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Part I: The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Israelite Temple

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Part I

The Book of Mormon

as an

Ancient Israelite Temple

It has become increasingly evident that the entire Book of Mormon is an ancient Israelite temple text.² The Book of Mormon may be the most comprehensive and authoritative commentary on the ancient Israelite temple drama that has ever been written. It is certainly the most comprehensive and authoritative discussion of that drama that we now have access to.

The Book of Mormon is a wonderful testimony of the Savior. Woven among its histories and biographies is a profound intimacy that resonates with each of us. The stories never let us lose sight of the overriding fact that the Book of Mormon really is only about ourselves and about our relationship with the Savior.

In many ways, there are two books written on the same pages of the Book of Mormon. The first is an invitation to “come unto Christ.” The surface text of the Book of Mormon may be the most marvelous book ever written. It is about us and the Savior. Its truthfulness is testified by the Holy Ghost and there are millions of people who know by that Spirit that its words are truth.

The second is a subtext, written with the same words, but in a different language. It is written in the language of the ancient Israelite temple drama. That story is about One’s Self and about our relationship with the Savior *in the Nephite temple*.

In comparing the Book of Mormon to the ancient Israelite temples, I have carefully avoided pulling back the curtain to reveal the ancient temple in the Book of Mormon subtext. Instead, what I have sought to do, is to point out that there really is a curtain that

²LeGrand L. Baker and Stephen D. Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord? The Psalms in Israel’s Temple Worship in the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Eborn Books, 2009). The book was reprinted in 2011 and following footnotes references are to the page numbers in that 2011 second (paperback) edition.

may be pulled back, and that behind that veil we may discover a new dimension of sacred space.

This is not an attempt to reconstruct the ancient Nephite temple drama. Stephen Ricks and I have already done that in *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord? The Psalms in Israel's Temple Worship In the Old Testament and In the Book of Mormon* (Eborn Books, Salt Lake City, 2009, 2011). In that book we have shown that the Psalms were the text of the ancient Israelite temple rites, and we have tried to put many of the psalms back in their original order, so we can see the format of the sacred drama as it was performed at the time of Solomon's Temple. Having done that, we showed that every major sermon in the Book of Mormon was based on the Nephite temple experience. We did that carefully and with much reverence, because those are the things "hidden from the foundation of the world." They have always been hidden; they always will be hidden. They must be known—but they cannot be taught except by the Holy Ghost. They are imbedded in the subtexts of all the scriptures, like diamonds in the mountain, only to be unearthed by those who recognize the value of what they find.

For example, we may ask, "Why are there no evidences of Christian temple services in the New Testament?" The answer is that it is found throughout the text. The Greek word *mysterion* is translated "mystery" in the New Testament. It means "secrets imposed through initiation into sacred rites." Almost every time that word is used by the Savior or by one of the apostles, it is a reference to the "sacred rites" in a Christian temple.³ A striking

³Vassilios Tzaferis, "'To God and Jesus Christ,' Early Christian Prayer Hall Found in Megiddo Prison," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, March/April, 2007 vol 33, no 2, 33-49.

There is a fascinating photo on page 49. Tzaferis describes it this way:

DOMUS IN QUA CHRISTIANI CONVENIEBANT, or "houses in which Christians gather," also called *domus eccesiae*, came into use in the second century A.D., when the Christian community did not yet have permanent churches dedicated to worship. A "house church" functionally similar to the prayer hall at Megiddo was found in the 1930s in Dura Europos in Syria. Although not originally meant to be a religious structure, the simple two-story dwelling was converted

example is 2 Peter 1:1-4 where he uses the word faith (*pistis*⁴) and then in those four verses describes the purpose of the entire Christian temple service. Thus, Nephi can introduce himself by saying that he has “a great knowledge of the goodness and mysteries of God” (1 Nephi 1:1).

Similarly, ancient Israelite temples housed two separate institutions—both acting under priesthood authority and functioning together as a single unit. First, they were the source of the ancient state’s economic and political stability. The story told in their ceremonies and rituals were the cultural underpinnings that gave legitimacy to the king and held the community together. Those functions of the Israelite temple can be shown historically, and are widely discussed. Hugh Nibley and his colleagues at FARMS have written extensively about them.

The second institution was altogether different from that. It taught the symbolic and very real *way*—that one might *walk* the *path* that leads to the summit of *the sacred mountain* where we may be in the presence of God. The underlying power of the ancient Israelite temples lay in this second institution. At the core of these teachings were the “mysteries of the kingdom.” They are not readily discussed and no scriptural author candidly describes them. It is a secret that only the initiated can know—and they must learn it through the study of the drama and the scriptures, and through the spirit of revelation. We cannot know the ancient temple drama if we do not know the scriptures, but we cannot know the

into a house of worship with a place for the Eucharist table, a vestry for clergy clothes, and a baptistery. The walls of the baptistery were decorated with frescoes illustrating scenes from the Bible such as Adam and Eve, the Good Shepherd and a parade of women that might depict the women at the tomb of Jesus.

His explanation is reasonable. However, looking at the photo suggests something different. What he calls a Eucharist table could be an altar, the vestry could be a small room that was once behind a veil, the baptistery is a font, in addition to the frescoes of Adam and Eve, and the women, the ceiling has painted stars. If this is what it appears to be, then it is also evidence that there were small temples, probably in many cities where there were Christians.

⁴For a discussion of faith as *pistis* see Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord* (2011 edition), 697-710.

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heart of the scriptures if we do not know the Israelite temple drama.

This present study does not discuss that second institution of the Book of Mormon temple. Rather, it simply acknowledges that it is there and refers the reader to our book, *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord?* where it is talked roundabout, but never explicitly described. In this present study we will examine the Book of Mormon in terms of the first functions of an ancient temple—the ones anyone could observe, and write or talk about. The purpose, here, is to show that the authors of the Book of Mormon had a full understanding of the ancient temple drama and used it as the structural outline of their sermons and writings.

There are ancient Israelite precedents for writing a book to follow the blueprint of their temple and its services. The Book of Job⁵ may be the best example in the Old Testament. The book of Leviticus may be another.⁶

When the Prophet Mormon compiled the Book of Mormon, he had at his disposal a thousand years of history and documents from which to glean the sermons and the stories he wished to use to paint a very big picture. It is a history, but it is also, like the Book of Job, a macrocosm of the Israelite temple drama and rites that sustained the Nephite culture during those thousand years. In writing his history that way, Mormon created a story that shows all the functional characteristics of an ancient temple. When we compare the patterns of the Book of Mormon to the public and easily recognized functions of ancient Israelite temples, we find that they each fit together remarkably well. Because those public

⁵For a discussion of the Book of Job see *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord* (2011 edition), 116-18.

⁶ Mary Douglas, *Jacob's Tears, The Priestly Work of Reconciliation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004). Douglas's theses is that the book of Leviticus was written as a microcosm of Moses's Tabernacle and its ordinances, which, in turn were a microcosm of Mount Sinai and Moses's enthronement there.

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temple functions have been discussed at great length by both LDS and non-LDS scholars, this present book relies heavily on their work.

In 1984, one of Hugh Nibley's students, John M. Lundquist, wrote a paper in which he synthesized all that scholars had written about the nature and purposes of ancient temples.⁷ Lundquist unified their findings into nineteen generalizations about what constituted a temple in the ancient Near East. He did not claim that all ancient temples had all of these characteristics, but he did claim that a structure that did not have at least the most important of these characteristics may be a beautiful building, but was not actually a temple.

The purpose of this present study is to show that the Book of Mormon is like an ancient Israelite temple in that it meets most of the criteria established by Lundquist when he cataloged the meaning and functions of an ancient temple. The greatest difference between the ancient temples he describes and the Book of Mormon is that he discusses buildings—three dimensional structures we can walk about inside. The Book of Mormon is not a building. Rather, it is a portable temple we can carry but cannot enter. It can be examined only as it is discovered between the covers of the sacred text.

The 19 typological characteristics that Lundquist identified as quintessential of ancient temples are:

1. The temple is the architectural embodiment of the cosmic mountain.
2. The cosmic mountain represents the primordial hillock,

⁷John M. Lundquist, "The Common Temple Ideology of the Ancient Near East," *The Temple in Antiquity*, ed. Truman G. Madison (Provo, Utah, Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984), 53-76.

Lundquist has since written a number of books and articles about the temples of various cultures, and is widely recognized as an expert on the meaning of the world's temples and of sacred space.

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the place which first emerged from the waters that covered the earth during the creative process. In Egypt, for example, all temples are seen as representing the primordial hillock.

3. The temple is often associated with the waters of life which flow from a spring within the building itself—or rather the temple is viewed as incorporating within itself such a spring or as having been built upon the spring....and of the life-giving, saving nature of the waters of life.

4. The temple is associated with the tree of life.

5. The temple is built on separate, sacral, set apart space.

6. The temple is oriented toward the four world regions or cardinal directions, and to various celestial bodies such as the polar star. As such, it is, or can be, an astronomical observatory, the main purpose of which is to assist the temple priests in regulating the ritual calendar.

7. Temples, in their architectonic orientation, express the idea of a successive ascension toward heaven. The Mesopotamian ziggurat or staged temple tower is the best example of this architectural principle. It was constructed of three, five, or seven levels or stages. Monumental staircases led to the upper levels, where smaller temples stood. The basic ritual pattern represented in these structures is that the worshippers ascended the staircase to the top, the deity descended from heaven, and the two met in the small temple which stood at the top of the structure.

8. The plan and measurements of the temple are revealed to the king or prophet, and the plan must be carefully carried out....

9. The temple is the central, organizing, unifying institution in the ancient Near Eastern society. The temple is associated with abundance and prosperity, indeed is perceived as the giver of these.

10. Inside the temple images of deities as well as living kings, temple priests and worshippers are washed, anointed,

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clothed, fed, enthroned and symbolically initiated into the presence of deity, and thus into eternal life. Further, New Year rites held in the temple include the reading and dramatic portrayals of texts which recite a pre-earthly war in heaven; a victory in that war by the forces of good, led by a chief deity; and the creation and establishment of the cosmos, cities, temples, and the social order. The sacred marriage is carried out at this time.

11. The temple is associated with the realm of the dead, the underworld, the afterlife, the grave....The temple is the link between this world and the next.

12. Sacral, communal meals are carried out in connection with temple ritual, often at the conclusion of or during a covenant ceremony.

13. The tablets of destiny are consulted both in the cosmic sense by the gods, and yearly in a special temple chamber.... It was by this means that the will of deity was communicated to the people through the king or prophet for a given year.

14. God's word is revealed in the temple, usually in the holy of holies, to priests or prophets attached to the temple or to the religious system that it represents.

15. There is a close interrelationship between the temple and law in the ancient Near East. The building or restoration of a temple is perceived as the moving force behind a restating or "codifying" of basic legal principles, and of the "righting" and organizing of proper social order. The building or refurbishing of temples is central to the covenant process.

16. The temple is a place of sacrifice.

17. The temple and its ritual are enshrouded in secrecy. This secrecy relates to the sacredness of the temple precinct and the strict division in ancient times between sacred and profane space.

18. The temple and its cult are central to the economic

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structure of ancient Near Eastern society.

19. The temple plays a legitimizing political role in the ancient Near East.⁸

Even though Lundquist's typology assumes an ancient temple is a three dimensional object, like a building or a mountain, the words of the Book of Mormon come remarkably close to meeting almost all of the criteria Lundquist mentions. This is because most of what constituted an ancient temple has to do with how people understood their temple's functions and teachings, rather than just what they actually do there. It is that understanding that gives their actions meaning.

As we study Book of Mormon's temple text, we discover how very important it is. Through it, we perceive that the concept — even the function—of the ancient Israelite temples also must have had a dual reality. A “temple” was a three-dimensional object that we can see and feel, and in which we can move about to observe and participate in its rites and dramas. But the ancient temple drama was also a complex, intangible reality in which our mind could move about and participate in a dimension unrestricted by walls and a roof, or our concept of time and space. This second reality is epitomized in the temple of the Book of Mormon.⁹

A three dimensional structure can facilitate what people do in their temples, but it can only symbolically represent what happens within their hearts and minds. In contrast, the Book of Mormon can only symbolically represent what is done in a three-dimensional temple, but it can lead people to the actualization of the principles they learn while in a three dimensional temple. For example, a manmade temple is only symbolically associated with the tree of life, but the Book of Mormon can teach us how to come

⁸Lundquist, “The Common Temple Ideology,” 53-76.

⁹For other examples of the significance of sacred books see Geo Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1950).

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to the real tree and partake of its real fruit.

In short, those parts of Lundquist's typology that presuppose walls and a roof are met by the Book of Mormon only in discussion, the structure of its ideas, and symbolism; but the parts of the typology that require no movement within a physical edifice are met by the Book of Mormon with a literalness that a manmade building can only represent symbolically.

The precision with which the Book of Mormon fits the criteria of an ancient temple is much too close to be coincidental. Mormon's overall outline—the sequence of events and sermons that he incorporated into the book—show that he had a thorough knowledge of all facets of ancient Israelite temple worship. The result of his work is a definitive commentary on the functions, purposes, and teachings of the ancient Israelite temple and its services. Indeed, his commentary is so precisely matched to the legitimate purpose, workings and theoretical structure of the ancient Israelite temple drama that the Book of Mormon is virtually an ancient Israelite temple in its own right.¹⁰

¹⁰For discussions of temples with which to compare similarities in the Book of Mormon see: Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord*; Catherine M. Thomas, "The Brother of Jared at the Veil," *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 388-98; Thomas R. Valletta, "Conflicting Orders: Alma and Amulek in Ammonihah," *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 183-231; John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple & Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 369-375.

For discussions on the meaning of the temple see: Beverly Campbell, "Mother Eve, Mentor for Today's Woman: A Heritage of Honor," *The Journal of Collegium Aesculapium* (Spring 1994): 37-49; also her *Eve and the Choice Made in Eden* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2003) and *Eve and the Mortal Journey* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005); Richard O. Cowan, "Sacred Temples Ancient and Modern," *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, 99-120; David S. King, *Come to the House of the Lord* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 2000); David S. King,

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Mormon designed the Book of Mormon so its temple could be portable but not too readily accessible. The temple of the Book of Mormon can only be identified and understood within the conceptual context of a three dimensional temple. The Book of Mormon does not admit its casual readers to its inner temple. Neither is it penetrated by an in-depth, but entirely academic study of the book. Similarly, neither will a casual nor a wholly academic encounter with a three dimensional temple give one access to the depths of its meaning.

The storyline taught in the ancient Israelite temple drama, like the one in the Book of Mormon, is in the same pattern as the cosmic myth.

The cosmic myth is a story that permits us to see the pattern of the ancient temple drama without revealing too much of what else might be seen there. It is a story that tells truth in sacred time. Whether the details of the cosmic myth do or do not represent historical fact has no bearing on whether the story conveys principles of eternal truth. The pattern of the classic cosmic myth is familiar to each of us. It is the most popular theme of our literature. It is the storyline of *Hamlet*, *Star Wars*, *Tom Jones*, and *The Hymn of the Pearl*, and is found frequently in the scriptures. The book of Job is one of the most beautiful examples. The reason these stories have a universal appeal is because we all share the innate sense

Come to the House of the Lord (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 2000); Hugh Nibley, "Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum: The Forty-day Mission of Christ—The Forgotten Heritage," *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, 10-44; Nibley, "A House of Glory," *Temples of the Ancient World*, 29-47; Nibley, "The Meaning of the Temple," *Temple and Cosmos*, 1-41; Nibley, "On the Sacred and the Symbolic," 535-621; Nibley, "What Is a Temple?" Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, ed. Todd M. Compton and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 355-90; Nibley, "Return to the Temple," Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present*, ed. Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 49-54.

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that somehow they are a reflection of our own eternal autobiography. The cosmic myth is always in the pattern of a chiasmus.¹¹ It looks like this:

- A. The hero is required to leave home.
- B. He is given a seemingly impossible task.
- C. He confronts overwhelming odds and certain failure
- B. He succeeds in accomplishing the task.
- A. He returns home, triumphant.

A way of writing that so it will be more meaningful to Latter-day Saints, is this:

- A. The hero is required to leave his premortal home .
- B. Before leaving, he is given a difficult task.
- C. On earth he confronts daunting odds.
- B. Notwithstanding the difficulties, he succeeds.
- A. He returns triumphant to his celestial home.¹²

It is the story of our own eternal progression, of the plan of salvation, the pattern of the Savior's eternal biography, and the drama performed in the ancient Israelite temples.

Consistent with his word, and as further evidence that his intent was to preserve an understanding of the Israelite temple, Nephi patterned the entire book of First Nephi after the cosmic myth, that is, after the same chiastic pattern as the Israelite temple drama:

- A. Nephi and his family must leave home.
- B. They are given a seeming impossible task.
- C. They receive all necessary empowerment.
- D. Rebellion and starvation in the wilderness.

¹¹See John W. Welch, ed. *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1981).

¹²Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord*, 80.

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- C. The Liahona leads to a mountain top and food.
- B. They travel to Bountiful to complete their task.
- A. They arrive at the promised land.¹³

The ancient Israelite temple in the Book of Mormon is veiled but it is not ambiguous. An in-depth study of the Book of Mormon within the spiritual/academic context of an ancient three dimensional temple will open the Book of Mormon temple to the full view of its reader, just as a spiritual/academic study of the three dimensional temple drama within the context of the Book of Mormon will give the activities within the Israelite three dimensional temple meanings that can open our mind to a new sense of eternity. The temple in the Book of Mormon invites us to a worldview that stretches our minds farther than the cosmic myth can reach and more profoundly than the coronation rites and the New Year's drama can begin to unveil. But to those who do not know the legitimate three dimensional temple, that invitation is not extended.

¹³This is from Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord* (2011 edition), 471.