

Temple and Temples: Some Linguistic Reflections

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Throughout the world are many kinds of sacred or consecrated sites and areas: cities, mountains and mountaintops, caves, and holy enclosures of various types, whether open spaces or constructions. The biblical patriarchs built altars and offered sacrifice unto the Lord under the open sky, and practically everyone has seen open air masses, at least on TV. Sacred, and usually permanent, edifices are erected for a variety of purposes: for the offering of sacrifice, for the performance of sacred rites and diverse forms of worship, and as the dwelling of a deity, actually or symbolically present. These various purposes are often interconnected, for example, when sacred rites are performed in a shrine not just in honor of, but in the presence of, the deity enshrined there.

Terminology of Sanctuaries

Different types of sanctuaries are designated through a varied terminology, and it would be an instructive exercise to review the relevant vocabulary in different languages. By “relevant” vocabulary I mean words that the speakers of a language would somehow consider equivalent or analogous to or bearing a “family resemblance” with what we have in mind when we say “temple.” We should bear in mind that terminology often serves to express distinctions, for example, church, synagogue, and mosque. Japanese language and orthography distinguish between Shinto *jinja/jingu/ miya*, generally translated as “shrine,” and Buddhist *tera/ji* “temple.” An examination of nonalphabetic scripts would be equally instructive. With what ideograms do Chinese (and therefore also Koreans and Japanese) write “temple” and its analogues?

Some Christian groups believe that the word *church* is too reminiscent of *temple* or, if applied not to a building but to the community of believers, too institutionalized, and hence they prefer to use assembly hall, chapel, or similar terms to refer to a building. Unlike Pentecostalist “Assemblies of God,” the movement founded by Jim Jones in 1953 that ended with the Jonestown horror of 1978 called itself not a church but the “People’s Temple.”

The biblical book of Kings often refers to “high places” (*bāmôth*) as sites of sacrificial worship. These were prohibited because sacrifice to the One God should be offered on the altar in the one temple in Jerusalem only. *High places* happens to be a very appropriate synonym for *altars* since solemn sacrifices were often performed not in buildings or on the ground but on platforms, sometimes on top of magnificent structures such as the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, which was reserved for imperial sacrifices. Worship in ancient times primarily involved animal sacrifice, but an altar could be built as a symbolic act without an accompanying sacrifice. A good illustration of this is culled from the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. On his way back to Jerusalem after having pronounced a dedicatory prayer on the Mount of Olives on 24 October 1841 at the behest of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the apostle Orson Hyde erected an altar on the Temple Mount, thus reconfirming the biblical significance of the site.¹

Accessibility of Temples

A more or less universal feature of temples is that they are accessible, as a whole or in graded and clearly marked areas, to certain people or groups only. To others, for example laymen, the uninitiated, those who are not members, or those in a state of impurity and pollution (however defined), temples are “out of bounds.” (This inaccessibility might apply also to certain sacred areas that are not temples in a strict sense.) The temple in Jerusalem had its holy of holies, which the high priest entered once a year only, and the areas accessible to priests, nonpriestly Israelites, women, and gentiles were precisely determined. Rituals of washing and purification when approaching a sacred space or within it are common. The passport that a member of the Church of Jesus Christ needs to enter one of the church’s temples is called a “temple recommend.” For individuals without this recommend, visitors centers built adjacent to the consecrated temple area provide instruction and edification.

No a priori reason exists why the number of temples or other such shrines should be limited. In polytheistic religions, each god has his or her temple, and the same god, represented by his effigy (in monotheistic religions also a noniconic One God), can be worshiped in any number of sanctuaries erected wherever worshipers are found. In many instances, several deities, even if not derived from the same religious tradition (for example, Taoism and Buddhism), might be worshiped jointly or severally in the same temple, with their images placed on the same altar. This juxtaposition is a fairly common practice in China and India, where several major deities could be worshiped in a common temple compound. The Shinto-Buddhist “syncretism” known as *shinbutsu* was evident in every Japanese shrine until the enforced separation of Shintoism and Buddhism by the Meiji regime.

Worship in Sanctuaries

The ideology underlying the centralization of worship of the One God in the One Temple in Jerusalem became so dominant that biblical historians judge the reign of kings not by the moral or political record of the king but by one criterion only: whether he destroyed the many “high places” of what we must assume to have been the nonofficial but actual popular practice in the First Temple period. Temples in the plural were, by definition, heathenish. In Second Temple times, high places (*bāmôth*) no longer existed, and only the Samaritan sanctuary on Mount Gerizim tried to compete with the temple in Jerusalem. But although the temple in Jerusalem had monopolized sacrifices and priestly ritual—we shall ignore here exceptional cases such as Yeb/Elephantine—Jews also gathered in “assembly places” (Greek *synagoge*) for prayer and for hearing the Torah read and expounded. Jesus and the apostle Paul preached in such synagogues.

Synagogues developed and functioned as a complement to the one temple in Jerusalem. After its destruction and the cessation of priestly ritual, synagogues became its substitute. The term *temple* remained reserved, in traditional Jewish language, for the future House of God, the speedy rebuilding of which was the subject of messianic hope and fervent prayer. Pending that consummation, the people of God would continue to congregate in synagogues. These gathering places for communal worship will continue to exist, according to orthodox belief, also in the messianic future when the restored temple will again have become the locus of God’s presence and “indwelling” among his people and the only place where priestly ritual will be performed and sacrifices offered. Traditional synagogue liturgy contains expressions of both mourning for the destruction of the temple and prayerful hope for its restoration. Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century, however, innovated a terminological inversion of this perspective. Rejecting the notions of priestly ritual and of a national return to Zion as anachronistic and incompatible with the universalist calling of Israel, Reform Judaism provocatively substituted the term *temple* for *synagogue*, thus programmatically abandoning the belief in a rebuilding of “the” temple in a geographical Jerusalem. Israel among the nations was the vanguard of a universal ethical monotheism, and hence its houses of worship everywhere were God’s temples even though no special rituals were performed in them. In contemporary Jerusalem, on the other hand, some enthusiastic rabbinic students are intensively studying the rules of priestly sacrifice, which has been in abeyance for so long, in expectation of its (imminent, as they hope) resumption in the restored temple.

The term *temple* was still used by the early Christians for their assembly and gathering until supplanted by the Greek word *ekklēsia*. A Protestant church is an *ekklēsia* in the sense of *synagogue*: here the people of God assemble for worship and for hearing the word of God read and preached, though other rites such as baptism and marriage are by preference performed also. The model of a place of gathering for worship was also adopted by Islam, although the technical term for the edifice (*masjid*, mosque) has a different meaning etymologically. Islam has sanctuaries and holy sites distinct from its mosques, but even the holiest site, the Ka’ba in Mecca, is not a temple. The structure is rarely entered by the single door in the northeastern wall, and the central ritual associated with the Ka’ba is its circumambulation. In this respect the Ka’ba is similar to the (Theravada) Buddhist stupa, which cannot be entered at all but is circumambulated with the right shoulder toward the structure.

Holy Books

In religions in which a holy book plays a central role, its relation to the temple can assume various forms. Perhaps no tradition is as book-centered as Islam, yet the Qur'an, no matter how highly venerated, is not an object of worship in the mosque. The attitude of members of the Church of Jesus Christ to the Book of Mormon, one of the books of scripture considered holy and central to their faith, can be judged by the fact that the three witnesses to its existence and to its translation by the Prophet Joseph Smith did not revoke their testimony after their expulsion from the church. On his deathbed Oliver Cowdery (who had rejoined the church) exhorted David Whitmer to remain faithful to the testimony, and Whitmer had his testimony engraved on his tombstone. When Martin Harris died on 10 July 1875 at the age of 92, his last words were "book, book, book." Yet temples of the Church of Jesus Christ are not built for the purpose of housing a book.

The interior architecture of the Jewish synagogue is focused on the wall with the "ark" in which the Torah scrolls are kept and from which they are carried in procession for reading. But they are considered an object of veneration and not of worship. The holy ark in Jewish synagogues is undoubtedly meant to suggest associations with the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies containing the tablets with the Ten Commandments. But these tablets were distinct from the Divine Presence, which gave the sanctuary one of its appellations: *mishkān* ("dwelling place"). Rabbinic Hebrew formed the noun *shekhinah*, derived from the same root *ŠKN, "dwell," to designate the "indwelling divine presence."

Dwelling Places of the Divine

Sometimes the meaning of *temple* as primarily a dwelling place of the divine is so much taken for granted that the term is also applied metaphorically to individuals. Paul the apostle exhorts the Corinthians, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you" and that "your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you?" (1Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). The same metaphor can also be inverted. In reference to the New Jerusalem, "I saw no temple therein, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it" (Revelation 21:22; see 21:3). The term *temple* imparts a special significance and value, almost of "sacredness," to an establishment. We thus find expressions such as "temple of learning" or "temple of art."

Images of the deity in the temple were the rule in the ancient Near East where, in combination with notions of divine kingship, the temple was also conceived as a palace. *Hêkhāl*, in biblical Hebrew, signifies both palace and temple. The Hebrew word *miqdāsh* (from root *QDŠ, "holy"), usually rendered as "temple," literally means "sanctuary." The sanctuary that Solomon built was God's earthly palace, a permanent residence taking the place of the premonarchic, nomadic, and mobile "tent" that was constructed in the desert as "a *miqdāsh*, that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). The temple in Jerusalem was a "royal sanctuary" in every sense, and the book of Psalms never tires of exalting the God who dwelleth in Zion (that is, in his temple on Mount Zion) as the Great King: the Lord reigneth (see Zechariah 14:9, 16–17).

In some Christian traditions the doctrine of a real presence (however defined) in the Sacrament gives the eucharistic liturgy a character that confers on the church building a more templelike quality in the sense of an "indwelling." This is emphasized spatially in Byzantine and Eastern churches by the separation, by means of the "Wall of Icons" (*ikonostasis*), of the sanctuary proper (*hieration*), which is inaccessible (*adyton*) to laymen from the main nave of the church (*naos*). The Roman Catholic Church has, since the late Middle Ages, rendered the sacred building even more like a classical temple, that is, the dwelling place of a materially present deity. Crucifixes, statues, and pictures of saints, especially of the Virgin Mary, may be numerous in church buildings and are venerated but not worshiped. The Blessed Sacrament, however, in which Christ is held to be present, serves not only for the rite of communion but is kept in a "tabernacle"—here in the sense of receptacle—on the altar, and on certain occasions exposed in a transparent monstrance (also called ostensorium) for public adoration.

Temples, as has been noted, were conceived in most traditional cultures as dwelling places of a deity or its material representation and for that reason also as the privileged place for the performance of sacred rites and for sacrificial offerings. The word *church* referred originally to the building, unlike the Greek *ekklesia* from which it is

derived, which primarily means assembly and hence, as in the Epistles of Paul, the community of saints. (The Septuagint uses *ekklēsia* for Hebrew *qāhāl*, “congregation.”) From “assembly” to “place of assembly” was but a small step. In Jewish usage *synagogue* became the non-Hebrew equivalent of the Hebrew term for “house of assembly.” In Christian usage the word came to designate the Jewish *ekklēsia* and served as a convenient idiom for distinguishing between the community of Jews and the community of Christians (the “church”). The word *mosque* refers to the building only, while the Muslim community calls itself *’ummaḥ*. Christians, as members of the church (or of churches) in either an organizational and institutional or in a theological and even mystical sense, go to church (as buildings) for worship. The original New Testament usage of the term *church* as an “organized body of believers” of Christ is still preserved by the Church of Jesus Christ. Members of this church do not just “go to church” in the traditional sense of the word, though their meetinghouses and facilities are principally for religious activities, including Sunday worship; most of their sacred ordinances, however, are performed in temples.

Temples of the Church of Jesus Christ do not house images of the Godhead, though there is no taboo of the Jewish, Muslim, or extreme Protestant type on statues. In fact, replicas of Bertel Thorvaldsen’s *Christus* statue have become popular, and gilded statues of the angel Moroni, a symbol of the restoration and preaching of the gospel, are found atop most Latter-day Saint temples. To Latter-day Saints, the temple is a sacred, consecrated edifice, inaccessible to outsiders. Its primary function is the performance of sacred rites, or ordinances, that cannot be performed elsewhere. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ have a very characteristic and complex vocabulary for these diverse rites (such as making covenants, receiving endowments, sealing couples and families), which are not our subject here.

From the point of view of this discussion, the Shinto shrine is also a temple since the *kami* (a noniconic deity though represented by a material symbol) is enshrined there. Also Mahayana Buddhist sanctuaries are “dwelling places” in the sense that the supramundane Buddha and his innumerable manifestations, not to mention the countless Bodhisattvas, are held to be present in their effigies, the abundance of which practically smothers the visitor to a temple. Not just any statue, no matter how valuable artistically, represents the Buddha—a special ritual has to be performed that turns the effigy into an actual presence. In Hindu temples the effigy represents the deity worshiped in an even more immediate and concrete sense. The total absence of images in Shinto shrines merits special emphasis since Shinto explicitly considers itself a polytheistic religion. Polytheism too can be aniconic and is, therefore, not identical with idolatry, literally the “worship of images,” as is often and incorrectly thought.

Conclusion

Mention has already been made of the message of nineteenth-century Reform Judaism, which substituted *temple* for *synagogue* although these “temples” remained functionally nothing but synagogues. The Church of Jesus Christ developed in a nineteenth-century Christian linguistic environment heavily laden with biblical associations and possessed of a wide range of words waiting, as it were, to be picked up. On the one hand it coined a novel and sometimes unusual terminology of its own for many of its beliefs and rituals. At the same time, and parallel to this process, it kept many biblical keywords as designations of certain central concepts and institutions.

Most languages, as we have seen, possess a wide vocabulary with which to designate their places of worship. This vocabulary has acquired, throughout the centuries, a variety of meanings, associations, overtones, and undertones that are present, consciously or unconsciously, in the minds of their users. Their history is an important part of the history of religions.

Note

1. Letter from Orson Hyde, 22 November 1841, in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950), 4:459.