

THE TREE OF LIFE AS A SYMBOL OF THE TEMPLE

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for

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Anthropology 678R

December 10, 1985

The Tree of Life is recognized by historians of religion and experts in folklore as one of the most widely distributed and recurrent themes of mythology and religious symbolism. This symbol takes the form of a great tree which stretches from the earth to the heavens. Related symbols, with like meaning, are found as a mountain, pillar, ladder, or umbilical cord. The tree is often regarded as a source of life and immortality. It also represents a connection between this world and the next life, both in the world of the dead and the realms of the gods. Moreover it represents a source of communication or revelation between man and the heavens. It is the purpose of this paper to show that these three symbolic aspects of the Tree of Life are each representative of temples as found in the civilizations of ancient history and have striking parallels to the modern temples of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TEMPLE IN HISTORY

Historians, as well as religious leaders of the Mormon church, have stressed the importance of the temple in history. Dr. Hugh W. Nibley, called the dean of Mormon historians, points out that all civilizations have one thing in common and that is the temple. This fact, he says, is enough in itself to indicate that the temple is "the source, and not one of the derivatives, of the civilizing process."¹ Dr. John A. Widtsoe, an apostle of the Mormon church, stated almost forty years earlier a similar thought.

¹Hugh W. Nibley, "Looking Backward," in T. G. Madsen, ed. The Temple in Antiquity (Provo, Utah, 1984), p. 50.

All peoples of all ages have had temples in one form or another. When the history of human thought shall be written from the point of view of temple worship, it may well be found that temples and the work done in them have been the dominating influence in shaping human thought from the beginning of the race. Even today political controversies are as nothing in determining the temper of a people, as compared with religious sentiments and convictions, especially as practiced in the temples of the people.

In every land and in every age temples have been built and used. In China, age old with four thousand years of history; in India; on the islands of the sea; in South America; in North America; in Africa and in Australia; everywhere there are evidences of the existence and use of temples.

Both Nibley and Elder Widtsoe explain why there are similarities in the temples of different peoples. The historical term used by Nibley is diffusionism - the borrowing, imitating, adapting and reworking of rituals and mythologies of one people by another. Elder Widtsoe says this:

Let me suggest that the reason why temple building and temple worship have been found in every age, on every hand, and among every people, is because the Gospel in its fulness was revealed to Adam, and that all religions and religious practices are therefore derived from the remnants of the truth given to Adam and transmitted by him to the patriarchs. The ordinances of the temple insofar as then necessary, were given, no doubt, in those early days, and very naturally corruptions of them have been handed down the ages. Those who understand the eternal nature of the Gospel - planned before the foundations of the earth - understand clearly why all history seems to revolve about the building and use of temples.

With the temple rites, as practiced by Adam, as a common source it is only logical that we should see basic similarities as we examine the rites and mythologies of various peoples. Many of these similarities are in symbolic form.

SYMBOLISM IN THE TEMPLE

It is necessary to point out that symbolism is a vital factor of latter-day Saint temple worship. An explanation of this is proffered by Elder Widtsoe.

John A. Widtsoe, Temple Worship, lecture given Oct. 12, 1920 (Provo: pub by YU Stakes), page 1

John A. Widtsoe, "Looking Toward the Temple," p. 710, quoted in "Questions frequently Asked About the Temple" (published by CES, n.d.), p. 6.

Much of the ordinance work of the temple is made clear to our finite minds by the use of symbols. Since man cannot fully fathom or express eternal realities, he lives in a world of symbols; for example, speech and writing are only symbols. We make a few strokes of our pen, R-O-C-K, the symbol of the hard, unyielding stuff of which mountains are made. I-O-V-E is a symbol of the mightiest and sweetest emotion given to man. A flag is merely a combination of colored cloth, but it is the symbol of our country.

Every ordinance has a symbolic meaning; as we are buried in water and brought out again, in the ordinance of baptism,⁴ the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is symbolized.

On another occasion Elder Widtsoe further commented: "We live in a world of symbols. No man or woman can come out of the temple endowed as he should be, unless he has seen, beyond the symbol, the mighty realities for which the symbols stand."⁵ Speaking again of the endowment Elder Widtsoe says: "The holy endowment is deeply symbolic. 'Going through the temple' is not a very good phrase; for temple worship implies a great effort of mind and concentration if we are to understand the mighty symbols that pass in review before us."⁶

The root of the word "symbol", says Stephen J. Reno, is in a Greek word meaning "to bring together." He further explains that in classical literature the reference of the word is often to commercial transactions which were verified by producing the matching halves of a token. This etymology, then, suggests the association in a symbol of two parts which are related one to another.⁷ Water, for example, is a universal cleanser and repentance is a way of "cleaning" the soul (a removal of the filth of sin). Baptism by water becomes a symbol by combining these two elements. The great advantage of this kind of symbol is that it transcends languages and can be understood in every

⁴Widtsoe, Temple Worship, *ibid*, p. 3. (footnote 3 and 4 should be reversed)

⁵John A. Widtsoe, Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine, (Salt Lake City: Utah Genealogical Society, 1926), 12:62.

⁶Widtsoe, Looking Toward the Temple, *ibid*, p. 7

⁷Stephen J. Reno, The Sacred Tree as an Early Christian Literary Symbol (Saarbrücken, Germany:Rotaprint-Offset), 1978, p. 14.

culture. Therefore, the fitting together of the two parts of the broken token represents the understanding which is shared by the parties involved because only the correct person will be in possession of the token. This also suggests the difference between a sign and a symbol. A sign is a form of communication using some representation but it prompts a response to an actual situation. A bell can indicate the end of class or a red light can indicate the stopping of traffic. A symbol is an abstraction that has significance beyond an immediate event.

Man is able to take, then, natural objects and events and invest them with significance. Thus the seasons, the animals, vegetation, mountains, childbirth and death can become symbols. These symbols gain power because they are so much a part of our everyday consciousness and life. Meaning can easily be attached to light, darkness, water, the sun and moon. Symbols can express ideas that are hard to express in ordinary language. Likewise they can inspire, arouse guilt or remind us of obligations.

THE COSMIC TREE AND THE COSMIC MOUNTAIN

John Lundquist, in an article titled "The Common Temple Ideology of the Ancient Near East," presents nineteen points that ancient Near Eastern temples have in common.⁸ Point number four is that the temple is associated with the tree of life. This happens in a number of ways. Sometimes the tree of life appears as a tree located in the temple.⁹ At times it is a part of the primordial landscape,¹⁰ the first land that appears at the creation of the world. At other times it represents the whole cosmos. When the tree of life serves as the cosmic tree or the world tree, it more properly is equated with

⁸ John M. Lundquist, "The Common Temple Ideology of the Ancient Near East," in T. G. Madsen, ed. The Temple in Antiquity (Provo: Bookcraft, 1984), p. 57.

⁹ George Widengren, The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion (Uppsala: Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1951), p. 2

the cosmic mountain as a symbol of the temple. This is the first of Lundquist's nineteen points that the temple is associated with the cosmic mountain. Other symbols of the same meaning are the pillar, ladder and umbilical cord. In order to understand these symbols a comparison can be made to the Latter-day Saint temples.

In Latter-day Saint theology the temple is the joining place of heaven and earth. It is accepted that the departed righteous dead are there to rejoice in the vicarious work performed for them. It is the place where instruction is given whereby man can ascend into the realms of heaven. Since it is a sacred place so closely associated with heaven it also serves as place of revelation from the heavens. Elder McConkie says "the temple is the place where time and eternity link hands and are joined together ... and foundations are laid for ... eternal happiness in the realms that are ahead."¹¹ This is similar to the beliefs of the ancients and is reflected in their symbolism. Nibley points out that anciently the temple was viewed as the one point at which men could establish contact with other worlds.¹² Now the symbolism can be examined more closely.

The cosmic tree has the same symbolism as the cosmic mountain. The mountain, as well as the tree, is a logical symbol from nature to portray the place of contact between heaven and earth. A mountain, or a tree, reaches high into heaven and seems to almost touch the celestial vault. Lundquist has shown

¹⁰ Reno, *ibid*, p. 59

¹¹ Bruce R. McConkie, The Promises Made to the Fathers, lecture given July 19, 1981 (Typewritten copy), p. 13.

¹² Hugh W. Nibley, "What is a Temple?," in T. G. Madsen, ed. The Temple in Antiquity (Provo: Bookcraft, 1984), p. 24.

that it is extremely commonplace among the ancient Near Eastern peoples to view temples as mountains. In Mesopotamia temples are called the "House of the Mountain" and the "House of the Great Mountain of the Lands." In ancient Sumer a temple was referred to as "a temple like a mountain in heaven and earth which raises its head to heaven" and also "the temple like a great mountain, is built up to heaven."¹³ In ancient Israel the temple mount in Jerusalem is referred to as "the mountain of the Lord's house." (Isaiah 2:2) This is further amplified when it is remembered that the Bible teaches that God has appeared on mountain tops such as Mount Sinai. Professor Mircea Eliade remarks that "the World Tree is a symbol which complements, or on occasion overlaps with, that of the Central Mountain, both symbols being only more elaborate forms of the Cosmic Axis or Pillar of the World."¹⁴ It is now necessary to examine the cosmic axis and its relation to the cosmic tree and mountain.

THE AXIS MUNDI

Heaven and earth are often symbolically seen as being connected by an axis which is called by scholars the axis mundi. It is often envisioned as leading from the center of the earth to the center of heaven. Of this "navel of the earth" we will speak later. Some mythologies, then, speak of a pillar connecting heaven and earth rather than a tree or a mountain. The Buryat and Kalmuck Mongols teach of a gigantic golden pillar which supports the heaven. The Yakut indians of Siberia teach both of a tree and sometimes a high stake which reaches to the heavens.¹⁵ The Achilpa, an Australian tribe,

¹³John M. Lundquist, "Temple Symbolism in Isaiah," in M. S. Nyman, ed. Isaiah and the Prophets (Provo:Brigham Young University,), pp. 37-38.

¹⁴E. A. S. Butterworth, The Tree at the Navel of the Earth (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter & Co.; 1970), p. 3

¹⁵loc. cit.



carried around a sacred stake made from a gum tree which represented the cosmic axis.¹⁶ In Greek mythology, Atlas held the sky upon his shoulders but in other versions "held the pillars that keep the sky and earth apart." A Germanic pillar is called the Irminsul and serves the same purpose. Sir Arthur Evans feels that the two pillars of Solomon's Temple and the columns in a fresco from the Palace of Knossos have this symbolic religious meaning.¹⁷ Lundquist is certain also that they have symbolic meaning.¹⁸

The axis mundi is seen to pass through an aperture in the sky which allows contact with the heavens. Often this aperture is located at the north star or Pole Star.¹⁹ The stars are sometimes depicted as holes in the tent or vault which provides a vertical passage through the universe by which souls may travel in one direction or the other.²⁰ The ideogram for writing "heaven" in Sumerian was a star. S. H. Langdon shows that it referred to the north star and thus this opening was the way to heaven.²¹ With the change from the lunar to the solar calendar the one central passage seems to become a sun which was always overhead.²² This adds meaning to the legend that the ray of the midsummer sun at noon descended vertically into the well beside which Christ spoke to the woman of Samaria.²³ A final word on the axis mundi comes from

¹⁶ Mircea Eliade, "The Prestige of the Cosmogonic Myth," *Diogenes*, 23 (1958):7.

¹⁷ Butterworth, *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁸ John M. Lundquist, "The Legitimizing Role of the Temple in the Origin of the State," *Society of Biblical literature 1982 Seminar Papers*, pp. 293-294.

¹⁹ Butterworth, *ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 65.

²¹ *op. cit.*, pp 69-70.

²² *op. cit.*, p. 67.

²³ *op. cit.*, p. 93.

Eliade.

We have here the prototype of a cosmological image that was very widespread: that of the axis mundi, the cosmic axis that supports the heavens and simultaneously paves the way to the world of the gods. We cannot detail here the innumerable images of the cosmic axis. It will suffice to state that all myths which stress the Tree of the World, the Cosmic Mountains, pillars, stone columns, or ladders that link the earth with the heavens, express this fundamental idea: that a "center of the world" exists thanks to which communication with the heavens can be accomplished and around which the totality of the habitable world extends. The center is the place where a split in the ontological level was effectuated...²⁴

The symbol of a ladder fits the same symbolism of a connection between heaven and earth and therefore represents a temple. This is illustrated clearly by Elder Marion G. Romney, an LDS apostle.

When Jacob traveled from Beersheba toward Haran, he had a dream in which he saw himself on the earth at the foot of a ladder that reached to heaven where the Lord stood above it. He beheld angels ascending and descending thereon, and Jacob realized that the covenants he made with the Lord there were the rungs on the ladder that he himself would have to climb in order to obtain the promised blessings—blessings that would entitle him to enter heaven and associate with the Lord. Because he had met the Lord and entered into covenants with him there, Jacob considered the site so sacred that he named the place Bethel, a contraction of Beth-Elohim, which means literally "the House of the Lord."²⁵ ... Temples are to us all what Bethel was to Jacob.

THE NAVEL OF THE EARTH

The tree of life is often pictured as being located at the center of the earth.²⁶ The center is sometimes called the "navel of the earth" or, in Greek, the omphalos. A. J. Wensinck says, "The sanctuary is not only the center of the earth, it possesses also another characteristic of the navel, namely that of being the place of communication with the upper and with the nether world."²⁷

²⁴ Eliade, *ibid.*, p. 7-8.

²⁵ Marion G. Romney, "Temples - The Gates to Heaven," *Ensign*, Mar. 1971, p. 16.

²⁶ Butterworth, *ibid.*, p. 88.

²⁷ Lundquist, "Temple Symbolism in Isaiah," *ibid.*, p. 49.

The concept of the umilical cord running from the earth to the heavens serves the same purpose as the cosmic tree, the mountain, the pillar, the ladder and of course the axis mundi. Roscher says the idea of a cord of some sort binding heaven and earth is very old.²⁸ The omphalos was sometimes represented by an actual stone or object near or in the temple. It varied a great deal in both shape and size. Its typical shape is approximately that of an old fashioned domed bee-hive. In ancient Greece it was located in Appolo's temple at Delphi. In Rome the omphalos can today be seen in the Roman Forum where it stands next to the temple of Jupiter. In India the omphalos, interestingly enough, was called the dagobas.²⁹ Those who have seen the Star Wars movies are aware that Yoda - he who controlled "the force" and could communicate with the dead (Obi Wan Kanobi) - lived on Dagobah. Perhaps a connection was intended. The tree in Eden, according to some Jewish legends was at the navel of the earth.³⁰ For the most part however the temple in Jerusalem was considered the navel. Again the symbolism is of a place where the heavens can be contacted. This place of contact is figuratively the center of the world or in other words the most important or sacred spot.

LIFE AND DEATH

The tree of life is also regarded as a source of life and immortality. In its proper perspective the temple teaches mankind how to reach eternal life. In the symbolism of the past it is the fruit of the tree which brings immortality as in the Garden of Eden. Sometimes it is the sap of the tree³¹ or the bark.³² Widengren demonstrates that the waters of life are often associated

²⁸ Butterworth, *ibid.*, p. 33

²⁹ *op. cit.*, p. 67

³⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 89

³¹ Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life* (New York: Avon Books), 1974, p. 12.

³² Reno, *ibid.*, p. 59.

with the tree of life.³³ Most commonly it is planted next to the river.³⁴ One goes to the temple to learn how to attain immortality; it teaches us how to reach heaven.

Not only do the branches reach into the heavens but the roots reach down to the underworld or place of the dead. The tree becomes a path for the dead also. Temples and tombs have always been connected says Nibley.³⁵ One scholar has suggested that the mound on the grave was considered as a kind of omphalos. Odysseus speaks with the dead on Circe's island because it is the navel of the world.³⁶

REVELATION

One of the main ideas of this paper is that the temple, as represented in a number of symbols, is a place of revelation or contact with heaven.

Eliade says:

...there, within the sacred walls, communication with the gods has become possible; consequently, there must be a "door" up above through which the gods can descend to the earth and man, symbolically, can rise to the heavens. And, indeed, this was the case for many religions; the temple, properly speaking, represents an "opening" toward the heavens and insures communication between the world and the gods.³⁷

Elder Widtsoe taught this about modern temples: "Certainly the temple is a place where revelations may be expected. ... I bear you my personal testimony that this is so."³⁸

CONCLUSION

There seems to be an inward desire in man to express beliefs and sacred

³³Widengren, *ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁴Reno, *ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁵Nibley, "What is a Temple?," *ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁶Butterworth, *ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

³⁷Eliade, *ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁸Widtsoe, "Temple Worship," *ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

and sacred feeling in the forms of symbols and imagery. They clarify and teach and certainly make an impact on the mind. Birth, death and many of the events of this world have been represented through the ages. The tree of life, along with its similar symbols, seems in many instances to stand for the temple itself.

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