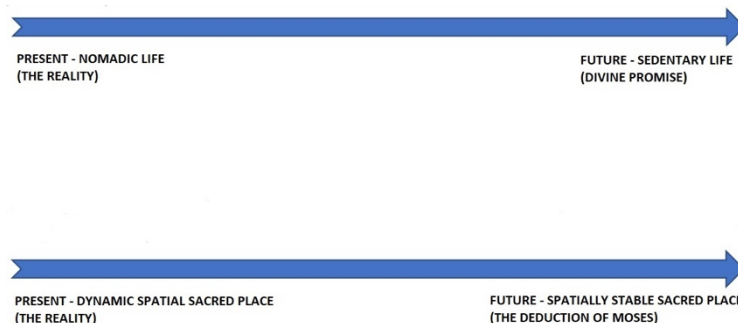
Another remarkable fact is the change in paradigm orchestrated by God, from a sacred place located in spatial coordinates well identified to people (Samuel) as a carrier of the sacred³. This represents among other things, an archetype in the Old Testament for the times of the New Covenant afferent to the New Testament. The moment man places himself in the economy of the sacred space, even if he has no available a material manifestation of a mental construct, YHWH convey the idea that the possibility of becoming a carrier of the sacred is not excluded, if the covenant is taken seriously.

Chapter 8 of the thesis is dedicate to the *Temple of Solomon*. The sacred space constituted in this way is the one centralized but also static, where periodical pilgrimages were organized and, as opposing to the previous period, the only national sacred space.

The argument that in this time in the history of the Jewish people as a nation this sacred space represents and justify such a stable (or static) space is seen in the figure

³ David Toshio TSUMURA, *The First Book of Samuel*, Grand Rapids, MI, W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006, p. 189.

below, through the parallel between the cultic manifestation in the time of Moses (their present) and the future (namely, the manifestation of the sacred in the times of Solomon):



Even if there is still a discussion about the initiator of this sacred space (David or God), it is a sure thing that we notice the divine permission, as in the case of the previous occasions in the Old Testament. A particular aspect of the Temple is the dimension of the covenant; we talk here about also a davidic covenant still operating, as an extension of the Mosaic covenant that governs the entire cult in the Temple. One of the important conclusions of this chapter is the idea that the Temple as a sacred space does not represent a house for YHWH, so that as such it will fulfil certain needs, but it represents the place where God makes Himself available to man so that he can fulfil

his need for a divinity. Without an conceptual mistake, the sacred space should be contextualized and adapted to the worshiping needs of the community (the people); what counts is the authentic worship of YHWH, and the sacred space is seen as a necessary means to this worship.

Chapter 9 and the last one, before the final conclusions, analyzes and highlights the reconstruction of the Temple, after the Babylonian captivity in what will be named afterwards as *The Temple of Zorobabel*. Our approach will start with the "Cirus Decree" to rebuild and implicitly to return in the motherland of the Jews captives in Babylon.

The divine sovereignty and the intervention to rebuild the Temple is clearly seen in the biblical passages and so we notice a restauration and the value placed on the covenant dimension on the old Mosaic coordinates, with its Davidic extension. So, calling on the tradition, the idea of a sacred space is valorized again by building a new Temple on the same spot that the older one, even if the opinion of the elders of Israel this has not the grandeur of the Temple of Solomon.

After a delay of nearly 20 years, the new Temple is finished, under the insistence of the prophets Hagai and Zacharia, who motivates and set the people on fire, especially with a eschatological perspective on the Temple.

The dynamics of the sacred space is arranged on the traditional coordinates. The Temple and the altar are erected on the old locations, which gives them an extra element of authority in the nation. What is different this time, however, from the old Temple is the fact that the Holy of Holies lacks the Ark.

We consider that the alternative to this reality is the whole organization of praises and psalms that are sung, in a liturgy that maybe be different and have superior quality to the Temple of Solomon, probably because it was religious, spiritual and emotional amplified by the missing of the most valuable object of the cult from the Temple: the Ark

In a sense, this emptiness had to be compensated with something of an equal value, hence our conclusion that in the accepted limits set by YHWH for the sacred activities in the new Temple, the Jews that returned from

the captivity had the possibility of a cultic and spiritual expression more intense and fresh.

Chapter 10 presents *The Final Conclusions* of our study. These bring into discussion the initial objectives that we set for this study at the beginning. We also summarize the important aspects of every biblical passage that we have studied, going to the verification of the initial working hypothesis.

So, the main conclusion of our thesis are as follows:

- In the Garden of Eden, identified taxonomical as being in the frame of sacred spaces decentralized, we find a classic and general archetype of the concept. The divine dimension is powerfully represented by the divine anthropomorphism and theophany, which creates an intentional sacred space, where He places the exponents and representatives of humankind to be a continual fellowship with them.
- The story of the Babel Tower can be considered as a hermeneutical bridge for the evangelical Christian of the postmodern world; searching the timing with the

covenant dimension, anywhere on the face of the earth leads inevitably to the perspective of constituting the consecrated sacred space. Thus, we notice that YHWH does not encourage a fake sacred space where his four dimensions are not wholly satisfied.

- We notice that in the case of the patriarchs, God does not necessarily bind them to a specific geographic space to validate a certain sacred space. In this sense the spatial dynamics is easy to notice. Again, everything comes down to the fourth dimension that enters in the analysis of such spaces, that of the covenant.
- We notice that by comparison with the period of the patriarchs, when no priestly class was necessary to reach to a sacred space and, through it, to communicate with divinity, in the case of the centralized sacred space this is accomplished through substitutes. What we see in this case is the divine permission that a certain sacred space centralized to be adapted to the conditions of the people.
- The Temple in Silo, in the times of the judges represents a sacred space with peculiar characteristics.

The religious syncretism made the leaders of the people to desacralize inclusively the way they approach the divine dimension. Wherever the Ark may go, that place does not become intrinsically sacred; its sacrality is given by the balance of the four dimensions.

- The Temple of Solomon reproduces the mechanism and conditions of the Tabernacle on an almost 1:1 scale. We have the same centralized sacred space, the same ritual and the same covenant dimension. There is however two different elements: the static character and the Davidic covenant, an extension of the Mosaic one.
- After the Babylonian captivity we can say that the materialization of a new sacred space in Israel comes on the same old coordinates: the same geographical location, exactly to confer an added authority to the new Temple, giving the fact that the Ark, that became a talisman for many Jews, is missing and that leads to adapt worship on new coordinates.

We consider that the actual endeavor and the working hypothesis that we assumed in the beginning were totally satisfied:

- There is a dynamic in the evolution of the concept of sacred space in the Old Testament. We resist the temptation to arrange it on a certain trajectory; we consider more that this perspective of the relative divine permission in regard to certain components of the sacred space represents the beauty of the relation and communion with divinity.
- The covenant dimension represents for the evangelical Christian the paradigm of a dynamic constant. We say this because the divine covenant works permanently as a “glue” between man and God (the constant), but also because now we cannot discuss the coordinates of the same Old Testament covenant that is equally valid (the dynamics). Thus, we challenge the possibility of a future survey and analysis of the New Testament sacred space for a more exhaustive clarification of the sacred space analyzed by this paradigm of the covenant.

New Directions of Research

Our study, once finalized, makes mandatory for the author to take on a natural endeavor that derives from this

one, respectively, to new directions of research, exactly because the subject of the “sacred space analyzed by the paradigm of the divine covenant” to be extrapolated to other reference units. In this sense, we present the following direction of research which impose:

- The concept of the New Testament sacred space;
- The sacred space in the deuteron-canonical literature;
- The sacred space in the Writing Church Fathers;
- The Old Testament theophanies and sacred places;
- The relation between the sacred space/place and the ”sandals off your feet”;
- The Old Testament sacred time;
- The eschatological sacred time;
- The relation between the sacred time and the sacred space;
- Man as a carrier of sacrality and the theology of the human body.

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