

The Ark and the Tent: Temple Symbolism in the Story of Noah

Extended Abstract

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It has long been recognized that the story of Noah recapitulates the stories of the Creation,¹ the Garden,² and the Fall of Adam and Eve.³ What has been generally underappreciated by modern scholarship, however, is the nature and depth of the relationship between these stories and the liturgy and layout of temples, not only in Israel but also throughout the ancient Near East.⁴ And this relationship goes two ways. Not only have accounts of primeval history been included as a significant part of ancient temple worship, but also, in striking abundance, themes echoing temple architecture, furnishings, ritual, and covenants have been deeply woven into the scripture stories themselves. To the extent that the biblical accounts of the Creation, the Garden, and the Fall are *re*-played in the story of Noah, one might expect similar temple themes to recur.

Rest is one of the most significant themes in the story. Noah’s name means “rest,” the noisy clamor of the wicked prevented rest, Noah’s labors provided rest, and Noah eventually entered into the rest of the Lord, meaning the fulness of His presence.

Apart from the Tabernacle of Moses⁵ and the Temple of Solomon,⁶ Noah’s Ark is the only structure mentioned in the Bible whose design was directly revealed by God.⁷ Like the Tabernacle, Noah’s Ark “was designed as a temple.”⁸ The Ark’s three decks suggest both the three divisions of the Tabernacle and the threefold layout of the Garden Eden.⁹ Indeed, each of the three decks of Noah’s Ark was exactly “the same height as the Tabernacle and three times the area of the Tabernacle court.”¹⁰ Noah’s Ark is made of resinous timbers and reeds (not “rooms”¹¹) covered with waterproof pitch, just as was the reed sanctuary that was the dwelling place of the high god and his consort in *Enuma Elish*,¹² and as was the cult hut that was torn down to provide construction materials for the boat in the stories of *Atrahasis*¹³ and *Gilgamesh*.¹⁴

In considering the role of Noah’s Ark in the account of the Flood, it should be noted specifically that it was a *mobile* sanctuary, as were, of course, the Tabernacle and the Ark of bulrushes that saved the baby Moses.¹⁵ Each of these structures can be plausibly described as a traveling vehicle of rescue that was designed to parallel in function God’s portable pavilion or chariot.¹⁶ I show how this theme plays out in both the original and the Noachic creation accounts. I also explore the rich thematic connections between the emergence of the dry land at Creation, the settling of the Ark at the top of the first mountain to emerge from the Flood, New Year’s Day, the Tabernacle, and Solomon’s Temple.

Nothing in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden can be understood without reference to the temple. Neither can the story of Noah and his family in the garden setting of a renewed earth be appreciated fully without taking the temple as its background. As the book of Moses highlights Adam's diligence in offering sacrifice when he entered the fallen world,¹⁷ so the book of Genesis describes Noah's first action on the renewed earth as being the building of an altar for burnt offerings.¹⁸ Most of the significant elements in the Garden of Eden are present in Noah's garden: a prominent mountain, fruit whose eating leads to important consequences, and a place of holiness where unauthorized entry is forbidden.¹⁹

This holy place becomes the scene of a "Fall" and consequent judgment.²⁰ Often, the instigator of this "Fall" is wrongfully seen to be Noah who, it is reported, succumbed to the intoxicating influence of wine from his vineyard. However, the scriptures omit any hint of wrongdoing by Noah, and instead reserve all condemnation for his grandson Canaan,²¹ who is likened in the *Zohar* to the "primordial serpent"²² who was cursed by God in the Garden of Eden.²³ And what was the sin? If we have understood the situation in Eden correctly,²⁴ it is a perfect parallel to the transgression of Adam and Eve.²⁵ Without proper invitation, Ham approached the curtains of the "tent of Yaweh,"²⁶ and looked at what was "uncovered within"²⁷—literally, "in the midst of"²⁸—the tent, in what seems to be part of an effort to steal Noah's priesthood garment and usurp his authority.²⁹

According to Joseph Smith, Noah "was not drunk, but in a vision."³⁰ "This explains why Shem and [Japheth] refrained from looking at Noah even after they had covered him, significantly 'ahorannî' [Heb. "backward"] occurs elsewhere with regard to avoidance of looking directly at God in the course of revelation."³¹

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Endnotes

- 1 See, e.g., J. H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, p. 94 n. 8:20-9:17.
- 2 See, e.g., A. J. Tomasino, *History*, p. 129.
- 3 See, e.g., J. H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, p. 80; A. J. Tomasino, *History*, pp. 129-130.
- 4 See, e.g., J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *Investiture Panel*.
- 5 Exodus 25:8-40.
- 6 1 Chronicles 28:11-12, 19.
- 7 Genesis 6:14-16. Cf. E. A. Harper, *You Shall Make*, pp. 55-56

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- 8 C. H. T. Fletcher-Louis, *Glory*, p. 41. See also Wyatt's discussion of the arks of Noah and Moses, the ark of the covenant, and the story of Utnapishtim in *Gilgamesh* (N. Wyatt, *Water*, pp. 214-216).
- 9 J. M. Bradshaw, *Moses Temple Themes*, pp. 77-87. Cf. Ephrem the Syrian, *Paradise*, p. 53; A. S.-M. Ri, *Caverne Syriaque*, p. 208. See the discussion in E. A. Harper, *You Shall Make*, p. 50 of readings of Genesis 6:16 in the *Targums* and the *Septuagint*, and for a description of parallels in 1 Kings 6:6 and Ezekiel 41:7.
- 10 E.g., J. D. G. Dunn *et al.*, *Commentary*, p. 44.
- 11 J. M. McCann, *Woven*.
- 12 E. A. Speiser, *Creation Epic*, 1:71-79, pp. 59-60.
- 13 S. Dalley, *Atrahasis*, 3:21-22, p. 29.
- 14 A. George, *Gilgamesh*, 11:22-24, p. 89.
- 15 Exodus 2:3-5.
- 16 Cf. N. Wyatt, *Darkness*, p. 96.
- 17 Moses 5:5-8.
- 18 Genesis 8:20.
- 19 E.g., J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image*, p. 248.
- 20 Genesis 9:21-27.
- 21 T. L. Brodie, *Dialogue*, p. 192.
- 22 D. C. Matt, *Zohar 1*, 1:73a, p. 431.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 1:73b, p. 435, n. 708.
- 24 A Jewish tradition about the two special trees in the Garden of Eden holds that the foliage of the Tree of Knowledge hid the Tree of Life from direct view: "God did not specifically prohibit eating from the Tree of Life because the Tree of Knowledge formed a hedge around it; only after one had partaken of the latter and cleared a path for himself could one come close to the Tree of Life" (R. M. Zlotowitz *et al.*, *Bereishis*, p. 101, cf. p. 96. See also L. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:70, 5:91 n. 50).

Consistent with recent scholarship that sees the Garden as a temple prototype (e.g., G. K. Beale, *Temple*, pp. 66-80; R. N. Holzapfel *et al.*, *Father's House*, pp. 17-19; J. M. Lundquist, *Reality*; J. Morrow, *Creation*; D. W. Parry, *Garden*; J. A. Parry *et al.*, *Temple in Heaven*; T. Stordalen, *Echoes*, pp. 112-116, 308-309; G. J. Wenham, *Sanctuary Symbolism*), Ephrem the Syrian, a fourth-century Christian, called the Tree of Knowledge "the veil for the sanctuary" (Ephrem the Syrian, *Paradise*, 3:5, p. 92). He pictured Paradise as a great mountain, with the Tree of Knowledge providing a boundary partway up the slopes. The Tree of Knowledge, Ephrem concludes, "acts as a sanctuary curtain [i.e., veil] hiding the Holy of Holies which is the Tree of Life higher up" (Brock in *ibid.*, p. 52). Recurring throughout the Old Testament are echoes of such a layout of sacred spaces and the accounts of dire

consequences for those who attempt unauthorized entry through the veil into the innermost sanctuary.

Careful analysis of the narrative features of the Genesis account provides support for these ancient perspectives. The subtle conflation of the location of two trees “in the midst” of the Garden of Eden prepares readers for the confusion that later ensues in the dialogue with the serpent, and set the stage for the transgression of Adam and Eve. See J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *Mormonism's Satan*, pp. 18-19; J. M. Bradshaw, *The tree of knowledge as the veil of the sanctuary* for more detailed argumentation.

25 This theme recurs throughout Genesis 1-11. In a seminal article relating to the story of Noah, the eminent Genesis scholar Ronald Hendel makes the case that one of the most prominent themes in the first eleven chapters of the Bible is “a series of... transgressions of boundaries” that had been set up in the beginning to separate mankind from the dwelling place of Divinity (R. S. Hendel, *Demigods*, p. 23). David Carr arrived at a similar conclusion, observing that both the pre-flood and post-flood stories of mankind “end in the same place: a threat to the divine-human boundary and God’s work to reinforce it” (D. M. Carr, *Reading*, p. 239). Tryggve Mettinger also recognized the “stress on a borderline between the divine and human spheres... in Genesis 1-11” (T. N. D. Mettinger, *Eden*, p. 127). Likewise, Robert Oden highlighted the “human aspirations to divine status” as an underlying theme in all these stories, and the fact that such “status “is ultimately denied them” (R. A. Oden, Jr., *Divine aspirations in Atrahasis and in Genesis 1-11*, pp. 211, 215). (Note, however, the prime exceptions of Enoch and Noah, of whom it was explicitly said that they “walked with God” (Moses 6:39, 7:69, 8:27. Cf. Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 17:1; Genesis 24:40).

26 Koler and Greenspahn, as discussed in W. Vogels, *Cham Découvre*, pp. 566-567. Cf., e.g., D. C. Matt, *Zohar* 1, 1:73a-b, p. 434 n. 700: “‘the tent of the vineyard,’ namely the tent of *Shekhinah*.” Given the many allusions in the story of Noah to the Tabernacle of Moses, it would have been natural for the ancient reader to have seen in Noah’s tent at the foot of the mount where the Ark-Temple rested, a parallel with the sacred “Tent of Meeting” at the foot of Mount Sinai, at whose top God’s heavenly tent had been spread. R. J. Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, p. 123, see also p. 191 explains this recurrent phenomenon with respect to the “ancient religious principle, ‘like is like’”: “The similarity in form between the earthly dwelling of the god and its heavenly prototype brings about the presence of the deity.”

27 Genesis 9:21.

28 Compare Moses 3:9; 4:9, 14.

29 H. W. Nibley, *Lehi* 1988, pp. 168-170; H. W. Nibley, *What*, p. 366; H. W. Nibley, *Vestments*, pp. 128-131; H. W. Nibley, *Message* 2005, pp. 309-311; H. W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon*, 3:63-65. Cf., e.g., A. I. A. I. M. I. I. al-Tha'labi, *Lives*, pp. 190-193, 228-229; L. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:177, 5:199 nn. 78-80; M. M.

Noah, Jasher, 7:24-30, p. 15, 27:10-12, p. 72; M.-A. Ouaknin *et al.*, Rabbi Éliézer, 24, pp. 145-146.

- 30 Joseph Smith, Jr., as reported by William Allen to Charles Lowell Walker (C. L. Walker, Diary, 12 May 1881, 2:554). Cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, Genesis Apocryphon, 13:8-15:20, pp. 89-93, which relates an account of a dream vision of Noah that immediately followed the ritual partaking of the wine by him and his family. In a statement that presumably preceded his reading of Noah's "drunkenness" as a "vision," the Prophet stated that (J. Smith, Jr., Teachings, 7 November 1841, p. 193): "Noah was a righteous man, and yet he drank wine and became intoxicated; the Lord did not forsake him in consequence thereof, for he retained all the power of his priesthood."
- 31 Koler and Greenspahn, quoted in W. Vogels, *Cham Découvre*, p. 567 n. 31.