The Symbolism of the Biblical World

Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms

by

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THE TEMPLE:
PLACE OF
YAHWEH'S
PRESENCE AND
SPHERE OF LIFE
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craftsmanship, obviously from an important building which had stood on top of the scarpe, may
be the one architectural relic of Solomon’s Jerusalem so far found.Ś
Besides the Phoenician influence, there is also archaeological evidence of Egyptian influence, perhaps mediated by
Phoenicians, for Jerusalem of the early
monarchic period. In the presence
of Silwan, within the pre-exilic necropolis of pre-exilic Jerusalem, are ruins of a tomb (146)²
clearly of Egyptian derivation (c.
1138 BC).²
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1. TEMPLE ANI

Holy places in the ancient Near East were usually holy “by nature,” all the great Egyptian sites claimed to house within their walls
the primordial hill, the “glorious hill” of the first primordial at the beginning, which emerged from the floods of Chaos.
The great wall which surrounded the temple of the primordial hill substantiated the god’s presence at all other holy places.¶ The creator
made his appearance on the hill; the ordered world had its origin from it. It was filled with primordial energy and vital forces. The
diagrammadesigned for the primeval hill portrayed monumental forms that they might be regenerate
powers. The pyramids represented the primeval hill that was the source of all other holy places.¶ The
pyramids were laid out in a peculiar design, and the primeval hill was the temple.

Phoenician masons were employed in the work, one link in architectural style can be
based on the evidence of the excavations (in Jerusalem). Against the foot of the summit of the step-pyramid, the exterior walls
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masonry, and that the platform was constructed of stones with the bolder type of
dressing. Though so much of this has to be deduced from the mere statement that

145. Proto-Ionic (or proto-Aeolian) capital from Jerusalem, bearing witness to Phoenician influences.

146. Reconstruction of a tomb at Silwan, the most important necropolis of Jerusalem in the period of the monarchy. The tomb is constructed in a pure Egyptian style (cf., e.g., 76).

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monarchic period. In the present village of Silwan, within the precincts of the necropolis of pre-exilic Jerusalem, there are ruins of a tomb (146) which is clearly of Egyptian derivation (cf. 76).

While the institution of the temple as such was undoubtedly of Canaanite-Phoenician origin, and while its craftsmanship was certainly the work of Phoenician artisans, it does not follow that the plan of the structure as a whole was without specifically Israelite features. No doubt Solomon himself, as the builder, ultimately and authoritatively determined the design of the building, and he himself had to give at least minimal consideration to the sentiments of various conservative circles (cf. 2 Sam 7:4–7). That fact is evident, for example, in the design of the holy of holies.

1. TEMPLE AND MOUNTAIN

Holly places in the ancient Near East were usually holy “by nature.” Almost all the great Egyptian sanctuaries claimed to house within their courts the primeval hill, the “glorious hill of the primordial beginning,” which had first emerged from the floods of Chaos (147; cf. 40). The great wall which surrounds the huge temple enclosure of Karnak is laid out in an undulating design. This unusual form is intended to represent the primeval waters which formerly lapped around the temple hill. The primeval hill substantiated the claim of particular temples and cities to antedate all other holy places. The creator-god made his appearance on the primeval hill; the ordered world had its origin from it. It was filled with prodigious energies and vital forces. The dead were portrayed on the primeval hill (148) so that they might be regenerated by its powers. The pyramids represent huge primeval hills (149), but that is not their only significance. Like so many Egyptian symbols, the pyramids are ambiguous. The step-pyramids had the shape not only of a hill, but (at least in their most ancient form) that of a staircase. Spell 267 of the Pyramid Texts reads: “A staircase to heaven is laid for him [i.e., the king] so that he may climb up to heaven thereby.”

In Mesopotamia, as in Egypt, every temple has its du-ku, its “pure hill.” And in Mesopotamia too, the sanctuary constituted a part of the primordial beginnings. The construction of the Esagila, the principal temple of Babylon, is described within the framework of the creation epic Enuma elish. Construction took place after Marduk, the principal Babylonian deity, had vanquished the powers of Chaos (Tiamat, Kingu) (cf. 240). The gods then raised the summit of Esagila against the Apsu: they built the temple tower (150). It is called the “house of the foundation of heaven and earth.” In step-temples, the character of staircase generally dominates that of the primeval hill. It is obvious where the huge stairs lead. The ziggurat of Larsa bears the beautiful name, “house of the bond between heaven and earth”; that of Kish is the “exalted house of Zababa and Inanna, whose head is as high as the heavens” (cf. Gen 11:4; Ps 78:69). The step-tower of Nippur bears the title, “house of the mountain”; that of Assur is the “house of the great mountain of the nations.” Ziggurat, like “step-tower,” can mean “mountaintop.” In the Gilgamesh epic, Ut-napishtim, on the ziggurat, pours out a libation after the flood. Here the “ziggurat” is the top of the mountain Nisir, on which Ut-napishtim’s “ark” has come to land.

In the Ugaritic sphere, the conquest of Chaos is also closely related to mountain (hill) and temple. After his victory over the sea god Yam, Baal receives a temple
Various Egyptian representations of the primeval hill, the first entity to rise from the water of Chaos. The world evolved from the primeval hill.

148. The deceased was portrayed on the primeval hill in order that his life might be regenerated by the powers inherent in the hill. Ps 103, which views sin and sickness in close relation, makes the renewal of youth dependent on Yahweh's forgiveness.
149. The pyramids have the form and thus also (in the understanding of the ancient Near East) the character of the primeval hill. In the pyramid of Djoser, these aspects coincide with that of a double staircase, which is probably intended to enable the ascent of the deceased into the heavenly world. The Egyptian words for "climb" and "ascent" are determined by a double stair.

mountains: it lies 66 meters below that of the Mount of Olives, 76 meters below that of Mount Scopus, 33 meters below that of the hill to its west (the Christian Zion), and 53 meters below that of râr el-mekkabber (cf. Ps 125:1-2 and Plate VI). Ancient Jerusalem was centered on Ophel (the eastern hill) (151), and Zion may indeed have seemed like a mountain to its inhabitants: they had to negotiate a difference in elevation of some 100 meters from the south end of their city wall to the top of Zion (152; Plate VII). From En-rogel, the difference in elevation was even greater (130 meters). Nonetheless, it was evident that there were a number of more important mountains. There was, for instance, the

150. The title of the step-temple of Babylon is "house of the foundation of heaven and earth" (cf. Ps 78:69). The temple is the center and mainstay of creation.
151. The situation and dimensions of Jerusalem in the time of David (Jebusite) and Solomon.

152. Section along line A (151). One ascended to the temple from Solomon's Jerusalem.

wonderful dome of Tabor towering mightily over its surroundings, and the powerful, lofty mass (elevation: 2,814 meters) of Hermon (brm., "ban"; Hermon: "mountain of the ban"); cf. Plate VII A). In North Syria, Zaphon, the ancient Canaanite mountain of the gods, rises precipitously from the sea to an imposing height (Plate VII B); and in the south lies Sinai (or Horeb), the famous holy mountain of Israel's early epoch. In Ps 89:12, all are depotentized to the status of creations of Yahweh. The suppliant is to await his salvation from Yahweh, who dwells on Zion, and not from any holy mountain (Ps 121:1-2). Yahweh has chosen Zion in preference to all of them. The high mountains of the region look down on it, glowing and jealous (Ps 68:15-16), for despite its modest appearance it is the true mountain of the gods, the real Zaphon (Ps 48:2). At the end of time, it will rise above all other mountains (Isa 2:2 = Mic 4:1).

Yahweh has already given to Zion the dew of Hermon, embodying its fruitfulness and life (Ps 133:3). Zion possesses all the prerogatives of the cosmic mountain. Fig. 153 (cf. 42) shows a mountain god (identified by the scale-pattern on his robe and cap) who embodies at one and the same time vegetation, fertility, and life. Two fruit-bearing stalks spring forth from his hips. In his hands he holds two more, from which mountain goats eat their fill. The mighty mountain god is flanked by two fountain goddesses (cf. 42). Each holds in both hands an aryballos-shaped vessel, from which water rises in a high arc (cf. 191, 256). Trees and water identify the mountain as a sphere of life.

In Fig. 153a, the mountain god him-
... with the finest produce of the ancient mountains, and the abundance of the everlasting hills ..." (Deut 33:15; cf. Ps 133:3).
The four streams flowing from the vessel of the mountain deity are reminiscent of the four branches of the river of paradise (Gen 2:10; cf. 185).

self holds the water vessel (cf. Plate I B). The four streams emanating from the god are reminiscent of the four rivers of paradise.

Brushwood is found on the mountains of Palestine and Syria, but there is very little water. The concept that the mountain (the height) is a sphere of life may have been motivated less by geographical considerations than by the psychological association of "being happy" (as an expression of the fulness of life) with "being high" (as an expression of heightened vital consciousness). "to be happy," and rum, "to be high," are synonymous (cf. Ps 89:16 RSVm). The interpretative sign for the Egyptian h'j, "to be happy," is a man with uplifted arms (cf. 21). Paradise was thought to be located on a high mountain (cf. Ezek 28:13–16); it was densely forested (Gen 2:8–9) and the source of mighty rivers (Gen 2:10–14). The temple site, as locus of God's presence, was very closely related to paradise. In Mesopotamian creation myths, the foundation of the temple replaces the creation of paradise.

The hill Zion is identified with the primeval hill, paradise, the cosmic mountain and mountain of the gods. But this identification depends less on Zion's relative merits as a mountain than on its Holy Rock. The rock, with its solidity and strength, constitutes the antipole to the bottomless, slimy, sluggish (cf. 55) floods of Chaos, which threaten the ends of the earth (Pss 18:2–5; 61:2; Isa 28:15–16; Mt 16:18). At the temple site in Jerusalem is a rock which has been venerated at least since the seventh century of the Christian era. At that time the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (A.D. 687–691) built the exquisitely beautiful central structure whose dome dominates the site to this very day (cf. Plate IX). It is not likely that 'Abd al-Malik arbitrarily declared the rock holy. Rather, he carried forward an older tradition. As early as A.D. 333, a pilgrim from Bordeaux records seeing a lapis pertusus (a stone or rock full of holes) which was the object of cultic veneration by the Jews and was annually anointed in commemoration of the destruction of the temple. This rock was located not far from two statues of Hadrian, one of which (according to Jerome) is said to have stood on the site of the former holy of holies. Thus, according to traditions current in the fourth century this Holy Rock had not served as the foundation of the holy of holies. This lapis pertusus may nevertheless be the same rock enclosed by 'Abd al-Malik's dome. That rock too is pierced by a circular hole (154 s) which leads down to a rectangular cavity (154 l, m, n, o). The rock also displays a great many other holes and basinlike recesses.

T. A. Busink has recently evaluated the various arguments concerning the location of the temple. He concludes that the temple was probably situated to the north of the Holy Rock. Without reference to Busink's opinion, E. Vogt harks back to the view of C. Warren, locating the temple to the south of the Holy Rock. Busink and Vogt agree, at any rate, that the Holy Rock cannot have served as the foundation for either the altar of burnt offering or the holy of holies. If it had held the altar of burnt offering, the holy of holies would have to have been built over a substructure of some kind, for the hilltop drops off quite sharply just west of the Holy Rock.
The Holy Rock in Jerusalem (q-sahra):

a-b: Corner line of the lower west terrace.
c-d: Line of the upper west step.
e: The cleft hewn in the rock eastward from the step.
f: The cavity on the west face.
g, h, i: The southwesterly cut in the rock.
g: The relic shrine.
k: The two small marble columns on the south side of the great west step.
l, m, n, o: The cave.
p: The niche in the cave.
r: Cave stairs.
s: The round hole in the ceiling of the cave.
t: The marble slab on the floor of the cave.
u-w: The northern wall of the rock.
x: Northeast corner of the rock.
y: High-point of the northern stairway to the rock.
z: Slabs over the subterranean passage leading toward the north.
a-β: The natural cleft in the rock.
y: The footprint of Idris.
θ: Traces of excavations and cuts.
ε: Basin cavity (H. Schmidt, Der heilige Pels, key to Fig. 1).

The Holy Rock closely resembles the holy rocks which have been found at Gezer. The dates of the various traces of workmanship cannot be determined with certainty. It is known that the Crusaders sent altar stones hewn from the Holy Rock to Europe.

Despite the unmistakable presence in the Jerusalem temple of components

154. The Holy Rock in Jerusalem (q-sahra):

155. The "Holy Rock" at Gezer.
reminiscent of the Chaos-cosmos conception prevalent in ancient Near Eastern sanctuaries, no attempt was made to trace the foundation of the Jerusalem sanctuary back to the time of the primal beginnings. In the Yahwistic creation narrative (Gen 2), there appears instead of a temple a garden made for men; in the Priestly version (Gen 1) there is no special area at all. In the course of his history with Israel, Yahweh chose Zion. Yahweh is not, as it were, elementally or eternally linked with Zion. Ps 132 relates, in the context of the story of the ark (1 Sam 4–6; 2 Sam 6), how he moved to Zion. Yahweh loved (Pss 78:68; 87) and desired (Ps 132:13b) Zion, and chose (Ps 132:13a) it over all other mountains (Ps 68:16), over all the sanctuaries of Jacob (Ps 87:2). Yahweh’s dwelling on Zion is thus a free act of grace. In it the exodus from Egypt and the settlement of the land find their full completion. The object of the exodus is the sovereignty of Yahweh, which produces life and salvation. That lordship will extend from Zion to include all nations (Ps 87; Isa 2:2–4; Mic 4:1–5). In the free election of Zion as an act of divine condescension lie the essence and

2. THE TEMPLE GATES

As a holy precinct, the temple area, like paradise, is safeguarded by extraordinary measures. Moses had to set a boundary around Sinai (Exod 19:12). Zion was surrounded by a wall suitable for military service (Ps 48:12–13). In Jerusalem, as in the Egyptian (157) and Assyrian (158) representations of a Canaanite city, one must distinguish the outworks (158), the city wall itself, with its towers and salients (157 and 158), and the acropolis, with its fortified palaces and the temple (157 and 158). It is not quite clear whether “Zion” in Ps 48:12–13 includes at least some part of the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem and Zion are sometimes virtually synonymous (Pss 51:18; 102:21; 147:12). According to Ps 116:19, the forecourts of the temple lie “in the midst of Jerusalem.” Acropolis and city, as Figs. 157 and 158 suggest, were understood as a unity.

The gates were the most vulnerable points of an ancient Near Eastern city. Attempt was made to secure them by special fortifications (cf. 159–61) and by all kinds of magical or religious measures (158a).

Because the gate, flanked by two mighty towers, formed a most impressive representation of the city, it could stand as pars pro toto for “city” (cf. Fig. 162, where the temple gate represents the temple; cf. “gates of death” in Ps


140. Bronze relief, h. ca. 28 cm.: Tell Balawat, Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.); BM. L. W. King, *Bronze Reliefs*, pl. 8.


148. Sculpture, h. 35 cm, 19th Dynasty (1345–1200 B.C.); Florence. H. Frankfort, *Kingship*, p. 35.


152. Diagram of the north-south line of Ophel, drawn from Fig. 151. Drawing by U. Winter.


182. Cylindric stele, painted clay, h. 106 cm.: Megiddo (1350–1150 B.C.); Loud, *Megiddo*, vol. 2, pl. 251.


199. Section of the relief in Fig. 157.


203. Long-house types. V. Müller, *"Types*"., p. 179, pl. 1. ANEP, no. 752.

204. Bent-axis house types. V. Müller, "Types," p. 180, pl. 2. ANEP, no. 753.

205. Bent-axis house. W. Andrae,