

TEMPLE RITUAL AND TRADITION IN  
MESOAMERICA AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

Submitted to  
Professor Stephen D. Ricks  
Brigham Young University  
Provo, Utah

by  
Gregory M. Taylor

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### I. INTRODUCTION

There have been a lot of studies on the temple-pyramid complexes in Mesoamerica because of the many ruins that have survived. However, not a lot has been learned about what went on inside Mesoamerican temples. This is due to the fact that ancient records did not survive except in the form of glyphs. Since there is little in the way of actual written history, we have to rely on other sources to obtain information on temple practice. These sources include archaeology, ethnohistory, and the Book of Mormon. In addressing the topic of temple ritual and tradition, I will attempt to show who was allowed to enter and participate in temple rituals and what types of rituals and practices went on in them. In finding information on these questions the previously mentioned sources were used. In answering these questions I will be using three traditions from Mesoamerica: the Zapotec, Maya, and Aztec. Data from these three sources come from ethnohistorical accounts made by Spanish colonizers and missionaries, and written accounts of the natives themselves, both made during the 16th century. Also data from archaeology will be used to provide some insight. I will also use the text of the Book of Mormon to try and shed some light on temple practice in the Book of Mormon.

## II. BOOK OF MORMON TEXTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The fact that temples were important and fairly abundant in Book of Mormon times is obvious in the text itself. There are references to temples in different cities and lands, including the land of Nephi (2 Nephi 5:16), Zarahemla (Mosiah 1:18), Lehi-Nephi (Mosiah 7:17), Bountiful (3 Nephi 11:1). There are also references to many temples throughout the land of the Nephites and the Lamanites. Alma and Amulek preached to the Nephites in their temples and Ammon and his brethren preached to the Lamanites in their temples (Alma 16:13, 23:2, 26:29). The Book of Helaman records that the people planned to build many buildings including temples. And that only a small part of their activities, including temple building could be recorded. Thus, it can be seen that temples were quite common in Book of Mormon times and were an important part of the community. However the text itself gives little information on who could enter the temple and participate in the temple rituals and what went on there. There are a few references to these questions in the text which can be examined.

There are a few instances where the temple was used as a gathering place for the people to be instructed. Jacob taught and preached to the people of Nephi in the temple, calling them to repentance and declaring the word of God. (Jacob 1:17, 2:2, 11)

From this passage it appears that probably only men were in the temple because Jacob begins his preaching by saying "My beloved brethren." The population must have still been pretty small to allow Jacob to teach the people in the temple. Jacob held the priesthood (2Nephi 6:2), and thus would have the authority to preach to the people in the temple and also to probably run the temple rituals.

In the Book of Mosiah we learn that the people in the land of Zarahemla gathered around the temple to hear King Benjamin speak. There were so many of them that they could not all come into the temple, and so they pitched their tents around the temple. It is here that we get an indication of what was done at the temples. In Mosiah 2:3 it says the people took the firstlings of their flocks and brought them to the temple to offer sacrifice according to the law of Moses. Having a great multitude gather at one time and offer sacrifice would be very impractical. Most likely there were priests associated with the temple at this time that would take care of the sacrifice and making of offerings. Once again, a figure with authority, King Benjamin, is the one in charge and the one who speaks to the people from the temple.

Another king, Limhi, sent a proclamation to his people in the land of Lehi-Nephi to gather to the temple to hear his words (Mosiah 7:17). Later in the Book of Mormon, the people gathered around the temple in the land of Bountiful after the great destruction. They conversed about the great sign of Christ's death that had just taken place (3Nephi 11:1,2).

From these accounts it is obvious that the temple was used as a gathering place and that people were used to going up to the temple for different occasions. Since the law of Moses was practiced, the making of offerings and sacrifice would be an important part of the temple rituals. The people would have gathered for different festivals and rituals as required by the law. Even before Lehi and his family arrived in the Americas, Lehi, who had proper authority, made an offering and performed sacrifice on an altar of stones (1Nephi 2;7, 5:9). Since they had the plates of Laban, they had a record of the law of Moses and would know how to perform the various rituals and sacrifices required. It would also be obvious that those that participated in these rituals would have to be priests and others with the proper authority.

That the temple was a sacred place and even a place of revelation can be seen in Alma 10:2. Here Amulek is introducing

himself by giving his lineage before starting to preach to the people. He recounts the episode of one of his ancestors, Aminadi, who interpreted writing which had been written on the temple wall by the finger of God. Most likely, this occurrence was well known to the people and would have caused the temple to be held in even more reverence. Aminadi probably was a priest or a prophet, so the association of the temple with those in authority would be strengthened in the minds of the people. This would add legitimacy to the roles of the priesthood and the elites who ran the temple rituals and practices. They would be the ones who would actually enter the temple and participate in the rituals.

At the end of the Book of Mormon record, we can see sacrifice carried to the extreme. The Lamanites would take Nephite women and children prisoners and offer them as sacrifices to their idol gods (Mormon 4:14-15, 21). Even though the text does not include where those sacrifices were performed, a lot of them were probably done in temples of the Lamanites. The importance and widespread practice of human sacrifice in temple rituals in Mesoamerican cultures is evident, as we will see.

In summary we can see from the Book of Mormon text that temples were an important part of their culture. They were a place of gathering for instruction, sacrifice, and ritual. They were sacred places that were mainly the abode of the elites and the priesthood.

### III. MESOAMERICAN TEMPLE RITUAL AND PRACTICE

As was mentioned earlier, the three main cultures I will examine are the Zapotecs, Mayas, and Aztecs.

#### Zapotec Temple Ritual

The Zapotec culture was centered in what is now the state of Oaxaca in Mexico. Many of their ancient cities and sites date to Book of Mormon times. To better understand Zapotec temple rituals and who could enter and participate in them it is important to understand the physical nature of their construction as the architectural manifestation of their religion. One of the best preserved early Zapotec temples is at the site of Monte Albán, which dates from 100 B.C. to A.D. 100. (Period II). This temple stood on an elevated platform and had a lower outer room and a raised inner room. A similar temple was discovered at nearby San José Magote, only this was about 1.5 times as large as the temple at Monte Albán and probably the major temple in the area at that time. (Marcus 176).

In the 16th century, Zapotec temples were known as Yohopèc, which means "the house of pè" or "the house of spirit". The Zapotecs believed that pè was the vit-al force that made all living things move. Therefore, the temple would be a sacred place to the Zapotecs. These 16th century temples were reported to be two room structures, frequently in an elevated location, and

manned by full-time priests. These priests made the most important offerings in standardized temples. The lay person would bring his offering to the outer room of the temple, but a priest would perform the actual sacrifice in the inner more sacred room on an altar. Laymen never entered the inner room and rarely did priests come out of it. (Marcus 174-175).

The Zapotec priesthood carried out most of the rituals and sacrifices for the people. There was a hierarchy composed of high priests, ordinary priests, lesser religious functionaries, and young men who were educated to enter the priesthood. Priests were recruited among the children of nobility and some religious offices were passed on to sons and other relatives (Marcus 175). Thus, power and right to enter the temple and perform their rituals stayed within the priesthood and nobility. The chief priest among them was the 'Great Seer' whose chief function was consulting the supernatural on important matters and then giving this information to others. In other words he was a prophet and a revelator. Most likely he would perform his functions within the temple itself. Evidence for this can be seen at the site of Mitla in the eastern valley of Oaxaca whose temples date from A.D. 1100-1500. One of the central structures there known as the "Hall of Columns" contained the temple and the priests residence. There is an altar at the center of the patio and the western and eastern



halls each have pairs of columns. The largest hall on the north side of the patio has six huge columns and is attached to a traditional four room structure that was the residence of the 'Great Seer' (Marcus 178).

There was a specialized group that performed sacrifices, especially the human sacrifices. Duties of other religious officers included burning of incense, animal sacrifice, and ritual blood letting of one's own blood from veins under the tongue and from behind the ears. This would be done using a sharp bone, stingray spine, obsidian blade, stone knife or fingernail. The blood would be caught on grass or bright feathers and offered to sacred images (Marcus 175).

Humans that were sacrificed were usually prisoners of war and their flesh would be cooked for eating. They would be sacrificed for the harvest and also for lightning which would bring rain (Marcus 175) Evidence for child sacrifice was found at a Period II temple in Mound I-bis at Cuilapan, Oaxaca. This temple was rebuilt several times and associated with the third building stage (A.D. 300) was an apparent dedicatory offering which included a sacrificed child.

Another temple-pyramid on Mound III at Cuilapan had a massive offering which included 71 jade beads, 157 beads of various other stones, 2 jade ear spools, 3 obsidian blades, 8 marine shells, 3

stones, a pearl, and numerous small animal bones (Marcus 177). Types of animal bones that have been found include quail, turkey, and dog. Also, food and drink offerings were made (Marcus 174).

The Zapotecs made their offerings to both supernaturals and ancestors, who they thought took part in community affairs after death. Offerings were made in return for favors and concessions from the supernatural or ancestors (Marcus 174-175).

### Maya Temple Practice

There were two types of pyramidal structures used in temple practices by the Mayas. The earlier type could be called an open-air temple used for sacrifices. It was a pyramid with four stairways leading to the top that had no enclosed structure. Pyramid E-VII-sub at Uaxactún is an example of this type of structure and is broadly contemporary with the Period II temples at Monte Albán. The upper platform did not support a two room masonry temple but was probably an open-air altar reached by stairways on all four sides. The latter type (A.D. 250-500) was the temple-pyramid that had one stairway to the top which had a two room stone masonry temple. Temple E-I at Uaxactún is an example of this, having two small rooms, one accessible outer room and an interior room with a large altar.

The Maya had a full-time priesthood with an internal hierarchy that conducted important rituals in permanent temples of various types. The 16th century Mayan women were not allowed to go to the temple to perform sacrifice except on one occasion involving only the old women (Landa (1941) 128-129). There was a high priest who was succeeded by his son or near relative (Landa (1941) 27). The high priest was an advisor to the Mayan ruler and the priests controlled the calendrical knowledge used in the timing of ceremonies and festivals. There were lesser priests and below them other religious personnel which included the human sacrificers (Marcus 181).

At the Mayan ceremonial centers, the "state" religion that was practiced by the priests and elite probably had little appeal to the peasants. The high priest carried out the rights of various ceremonies in temples on top of large pyramids. Much of the ceremony took place inside of the temple where not many could have gathered, probably just a few chiefs or priests. The general public probably participated little in the actual ceremony and may have even been forced to attend it (Thompson 163). This shows that in the Mayan culture, the priests and the elites were the ones who entered the temple and took the active role in ceremonies.

Many of the same ritual practices of the Zapotecs were practiced by the Maya. The 16th century sources show examples of bloodletting, animal sacrifice, burning of incense, and cannibalism. Food and fermented beverage offerings were placed on altars in courts of the temple and on top of pyramid staircases. The priests conducted the major ritual for the nobility and the entire community (Marcus 182-183).

Archaeological data gives much information on the nature of some of the rituals and who participated in them. The act of bloodletting is depicted on stelae, lintels, murals, and ceramics during the Late Classic Period (A.D. 600-950). The blood was given from the tongue, ears, and fleshy parts of the arms and was presented to the supernatural after being collected on bark paper in ceramic bowls or baskets. There are some depictions of women involved in bloodletting which can be seen on Yaxchilán stone monuments. Most likely these women were from the nobility. Another depiction with women can be seen in a mural painting in Room 3, Structure 1, at Bonampak. Three persons are seated on top of a large table or bench in long gowns. The central figure is probably the wife of the ruler and behind her is a younger woman which may be the daughter. In front of them is the Mayan lord in the act of drawing blood from his tongue. This mural dates to about A.D. 800. Obviously these examples show women

participating in an important ritual usually done in temples. This contradicts Landa's 16th century descriptions of no women being allowed to go to the temples for sacrifice. It seems that at least the women of nobility played a greater role in Classic Mayan temple rituals than the 16th century records suggest (Marcus 185-187).

The making of offerings and sacrifice were an important aspect of Mayan temple ceremonies and a great many objects have been found at various sites. Inanimate objects as well as living things were given in sacrifice, with human blood and sacrifice being the ultimate gift they could give to supernatural beings and forces. Children were considered uncontaminated and thus were appropriate sacrifices (Marcus 186).

Ritual purity and preparation for ceremonies was very important to the Maya. Those who participated would abstain from sexual relations, fast, and confess. The purpose behind this was to purify the body of sin. Pure water was obtained from caves for ceremonies because it was uncontaminated. "Virgin fire" was kindled before many ceremonies and the temple was purified (Thompson 184). Before important ceremonies, priests and others participating would withdraw themselves from the community and live for a time at the ceremonial centers. Landa reported that

before a great festival in honor of Kukulcan, priests and lords remained in the Temple of Kukulcan for five days and nights without returning to their homes (Thompson 174).

The Maya might also have seen the temple as a house of revelation. The Prophecy for the katun was the most important of all Mayan prophecies and drugs would be used to aid in receiving it. In the Dresden Codex there could be a representation of the chilán (prophet) receiving this Prophecy. In one picture a priest is shown striding toward a temple or hut. In another depiction, a small figure is inside the temple or hut seeming to be dead, unconscious, or asleep. This could be showing a chilán going to receive the prophecy and in a trance while receiving it (Thompson 186).

Prayer was also a part of Mayan ceremonies and rituals. The prayers were usually always for a physical thing such as food. There is even an account of prayers being performed before a human sacrifice (Thompson 192). There are also several Maya sites that have murals showing processions of lords and priests dressed to imitate or represent the gods and chanting hymns (Leon-Portilla 96). These murals are probably showing processions to the temple during ceremonies. In a description of the Festival of Kukulcan a great procession of lords, priests, common people, and clowns set

out from the house of the lord giving the feast to the Temple of Kukulcan (Morley 217). Other aspects of Mayan rituals included an expulsion of the evil spirit from the worshipers, incensing of idols, and general feasting at the conclusion of the ceremonies (Morley 206).

### Aztec Temple Practice

There is much information available on Aztec temple practice because it was in full operation when the Spaniards arrived in Mexico. The single most important ceremonial structure in the Aztec empire was the Great Temple, located in the capital city of Tenochtitlan. This temple was a four tiered platform, pyramidal in structure, with two shrines on top. One of the shrines was dedicated to their patron deity Huitzilopochtli and the other was to the rain god Tlaloc. Cortez described the capital city as having many temples in all districts and gave a description of the vast size of the Great Temple complex. He said the complex had a high wall around the outside and had many towers within its precincts. Included in the complex were large and elegant living quarters where the priests lived (Nicholson (1982) 47).

Most of the Aztec temples were on solid staged platforms with stairways on one side. The shrines on top had one or two rooms, an anterior room and a sacred inner sanctuary, and had tall

somewhat slanting roofs. The image of the deity to whom the temple was dedicated was placed inside of the shrine. Between the door of the shrine and the top of the stairs was the place where the sacrificial altar of stone stood. The ceremonial precincts also included ballcourts, artificial forests and gardens, sacred pools for ritual bathing and purification, priestly schools, skull racks, platform altars, braziers for perpetual fires, and arsenals. The religious activities of the Aztecs were focused on these walled ceremonial precincts that were around the temples which were near the centers of all sizable communities (Nicholson (1971) 437-438).

This elaborate temple tradition was run by a full-time professional priesthood that was supported by the community, being highly developed and well organized. Every important temple probably had at least one full-time priest in residence and the greatest temples most likely had a large staff. The priesthood was organized hierarchally from high priest to student (Nicholson (1971) 436). The priests conducted most of the rituals and probably very few lay people ever actually went inside the temples.

While on duty priests would live together and practice sexual abstinence. They were obliged to perform daily rituals within the temple precincts, including offeratory, sacrificial, and



penitential exercises. This included bloodletting from various parts of their bodies. They typically painted their bodies black, let their hair grow long, and had a red smear of blood on each temple of their head (Nicholson (1971) 437).

The major community ceremonies were attended by hundreds, and even thousands of individuals who at least made some kind of offerings and were spectators to the ritual dramatic enactments that took place within the temple precincts. The ritual system was highly organized and there is evidence that the regular priesthood combined with their students and other volunteers to prepare for the ceremonies. Important ceremonies were highly theatrical and had dramatic appeal to the populace (Nicholson (1971) 433).

Preparation for a ceremony was an important aspect of the Aztec ritual life. Many important ceremonies were preceded by a period of preparation which included four days or a multiple of four days of fasting, especially by the priests (Nicholson (1971) 431). There is even an account of a group of young men who fasted for a year, serving in the temple of Huitzilopochtli. Fasting usually consisted of eating one meal a day without seasoning, sexual abstinence, and avoidance of bathing (Sahagun 6-9).

The festivals and ceremonies of the Aztecs used ritual drama to honor their gods, with the form of this sacred theater having a

double nature. The priests, students, and others who took part in the drama, would sometimes wear disguises and were present during the dialogue with the gods. They chanted hymns and went through a set form of action, dramatizing ancient myths and doctrines. On the other hand, the "actors" who impersonated the deities themselves, played their parts only once because they were to be sacrificed and thus united with the gods they represented. Most of the victims representing a god learned their parts perfectly (Leon-Portilla 97-98). Sahagun reported that at the great ceremonies that were for public display, someone had to be sacrificed that fit the image of the god being honored. They had to wear the correct attire (garments), and have the right age, sex, physical conditions, and attitude. A leading member of the pantheon was honored at the eighteen monthly ceremonies of the Aztec calendar where most of the sacrificing took place (Anawalt 44).

Sacrifices would come at the end of ceremonies and were a ritualistic act of profound significance. Quail or other birds would be sacrificed and then there would be one or more human sacrifice. These ceremonies would sometimes include ritual conflicts where the captive with unequal arms was confronted by a well-armed warrior who fought and killed him (Leon-Portilla 98). Victims who were to be sacrificed were prepared and purified in

various ways, including actual bathing. There was a great variety of methods used in killing the victims, with probably the most well known being the gashing of the chest open with a stone knife and then ripping the heart out. After the killing, the heart of the victim was placed in a ceremonial vessel and the head was cut off and added to a skull rack (Nicholson (1971) 432-433).

Human sacrifice was considered the most holy offering that could be made and the greatest number of victims were captured warriors. When a prisoner was taken, the captor uttered the traditional words "He is my beloved Son", and the captive replied "He is my beloved Father." The prisoner saw himself as being the god's elect and accepted his fate. After a warrior was sacrificed his body was rolled down the steps of the temple. The body was then cut up and a thigh was sent to the emperor. The rest of the body then went to the captor and he gathered his family for a ritual feast of stew made of dried maize, beans, and strips of human flesh (Anawalt 44).

The Aztec motivation behind human sacrifice was that they felt they were chosen of the sun god, Huitzilopochtli, and that they must furnish him and other gods nourishment with the most sacred food, human blood. Information collected by Spanish missionaries indicates that there was no intent of cruelty,

punishment, or blood lust connected with human sacrifice. It was the supreme act of a devout people and took place in the most reverent of circumstances (Anawalt 45).

The making of other offerings was also an important part of Aztec ceremonies. The most common offerings were food, flowers, rubber spattered paper, and clothing. Incensing was common as well as embowring of shrines and sacred places particularly associated with fertility (Nicholson (1971) 431-432). In the excavations of the Great Temple in Mexico City an extraordinary number of offeratory caches containing a wide variety of objects have been found. These included knives, human skulls, masks, shells, ceramics, gold, silver, and copper ornaments. Many of these objects are non-Aztec in style and would have come from distant provinces of the empire. These offerings were connected with the constant renovations of the temple and other structures, and were an important aspect of their rituals (Nicholson (1982) 57-58).

#### IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DATA AND CONCLUSIONS

In relating Mesoamerican data to the Book of Mormon text, especially data from ethnohistorical sources, we need to remember that the ethnohistory gives accounts that happened over a thousand years after Book of Mormon times. Many aspects of the temple rituals would have changed through the centuries. However, many of the essential elements would have survived in some form and can be seen in the cultures I have examined. Archaeological data dating to Book of Mormon times can be particularly useful when comparisons are made.

The following is a summary of the Mesoamerican temple practices and rituals that I have examined. Most of these items are common to all three cultures and seem to be essential to their temple traditions.

1. Temples were quite abundant throughout the land and usually consisted of a highly sacred inner room and a less sacred outer room, with the temple itself resting on top of a raised platform. The outer rooms were accessible to the

secular nobility and perhaps others, but only the priests could enter the inner sanctuary for sacrifice and communion with deities.

2. Most ceremonies associated with the temple were run by an organized priesthood. Students and a few other volunteers also participated, but it seems most of the general public were only involved as spectators.

3. Women were excluded from the temple ceremonies except on a few rare occasions and then probably only women of the nobility participated.

4. Ritual purity and preparation was an important aspect of festivals and ceremonies, especially fasting.

5. An important part of the ritual was the dramatic portrayals of religious beliefs and myths. Processions, songs, prayers, dances, deity impersonators, and sacrifice were all part of the ritual drama.

6. Sacrifice and offerings played a key role in all rituals and ceremonies. These included nonliving as well as living things, with human sacrifice being the most sacred offering.

7. Most ceremonies and festivals ended with general feasting, often on human flesh.

The Book of Mormon data compares quite favorably with some of these points but is void of information on some of the others. The fact that there were temples in many parts of the land according to the Book of Mormon text is in very good agreement with archaeological findings in Mesoamerica. It is obvious that the temple was an important aspect in the lives of Mesoamerican and Book of Mormon peoples. The accounts of the Nephites gathering to the temple to be instructed is similar in nature to Aztecs and Mayans who would gather in great throngs to watch various temple ceremonies. Men seem to play the dominant role in the Book of Mormon accounts of the temple and they were the ones who taught and preached to the people there, being priests and rulers. Similar practices can be seen in the Mesoamerican cultures, with women not being allowed to participate for the most part in temple rituals, and the nobility and priesthood in charge of the ceremonies and also the main participants.

The fact that sacrifice played a major role in Mesoamerican ceremonies has already been examined. Examples previously cited from the Book of Mormon show that sacrifice was an important part of their rituals. The first accounts of human sacrifice, similar

to Mesoamerican cultures, coming at the end of the record with the Lamanites sacrificing prisoners of war. This sounds quite similar to the Aztec practice previously mentioned.

The account in the Book of Mormon of the writing on the temple wall being interpreted by a Nephite prophet shows the temple to be a place of revelation. Mayan prophets going to the temple to receive the Prophecy and the Zapotec 'Great Seer' receiving revelation in the temple indicates a Mesoamerican belief in the temple as a place of revelation and communion with the gods.

Other details of Mesoamerican temple practices and rituals are not apparent in the Book of Mormon text. However, they probably had similar elements since these practices seem well established in differing Mesoamerican cultures.

### Conclusions

In examining the Book of Mormon text as well as data from Mesoamerica I have come to the following conclusions in regards to who could enter and participate in the temple and the basic rituals and practices that took place there. It seems that those that entered the temple and participated in the rituals were the males of the elite class that included the nobility and the



priesthood. Women and the common people seem to generally be excluded from the temple ceremonies, except as spectators.

The ceremonies themselves were an important part of these people's lives. They felt that it was necessary to prepare themselves and to be worthy to participate in their temple rituals. The people were instructed at the temple by word, music, and drama. The central unifying practice in their rituals was the making offerings and sacrifice, with human sacrifice coming into prominence as time progressed.

These are not the ultimate answers to questions about temple practice and ritual in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon. There is still much research that can and should be done before we will fully understand this important part of ancient Mesoamerican people's lives.

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