

## “TEMPLE” FROM DIFFERING DISCIPLINES:

### A FORUM DISCUSSION

*Participants: Gerald E. Hansen, Ross Baron, Thomas E. Toone, David Peck;  
moderated by Scott Samuelson*

Scott: The temple is a place where we discover, articulate, and affirm who we are, particularly in relationship to God. The overarching question is: How do people use temples and other sacred places to formulate and confirm their ideas of who they are relative to deity and meaning?

Gerald: You are asking, “How do temples define the idea of deity in various religions?” Most temples have some type of theater, and it’s in theater that the main myths of society are portrayed. By “myth” I mean a story that gives an idea of how we are related to God. Dionysian cults in ancient Greece portrayed the myth of a half-god/half-man who was able to overcome death and even go back down into the spirit world and retrieve his dead mother. In many mythologies we see this kind of harrowing of hell.

Fairly typical of many temples, ancient and modern, is the acting out of the main myths of the society. In Mormonism, of course, our main myths are of the creation, fall, and atonement. The word “myth” here refers only to the phenomenon of a divine narrative, not to whether or not it is true. From culture to culture, by looking at the sacred drama, we see how people perceive their relationships with the gods. The LDS concept, of course, is that God has a plan for us, a plan by which we become like him. That doesn’t show up very often in other mythologies. A good part of the time, the mythology is about just trying to understand who the gods are and how the people can keep the gods happy.

Tom: We think of Mesopotamia and Egypt when we think of temples. It’s really interesting that when writing comes on the scene, then also comes what we call organized religion. Let me read from Moses 6:4-8. Adam and Eve have just had children, and the scripture says, “A book of remembrance was kept, in the which was recorded, in the language of Adam, for it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration....” So it is significant that in history, at the same time you see religion and temples, you see written language too. The other idea is that right from

the very beginning the idea of a temple as a symbol of what people believe seems to dominate the city and the civilization. In the early states, in the earliest civilizations, the temple is central and dominant.

Scott: How do the dramatically presented story and the written narrative tie together in belief or worship?

Tom: In Mesopotamia you have one of the first epics, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, that includes a retelling of the flood story.

Gerald: The Gilgamesh epic takes us through a pattern of creation, garden, fall, long journey, final trial, coming to the presence of God, and resurrection. The Gilgamesh story turns out a bit different. The long journey for eternal life ends in death—a variation on the theme—but the basic temple pattern of ascension and journey is there.

Regarding the question about the word and the drama, the Catholic mass, for instance, is a drama. And in fact modern theater derives from worship in the Western tradition that is, in a way, parallel to Greek theater growing out of the Dionysian temple cult and through evolution of the dithyramb, the choral dancing and singing as religious observance. There are two separate histories but a common pattern. So we have theater in the mass, and we have theater in the Greek cults.

But in some religions, deity is represented more in the written word than in drama. For Jews the synagogue isn't really a temple, but it takes on a temple pattern. Jews represent God in word, and they don't have as much theater. This is typical of Protestants too. Protestants, in some ways, are the only large religious group I know of that doesn't have a temple. Protestants, I think, would suggest that they themselves are God's temple, and it's through the Bible and the holy word that they come to God. Their counterpart to theater would be God working out salvation through them. So we see two different threads for the divine story. You have theater sometimes, and at other times it isn't so much theater as simply the word of God.

Ross: Mircea Eliade wrote a book entitled, *The Sacred and the Profane*, and the premise of the book is the idea that man—humanity—is homo-religious. In other words, by nature we seek the divine. From culture to culture that's always the case. And so whether it's a synagogue or a temple, we're going to try

to create order from chaos. But humanity lives in a generally de-sacralized state. We eat, we sleep, and we go to work, but we find that we can't last long in the de-sacralized state of affairs. So we have to create space and time that is sacred, where we get away from the homogeneity of daily life.

For example, Abraham leaves Ur, goes to Haran, comes south from there, and where does he find himself? It's just a howling wasteland until God says to go to Shechem and build an altar there. Then that howling wasteland becomes a sacred space; it becomes the gate of heaven. It has become sacralized space. Generations later, that is what Jacob's ladder signifies. Jacob says in Genesis 28:17, "How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." He calls it Beth-el, which in Hebrew is "house of God." You can find in all cultures this idea of seeking for deity or his dwelling place. In the Jewish synagogue there is no drama played out, but it is still a sacred space and sacred architecture that is supposed to break up the monotony of the de-sacralized space of the world.

Scott: I'm interested in the idea of teaching in relation to the temple. It seems to me that keeping the book of remembrance is one of the chief functions of the sacred space. We perform or reenact our myths or we write the book of our race to pass on our values from generation to generation. God brings Abraham, but then Abraham brings his family to this same sacred space. How do we see this sacred space and these reaffirmations through drama and text being a form of education, or perpetuation of sacred values, or relationships with God?

Gerald: One of the things I like about the temple is that it throws a lot at you, and those who are curious ask questions, and those who aren't curious don't have to concern themselves more than they want to. I like to compare this to the bestowal of knowledge that Moses records in what we call Moses chapter 1. One of the first things God shows him is the creation. I wonder why Moses is shown the creation and why that is also shown to the Brother of Jared. I think you can't look at God's creations the way he would show you them and not have an immense desire to ask just exactly what Moses asks in verse 30: "Tell me, I pray thee, why these things are so, and by what thou madest them?" That's the best type of education.

The other thing we shouldn't miss, concerning instruction, is that it's so symbolic. Temples around the world teach symbolically with words and paintings, and quite often on the outside are friezes and sculptures meant to work through the teachings of the religion. Our Salt Lake Temple is a good example.

Ross: I want to go back to Protestantism, which Jerry mentioned earlier, particularly the idea of unmediated salvation, that says, "I am going to access God directly." But there is still tension in that community because, though we have unmediated salvation, we still want to worship together. So while Protestants don't have temples, they're going to have beautiful chapels. Even Calvinists, adherents to an extreme form of Protestantism, still worship together. Even they still break up the de-sacralized space with sacralized space.

Returning to Moses, the Lord taught him by induction. Moses is with Pharaoh, and Pharaoh is building these huge monuments and huge construction projects. What does Moses think? Perhaps, he thought, "No one is better than Pharaoh." However, the Lord will later show him, in vision, the creation, and then Moses will know that there is not even a comparison between the things of man and the things of the Lord.

Let's remember that temples are not just structures but that they have to be sanctified. In the case of the Rexburg Temple, before dedication it was a specially constructed building, but it wasn't yet a temple. We were waiting for it to be dedicated, but then President Hinckley passed away, and so for a week it remained this beautiful building on the hill. Then a man comes, President Monson, who has the keys of the priesthood, and now it is more than a special building put up by the Church—it is a temple of the Lord. It is Beth-el—it is the House of God. The space must be sanctified. Somebody with authority must come, or something has to happen to make the building different.

Scott: The process of going to the temple, itself, becomes sacred. It's not just that the space is sacred; it's everything that happens within the space becomes sacred as well—especially the individuals. The people who go there themselves become sacred.

Tom: Why is that? It seems to be what makes us human as opposed to the animals, a yearning for the sacred.

Scott: To me it's something of a paradox. One of our basic human impulses is our desire to be like our Heavenly Father. We have these deep yearnings for connection with God because that's our heritage, but we are strangers in a strange land, and we don't want to be animals. We don't want to be just human either; we want more for ourselves. We have to be human because we are in a mortal sphere, but we want to be like Heavenly Father as well, and so we build temples.

Tom: All religions build these physical manifestations, and they become their temples. Rudolph Arnheim says, "Buildings acquire their meaning only when they are shown to reverberate in their shapes the deeper shivering of human nature. Religious architecture is the best proclaimer of this truth." Isn't that what the temple means to us?

Ross: It is our yearning to become and our yearning to become more than we are. But it's also death-defying. The genius of the temple and the prophet is this absolutely death-defying teaching that death literally is no more than going to another room. All the existential angst about death needs to be put aside within this drama being played out in individuals and communities and in terms of what God's plan is for the world. It is so powerful now as temples dot the earth. We are saying to the world, "There is more; there is much more."

Gerald: I see a couple of threads. The desires to become like God or to overcome death or to ascend to God—those are always the key motifs. And you see them worldwide. In our temples you see symbols pointing us upward.

Most temples have some type of architectural device that symbolizes the movement toward God. This movement can be literal as patrons climb stairs as they move from room to room. It can be more figurative as in the use of dark woods and colors changing to lighter woods and colors as one progresses through the temple. So architecturally our temples teach the upward path in various ways.

There are a series of other symbols and devices that many temples—though not all—use to teach the doctrines of God. Several of our temples feature trees rather prominently. Some have sculptural friezes. Suns, moons, stars are common, as

are battlements. I mention these symbols because my own love of the temple has increased as I realized how much time and thought has gone into these buildings in an effort to lift our souls to God. Another symbol to look for is an octagon. It has traditionally been a symbol of rebirth. When it appears it reminds us that one of the purposes of the temple is to help us reborn through Christ, a new person who has no more desire to do evil, as the people of King Benjamin.

Scott: J. E. Cirlot, in *A Dictionary of Symbolism*, says the eight-sided figure is the transition from the four-sided figure, symbolic of the earth and its four corners, to the circle, which is symbolic of the wholeness, the oneness, of God. To get from the square to the circle you have to go through the eight-sided figure. This geometric relationship suggests transition, which, it turns out, is just what rebirth is.

Gerald: In fact, that squared circle shows up all over anciently and recently. A circle inside a square appears quite often and represents the joining of heaven and earth—the dome of the heavens and the four corners of the earth. That, of course, is what a temple does. It unites our hearts and souls to God. So we incorporate the squared circle in a variety of places.

I'd like to address the question about how our LDS temple experience links to temples in other cultures. When I see temples in other religions, my LDS temple experience informs what I'm looking at. It causes me to look for familiar patterns in the other temples. But while I look at the temples, it works the other way too. Seeing these cultural variations on religious themes begins to focus my mind towards patterns and symbols. I have learned a great deal about our temple experience because I've been looking for patterns in other temples. It keeps going back and forth.

The LDS moves me toward the other, and the other moves me back to the LDS, and this process has a couple of effects on me. The first is that it makes me deeply grateful for the pattern given in the restoration. And it also makes me highly appreciative of the others. Every time I've been to the Santa Scala—the sacred steps in Rome—watching Catholics on their knees with their rosaries, saying prayers on their way up the sacred steps to their holy place, I'm impressed by their devotion. It reminds me of a favorite saying of President Hinckley: "We must not only be tolerant, but we must

cultivate a spirit of affirmative gratitude for those who do not see things quite as we do.”<sup>1</sup> I can appreciate the devotion of others, and I can learn patterns. I can begin to look at things more symbolically, and then I am deeply appreciative of Joseph for the restoration of the true patterns.

Tom: Temples can be seen as structures that communities erect to strengthen community values, particularly values based on faith in the supernal deity. How do temples strengthen values, and what values do they strengthen? I think the Rexburg Temple has one of the most beautiful settings for a temple there is, just for the symbolism of its being a center, a focal point, higher than other things. If you go clear back to the beginning of civilization, as we said, to the Sumerian Temple, the Ziggurat, that was the center. The Egyptian temples were the center. And then I think of the Middle Ages and the cathedral being the center. Anytime I see a picture of Chartres from a distance, and you’re looking out across the field, I think of that, of the center. For the people around them, the cathedrals of the Middle Ages were the focus of life. The cathedral and what happened there brought them into life and took them out. In this respect our temple is much the same.

Scott: One of the things I love about our Rexburg Temple, besides the fact that it’s on a hill, is that it is next to the university. It seems to me this is such a lovely symbiotic relationship. I appreciate that they are next door to each other and are mutually invigorating.

Gerald: Tom mentioned the fact that the temple is supposed to be the center. I talk this out with my students occasionally, asking them, “Is the temple the center of the earth?” They look at me, and they are not quite sure how to answer. I say, “The earth is round. You can put the center anywhere you want.” I think that’s significant. It doesn’t have to be the geographic center of the earth for us. It could be Manhattan if we lived in that temple district. My own thinking is that temples teach doctrines to the faithful, and values are based on doctrines. You go to the temple to be solid and centered in your doctrines. It informs your values.

Scott: Value without doctrine isn’t very valuable. Without sound doctrine values are just philosophies of man.

Ross: About this idea of the center, concerning the temple of Moses, God says the tabernacle is in the middle, and he instructs its construction in order to have the temple there. And then we are going to put the Levites around it, 100 percent, and then we are going to tell you where each tribe is going to be. Moses is going to be right in front. Judah is going to be at the gate. Ephraim is going to be closest to the holy of holies. We are going to actually set up our organization, our people, with the temple in the center. And we are going to travel in a specific way with the temple leading out.

Following the Lord's pattern with ancient Israel, Joseph Smith's diagrams of the New Jerusalem always have the temple in the center. In the world's view, downtown—the center—is the business district. But downtown in the Lord's view is the temple. And in fact Joseph has the temple in the center, then the people living around the temple. And the business district—that's in the outskirts. The *axis mundi* has to be, by definition, in the center.

Then we read these beautiful lines about the cathedral being the center. I served my mission in Argentina, and in any older village you've got the *plaza central*, and right across the street is a cathedral, and then everything rings out from that. But if you go to New York, downtown is again all these business buildings. Wall Street is downtown, and downtown is Wall Street. We always think the center is where the business district belongs, but that's not the way it's supposed to be.

Scott: I'm glad they built the Manhattan Temple right downtown to qualify that pattern in New York.

Tom: The center shifts according to what building is highest. When the saints first built the Salt Lake Temple, it was the highest structure and dominated everything. Then Utah achieved statehood, and higher up on the hill was the Capitol Building. The Church builds the Church Office Building, and because the Church is so big, the administration becomes important. Now, of course, there are taller buildings in Salt Lake City, and they are business buildings.

The Woolworth Building, built in 1913 in lower Manhattan, was nicknamed the "Cathedral of Commerce." At some level society is aware of the competition between religion and business to be at the center. These shifts have happened in our society, from the sacred to the commercial, but I think it

is really interesting that in the last twenty years the Church has re-emphasized the sacred by building so many temples. When I went to graduate school at Penn State, when I first arrived there, it was in the Salt Lake City temple district. And then we went to the dedication of the Washington D. C. temple. I think it's prophetic that with the temples—there are so many now—the Church is creating a new center, or multiple centers.

Ross: We can take it one step further. Brigham Young comes to Salt Lake and puts the temple there. And how do we number the streets? You number the streets so you know where you are in relation to the temple. If I'm at 600 South and 200 East, I get my bearings from where I am relative to the temple. That's why Brigham did that. He wanted all Utah laid out as it relates to the temple because the temple has to be the center.

Scott: Now, we don't number Rexburg streets from our temple, but it has nevertheless become the center of our community. People say with wonder, "Anywhere in the valley I see that beautiful white lighted edifice on the hill." Our temple has become our center in a less numeric, more visual, way.

Ross: That's right. The Old Testament continually associates Zion, the holy mountain, and God's dwelling place. What is the mountain of the Lord? It is the temple. Zion and the mountain of the Lord are the temple. Zion can't start unless you have a temple.

Going back to Protestantism on this point, you have this massive schismatic thing that happens in Protestantism: "We don't like your doctrine, so we will just create another church. We rent the hall down the street and then eventually get enough members and build a building," and this process multiplies.

One dilemma the disaffected Latter-day Saint who wants to leave the Church faces is: "If I leave, then I can't go to the temple. There something is still sacred. I couldn't go to the temple. I've got to go through the priesthood to get back to the temple." Here we see the symbolic nature of the priesthood and keys and Levites surrounding the temple. That's what you lose when you don't have restoration authority and prophets and apostles. It's fascinating to me that you can have this diffusion and the schisms that occur in other

religions, nonchalantly almost, and people don't care too much. But in the Church, if you interview people who have left the Church, sometimes there's a nostalgia or melancholy about the temple: "I can't go to the temple any longer. My family ties have been broken. We're not an eternal family."

Tom: About the idea of community, we are building a Humanities Foundations class with our political scientist, Duane Adamson, who reminds us of the importance of asking what industrialization has done to us. For one thing, the industrial and technological world has shifted society away from the interdependent agrarian community. We go to our specialized work, and there we do just one small thing, and people tend to not talk to each other. People, for all their emails and texting, don't communicate very well. In a city there may be little sense of community, or neighborhood close-knittedness like there was before technology. In this day and age, can't the temple restore to us our sense of community, our connectedness with neighbors, by becoming the centers of community?

Gerald: And going back to education, I'd like to say that if our educational system isn't centered, then we have to discipline it so that it is centered. It becomes divided into individual disciplines, and they don't connect. One of the things I most hope the Foundations program will do is connect and center us in a way that no one else in the world is doing. Educational communities try to revamp their general education programs and integrate their courses, but it can't really be done if you don't center in the doctrines of God. We may be the only people in the world who can do this, and I hope we do it. The temple could help teach us how to do it in education.

Scott: Otherwise you are blown by the winds of educational whim. And you are left with a center that cannot hold. The temple can restore that communal and even academic center.

David: We can become so involved with our own view of things that we don't help make connections with what the students are learning and the world around them. All peoples seem subject to religious insularity. But at some point or another we have to decide, like our students, what our community is and how inclusive it is. Within religion are decisions that are culturally biased, as you will find Hindu people who don't talk to Muslims and Muslims who don't want to talk

to Hindus. If we talk about the idea of a temple—of sacred space—in a broader sense, then surely a fundamental role of a temple in any community is inclusive, is to bring together people of different backgrounds. One way or another, a community usually grows to a point where you have to address this question, the question of a global religion. I don't know if we have reached that point. We have to come up with a paradigm so that we build faith, we build testimony, we build appreciation for authority as it is given by God in the priesthood, where we understand our covenants, but at the same time we have not isolated ourselves. I think temple worship is a good way to build global community.

Ross: I love this idea that we go to the temple because it is the center, the place where we meet God. It is where we feel the sacred, and then we go out into the community, which is the world, and we see sacred potential in our fellows.

David: I recently went to a Hindu temple in India, and inscribed on the outside of it is one of their scriptural sayings. It said, "Anyone who claims to love God must also love all mankind." The notion here is that if we go to the temple and understand the doctrines we are taught, how could we believe but not see the application of temple teachings to the second commandment?

Ross: That brings us to the attitude that we are chosen. But the paradox is in this question: Chosen for what? Chosen to go out and help in the work of saving others. So, for example in baptismal symbolism, the font rests on the backs of the House of Israel, suggesting that taking the baptismal covenant out and offering it to all is the burden of the House of Israel. It's not that we are just going to sit in royal thrones because God has chosen us. The burden of being chosen is to do the work, to go out to people in the far reaches of the world and do all we can do for them. That's a powerful concept and injunction.

Gerald: Empowerment is the true nature of the chosen people. If we get into the insularity that says, "Oh, I'm chosen, and therefore I'll insulate myself," we have to go back to the prophetic mantle of the Prophet Joseph, who taught that we have to go out. We have centers of strength, but from these centers of strength we have to go out constantly. So then of course we can come back and build the centers. What does

Joseph do during the apostasy of 1837? He sends Brigham, Heber, and Orson off to England.

Scott: You go out so you can get other people and bring them back to where the temple is, so that they too can commune with the sacred. And then they can go back out, and this process goes on. It's the same pattern we learn on a larger scale—we leave God's presence to come to earth. Being born here, we left the presence of God to go out and do our work. And our work is to go back to where God is and to bring our fellows with us.

Tom: I had a personal experience, one of the sweetest I have had in years, one that makes me think this is what heaven would be like. We went to the Salt Lake Temple late on a Saturday evening, and a couple of our kids wanted to go. It was too late for an endowment session, so we offered to do sealings. Since we were on our own as a family, the company was made up of whoever came along. We waited in the room, and then next to us was this really elegant looking black woman with a strong accent from Jamaica. It was her first time to the temple, but she wanted to participate in the sealing ceremony too. A few minutes later a couple from China came in with names they wanted sealed. Having not much time, my family soon got up to go and were replaced by Polynesians. We were all children of our Heavenly Father.

David: Would it be possible to say that in a temple we learn more about godliness by learning about who we are and who are our fellowmen, our fellow creatures, humanity? And this knowledge empowers us to really implement the second commandment? Can we say we prepare ourselves to go to the temple, we obey commandments and keep ourselves worthy and clean, we struggle with the natural man, and we go to the temple, into the House of God, so we can repeat—we can make the return trip—like a parabola? We are going to reach out to deity in the temple, and then we are going to make the return trip back to everyday life, but on the return trip to life outside of the temple we ought to be better able to love our fellowman. ∞

## NOTE

Gordon B. Hinckley, "Out of Your Experience Here," (BYU Devotional, 16 October 1990).