

Approaching Holiness: Sacred Space in Ezekiel's Temple Vision

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A living, breathing temple tradition dramatically sets Latter-day Saints apart from contemporary Christianities and Judaisms. However, because Latter-day Saints are so familiar with the rituals performed and the concepts taught in these temples, it is easy for them to become complacent in their temple worship and to overlook the beauties of this tradition. Thankfully, Latter-day Saint scholars have produced a number of edifying and thought-provoking books and articles dedicated to the subject of the temple.¹ In general, these scholars have looked at the “big picture,” synthesizing statements and themes from Restoration scripture, the Bible, non-biblical religious texts, and religious scholars in order to understand their own temple tradition. However, detailed studies focusing on specific ancient temple texts have been significantly less frequent.² Since religious scholarship outside of the Latter-day Saint community has tended to focus more on individual temple texts, Latter-day Saint scholars would do well to benefit from this scholarship and to take this approach themselves. This study hopes to demonstrate the insights that a close study of individual temple texts can

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provide regarding the nature of temples by examining non-Latter-day Saint scholarship on Ezekiel's temple vision (Ezekiel 40–48). I will provide examples of two ways that scholars have tried to make sense of the sacred space that Ezekiel describes. While these two approaches may seem contradictory, I will suggest a way to reconcile these views. Ultimately, I hope to show how open-mindedness in engaging with a variety of scholarly and religious literature (both biblical and nonbiblical) can help Latter-day Saints better appreciate their own temple tradition.

Ezekiel's Vision

Born into a priestly family (Ezekiel 1:3), Ezekiel had every right to expect that his life would be both predictable and stable. However, with the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:11–14), he was torn from his homeland and its sacred temple, his priestly home away from home. Having been thrust into a Babylonian world dominated by ziggurats (pyramid-like temple structures), each one dedicated to a different deity, Ezekiel would have been reminded of his precious temple's loss at every turn. It was in this setting that Ezekiel received one of the most spectacular and detailed visions in all scripture, which, unsurprisingly, centered on the temple.

After twenty-five years in captivity, Ezekiel had a homecoming of sorts: the Lord gave him a vision of his native Israel and a glorious, complete temple in the midst of the land (Ezekiel 40–48).³ In this vision, Ezekiel is not alone—he is guided on a tour of the temple by an angelic figure (Ezekiel 40:3) who measures the temple's dimensions. Ezekiel then describes in detail the appearance of this temple, as well as its inner workings and its rejuvenating effects on the surrounding land. Finally, his temple vision concludes with the city of Jerusalem receiving the comforting new name of “The LORD is there” (Ezekiel 48:35).

While almost all biblical scholars recognize that some areas of Ezekiel's temple are holier than others, there is no consensus on how these degrees of holiness relate to how humanity should approach God. Two options proposed by scholars are 1) a vertical approach to sacred space, with the altar as its focus of worship, requiring the worshipper to ascend to reach God, or 2) a horizontal approach, with the Holy of Holies as its focus of worship, requiring the worshipper to move westward to reach God. Those who champion a vertical approach argue that Ezekiel was influenced by Mesopotamian ideas about temples because he

was in Babylon at the time of his vision (Ezekiel 1:3; 40:1). According to this view, the highest point of the temple is the holiest, and humanity approaches God by ascending symbolically through a vertically aligned world. On the other hand, those who champion a horizontal approach point to the story of Eden and other Old Testament texts relating to priests (e.g., Leviticus), claiming that Ezekiel's description was largely influenced by these biblical texts. This perspective emphasizes an approach toward sacred space along a horizontal axis, where one progresses toward increasingly sacred space the closer one gets to the Holy of Holies (which is situated toward the western end of the temple). This paper will explore both of these views and suggest that each can be valuable in illuminating the meaning of Ezekiel's temple vision, and, as a result, illuminate Latter-day Saints' understanding of their own temple tradition.

Vertical Conceptualization of Sacred Space

As mentioned above, Ezekiel's vision begins with an angelic figure who carefully measures the temple. Some scholars look to these measurements for clues to determine Ezekiel's emphasis. Walter Zimmerli's foundational study of Ezekiel made this claim: "What dominates the picture [described by Ezekiel] as a whole is not the sight of a building rising before one's eyes, as one would expect in a spontaneous vision, but a ground plan."⁴ While Zimmerli correctly notes the scarcity of height measurements in the otherwise meticulous description of temple architecture,⁵ there *are* vertical architectural elements that suggest the symbolism of ascending vertically towards increasingly sacred space.

While no specific measurements are given, the vertical ascent is implicit in the description of stairs in the temple vision. After orienting Ezekiel on the east side of the outermost temple walls, the visionary guide ascends (ויעל) a flight of stairs (מעלות) in order to measure the first temple gate (Ezekiel 40:6). There is another description of stairs as Ezekiel moves from the outer courtyard to the inner courtyard (Ezekiel 40:34), followed by a final set of stairs leading up to the sanctuary (Ezekiel 40:49). In the systematic description of the temple's stairs, the audience moves progressively higher up the temple compound. Daniel Block notes that "the difference in elevation increases with each unit in this sacred complex, as one moves from the outside toward the center. . . . The scene is impressive. The observer's eyes are drawn ever upward to the top of this temple mount."⁶ This description

of vertical progression, however, does not seem to be concerned with precise measurements of physical elevation. In the verse first mentioning ascent (Ezekiel 40:6), the stairs are not numbered (and they remain unnumbered until verse 22). Similarly, in the account of Ezekiel's final ascent, the stairs are never numbered (Ezekiel 40:49). Taken together, these passages suggest that the emphasis of the author was on the general concept of height, not on a precise physical measurement.

The subsequent description of Ezekiel's temple altar also sheds light on the use of vertical sacred space within the vision. One of the most noticeable features of this altar's description in Ezekiel 43:13–15 is the explicit mention of its height. The height itself is not remarkable (four cubits), but rather the peculiar language used to describe these measurements. Block notes that “the observations on the altar's height represent a significant departure from the preceding description, which has been satisfied to provide horizontal dimensions of the temple complex.”⁷ In addition, the author depicts this altar in terms that suggest a cosmic conceptualization of the space within the temple compound. Steven Tuell notes that “the contrast between the description of the altar and Ezekiel's description of the Temple comes . . . in the [cosmic] designations given to the parts of the altar in 43:13–17.”⁸ Of particular interest is the terminology used for the altar's base (חֵיק הָאָרֶץ “the bottom upon the ground”) and its hearth (הַרְאֵל “altar”) (Ezekiel 43:14–15).

Michael Fishbane notes that these terms did not merely describe architectural elements of the altar, but carried with them a much more significant connotation: “It is striking that Ezekiel describes the base platform of the altar of the envisaged Temple as *hēq hā'āreṣ* ‘bosom of the earth’ (43:14 [translated in the KJV as “the bottom upon the ground”]) and its summit, with four horns, as *har'ēl* ‘mountain of God’ (43:15 [translated in the KJV as “the altar”]).”⁹ These terms immediately bring to mind both depth and elevation. Regarding the significance of this conceptualization of the temple altar, Fishbane writes, “From this axial point . . . the new Temple, like the old, will be a font of blessing for Israel, a ‘mountain of god,’ linking the highest heaven to the nethermost earth.”¹⁰ Fishbane, then, sees the altar in this passage functioning as a metonymy for the entire temple compound, a sacred part representing the sacred whole.¹¹ Just as the altar is described in cosmic terms, the temple, too, can be seen as taking on cosmic dimensions.

The Mesopotamian temples that would have surrounded Ezekiel are described in some texts as filling the expanse of creation.¹² Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, portrayed his temple-building efforts in this inscription: “I raised the top of Esharra [the temple] to heaven, / Above, to heaven I elevated its top. / Below in the netherworld / I made firm its foundations.”¹³ This temple (and, by extension, the king who built it) was so grand that its power extended vertically from heaven to the “netherworld.”¹⁴

Ezekiel describes the temple altar using similar terminology. As Fishbane states above, the author is using a play on words to make a point. The uppermost tier of this altar is described using a word that can either be translated as “altar” or “mountain of God” (Ezekiel 43:15), and the word used to describe the base of the altar can either be translated as “the bottom upon the ground” or the “bosom of the earth” (Ezekiel 43:14). Many note the unique spelling of this first term (הַרְאֵל in verse 15) and suggest that it serves to explain the subsequent terms used for “altar” (הַרְאֵיל in verses 15 and 16, a difference of only one letter). Tuell explains that by using this unique spelling of “altar” to evoke images of the “mountain of God,” the author

accomplishes two purposes. First, it explains the ancient name for the altar hearth in a way that complements and contrasts with the designation of the foundation as הַאֲרֵץ חֶק [“bosom of the earth”], thereby making a profound statement in [cosmic] terms about the altar’s significance. Second, however, it ties the altar description firmly into its literary context. The designation of the altar hearth as הַרְאֵל (“mountain of God”) recalls the הַר גְּבוּהַ מְאֹד (“very high mountain”) of 40:2, as well as the הַהַר רֵאשׁ (“mountaintop”) of 43:12.¹⁵

Both of the purposes that Tuell mentions deal with height, suggesting that the description of Ezekiel’s altar emphasized a vertical element of sacred space in this text.

In his discussion of the altar’s significance, Block writes, “All that matters are its size and shape, the latter of which is seen to match the symmetry of the temple complex as a whole.”¹⁶ Indeed, this three-tiered altar corresponds nicely to the three-tiered temple compound described in Ezekiel 40–43,¹⁷ the top tier of which contains the sanctuary, the “place of my throne, and the place of the soles of my feet” (Ezekiel 43:7).¹⁸ It is here that humanity touches divinity.

According to these scholars, the temple appears as a vertical representation of the cosmos with the altar at its sacred summit, where one must ascend to approach God. Commenting upon the aforementioned altar language in Ezekiel 43, Jon Levenson writes the following: “What all this suggests is that the Temple is not a place in the world, but the world in essence. . . . In the Temple, God relates simultaneously to the entire cosmos, for the Temple . . . is a microcosm of which the world itself is the macrocosm.”¹⁹ He also explains that “the Temple is the epitome of the world, a concentrated form of its essence, a miniature of the cosmos.”²⁰ This was true of both Mesopotamian temples and Ezekiel’s temple. Therefore, both the altar and the temple compound in which it was enshrined should be viewed with a vertically aligned cosmos in mind.²¹ As demonstrated above, Ezekiel goes to great lengths to emphasize the element of a sacred, vertical ascent toward God in the account of Ezekiel’s temple vision. However, is this the only possible way to understand sacred space within that temple?

Horizontal Conceptualization of Sacred Space

Despite the plentiful evidence for Ezekiel’s emphasis on a vertical ascent toward the holy, some scholars argue for a completely different emphasis in the text. While recognizing the importance of the altar and its vertical position within the temple compound, Margaret Odell finds an alternative framework for understanding the directional emphasis in Ezekiel: “If [Jehovah] dwells in the temple, then it is no longer appropriate to think of [Jehovah] as ‘coming down’ to the altar to accept the offerings, which ‘go up’ to God (Hebrew *’ôlah*, ‘go up’). The altar remains the meeting place between deity and people; in Ezekiel’s temple, however, the intersection is worked out on a horizontal, *not vertical* plane, as offerings are brought in to the altar and [Jehovah] moves out from the temple to accept them there.”²² This emphasis on a horizontal framework within Ezekiel’s temple description is far from theoretical; it finds a great deal of support within the text of Ezekiel 40–43.

Significantly, the sanctuary (the holiest building within the temple compound, comprising the “holy place” and the Holy of Holies) receives special attention in these chapters. This significance is signaled by the order in which the angelic figure directs Ezekiel around the different locations of the temple compound. Ezekiel is guided through six gates, which he describes in detail (Ezekiel 40:6–46). After passing the initially nondescript altar (Ezekiel 40:47),

he reaches the sanctuary. It is at *this* location that the heavenly guide finally breaks his silence and gives a name to one of the rooms within the sanctuary. Zimmerli notes, “The prophet’s way leads through six gates to the building in which he reaches his goal, to the threshold of the holy of holies which alone is given a name by the figure of the guide.”²³ The sanctuary, with its most sacred room lying at the westernmost end of the building, is the climax of this tour.

A consideration of creation imagery suggests the prominence of this building within the temple compound. Each of the aforementioned gates had three chambers on each side (Ezekiel 40:10), creating a tripartite passageway.²⁴ It is only after recording all six of these unique tripartite gates that Ezekiel approaches the sanctuary, which also exhibits a three-part structure—the porch (אֵלֶם), the great hall (הַהֵיכָל), and the Holy of Holies (הַקֹּדֶשִׁים קֹדֶשׁ) (see Ezekiel 40:48–49; 41:1–4). Zimmerli suggests that “in two times three gates there is opened the access to the similarly tripartite seventh structure at the goal of this whole guidance. In this there seemed to be discernible something of the rhythm of the Priestly creation narrative with its culmination in the seventh, sanctified day.”²⁵ The focus on a most sacred seventh space by the priestly Ezekiel, who would have been concerned with both preaching and keeping the Sabbath day holy (see Exodus 20:8–11), can hardly be accidental.²⁶

In light of this discussion, the Holy of Holies (הַקֹּדֶשִׁים קֹדֶשׁ) appears to be the climax of Ezekiel’s initial view of the temple compound. Zimmerli explains, “In the continuation of the leading of the prophet, which has its goal *not* at the altar, but in the temple building to the west of the altar and there in the most westerly room of that building, the holy of holies,”²⁷ sacred space within the temple compound appears to be oriented along a horizontal plane, rather than a vertical plane. The west, then, takes on a clear significance in the sacred orientation (or “occidentation”) of the temple compound, becoming the most appropriate way to approach God.

Imagery of the Garden of Eden is also prevalent in the architecture of the sanctuary, and it, too, suggests a horizontal emphasis.. While the six gates of the temple courtyards were all decorated with palm trees, the walls of the sanctuary were decorated with both palm trees *and* cherubim (Ezekiel 41:20). In addition to these wall decorations, the two doors located on the east side of the innermost rooms of the sanctuary (Ezekiel 41:2–3) are described in the following manner:²⁸ “And there were two doors to both the great hall and the Holy [of Holies]. . . . And there were made upon them—upon the doors of

the great hall—cherubim and palm trees, like [those] made for the walls [of the sanctuary]” (Ezekiel 41:23, 25, translation my own). The author of Genesis uses this same imagery when God expels Adam from the Garden of Eden: “When he drove out the man, he placed on the east of the Garden of Eden the cherubim and a flaming sword continually turning to guard the way of the tree of life” (Genesis 3:24, translation my own). Here, God drives Adam eastward from Eden. Cherubim are placed “at the east of the Garden of Eden” (לְגַן־עֵדֶן מִקְדָּם) to prevent a westward return to the sacred garden and the presence of God. Similarly, the cherubim on the doors that Ezekiel describes are stationed at the east entrances to the sacred inner chambers of the sanctuary. This positioning of protective figures indicates the supreme sacredness of a western direction within Ezekiel’s temple compound.

In the period immediately following the Babylonian exile of the Jewish people, imagery of Adam, Eden, and the temple became much more prevalent. Marvin Sweeney explains: “Later texts of the Second Temple period . . . note that the priest in the Temple represents Adam in the Garden of Eden, which may explain the appellation *ben-’ādām*, ‘son of Adam’ or ‘mortal,’ that is consistently applied by [Jehovah] to Ezekiel throughout the book. The fact that only the high priest may enter the Holy of Holies, where the ark of the covenant is guarded by cherubim much like the Garden of Eden, reinforces this image.”²⁹ The text of Ezekiel 40–43 demonstrates that this conceptualization was prevalent in the mind of the author. However, Ezekiel’s use of Eden-related imagery does not begin with this spectacular temple vision in chapters 40–43.

There is precedent for the use of Eden-related imagery elsewhere in the book of Ezekiel. In chapter 28, Tyre is compared to “Eden, the garden of God” (גַּן־אֱלֹהִים עֵדֶן) (v. 13). In Ezekiel 31, Assyria, Egypt, and other unidentified nations are compared to the “trees of Eden” (עֲצֵי־עֵדֶן) that were found within the “garden of God” (הַגַּן־הָאֱלֹהִים) (see Ezekiel 31:9, 16, 18).³⁰ Fishbane suggests that the imagery of Eden was also used in Ezekiel 36–37. He describes the use of this imagery in the following way:

Longing for order and spatial restoration, the prophets imagined the ancient national centre [of Jerusalem] as an old-new Eden from which the people were evicted. But, quite unlike the old Adam, this new national counterpart will return to Edenic bliss—this being the return to Zion and to national dignity in the land. Perhaps for this reason,

Ezekiel . . . juxtaposed the oracle of hope that the old Eden would be restored (36:35) with the parable of dry bones, whereby he envisages the re-creation of the corporate body of Israel—much like a new Adam—with a new flesh and a new spirit (37:4–9). By this coupling of Edenic and Adamic imagery, national nostalgia and primordial fantasies are blended.³¹

The yearning for a symbolic return to Eden was, in part, a result of the trauma experienced by those who had been exiled to Babylon.³² From the perspective of these exiles, they, like Adam, had been driven eastward. A return to Eden meant a return to the sacred land of *their* inheritance, the land of Israel. Regarding this view in Ezekiel 40–48, Levenson explains, “[Ezekiel’s] stress on Eden traditions in his description of Zion is a way of reorienting the hopes of his audience from the east, where Eden had been thought to lie, to the west, the direction of Israel’s future.”³³ Thus, the literary allusions in Ezekiel 40–43 to the account of the Garden of Eden, combined with the exilic situation of the author, strongly suggest the west as the sacred direction of returning to the presence of God.³⁴

The *Lamassu* Statue: A Reconciling Paradigm

In light of the previous discussion, both the vertical and horizontal conceptualizations of sacred space seem valid, as they are both backed by ample evidence. However, many scholars have implicitly assumed from the description of his temple vision that Ezekiel could have held only one of these views. As seen above, one group of scholars assumes that Ezekiel had in mind a vertical conceptualization of sacred space, with the altar as its focus atop the sacred summit of the temple, requiring an ascent to reach God. Other scholars argue instead for a horizontal conceptualization of the temple with its sacred endpoint in the Holy of Holies situated at the western end of the sanctuary, requiring a horizontal, westward movement to reach God. These two groups of scholars appear to be in conflict regarding the “correct” conceptualization of sacred space within Ezekiel’s temple compound, including the proper way to approach Deity. However, did such a conflict exist for Ezekiel?

Iconographic evidence from the Mesopotamian temples and palaces that surrounded Ezekiel would argue that these two conceptualizations are not mutually exclusive. Figure 1 depicts a statue commonly identified



Fig. 1. *Lamassu* statue, British Museum.
Photo by Jacob Rennaker.

as a *lamassu* (or *šēdu*), which was recognized as a protective deity.³⁵ Such statues or deities were often guardians of temples³⁶ and were sometimes referred to as the *lamassi Ê puzra*, “the protective spirit of the temple.”³⁷ While there is a strong similarity between the function of the *lamassu* and the cherubim (כִּרְבִּיִּם) in Ezekiel’s earlier vision (see Ezekiel 9–10), the artistic technique used to depict these beings deserves special attention, as it provides a possible paradigm for understanding Ezekiel.

This *lamassu* statue is an example of a unique artistic device employed by Mesopotamian artists. In examining these particular statues, Julian Reade explains: “If one looks at one of these monsters from the side, one sees that it has four legs, striding purposefully forward. If one moves to look at it head-on, from the front, it has two front legs at rest. Both views in isolation are satisfactory and logical, as the figure might have been drawn by an artist looking at it either from one direction or from the other. The three-quarter viewpoint, in contrast, with both front and side visible at once, shows an animal that has not four legs but five.”³⁸ Using this artistic device as a paradigm for understanding Ezekiel’s temple description, any perceived tension between vertical and horizontal conceptualizations of sacred space and the direction of sacred approach to reach God is relieved. The position that only one of these approaches is valid is akin to an observer’s confusion at noticing five legs on a *lamassu* statue. Just as the artist did not intend for the viewer to examine the statue from multiple viewpoints at once, perhaps the author of Ezekiel 40–43 did not intend for the audience to view the temple from both vertical and horizontal perspectives at the same time.

With this in mind, it becomes clear that both the vertical and the horizontal representations are appropriate ways of conceptualizing sacred space in Ezekiel’s temple compound, and both appropriately conceptualize how one may

approach God. The tension comes when one stands at a conceptual “three-quarter viewpoint,” seeing both possibilities present at the same time yet assuming that only one conceptualization can have precedence. For the artist of the five-legged *lamassu*, “this device was used to make them appear complete from both points of view,”³⁹ without respect for which view was “superior.” Likewise, *both* the vertical *and* the horizontal representations of sacred space in Ezekiel’s temple vision appear complete when viewed in isolation, and both are clearly significant.⁴⁰ These multiple emphases uniquely describe how humans must progress through increasingly sacred space in order to approach God. Ezekiel skillfully weaves together two different spatial paradigms: a vertical approach to a sacred summit and a westward approach to a Holy of Holies. In doing so, the exilic Ezekiel displays a level of literary sophistication that might confuse those rooted in an “either-or” interpretive paradigm but which, when understood, leads to an increased appreciation of Ezekiel’s unique perspective on the temple and what it symbolizes.

As demonstrated above, biblical scholarship provides valuable perspectives on understanding Ezekiel’s temple vision; it shows ways to understand progression through increasingly sacred space and the relationship between the temple and Eden. These lessons can be applied easily to architecture and worship within Latter-day Saint temples, as well as the doctrines taught within their sacred walls. Such scholarship can also provide alternative paradigms and categories for thinking about Latter-day Saint temples that can help breathe new life into temple worship. For example, the categories of sacred height and sacred direction discussed here are noticeably present in Latter-day Saint temples—worshippers experience a rise in elevation by steps or ramps as they physically approach the temple’s holiest space (the direction one approaches this space, however, differs from temple to temple). What do these changes in height and direction mean? How would a Latter-day Saint describe his or her approach to God in the temple? In addition to these directional questions, what sort of role does Eden play (architecturally, symbolically, theologically, and so forth) in temple worship for Latter-day Saints? In light of the significance these questions held for biblical authors, Latter-day Saint worshippers would do well to consider such questions themselves.

Latter-day Saints need not fear using scholarship from those of other faiths to better understand our own. This, however, requires Latter-day Saints to be humble about what they think they know and how they know it, as well as

where they are willing to look for truth.⁴¹ While the results of such studies may sometimes appear contradictory to our own current understanding and assumptions, there may be ways of reconciling these views.⁴² As seen above, biblical scholars provided valuable information on Ezekiel's use of vertical and horizontal sacred space, but they appeared to be at odds regarding which was more significant. However, by thinking outside the box and using the example of the Mesopotamian *lamassu* statue, we see that both views can actually work together. Similarly, for Latter-day Saints, insights and answers to questions about the temple can come not only from the study of biblical scholarship, but also from the study of religious traditions outside of Christianity and Judaism. Due to such an incredible wealth of available information, Latter-day Saints should never feel complacent in the understanding of their temples or temple worship. It is only through the arduous process of both study and faith (see D&C 88:118) that such illuminating insight is available. And, though challenging, it is this very process of reaching for divine truth—wherever it may come from—that allows us to approach holiness ourselves.

Notes

1. One of the pioneers of Latter-day Saint temple scholarship was Hugh Nibley, whose *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992) is still invaluable. A good sampling of the sorts of studies that Latter-day Saint scholars have engaged in more recently is *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994).

2. Notable exceptions are Jeffrey Bradshaw's *Temple Themes in the Book of Moses* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Publishing, 2010) and *Temple Themes in the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Publishing, 2012).

3. Scholars still debate the nature of this temple: Was it a heavenly pattern, similar to the one shown to Moses before he constructed the tabernacle (see Exodus 24) or to the one shown to David before he attempted to build the temple at Jerusalem (see 1 Chronicles 28:2–5, 11–12)? Was it a vision of the actual temple in Jerusalem that Ezekiel had grown up with? Or was it a vision of a temple that would be built at a future time of paradisiacal splendor? Because Ezekiel never clearly answers these questions, this paper will focus on the imagery that Ezekiel used in describing the temple itself, and it will explain the imagery in order to help better understand what this temple meant to him.

4. Walter Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Book of Prophet Ezekiel Chapters 25–48* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 343. Daniel Block similarly notes: "The dimensions recorded are exclusively horizontal measurements, apparently without regard for

the vertical distances required by architectural plans.” Daniel Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 510–11.

5. The only two measurements of height (גבה) appear in the description of the sacrificial tables (Ezekiel 40:42) and in the description of the sanctuary’s golden altar/table outside the Holy of Holies (הקדשים קדש) (Ezekiel 41:22).

6. Block, *Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, 542–43.

7. Block, *Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, 595.

8. Steven Tuell, *The Law of the Temple in Ezekiel 40–48* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars’ Press, 1992), 46. Throughout this paper, I have replaced the word *mythic* with *cosmic* to avoid any negative connotations associated with *myth*. Technically, a myth is a story that cultures use to explain and give meaning to their history, the supernatural, and the world around them. In popular use, however, because greater preference is given to straightforward and technical descriptions of the world, *myth* has come to mean “something false.” In using the term *cosmic* in this paper, I am referring to a way of viewing the world that describes it using the largest scale possible.

9. Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 370, n. 132.

10. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 370.

11. Other scholars agree with this interpretation of “bosom of the earth” (היק הארץ) and “mountain of God” (הראל), likewise suggesting that the cosmic properties here ascribed to the altar also apply conceptually to the entire temple compound. See Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1985), 139; and Marvin Sweeney, “Ezekiel: Zadokite Priest and Visionary Prophet of the Exile,” in *Form and Intertextuality in Prophetic and Apocalyptic Literature* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 142. Block, on the other hand, finds this etymology of הֶרְאֵל as “mountain of God” suspect. He points out that this same hearth is spelled differently (הֶרְאֵל) twice: once in the same verse (Ezekiel 43:15) and once in the verse immediately following (Ezekiel 43:16), and therefore the extra letter in these subsequent descriptions needs explaining. At the very least, however, he admits that “it seems best . . . to treat har’el [הֶרְאֵל, “mountain of God”] as an intentional theological play on an architectural designation for the flat surface of the altar on which the offerings were presented.” Block, *Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, 600.

12. Margaret Odell’s commentary does an excellent job of showing how Ezekiel’s writings reflect his Babylonian environment. See Margaret Odell, *Ezekiel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005).

13. Victor Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in Light of Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic Writings* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1992), 336.

14. Similarly, the Papulegara hymn describes the temple of Kesh in the following words: “The head of the temple is lofty / Below its roots touch the netherworld / The head of the Kesh temple is lofty / Below its roots touch the netherworld / Above may its . . . rival heaven / Below its roots touch the netherworld.” Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House*, 335–36; ellipsis in original.

15. Tuell, *Law of the Temple*, 50–51.

16. Block, *Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, 597.

17. Identified as such in Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1972), 179. See also the depiction of this altar in Odell, *Ezekiel*, 500.

18. Another Mesopotamian temple description also equates the heights of the temple with heaven. The temple hymn to Ezida in Barsippa reads: “Barsippa resembles heaven, / Rivaling Esarra, is lofty Ezida, / Its foliage reaches the clouds, / Its roots are founded piercing the netherworld” (Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House*, 336). Likewise, Odell notes the similarity between the stepped nature of this altar and ziggurats, the stepped Mesopotamian temple structures that Ezekiel would have certainly seen in Babylon. See Odell, *Ezekiel*, 501.

These three tiers or levels of the altar and the temple correspond with and may be representative of the three levels of the cosmos as envisioned by both Mesopotamians and Israelites: the heavens, the earth, and the netherworld. The thoroughly Jewish Apostle Paul mentions these three levels in his letter to the Philippians, explaining the scope of Jesus’ lordship: “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven [επουρανίων], and things in earth [επιγειών], and things under the earth [καταχθονίων]; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10–11). Paul uses the first two of these three words elsewhere in his discussion of the Resurrection, where they are translated as follows: “There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial [επουρανίων] is one, and the glory of the terrestrial [επιγειών] is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars” (1 Corinthians 15:40–41). In light of this information, one may translate Paul’s earlier statement to the Philippians as follows: “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, those who are celestial, terrestrial, and telestial.” Thus, these three levels of the universe mentioned by Paul may correspond to the three degrees of glory: celestial, terrestrial, and telestial (see D&C 76). Likewise, the three levels of the temple and its altar may also correspond to these three degrees of glory.. My thanks to John Gee for suggesting this interpretive possibility in Philippians 2:10.

19. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 139. This view is strengthened by the fact that the author describes the temple as being positioned “upon the top of the mountain” (היהר על-הַ שֶׁרָ) (Ezekiel 43:12), which is itself a location with cosmological overtones. See Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*, 5–8.

20. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 138.

21. Latter-day Saint scholar John Lundquist makes a similar argument regarding all temples. See John M. Lundquist, “What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, 83–117.

22. Odell, *Ezekiel*, 502; emphasis added.

23. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 361.

24. “Tripartite” simply means “three-part.” The tripartite gate structure described by Ezekiel here is similar to the city-gate structures archaeologists have uncovered at some of Solomon’s cities. See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 352 and footnotes.

25. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 362. Many scholars argue that there are actually two creation stories present in Genesis 1–3. Because the emphasis in this first section (Genesis 1:1–2:3)

is on sacred boundaries and sacred time, scholars argue that this portion of the creation story was written by a priest (someone who would have been especially concerned with such sacred divisions).

26. Israelite priests were responsible for teaching their people the difference between the sacred and the profane (see Leviticus 10:8–11). For an excellent discussion of Ezekiel's priestly concerns throughout the book of Ezekiel, see Sweeney, "Ezekiel: Zadokite Priest and Visionary Prophet of the Exile," 125–43.

27. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2*, 355; emphasis added.

28. Both of the following translations of Ezekiel 41:23, 25 and Genesis 3:24 are my own.

29. Sweeney, "Ezekiel: Zadokite Priest and Visionary Prophet of the Exile," 141–42.

30. For a more complete examination of the imagery of these two chapters, see Jon Levenson, "The Mountain of Ezekiel's Vision as the Garden of Eden," in *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40–48* (Missoula, MT: Scholars' Press, 1976), 25–36.

31. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 370.

32. Fishbane writes, "It was not until the woe and dislocation of the exile, and with it the destruction of the land and Temple, that the symbolism of Eden emerges with singular emphasis. In the mouths of the post-exilic prophets, this imagery serves as the organizing prism for striking visions of spatial renewal." Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 369–70.

33. Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40–48*, 32.

34. Latter-day Saint scholar Donald Parry makes a similar argument regarding the Israelite tabernacle and temple. See Donald Parry, "Garden of Eden: Prototype Sanctuary," in *Temples of the Ancient World*, 126–51.

35. Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin: University of Texas, 1992), 51, 115.

36. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 181.

37. Miguel Civil and others, eds., *The Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. 9 (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1973), 63. In the Neo-Babylonian period, these protective deities "usually introduc[ed] worshippers into the presence of important deities" (Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 115).

38. Julian Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1999), 28.

39. Cyril John Gadd, *The Assyrian Sculptures* (London: The British Museum, 1934), 14.

40. In fact, the measurements of both the altar and the Holy of Holies (הקדושים שֶׁבַּקֶּדֶשׁ) suggest that these two seemingly opposed locations are equally significant. Odell notes, "The altar's size in comparison with other elements in the temple also indicates its importance. . . . In area, it equals that of the holy of holies." Odell, *Ezekiel*, 502–3. See also the reconstructions of these two locations in Block, *Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, 541, 598.

41. Ever a student, Joseph Smith stated, "One [of] the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth, let it come from where it may." *The Words of*

Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1991), 229; spelling and punctuation standardized.

Following Joseph's lead, Brigham Young expanded upon this principle:

It is our duty and calling, as ministers of the . . . Gospel, to gather every item of truth and reject every error. Whether a truth be found with professed infidels, or with the Universalists, or the Church of Rome, or the Methodists, the Church of England, the Presbyterians, the Baptists, the Quakers, the Shakers, or any other of the various and numerous different sects and parties, all of whom have more or less truth, it is the business of the Elders of this Church . . . to gather up all the truths in the world pertaining to life and salvation, to the Gospel we preach, . . . wherever it may be found in every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, and bring it to Zion.

The people upon this earth have a great many errors, and they have also a great many truths. This statement is not only true of the nations termed civilized—those who profess to worship the true God, but is equally applicable to pagans of all countries, for in their religious [rites] and ceremonies may be found a great many truths which we will also gather home to Zion.

Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 7:283–84.

42. Encouragement for such an endeavor can be found in the words of Joseph Smith, who once said, "By proving contraries, . . . truth is made manifest." *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 6:428.