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St. Peter's Basilica as *Templum Dei*: Continuation of the Ancient Near Eastern Temple Tradition in the Christian Cathedral

Rachel Ann Seely

Inscribed on the entrance of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is *Templum Vaticani* (Temple of the Vatican). Upon entering St. Peter's, one can see many parallels between it and Solomon's Temple in both architecture and orientation. Even more striking are the similarities between the political and religious roles of St. Peter's Basilica and those of an ancient Near Eastern temple. Christians believed that Christ fulfilled the Levitical temple functions and that temple worship finally ended with the destruction of the Second Temple at Jerusalem in AD 70, but Christians never completely escaped from the idea that a temple was necessary. This is seen later through the continuation of pilgrimages to sacred sites (such as those in Jerusalem and later in Rome) and through the building of magnificent churches that would house many of the rites that once belonged to the temple.

Hugh Nibley's essay "Christian Envy of the Temple" explains that many Christians think that the physical temple, or the building itself, was replaced with a spiritual temple, or the church: "they boast that the Church possesses all the physical properties of the Temple—the oil, myrrh, the altar, the incense, hymns, priestly robes, etc., everything, in fact, but the Temple itself, for 'in the
place of the tangible Temple we behold the spiritual.' Strange, that the solid walls should vanish and all the rest remain?"1 Porphyry around AD 262–63 saw the Christians as "inconsistent and irrational since they deprecated pagan worship but, he says, they 'erected great buildings' of their own, 'imitating the construction of temples.'"2 St. Peter’s Basilica is an example of how Christians incorporated the ancient temple tradition into their contemporary architecture and worship. To explain this phenomenon, John M. Lundquist has developed a typology of elements permeating temple traditions throughout the ancient Near East.3 By applying the Lundquist temple typology to St. Peter’s Basilica, we can see the relationship of Christian sacred space to the ancient temple.

St. Peter’s Basilica

Vatican Hill has not always been a sacred site for Christians. Originally it was a Roman necropolis; not until AD 150–70 did Christians begin to revere it as the burial site of Peter. The tradition that Peter’s grave could be found on Vatican Hill began about one hundred years after Peter’s execution in AD 64. It is unclear whether the Christian community recovered the body of Peter from the executioners because the bodies of the executed were often thrown into the Tiber River.4 To mark the grave, there was a small trophy and later an aedicula (part of which remains today) built over the site.5 The Christians were so exact in orienting the Aedicula that instead of building it around the existing structures, they cut into the Red Wall, so that the monument could be erected exactly over the body they believed to be Peter’s. Although a shift of only fifty cm would have avoided damaging the Red Wall, the early Christians insisted that the Aedicula be located directly over

5. Ibid., 153–55.
the gravesite. Later, in concurrence with this attitude, Constantine decided to build St. Peter's Basilica on Vatican Hill, preventing an exact orientation with the Aedicula. This audacious endeavor by Constantine meant the destruction of an ancient Roman necropolis, a place where people still came to give offerings to their ancestral dead.

Although Vatican Hill did not always function as a temple-like, once Constantine built his basilica, the temple aspects began to be incorporated. According to Eusebius, Constantine's churches were equated with temples. Innocent III's inscription on the basilica of Constantine reads,

\[
\text{summa Petri sedes est h(a)ec sacra principis aedes,}
\]
\[
\text{mater cunctar(um) decor et decus ecclesiar(um).}
\]
\[
\text{devotus XPO qui templo servit in isto}
\]
\[
\text{flores virtutis capiet fructusq(ue) salutis.}
\]

"This sacred shrine of the Prince of the Apostles is the chief dwelling-place of Peter, the mother, the ornament, the glory of all churches. Whoso serve Christ devoutly in this temple shall receive the flower of virtue and the fruit of salvation." In 590, Gregory of Tours recorded the impressions of the deacon Agiulf:

"sanctus vero Petrus apostolus . . . sepultus est in templo quod vocitabatur antiquitus Vaticanum. 'St. Peter . . . is buried in the temple formerly called Vaticanum.'" Constantine's Basilica was in a state of disrepair by the fifteenth century, and around 1450 Pope Nicholas V decided to rebuild it. Most features of Constantine's Basilica were leveled, but some were preserved and incorporated into the new structure. The current structure of St. Peter's Basilica is the one begun by Pope Nicholas V and continued on by Bramante, Michelangelo, Bernini, and Maderno. Today St. Peter's Basilica stands as a symbol of the Catholic Church and is also a Christian

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6. Ibid., 155.
10. Toynbee and Perkins, 224, 247.
pilgrimage destination. Now let us examine the Basilica of St. Peter's in respect to Lundquist's temple typology.

1. The temple is built on separate, sacral set-apart space. The temple and its ritual are enshrouded in secrecy.

The builders of St. Peter's Basilica created levels of set-apart space. The first level of separate space is the Vatican, a self-contained, albeit tiny, country set apart by massive walls. It is considered holy ground for Catholics. The second level of set-apart space in the current structure is St. Peter's square, an oval courtyard set apart by Bernini's triple row of Doric columns. One must pass through either the colonnade or the break in the colonnade before entering St. Peter's. The next level of set-apart space is the portico area. Next, one can enter the doors into the actual Basilica of St. Peter's where the space is divided into increasing levels of sacredness. Constantine's church had a veil or screen separating the transept from the apse as a part of Peter's shrine. The current structure, which dates back to the Renaissance, still maintains this sanctuary, or holier space, right above St. Peter's tomb, which is below the Baldacchino. This is where the altar resides, and only the priests and those taking part in certain ceremonies are allowed to enter. The Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism describes this holier space: "The Christian sanctuary, insofar as it was a temple, recalled in some way the holy of holies, in the temple of Jerusalem."

2. The temple is oriented toward the four world regions, or cardinal directions, and to various celestial bodies such as the polar star.

The orientation of St. Peter's Basilica is interesting because it has been dictated by the place where Peter's body is supposedly buried. Thus, St. Peter's is not exactly oriented in accordance to

11. Ibid., 201.
the cardinal directions or celestial bodies. The main doors are on the east side of the building and the visitor ascends towards the west to Peter's tomb. It is appropriate that the worshipper walks west to approach Peter's grave because death is associated with the setting of the sun in the west. This also makes St. Peter's oriented in a similar way to the temple at Jerusalem, where the main doors were on the east side of the building and the holy of holies was in the western portion of the temple.

3. Temples, in their architectonic orientation, express the idea of a successive ascension toward heaven.

The ascension aspect of St. Peter's is very prominent. The oblong St. Peter's square is terraced and, in order to enter the basilica, one must ascend many stairs. Once inside the basilica, the worshipper encounters many symbols of heaven, from the enormous cherubs lining the wall to the dome of heaven near the center of the church. The dome's star motif emphasizes that it represents the heavens (see Figure 1).

Under the dome is Bernini's bronze Baldacchino canopy, which sets off the main altar (see Figure 2). The altar is not only a feature associated with sacrifice but in "The Catholic Liturgy and the Mormon Temple" Marcus von Wellnitz explains "the altar also appears as throne of God, the mercy seat, covered by a royal canopy as over a king's throne from which he ruled his domain." Bernini's large bronze Baldacchino emphasizes the throne of God in Baldacchino's relation to the royal canopy. Jocelyn Toynbee, a professor of classical archaeology at Cambridge, writes, "Men might marvel at the form and workmanship of the columns of the canopy; but the canopy itself spoke a language that was familiar to all. As an attribute of divinity it had many centuries of history behind it, at first in the ancient East and later in the Hellenistic world, whence it passed, quite early in the Empire, into the repertory of Roman imperial symbolism." An interesting

14. Toynbee and Perkins, 211.
sidenote that ties the Baldacchino to ancient Roman temples, as Toynbee explains, is that "to provide metal for this canopy, the porch of the Pantheon was stripped of its gilded bronze tiles—whence the famous pasquinade: *quod non fecerunt barbari, fecerunt Barberini* (‘what the barbarians did not do, the Barberini did’).”

In addition to the altar, at the end of the nave is an actual throne—the Throne of St. Peter (see Figure 3). Above the Throne of St. Peter is Bernini’s elaborate stained glass window depicting rays shooting from the sun with a dove in the center. The setting sun shines through the window, illuminating the image into a heavenly brightness. The rays and heavenly motif are continued in gilt sculpting that lifts the Throne of St. Peter into space, making it seem to float in golden light and sculpture. The combination of the rays of light, the dove, and the golden chair floating in clouds is a clear reference to encountering the throne of God. The ascension to heaven is complete at the very end of the nave with the artistic rendition of the heavenly throne.

4. Sacral, communal meals are carried out in connection with temple ritual, often during or at the conclusion of a covenantal ceremony. Temples are associated with initiation into the presence of deity.

The Catholic liturgy is complex and replete with ceremonies that reflect temple ritual. Nibley writes, “Rome has not abolished the rites of the Temple, however, but simply taken them over, every particle of the ancient ordinances and imagery having been absorbed by the Christian sacraments.” Sacral, communal meals can be seen in the partaking of the mass. “The mass, as part of the liturgy, becomes therefore another initiation, ‘the re-enactment of the work of our salvation under a symbolic veil,’” as Wellnitz explains. “Since the mass is indeed another initiation, the celebrants are obliged to go through a further

15. Ibid., 238, fn. 71.
16. Ibid., 135.
cleansing ceremony before commencing the liturgy, as would be expected before initiation.”  

Another example of a practice reminiscent of temple ritual and initiation into the presence of deity is the Catholic confession. Wellnitz writes, “The activity in the confession booth could be representative of a symbolic veil scene, for the candidate appears before God, who alone can forgive sins and who is represented by the priest; he meets with him in solitude for a personal examination and audience, separated only by a curtain or screen.” The architectural ascension to heaven led to the throne of God, discussed in the previous section, and is related to the initiation into the presence of deity.

The rite of the opening of the holy door at St. Peter’s is tied to coming into the presence of God. Wellnitz explains this idea in writing:

The ceremonial entry into the church and to the altar in the sanctuary is also acted out in the ritual of the opening of the Holy Door, the Porta Santa at St. Peter in Rome, and other carefully selected churches. This rite is executed only every twenty-five years and represents the entry of the children of God into the presence of the Lord. . . . A prayer said by Pope Clement VIII during the rite in 1600 demonstrates clearly that the ceremony does indeed portray entry into the temple of God: ‘Open unto me the gates of justice, when I am entered I will praise my Lord. I will enter, O Lord, into Thy house. I will adore Thee in Thy fear in Thy temple.’

5. The temple is associated with the realm of the dead, the underworld, the afterlife, and the grave.

The Basilica of St. Peter was built to venerate the tomb of Peter; the original purpose of the building therefore was to

19. Ibid., 29.
20. Ibid., 34. See also fn. 191: Herbert Thurston, The Holy Year of the Jubilee (London; Sands & Co., 1900), 284, 406. This door is compared to the King’s Gate or the Holy Gate or even the Golden Gate in Jerusalem.
commemorate a grave. Originally Vatican hill was a necropolis, and, although much of the necropolis was demolished when Constantine built his basilica there, a city of the dead remains beneath the current structure of St. Peter’s. Prearranged tours with Vatican guides can be obtained to enter into this realm of the dead to view what remains of the pagan necropolis and the original Aedicula over the grave of Peter. Above the necropolis excavations is the basement or crypt of St. Peter’s, where hundreds of popes and other Christians are buried. Tombs and monuments to the dead can be seen throughout St. Peter’s. In addition to the physical association of the actual Basilica with the realm of the dead, the liturgy of St. Peter’s is also associated with the afterlife in a very spiritual and literal sense. Even the porphyry baptismal font was once part of a classical sarcophagus.21

6. The temple is the architectural embodiment of the cosmic mountain. The cosmic mountain represents the primordial hillock, the place that first emerged from the waters that covered the earth during the creative process.

The cosmic mountain is not as physically apparent in St. Peter’s Basilica. It is not built on a particularly high place, nor is it architecturally designed to represent a mountain, like the ancient Near Eastern ziggurat. Nevertheless, the primordial hillock is often tied to Calvary because Christ was crucified, according to tradition, on the primordial mound where his blood could cleanse the fall of Adam. This is most clearly illustrated in the Calvary at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where the cave of Adam is located directly below the Crucifixion site. Therefore, as the worshippers follow the Stations of the Cross in St. Peter’s Basilica, they are re-enacting the ascent to Calvary and, in a sense, climbing the cosmic mountain.

7. The temple is often associated with the waters of life that flow forth from a spring within the building itself.

While there is not a spring that comes forth from St. Peter's Basilica, there are several ways in which St. Peter's is associated with the waters of life. There are fountains in the courtyard and upon entering the Basilica the worshiper encounters large putti on the right and left holding holy water basins. Holy water is used for purification before entering the sacred space or proceeding with certain ceremonies. Also present are the waters of baptism in the font of St. Peter's. Representing the waters of life, the baptismal font is associated with rebirth.

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

In Israelite temples, such as the Tabernacle and Solomon's temple, the symbolic tree of life was found in the candelabrum, or menorah. Professor Donald Parry writes, "The fact that the menorah was a stylized tree of life is made clear in the description produced in Exodus 25:31-40."22 In Christianity the symbol of the tree of life is directly related to the cross. Thus, not only do the candelabrum and the cross both have tree of life symbolism, but they both hold life—the cross held "the light of the world" and the candelabrum holds physical light. Not only are there crosses of all sizes in the interior and on the exterior of St. Peter's, but the building itself is built in the shape of a cross. "The cross is, in early traditions, the tree of life, bringing us back into the presence of God through the Savior's atonement (see Epistle of Barnabas 11:1-11)," as John A. Tvedtness explains.23 St. Peter's contains large candelabra that are reminiscent of menorahs but which play a smaller role than the menorah did in lighting the building because natural light pours through

clerestory windows and the oculus in the dome in order to light the interior of St. Peter's. Also, in relation to the tree of life, temples are often associated with gardens, and directly behind St. Peter's Basilica are the extensive Vatican Gardens.

9. The plan and measurements of the temple are revealed by God to the king, and the plan must be carefully carried out.

We do not have thorough documentation regarding the inception of St. Peter's Basilica. There was a shrine on Vatican Hill from about AD 170 that inspired Constantine to erect his large basilica in the fourth century. "The earliest explicit reference to the construction of the church is probably that contained in the mosaic that once adorned the triumphal arch (the arch between nave and transept) of the old church. It showed Constantine presenting the church to Christ, accompanied by St. Peter, and bore the metrical inscription:

\[
\text{quod duce te mundus surrexit in astra triumphans}
\]
\[
\text{banc Constantinus victor tibi condidt aula(m)}
\]

"because under Thy leadership the world rose up triumphant to the skies, Constantine, himself victorious, has founded this hall in Thy honor."24 This mosaic was destroyed by 1525, but this inscription from the mosaic was first recorded in the *Sylloge Einsidlen*, a collection of inscriptions compiled no later than the ninth century and preserved in the monastery of Einsiedeln. While God did not necessarily reveal the plan for St. Peter's Basilica to Constantine, it was certainly dedicated to God.

10. The tablets of destiny (tablets of the decrees) are consulted and God's word is revealed in the temple. There is a close relationship between the temple and the law.

The law is contained in St. Peter's Basilica in the Bible on the pulpit near the altar and in symbolic depictions of the Ten

Commandments throughout the Basilica. Also, although the Catholics do not exactly term it revelation, whenever there is an important announcement or doctrinal issue the Pope stands in front of St. Peter’s, under a canopy, and proclaims it to all who are at St. Peter’s square and by extension to the world (see Figure 4). Lundquist writes, “The temple creates law and makes law possible. It allows for the transformation of a chaotic universe into a cosmos.”25 Just as Ezra read out the law from the temple in Jerusalem, the Pope reads out the law from the portico of St. Peter’s. The process of law being presented at the temple can also be seen in the Book of Mormon with Benjamin (Mosiah 1:18), Limhi (Mosiah 7:17–18), Jacob (1:17), and Christ (3 Ne. 11:1). As for Latter-day Saints, we gather around the temple in Salt Lake City (either physically or via satellite broadcasts) to hear the law, instruction, and commandments from our prophets.

11. The temple is a place of sacrifice.

Sacrifice is a focus in St. Peter’s as a result of the many altars found within the Basilica. Wellnitz explains that “the concept of an altar was not taken from the service in the synagogue for there was no altar there; it is an adaptation from the temple in Jerusalem, or from any temple for that matter.”26 This shows a profound influence of the ancient temple on Christian church architecture, for altars are found in most Christian churches. The altar not only represents the blood sacrifices of the Temple at Jerusalem and the Atonement of Christ but is also a key element in the Catholic liturgy. Wellnitz continues, “The Catholic mass evolved around the altar, which was the central place of worship and ritual in the church. It was literally the ark of the covenant where covenants and vows were made to God. . . . However, the altar is also a replacement for the altar of sacrifice in the temple court at Jerusalem. . . . It symbolizes the sacrifice of Christ and,

at the same time, the sacrifice of the individual participant which he is willing to make for Christ.”

The mass not only symbolizes the sacrificial death of Christ, but it actually re-enacts the sacrifice on the altar.

12. The temple is the central organizing and unifying institution in a nation and plays a legitimizing political role in the ancient Near East. The temple is associated with abundance and prosperity.

Constantine’s construction of the Basilica of St. Peter was certainly an attempt by the leader to legitimize his political role in Rome. Centuries later, in the Renaissance, the rebuilding of St. Peter’s was a re-legitimization of the political power of the popes. Lundquist writes that “the building or restoration of the temple legitimizes the state or the society.”

According to Nibley, “The Emperor Constantine’s plan . . . was the old ‘hierocentric’ concept of the sacral state, represented among others by the Roma aeterna of which Christian Rome claimed to be the revival, but also typified from time immemorial in the temples of the East, each a scale-model of the cosmos, which was thought literally to revolve around it. Constantine’s architectural projects proclaim his familiarity with the idea of a templum mundi as the physical center of the universe, just as clearly as his panegyrists hail him in the role of Solomon the Temple-builder.”

This shows that Constantine’s basilicas were a central, organizing, and unifying institution like ancient temples.

Additionally, St. Peter’s became a center for pilgrimage and, although the Vatican was on the other side of the Tiber from Rome proper, St. Peter’s created a new city-center for Rome. The Holy Roman Emperors took advantage of this new central

27. Ibid., 28.
institution by choosing to be crowned in St. Peter's Basilica. Toynbee writes about this event, "The coronation of Charlemagne in St. Peter's on Christmas Eve of the year 800 was the culminating point of a fifty-year-old collaboration between the Frankish kingdom and the Papacy. Charlemagne already controlled a large part of what had been the western Roman Empire; and by his coronation he laid claim to be the legitimate successor of the Roman emperors of Antiquity." Although Charlemagne wanted to be the legitimate successor to the ancient Roman emperors, he did not go to the place where these ancient Roman emperors had been crowned. Rather, Charlemagne went to St. Peter's, the templum vaticani, in his effort to make it the new organizing and legitimizing center of society. St. Peter's and the Vatican continue today to be the organizing and unifying center for the global Catholic Church. As Nibley writes, "The temple marks the universal meeting place of all great societies. It is actually the source of everything that makes civilization."  

**Conclusion**

There are two additional elements worth noting about St. Peter's as templum dei: its association with scholarship and the relation of its twisted columns to Solomon's Temple. Nibley writes that "central to all great temples was the great library. The temple is definitely a school, a very high school of intense study, as temples in the past have been." Tied to St. Peter's is the Vatican Library, containing important manuscripts, and the Vatican Museum, containing paintings, sculptures, tapestries, and other artifacts. The Vatican is truly a great place of scholarship and learning.

The second element worth noting is the interesting history of the twisted columns that have been characteristic of St. Peter's since the Basilica of Constantine (see Figure 5). One tradition

30. Toynbee and Perkins, 244.
32. Ibid., 36.
asserts that these spiral columns were designed in imitation of the columns of Solomon's Temple. In the Basilica of Constantine the spiral columns originally upheld the canopy above St. Peter's tomb, and Toynbee believes they "were part of a set of six sent for the purpose. . . . They are of classical workmanship, dating from about the end of the second century AD, and they must almost certainly have come from some well-known building in the neighborhood of Constantinople." Toynbee posits that the twelve spiral columns of St. Peter's were the models for all subsequent spiral columns in Christian art and architecture. She writes:

Jean Fouquet had seen and drawn them in the forties of the fifteenth century; and later he reproduced them to illustrate the Temple in the Book of Hours of Etienne Chevalier and in his miniature for the 'Jewish Antiquities' of Josephus. But they would have attracted little attention outside Italy if it had not been for Raphael. When he was commissioned, in 1515, to prepare a series of cartoons for tapestries to hang in the Sistine Chapel—the cartoons that are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum—he used these columns to illustrate the scene of the Healing of the Lame man at the Beautiful Gate. The tapestries woven from these cartoons carried representations of the St. Peter's columns all over Europe, and it was these that inspired the countless corkscrew columns and colonettes that were used in European art from the mid-sixteenth century onwards.

There is a possibility that the tradition of the twisted pillars of Solomon's Temple came from artists using the spiral columns of St. Peter's to illustrate Solomon's Temple. Or, if the

33. Toynbee and Perkins, 247.
34. Ibid., 250.
spiral column tradition is earlier than St. Peter’s, perhaps the original builders used spiral columns as a reference to temple architecture.

The Lundquist temple typology is clearly illustrated in the structure and role of St. Peter’s Basilica. It would be useful to make a more complete study of the development of churches and cathedrals across Europe. For example, contemporaries of the dedication of Canterbury Cathedral in England described it as more splendid than any of its kind “since the dedication of the Temple of Solomon.” Also, in 1124 Abbot Suger of France wrote that he modeled his cathedral St. Denis after both Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and the Temple of Solomon as it was described in the Bible. It is clear that in certain ways Christians saw their Cathedrals as related to the ancient Near Eastern temples. However, remarkable as the similarities between St. Peter’s Basilica and the ancient Temple at Jerusalem may be, it is important to remember Hugh Nibley’s warning about the emptiness of temple worship without the proper authority. “One thing that leads us to suspect that most of the great powerhouses whose traces still remain were never anything more than pompous imitations or replicas is their sheer magnificence. . . . After the vital powers are spent, then is the time for the super-buildings, the piling of stone upon stone for monuments of staggering mass and proportion.”

36. Lawrence Cunningham and John Reich, *Culture and Values* (Fort Worth: Harcourt, 2002), 226.
Figure 1. Star motifs on the dome.  
www.ewtn.com/gallery/sp/sp1.htm

Figure 2. Bernini’s Baldacchino or royal canopy.  
www.ewtn.com/gallery/sp/sp1.htm
Figure 3. The Throne of St. Peter.
www.ewtn.com/gallery/sp/sp1.htm
Figure 4. Porch of St. Peter's and the canopy under which the Pope stands when speaking. www.sousacorp.com/jubilee1.htm

Figure 5. Two of the original marble, spiral columns can be seen in the gallery. www.ewtn.com/gallery/sp/sp1.htm