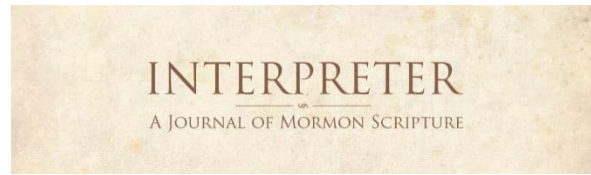




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Axes Mundi: Ritual Complexes in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon

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Mark Alan Wright

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AXES MUNDI:
RITUAL COMPLEXES IN MESOAMERICA
AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

MARK ALAN WRIGHT

Places are made sacred through manifestations of the divine or ritual activity. The occurrence of a theophany or hierophany or the performance of particular rituals can conceptually transform a place into an axis mundi, or the center of the world. A variety of such axes mundi are known from the archaeological record of Mesoamerica and the text of the Book of Mormon. I compare and contrast several distinctive types of such ritual complexes from Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon and argue that they served functionally and ideologically similar purposes.

An *axis mundi* is a sacred place that connects heaven and earth and is believed to be the center of the world, even the cosmos. Mircea Eliade notes that such places are made sacred either through ritual consecration or through a manifestation of the divine known as *hierophany*, which “results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different.”¹ Countless cultures, ancient and modern, use *axes mundi* as ideological and ritual foci. Eliade explains:

Where the break-through from plane to plane has been modified by a hierophany, there too an opening has been made, either upward (the divine world) or downward (the underworld, the world of the dead). The three

¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1959), 26.

cosmic levels — earth, heaven, underworld — have been put in communication ... this communication is sometimes expressed through the image of a universal pillar, *axis mundi*, which at once connects and supports heaven and earth.²

The sacred architecture of Mesoamerica was designed according to cosmological principles, establishing specific locations within their polities as an *axis mundi*. Their pyramids, topped by temples, were man-made sacred mountains, representing the first mountain that rose from the primordial waters of creation. Mesoamerican scholar Julia Guernsey noted that even comparatively early Mesoamerican cities, such as Izapa, “created a dynamic environment in which primordial time and the present were seamlessly woven together, creating a veritable web of politics and cosmogenesis.”³ Concerning specific ritual *loci* [sacred places] established by such communities, Pamela L. Geller notes, “Fraught with liminal connotations, *axes mundi* mediate between past and present, natural and supernatural arenas.”⁴ The rulers and ritual specialists used a variety of complex rituals in an effort to bring the past into the present.

A modern analogy might be drawn with Latter-day Saint temples. Prior to their dedication, they are merely beautiful buildings that can be entered by anyone during the “open house” period. Once they are dedicated through ritual action, however, they become an *axis mundi*. Ancient Maya temples similarly had dedicatory rituals for their temples. The most common was the “fire-entering” ritual, wherein incense was

2 Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 36.

3 Julia Guernsey, *Ritual & Power in Stone: The Performance of Rulership in Mesoamerican Izapan Style Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 120.

4 Pamela Gellar, “Maya Mortuary Spaces as Cosmological Metaphors,” in EC Robertson, JD Seibert, DC Fernandez, and MU Zender, eds *Space and Spatial Analysis in Archaeology* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006), 38.

burned inside of a sacred building to dedicate (or rededicate) it. Such rituals are recorded in the hieroglyphic texts as *och k'ak' ta-y-otot*, “the fire enters into his house.”⁵

Many types of axes mundi existed in ancient Mesoamerica, both natural and man-made. The structural form of these supernaturally-charged locations was virtually irrelevant; what mattered was the symbolic function. Mountains, caves, temples, altars, performance platforms, the central hearth of a home, portable objects such as censers for burning incense, and even the human body (when adorned with sacred regalia) could all function as portals of communication between the human and divine realms. Likewise, in the Book of Mormon there are countless places where ritual activity was performed that opened the portal between earth and heaven. Some of these are obvious, such as temples, synagogues, and sanctuaries, but we also read of ritual activity at royal palaces, in mountains, the wilderness, fields, and even homes. Such ritual complexes are not limited to faithful Nephites; the Book of Mormon explicitly mentions them among other groups such as the Lamanites, Nehorites, Amalekites, and Zoramites (Alma 23:2; 26:29).⁶

The most conspicuous type of *axis mundi* in the Book of Mormon and ancient Mesoamerica is the temple. Nephi tells us that he built a temple “*after the manner* of the temple of Solomon,” but is quick to qualify that statement by noting that “it could not be built *like unto* Solomon’s temple” because they

5 David Stuart, “‘The Fire Enters His House’: Architecture and Ritual in Classic Maya Texts,” in Stephen D. Houston, ed., *Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1998): 373–425.

6 John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 348; William J. Adams, Jr., “Synagogues in the Book of Mormon,” in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 4–13.

lacked “precious things” (2 Nephi 5:16).⁷ What is the difference between “after the manner of” and “not ... like unto”? In essence, it differed from Solomon’s temple cosmetically but not cosmologically. We might draw an analogy between the temples in San Diego, California, and Provo, Utah. Stylistically, the two buildings are quite distinct, but functionally they are identical. The same might be said for comparing the temples described in the Book of Mormon with what is known of those found in ancient Mesoamerica. Although they were superficially different, they may have had similar functions. This study will explore the functions of temples and other ritual locations in both the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica and draw comparisons between the ways these *axes mundi* were used. Methodologically, I will rely on epigraphic, iconographic, ethnographic, ethnohistoric, linguistic, and archaeological sources of data from Mesoamerica and compare them to relevant passages from the Book of Mormon.

John Welch’s careful analysis of Nephite temple worship highlighted a number of functions that Nephite temples served.⁸ In them, kings were crowned, religious teachings were dispensed, the plan of salvation was taught, the people were exhorted to proper behavior, sacrifices symbolizing the atonement of Christ were performed, religious and legal covenants were made and renewed, and the resurrected Jesus appeared to His faithful people as their God. Though clearly not identical, I argue that Mesoamerican ritual loci — *axes mundi* — served functionally and ideologically similar purposes.

7 1 Kings 5:17 notes that Solomon’s temple was built with “great stones, costly stones, and hewed stones.” The “precious things” that were “not to be found upon the land” likely refer to the types of stones used in construction and other types of “precious stones” used to garnish the temple in 2 Chronicles 3:6.

8 Welch, “Temple in the Book of Mormon.”

The Temple as a Place of Ritual

Temples were typically the most prominent and grandiose structures in Mesoamerican cities. Although the ancient term for them has thus far resisted translation, among modern Maya speakers they are referred to as *k'uh na*, or “god house.”⁹ At any given Maya city, temples and royal palaces anchor the site core. Maya scholars use term *temple* in reference to buildings whose primary function is assumed to be religious, whereas *palaces* are structures that appear to have been loci of political activity. However, the religious and political realms are not necessarily distinguishable among the Classic period Maya ruins, so a strict delineation between them is an imposition of our own modern perspective. Admittedly, the precise function of these structures is not clearly understood; the epigraphic and iconographic records contain precious few clues as to their use. It is common for large sites to have multiple temples, even within a single site core, each of which may have served different religious or political purposes.¹⁰

There was a shift in the manner of temple construction from the Preclassic to the Classic periods in the Maya lowlands.¹¹ Preclassic temples typically were not intended to aggrandize individual rulers; rather, their architecture and

9 John S. Justeson, “Appendix B: Interpretations of Mayan Hieroglyphs (1984:351),” in John S. Justeson and Lyle Campbell, eds. *Phoneticism in Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing*. Publication 9 (Albany, NY: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, State University of New York at Albany). While the term *k'uh nah* “god house” in modern Mayan language calls to mind the Hebrew *beit el* or *beit elohim*, we must be cautious in drawing analogies since the ancient Maya glyph for temple has not yet been deciphered phonetically (although the conceptual meaning of the logograph is clearly understood to be a temple structure).

10 Lisa Lucero, “Classic Maya Temples, Politics, and the Voice of the People” *Latin American Antiquity* 18/4 (2007): 407–427, esp. 407.

11 Chronologically, the Book of Mormon falls roughly within the Late to Terminal Preclassic Maya eras (400 BC–AD 250), although the precise geography is still a matter of intense debate, even among those who hold to a limited Mesoamerican setting.

iconography tended to highlight specific deities and reflect grand cosmologies.¹² Since the focus of Preclassic period temples was typically not on specific rulers, it is unsurprising that few of them have been shown to contain royal tombs.¹³ Likewise, in the Book of Mormon the focus of temple rituals was on their deity rather than their rulers. King Benjamin seemed concerned that because of his exalted office his people might believe him to be more than a mortal man, perhaps even a divine king. Ironically, by informing his people that the words he was delivering to them were given to him by an angel who literally “stood before” him (Mosiah 3:2), he confirmed that he was in fact an intermediary between the human and supernatural realms, a defining characteristic of divine kings in the ancient world.

The Temple as a Place for Coronation

The most well-documented coronation in the Book of Mormon takes place at the temple in Zarahemla, when King Benjamin gathers his people together to declare that his son Mosiah was to be “a king and a ruler over” them (Mosiah 2:30). Benjamin ritually presents Mosiah with the royal paraphernalia: the plates of brass, the plates of Nephi, the sword of Laban, and the Liahona (Mosiah 1:16). The presentation of royal regalia was likewise an important aspect of accession among the Maya. On

12 Linda Schele, “The Iconography of Maya Architectural Facades During the Late Classic Period,” in *Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture*, 479–517.

13 Richard Hansen, “Continuity and Disjunction: The Pre-Classic Antecedents of Classic Maya Architecture,” in *Function and Meaning*, 89. Hansen cautions, however, that the scarcity of royal tombs that have been identified from the Preclassic period may simply be the result of inadequate testing in structures. Nonetheless, when Preclassic temples are adorned with stucco facades they consistently portray supernatural entities rather than historical rulers.

the murals of San Bartolo, Guatemala (ca. 100 BC)¹⁴ we see an enthronement ceremony wherein the ruler sits upon a wooden tower or scaffold to receive the emblems of rulership.¹⁵ The coronation and presentation of a new king to his subjects would have been an occasion of much pomp and circumstance. Maya temples form part of the site core, and were designed with public spectacle in mind.¹⁶ They were typically the tallest building in the central precinct and always faced a large plaza that would accommodate thousands of people. The architectural layout of temple complexes effectively maximized acoustics, enabling speakers atop a temple to be seen and heard clearly throughout the plaza.¹⁷ Nephites temples may have had similar acoustic properties (cf. Mosiah 1:18; 2:1, 5-6; 7:17).

The Temple as a Place for Religious Instruction

Throughout the Book of Mormon we read of religious instruction being given at the temple: by Jacob, Benjamin, and even the Savior. Among the Maya, we turn again to the murals of San Bartolo for a comparison. The murals were likely didactic, meaning they were used for religious instruction. Elaborate imagery was used in lieu of writing to teach those

14 William A. Saturno, Karl Taube, and David E. Stuart, *The Murals of San Bartolo, El Petén, Guatemala: Part I: the North Wall* (Barnardsville, NC: Center for Ancient American Studies, 2005); Karl A. Taube, William Andrew Saturno, David Stuart, and Heather Hurst, *The Murals of San Bartolo, El Petén, Guatemala: The West Wall* (Barnardsville, NC: Boundary End Archaeology Research Center, 2010).

15 As it happens, the date of the San Bartolo murals falls squarely in the time of Mosiah II, who reigned from ca. 124–91 BC, and whose reign was pronounced upon a tower by his father Benjamin.

16 Takeshi Inomata, “Plazas, Performers, and Spectators,” *Current Anthropology* 47/5 (2006): 805–42.

17 Although this seems obvious to modern visitors of Classic Maya sites, to date, there have been no serious academic studies concerning the acoustic properties of Maya plazas. See Stephen Houston and Karl Taube, “An Archaeology of the Senses: Perception and Cultural Expression in Ancient Mesoamerica,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 10/2 (2000): 280–81.



Figure 1: Flower Mountain, the paradise of creation, from the murals of San Bartolo, Guatemala (ca. 100 BC). (Drawing by Traci Wright after Heather Hurst from *The Murals of San Bartolo, El Petén, Guatemala*

Part 1: The North Wall, 2005:8)

who may have been illiterate, similar to the art that adorned Medieval churches¹⁸. The San Bartolo murals were found in a comparatively small room that juts out from the base of a much larger temple structure. The two entry doors are low — about four feet high — which would require those who enter to lower their heads and bow deeply in order to gain access. Once inside, the initiates would stand upright and find themselves

18 The 12th century Christian theologian Honorius of Autun declared that “Painting ... is the literature of the laity” (*Gemma Animae*, chap. 132 [PL, 172, col. 586]).

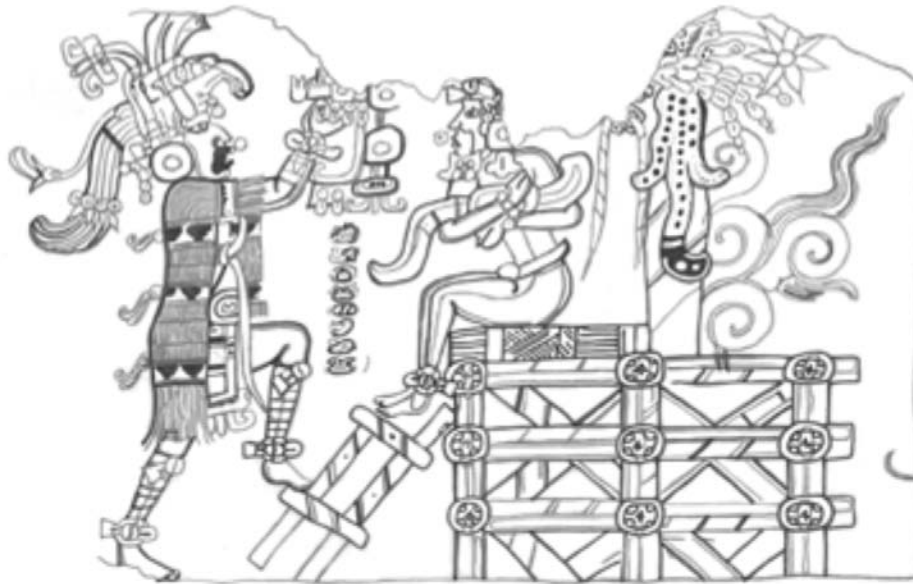


Figure 2: Early Classic Maya ruler being enthroned in emulation of the accession of the Maize God, from the murals of San Bartolo, Guatemala (ca. 100 BC) (Drawing by Traci Wright after Heather Hurst from *The Murals of San Bartolo, El Petén, Guatemala Part 2: The West Wall*, 2010:59)

surrounded by beautiful murals running along the upper portion of each of the walls, composed of elaborately painted mythological scenes. Questions remain as to where the visual narrative begins and ends, and some of the iconography remains difficult to interpret. Stephen Houston describes it as “a room of ‘mysteries’ for initiates, sequestered in an unusual location at the back of a temple.”¹⁹

In the most general of terms, the murals of San Bartolo depict the moment of creation — the ordering of the cosmos, the establishment of the primordial *axis mundi*. It is followed by a paradisiacal scene, Flower Mountain, and the ensuing emergence of the first humans. Next are scenes of sacrifice, leading up to a scene of resurrection of the Maize God and his subsequent enthronement. The murals culminate with a

¹⁹ Stephen Houston, “A Splendid Predicament: Young Men in Classic Maya Society,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 19/2 (2009): 171.

human ruler being enthroned in the exact same manner as the Maize God — his accession to an earthly throne mimicking that of the Maize God’s ascension to a heavenly throne.

In sum, the murals may depict a premortal existence; the ordering of the cosmos; a paradise of creation and the emergence of mankind; instruction on proper sacrifice; and the heavenly enthronement of the god of resurrection, culminating in a scene where a human accedes to a throne identical to the one used by the god of resurrection. It explains where humans came from (Flower Mountain); why they are here (to worship the gods), and where they are going (to the solar paradise of the sun where they will ultimately sit upon a celestial throne).

When we refer to the “plan of salvation,” we are essentially referring to the underlying mythology that answers our favorite questions as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? These answers are provided in the Book of Mormon and clearly center on Christ; that He was born, was crucified, and rose on the third day, enabling us to resurrect and return home to God the Father. How can we relate this to Mesoamerica? Here I wade into some extremely speculative waters. To be clear, I am not postulating that the Preclassic Maya of San Bartolo were Nephites or that they maintained a belief in the plan of salvation,²⁰ but I am suggesting that some of the underlying themes on the murals of San Bartolo may be an indication as to how the Preclassic Maya attempted to answer those same questions.

Temple as a Place of Sacrifice

Ancient Mesoamerican temples were the epicenter of royal sacrifice. Blood was the most sacred of substances, and Mesoamerican cultures engaged in both human and animal

²⁰ The Nephites, for that matter, had an incomplete understanding of the plan of salvation as well (cf. D&C 128:18).

sacrifice. The typical method of human sacrifice was to stretch the victim across a stone altar and have his hands and feet held down by four men. A priest would then make a large incision directly below the ribcage using a knife made out of razor-sharp flint or obsidian, and while the victim was yet alive the priest would thrust his hand into the cut and reach up under the ribcage and into the chest and rip out the victim's still-beating heart. Among the Aztec, the body of the victim would then be rolled down the precipitous front stairway of the temple. Accounts by the early Spanish conquerors who witnessed such events claimed that the Aztecs would do such sacrifices by the thousands and the bodies would literally pile up at the base of the temple. The numbers are likely exaggerated, and little evidence from the earlier Maya periods suggests that human sacrifice was performed on a grand scale, but the evidence is clear that it was in fact performed.²¹

The peoples of the Book of Mormon would have been familiar with the types of sacrifices being offered by their surrounding Mesoamerican neighbors, which often comprised burnt offerings of animals, such as deer or birds. The righteous would have interpreted such sacrifices as a means to point their souls to Christ (Jacob 4:5; Alma 34:14). Yet Amulek prophesied that “it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice; yea, not a sacrifice of man, neither of beast, neither of any manner of fowl; for it shall not be a *human sacrifice*; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice” (Alma 34:10). It is significant that the three things that Amulek is expressly telling the apostate Zoramites *not* to sacrifice are the three most common things that were offered by Mesoamerican worshipers: human, beast, and fowl.

21 Linda Schele, "Human Sacrifice among the Classic Maya," in *Ritual Human Sacrifice in Mesoamerica* (1984): 7 — 48; Carrie Anne Berryman, "Captive Sacrifice and Trophy Taking among the Ancient Maya," in *The Taking and Displaying of Human Body Parts as Trophies by Amerindians* (2007), 377–99.



Figure 3: Classic Maya scene of sacrifice involving human, beast, and fowl. (Drawn by Traci Wright after Alexandre Tokovinine from *Reading Maya Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Maya Painting and Sculpture*, 2011:92)

It stands to reason that the Zoramites, in rejecting Nephite religion, would embrace the cultural practices of the more dominant culture, as would be expected of an apostate group.²²

The faithful in the Book of Mormon looked forward to the day when Christ would offer himself as sacrifice in their behalf. However, having no point of reference with regard to crucifixion in their own history, they may not have had a clear understanding of what such a death entailed. Nephi explained that the Lord speaks to us “according to our language, unto our understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3). Correspondingly, cultural context directly impacts the way people interpret manifestations of the divine.²³ Thus, when Christ appeared to the Nephites, he

22 Mark Alan Wright and Brant Gardner, “The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 25–55. <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/the-cultural-context-of-nephite-apostasy/>

23 Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11.

may have been communicating with them according to their cultural language when he invited them to come and feel for themselves the wounds in his flesh. He bade them first to thrust their hands into his side, and secondarily to feel the prints in his hands and feet (3 Nephi 11:14). This contrasts with his appearance to his apostles in Jerusalem after his resurrection. Among them, he invited them to touch solely his hands and feet (Luke 24:39–40).²⁴ Why the difference? To a people steeped in Mesoamerican culture, the sign that a person had been ritually sacrificed would have been an incision on their side — suggesting they had had their hearts removed²⁵ — whereas for the people of Jerusalem in the first century, the wounds that would indicate someone had been sacrificed would have been in the hands and the feet — the marks of crucifixion.

Temple as a Place to Enter Divine Presence

In both Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon, the temple is a place where worshipers go to enter into the presence of the divine. It was at the temple in Bountiful where Christ appeared in a grand theophany to the gathered Nephite survivors. The Maya believed they could evince the presence of gods and other supernatural beings within their sacred spaces through ritual activity. This was oftentimes done through incense or burnt offerings, wherein it was believed the billowing smoke effectually created a screen or portal through which supernatural beings could manifest themselves. On Lintel 25 from Yaxchilán, for example, a noblewoman named *Ix K'abal Xook* burns strips of paper that are soaked with her own blood.²⁶ From the smoke of

24 In John 20:19–20, 26–27, Christ invites His apostles to touch His hands first and secondarily His side.

25 We might speculate that the expression broken heart may have had a much more literal connotation in their cultural context.

26 On Lintel 24 from Yaxchilan, *Ix K'abal Xook* is shown pulling a thorny rope through her tongue, and the ensuing blood drips onto the paper that she burns on Lintel 25.



Figure 4. A Maya noblewoman conjures a supernatural being through a sacrificial burnt offering of her own blood. Lintel 25 from Yaxchilán (Photograph by William Hamblin).

the sacrificial bowl issues forth a vision serpent, out of whose jaws emerges a patron deity of her city.

Within their temples, the Maya placed effigies that they believed were physical manifestations of their gods. Iconographically, there are only a handful of depictions of such deity effigies — idols, as the authors of scripture would call them — that are housed within temples. Although no direct evidence survives from the Preclassic or even the Classic periods, in the Postclassic these effigies were

carved by priests out of cedar, called *k'u che*, which literally means “god tree” or “holy tree.”²⁷ The priests had to engage in rituals of purification in order to produce these effigies, and it was a fearful act. To be clear, these effigies were not merely representations of the gods, they *were* the gods. Once the priest finished carving one, it would be ritually activated and placed within the temple. In the Classic period, only Maya rulers and priests could enter into the inner sanctuary where these effigies were housed. To enter into the room would literally be to enter into the presence of the god. Perhaps notably, the rooms that housed these effigies within the temples were typically covered with a curtain. Mesoamerican scholar Karl Taube notes, “Just as a covered household doorway could signal for privacy, the temple curtains probably were also used to indicate states of the god housed within.”²⁸ This curtain may be conceptually similar to Latter-day Saint beliefs concerning the “veil” that separates humanity from the presence of the Lord in the celestial realm.

Other Ritual Locations

Temples were not the only places for ritual activity. Among the Maya, rituals and prayers were frequently performed in the forest, in *milpas* (cornfields), and in homes. The home is considered an especially sacred place, the center of which has a hearth comprising three stones at its center. As Taube explains,

As the first central place, the simple three-stone hearth may well constitute the original construction of creation ... According to Post-Classic Central Mexican thought, the old fire god *Xiuhtecuhtli-Huehuateotl* resides in a hearth at the world center. The *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*

²⁷ Alfred M. Tozzer, *Landa's relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology 18 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1941), 159–60

²⁸ Karl Taube, “The Jade Hearth: Centrality, Rulership, and the Classic Maya Temple,” in *Function and Meaning*, 429.

explicitly defines this place as three sacred hearthstones, each personified by a specific god (Bierhorst 1992:23).²⁹ The Florentine Codex describes this locus as the circular earth navel, or *tlalxicco*: “mother of the gods, father of the gods, who resideth in the navel of the earth, who is set in the turquoise enclosure, [enclosed] with the waters of the lovely cotinga, enclosed with clouds — Ueuetotl, he of Ayamictlan, Xiuhtecuhtli” (Sahagún 1969, Book 6: 88–89).³⁰ In this account, the earth navel is a place of duality, embodying both the male and female creative principles ... This evocation of dualistic principles seems to describe the hearth as a place of creation. However, as the *axis mundi*, the hearth is also a conduit between the levels of earth, sky, and underworld.³¹

In the Book of Mormon, the Zoramite proletariat complained to Alma and Amulek that they had labored abundantly to build all of the synagogues in Antionum but were subsequently forbidden to worship there due to the coarseness of their apparel (Alma 32:5–9). They believed they could only worship in the synagogue and seemed genuinely distraught that they were being denied entry. Alma recited the words of Zenos to them to assure them that they could worship anywhere and their petitions would be heard: wilderness or field, house or closet. In essence, they could connect heaven and earth wherever they worshipped in faith, effectively creating their own *axis mundi*.³²

29 John Bierhorst, *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 23.

30 Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*. 1555-79. Translated by Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. 12 Vols. (Santa Fe: School of American Research; Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1950-82).

31 Taube, “Jade Hearth,” 432–33.

32 Alma and Amulek were speaking from experience, as they had both had powerful hierophanic experiences in the form of angelic visitations while out

Cultural Diversity in Mesoamerica

A common misconception is that Mesoamerica was a relatively homogenous area, beginning with the Olmec in the Formative period, moving on to the Maya in the Classic period, and culminating with the Aztec during the Postclassic prior to the arrival of the Spanish. In actuality, there were scores of different cultures that inhabited Mesoamerica anciently, co-existing in space and time.³³ Cultures that modern scholars sometimes lump together were in fact quite distinct from each other. The hundreds of cities that we identify as Maya, for example, would not have identified themselves as belonging to the same culture. They were never unified under a single leader, such as the Pharaohs of Egypt. Rather, each city conceptualized themselves as a unique nation, with their own particular pantheon of gods and ritual complexes. Evidence from several major polities (such as Tikal, Caracol, and Naranjo) indicates that each city had its own distinctive triad of patron deities, along with a rich pantheon comprised of many other gods and supernatural beings.³⁴ There were even distinctions in the rituals each polity would perform. The accession rituals of kings, for example, varied from site to site in terms of the regalia that was worn and the specific ritual actions that were done to enthrone them.³⁵ The Mesoamerican landscape was extremely heterogeneous, both between and within cultures. Yet each had their unique *axes mundi* that made their cities sacred to them.

journeying rather than in a structure dedicated to worship (Mosiah 27:11; Alma 10:7)

33 Mark Alan Wright, “The Cultural Tapestry of Mesoamerica,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 23/2 (2013): 4–21.

34 David Stuart, *The Inscriptions of Temple XIX at Palenque*. (San Francisco: Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute. 2005), 160.

35 Mark Alan Wright, *A Study of Classic Maya Rulership*, PhD diss. (University of California, Riverside, Department of Anthropology, 2011). Accessible at <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/6pb5g8h2>.

Without question, the specific rituals and sacred locations of righteous Nephites would have been different from those of their neighbors, but enough variation existed across the culturescape that the Nephites may have effectively fallen within the margin of acceptable diversity. But, as demonstrated above, the overlapping form and function of many of their rituals and sacred architecture may have enabled them to blend in better than we might suppose: temples and altars, sacrifices and burnt offerings, prayers and supplications, and belief in and emulation of a dying and resurrecting god. These rituals took place at their individual *axes mundi* — their own sacred centers of the world — and served to bridge the gap between the human and divine realms.

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