

ALTAR

A focal point of religious worship throughout the ages, and in most cultures, has been the altar—a natural or man-made elevation used for prayer, sacrifice, and related purposes. Sacrifice on the altar was a basic rite. The characteristic worship practice in Old Testament times was sacrificial in nature, and consequently the altar became one of the most important ritual objects described in that book of scripture.

Sacred and symbolic meaning is ascribed to the altar. The stipulations of the "law of the altar" (Ex. 20:24–26) suggest that its construction is associated with the creation of the world and God's COVENANTS with humankind.

As the waters of creation receded, dry land appeared. An altar was built by Noah that people might communicate and make covenants with their God (Gen. 8:20). The altar in Ezekiel 28:16; 43:13–17 is named "the mountain of God" (Hebrew term, *hahar'el*), and becomes the symbolic embodiment of the Creation, the primordial mound, and the presence of God.

At an altar ADAM learned the meaning of sacrifice (Moses 5:5–8). Following The Flood, the patriarch NOAH immediately built an altar and offered his sacrifices to the Most High. When ABRAHAM received the promise and covenant of an inheritance for his posterity, he marked this sacred event with an altar (Gen. 12:6–7). On Mount Moriah the young Isaac was bound upon the sacrificial table or altar in preparation for his father's supreme offering and demonstration of obedience (Gen. 22:9–14). Tradition says the place of this consecrated altar became the locus of the temple in Jerusalem.

The temple complex in Jerusalem had four different altars. In an ascending order of sacral primacy, they were as follows: First, the Altar of Sacrifice, often called the altar of burnt offering or the table of the Lord (Mal. 1:7, 12; 1 Cor. 10:21), was placed outside of the temple itself in the Court of Israel and was more public than the others. Sacrifices for the sins of Israel

were offered here, anticipating fulfillment in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:25–26; Alma 34:9–10, 14–16). Second, the Altar of Incense stood in the "holy place" before the veil inside the temple proper. John describes the smoke of this altar as the "prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne" (Rev. 8:3–4). Third, within the same area of the temple stood the Table of Shewbread, upon which rested twelve loaves of bread, frankincense, and a drink offering. And fourth, the ark of the covenant rested in the HOLY OF HOLIES, the most inner, sacred area within the temple. The ark was to Israel the portable throne or Mercy Seat and symbolized the presence of the Lord. It was here that the high priest, once a year on the Day of Atonement (Heb. 9:7; Lev. 16:1–17), made covenants with the Lord for all Israel, as though he represented all at the altar.

In LDS TEMPLES, altars of a different sort play a major role. Kneeling by them, Latter-day Saints participate in covenant-making ceremonies. They make these covenants, as was done anciently, in the symbolic presence of God at the altar (Ps. 43:4; cf. Ps. 118:27). Thus, while kneeling at an altar in a temple, a man and woman make covenants with God and each other in a marriage ceremony that is to be binding both in MORTALITY and in the eternal world. Here, if parents were not previously married in a temple, they and their children may be sealed together for time and eternity by the power and AUTHORITY of the priesthood. Likewise, these ORDINANCES may be performed by proxies at an altar within the temple on behalf of people identified in genealogical records as having died without these privileges.

As the ancients came to the altar to communicate and commune with God, so also do members of the Church, in a temple setting, surround the altar in a PRAYER CIRCLE and supplication. United in heart and mind, the Saints petition God for his blessings upon mankind, his Church, and those who have special needs.

In a more public SACRAMENT MEETING, the Altar of Sacrifice is symbolized by the "sacrament table." On this table are emblems of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the bread and the

3 - Altar (Porter)

water respectively representing the body and blood of the Savior (Luke 22:19-20). Each week individuals may partake of the SACRAMENT and renew their covenants.

Today members of the Church make sacred covenants with God and consecrate their lives and all that they have been blessed with as they "come unto Christ" and lay all things symbolically upon the altar as a sacrifice. To them a sacred altar is a tangible symbol of the presence of God, before whom they kneel with "a broken heart and contrite spirit" (2 Ne. 2:7; 3 Ne. 11:20).

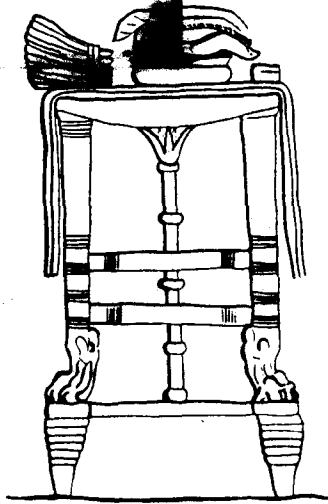
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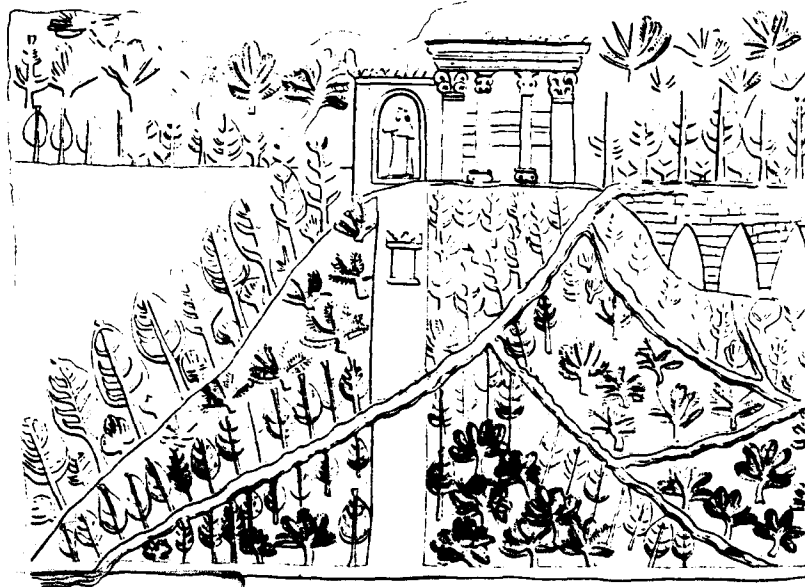
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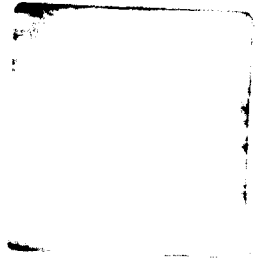
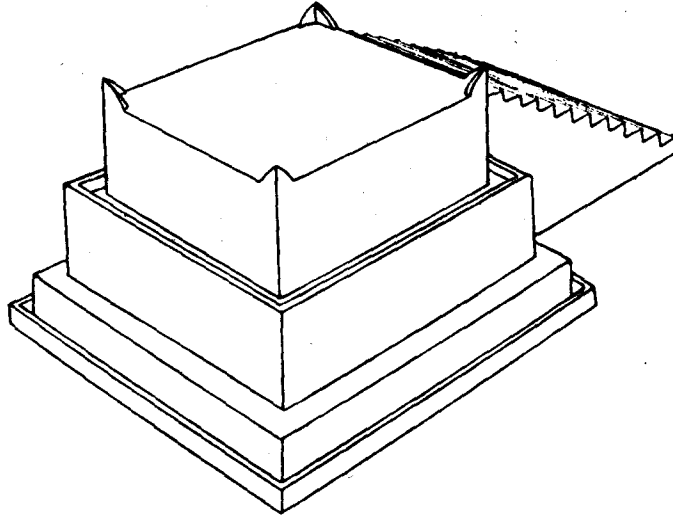
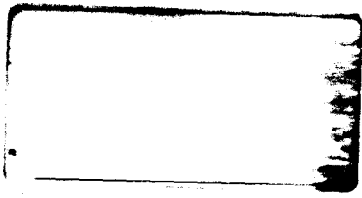
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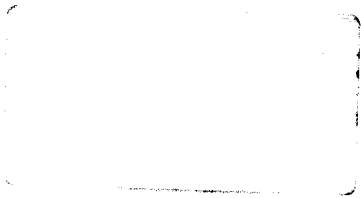
201. "If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world and all that is in it is mine" (Ps 50:12).

202. "How lovely is your dwelling place. O LORD of hosts! My soul yearns and pines for the courts of the LORD. My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. . . . Happy they who dwell in your house! continually they praise you. Happy the men whose strength you are! their hearts are set on the pilgrimage. . . . I had rather one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere" (Ps 84:2-3, 5-6, 11a NAB; cf. Ps 84:1-2, 4-5, 10a RSV).

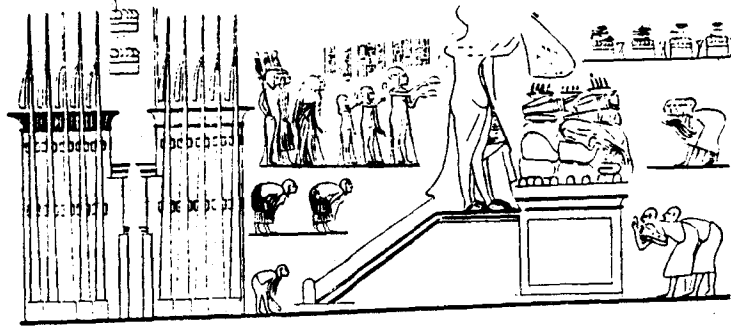




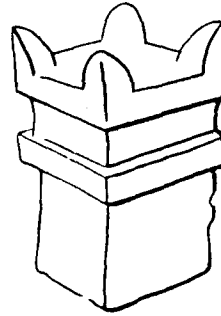
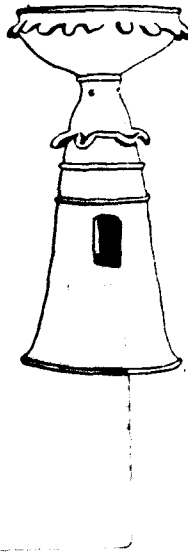
193. "I will go to the altar of God, to the God of my exceeding joy" (Ps 43:4).



196. "I . . . go about . . . altar, O LORD, . . . ing all thy wondrous deeds" (Ps 26:6b-7).
 singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and tell-



198. Stand with a bowl for burning incense (cf. 199). It was believed that the wrath of the gods could be appeased by fragrant odors pleasing to the nose (*'ap*), for a characteristic sign of wrath is heavy breathing through the nose. For that reason, *'ap* could be used as a term for wrath (cf. Num 16:46-47). Ps 18:15 speaks of the wrathful blast of Yahweh's nostrils.



195. ". . . horn of my salvation" (Ps 18:3).