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The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis

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Naftali S. Cohn. *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Avram R. Shannon

As John Lundquist already pointed out years ago, ancient temples served as “the central, organizing, unifying institution in ancient Near Eastern society.”¹ For many of the monarchies that populated the ancient Near East and the empires that dominated later antiquity, the temple undergirded and supported the kingship in its political as well as religious roles. This system worked very well when the groups in power controlled the temple and were able to use its authority to support their own rule and authority. However, because temples can be destroyed or sidelined in the vagaries of war and the development of societies, groups are not always able to maintain a direct connection between their authority and the temple. But in the midst of such changes to cultures and societies, it is still possible for a group to support and maintain its authority by appealing to the temple, even if that temple no longer stands.

Such is the argument of Naftali Cohn’s *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis*. In this carefully researched and well-argued book, Cohn addresses the concern the Mishnah—the second-century-CE collation of Jewish law—had for the administration and organization of the Jerusalem Temple. This interest existed in spite of the fact that at the point when the Mishnah was codified, the temple had been destroyed for over a hundred years. Yet the Mishnah contains detailed narratives describing the sacrifices at the Jerusalem Temple, discussions of temple-focused practices such as the swearing of vows and the eating of sanctified food, and even criticisms of the priests who

1. John M. Lundquist, “What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology,” in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1994), 94.

were responsible for maintaining and running the temple.² This specificity naturally leads to the question, What is the purpose of promulgating something as a foundational religious text when it points to a defunct institution? Cohn argues that the rabbinic sages used narratives about the Jerusalem Temple to establish themselves as ritual experts. Since the temple was the central ancient Jewish institution, by establishing themselves as experts over the rituals associated with it, the ancient sages were able to extend their influence to all aspects of Jewish life (15). This move was especially important because the ancient rabbinic sages were embedded in a Roman empire where non-Jewish authorities held all practical powers. In addition, the sages of the Mishnah were not yet in control of even Jewish society. Their detailed narratives of the temple helped provide a rationale for their claims to authority.

The first chapter of *The Memory of the Temple* connects the Mishnaic sages to jurists under Roman law, asserting that the rabbis co-opted the cultural and legal notion of serving as jurists from the dominant Roman culture (36–37). This lays the groundwork for a discussion in chapter 2 on the Mishnaic presentation of the Great Court, often called the Sanhedrin. Cohn argues that the sages of the Mishnah presented the Great Court as the ultimate arbiter of Jewish ritual matters, an argument that allows the sages, by connecting themselves to the Great Court, to claim that privilege for themselves. In chapters 3 and 4, Cohn discusses some of the specific techniques deployed by the sages to construct their identity through an appeal to the temple. Chapter 3 deals with detailed ritual narratives, while chapter 4 shows how the rabbinic sages' reconstruction of the sacred space of the temple placed the institution firmly in their hands. Chapter 5 is one of the most useful for a Latter-day Saint audience because it shows the power the temple continued to exert not just in a rabbinic environment, but also in the wider Jewish discourse, as well as in Roman and Christian thought. The book finishes with a conclusion and two appendices in which Cohn lists the various ritual narratives he sees in the Mishnah.

Although Cohn's book is focused on the Mishnah, and therefore on the often nitty-gritty legal aspects of rabbinic Judaism, his argument has

2. This has already been noticed in the late Jacob Neusner's "Map without Territory: Mishnah's System of Sacrifice and Sanctuary," *History of Religions* 19, no. 2 (November 1979): 103–27; and in Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

interesting implications for Latter-day Saint students of temples in both their own and others' traditions. In fact, the process of constructing authority and identity through the temple, which is laid out so well by Cohn, is suggestive of the power and authority that the temple can have. Even in a post-temple world, the rabbinic sages appealed to the authority of the temple to legitimate their own religious experience. The experience and practice of the sages, as laid out by Cohn, is something that can shed light on other religious groups, ancient and modern, and the authority that the temple can have within religious discourse. Historian of religion Bruce Lincoln has written on the ways ideas and discourse are "deployed" in supporting constructions of society.³ Ritual discourse, like that employed in a temple context, is just one way to present ideological and theological notions.⁴ This type of discourse is significant for Latter-day Saints, for whom the temple's ancient appeal is retained, something that puts the Saints in continuity with much of the ancient world.

This regard for the temple is something that marks Latter-day Saints as different from both mainstream Christianity and the Christians who lived immediately after Jesus. In many ways, the early Christians were not quite sure what to do with the presence, or lack, of a temple, something that Cohn addresses in the fifth chapter of his book. Hugh Nibley already made this observation in his seminal article "Christian Envy of the Temple," in which he explains that the Church Fathers were aware that the temple was a vital part of how God dealt with his people in times past and had different responses to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.⁵ Cohn notes, however, "Among early Christians, Temple discourse was

3. Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–6.

4. For an example of how both immanence and the distance of God was ritually presented in the Jerusalem Temple, see Avram R. Shannon, "'Come Near unto Me': Guarded Space and Its Mediators in the Jerusalem Temple," in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, forty-second annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, ed. David R. Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 66–84.

5. This article was first published in the second and third numbers of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* 50 (October 1959): 97–123; (January 1960): 229–40. It was subsequently republished in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol. 4 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 391–434. As an anecdotal aside, this article is the Nibley article I most often find cited in the field of Jewish Studies.

widespread and meaningful” (102). In light of the observations brought to the fore by Cohn, especially the observation that a temple does not have to actually be present for an individual or group to take something of its authority, it is not surprising that there is a strong response from Christians to the temple, even if that response is somewhat mixed.

According to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, one of the accusations leveled against Jesus was that he said, “I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days” (Matt. 26:61). Jesus also prophesied that not one stone of the temple would stand on top of another (Mark 13:2; Matt. 24:2). These prophecies recorded in the New Testament suggest that Jesus’s earliest followers were aware that he said things that could be interpreted as attacks on the temple. The Gospel of Matthew, which of all the Gospels is in many ways most concerned with the Jerusalem Temple, records Jesus stating that he is greater than the temple (Matt. 12:6). Christine Shepardson notes that the “early Christian authors predictably and consistently interpreted the destruction [of the temple] as evidence of God’s rejection of the Jews and of the rituals of Temple sacrifice.”⁶ But there is also the notion that for the earliest Christians, Jesus was at the center, replacing, in some ways, the temple, though still closely associated with it (102–5). Rejection and supersessionism is by no means the whole story.

The New Testament Pauline corpus presents a good example of this. In 1 Corinthians 3:16–17, Paul tells the Corinthian Saints that *they* are the temple of God. Even as Paul is moving away from the temple, he does so by underscoring its importance. A similar move, along with the associated underscoring of importance, is present in the noncanonical Epistle of Barnabas, especially in chapters 6 and 7.⁷

The authors of the Book of Mormon also hint at the authority derived from the temple. The clearest example of this is Nephi, who builds a temple as part of the legitimization of his royal authority. In spite of his misgivings (see 2 Ne. 5:18), Nephi functions in many ways as an ancient king, performing functions such as fighting wars for his people. In fact, in many ways 1 Nephi functions as a royal apology. (The word *apology*

6. Christine Shepardson, “Paschal Politics: Deploying the Temple’s Destruction against Fourth-Century Judaizers,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 62, no. 3 (2008): 238.

7. See William H. Shea, “The Sabbath in the Epistle of Barnabas,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 4, no. 2 (1966): 149–75. Shea suggests that the author of the epistle is essentially anti-Jewish and supersessionist but also notes the centrality of the temple and the covenant to the epistle’s theology.

here indicates explanation rather than an expression of regret.) Some ancient kings deployed this type of text to explain why they became king instead of the expected heir. Scholars have seen a royal apology in parts of the David story because the text explores why David was chosen as king. The explanation given is David's covenant loyalty to God.⁸ Nephi's presentation of himself in the Book of Mormon seems to create a similar argument.⁹

Nephi says that although he was unwilling to serve his people as a king, he "did for them according to that which was in [his] power" (2 Ne. 5:18). One service Nephi provides for his people is building a temple: "And I, Nephi, did build a temple; and I did construct it after the manner of the temple of Solomon save it were not built of so many precious things; for they were not to be found upon the land, wherefore, it could not be built like unto Solomon's temple. But the manner of the construction was like unto the temple of Solomon; and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine" (2 Ne. 5:16). Nephi builds a temple and does so in a manner similar to that of the temple in Jerusalem. Nephi takes it one step further by having his people not only construct a temple, but also construct it like Solomon's temple. Solomon's temple and his interactions with it serve as a model for how the Nephite civilization mapped the relationship between the king and the temple. The authority of the king among the Nephites connects closely to the temple.

In the Book of Mormon, King Benjamin delivers his famous speech at the temple in Zarahemla (Mosiah 2:1). The connection between king

8. P. Kyle McCarter, "The Apology of David," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99, no. 4 (December 1980): 489–504.

9. See the preliminary discussion in Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Political Testament," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 220–29. For further discussions on kingship in the Book of Mormon, see Taylor Halverson, "Deuteronomy 17:14–20 as Criteria for Book of Mormon Kingship," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 24 (2017): 1–10; Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephite Kingship Reconsidered," in *Mormons, Scriptures, and the Ancient World*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 151–89; Richard L. Bushman, "The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 189–211; and Gregory Steven Dundas, "Kingship, Democracy, and the Message of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 56, no. 2 (2017): 7–58.

and temple is perhaps even more significant in the story of the Nephite colony who returned to the land of Nephi with Zeniff. The land of Nephi is where Nephi went after the break between the Nephites and the Lamanites (2 Ne. 5:5–8), and it is also where Nephi built the temple mentioned above. The area was, therefore, a powerful symbol of Nephi’s “reign and ministry” (see the subtitle to 1 Nephi). Lamanites eventually took up residence in the land of Nephi, and although the Book of Mormon text does not say so explicitly, it seems likely that at least part of the “good” among the Lamanites that Zeniff saw was the temple (Mosiah 9:1). Even Zeniff’s son Noah, the archetypical wicked king in the Book of Mormon (see Mosiah 29:18) is closely (and positively) associated with the temple. In Mosiah 11:10, Noah “caused that his workmen should work all manner of fine work within the walls of the temple, of fine wood, and of copper, and of brass.” Even though this is part of the long litany of Noah’s crimes, it shows that, at least externally, Noah was very concerned with the temple, presumably because it served as a buttress to his kingship. It is certain that the temple priesthood was a vital component of Noah’s power structure (see Mosiah 11:11; 12:17–32).

Cohn’s book points to one of the important functions of temples: supporting and legitimating the various rulers and groups associated with them. This feature is underscored in the approach taken toward the Jerusalem Temple in the Mishnah, which explains the detailed collection of temple laws and temple concerns in a post-temple context. This was part of a project to legitimate the sages’ authority as they explained themselves to their Jewish coreligionists in the broader Roman world.

For Latter-day Saint readers, this book provides useful tools for thinking about other temple narratives. The authors of the New Testament (and related early Christian literature) also lived in an environment where the temple provided authority, although they present a more ambiguous picture of the temple that was likely rooted in their more ambiguous position on the Law of Moses, with its attendant ritual considerations. In the Book of Mormon, the temple was closely associated with kingship, and important prophetic sermons in the Book of Mormon happened at temples, culminating in Jesus Christ’s visitation to the Nephites in 3 Nephi. For Latter-day Saints, the temple and its rituals connect the ordinary and the heavenly realms. As modern readers of scripture, this connection gives context to the various discussions on the temple. Because temples are part of the ordinary religious experience of Latter-day Saints, thinking about use of temples in discourse can help Latter-day Saints not only connect to the divine, but also navigate

the relationship between the temple and its ordinances and the everyday organized Church.

With *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis*, Naf-tali Cohn has written a book that adds much to our understanding of the earliest stages of the rabbinic movement and its connection to the temple, which had defined Judaism and the covenant people for a mil-lennium. Outside of the world of Jewish studies, Cohn's book provides a methodological framework for discussing the role that the temple and its institutions play in a wide variety of religious discourses, including Latter-day Saint discourse about scriptures and temple rituals. Cohn's book is a must-read for anyone interested in the formation of the rab-binic movement and in religious identity formation. It is also a valuable read for those interested in how the temple fits into a broader religious discourse. The reader should note that *The Memory of the Temple* con-tains some very specific and technical argumentation, but its broader point can be of real use for those interested in temple studies broadly.

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