The Temple in Antiquity

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Religious Studies Center
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah
The Temple and the Holy Mountain

Richard J. Clifford

In the literatures of the Judeo-Christian tradition and in other sacred texts there is a close connection between, even an identifying of, temples and mountains. "The mountain of the Lord's house" symbolizes at least three ideas: (1) Theophanies have occurred on mountaintops (Abraham on Mount Moriah, Moses on Sinai, Elijah on Mount Carmel, Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration). (2) In both Eastern and Western religion one finds assumptions that elevation and height are proportioned to the thin veil that separates man from the heavenly realm. (3) The mountain peak represents a pristine and therefore undesecrated region. It is a "natural temple," a place of altar, of consecration, of ordination, even of coronation. As the modern exodus of the Mormons was anticipated, Joseph Smith said: "I want every man who goes to be a king and a priest. When he gets on the mountains he may want to talk to his God." In the present essay, Richard Clifford outlines powerful symbolic connections between the sacred mountain and the privileges of the temple in ancient Israel.
Two mountains dominate the landscape of the Old Testament—Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. On both the Lord is depicted dwelling in his house, appearing to his votaries in majesty, pronouncing words decisive for Israel and the nations. The two mountains are fixed points in the national story of exodus-conquest which Israel recited to express its identity as Yahweh’s people. Sinai is the mountain of the beginnings, the site of the initial encounter between the just-freed slaves and Yahweh, and of the covenant that shaped that relationship. Mount Zion is the ultimate term of the great procession that led from Egypt and Sinai to the land of promise. Sinai not only dominates the Pentateuch; associated with Moses and with the Law, it plays an enormously significant role in Judaism and Christianity. Zion too has an impressive trajectory, particularly in the shaping of Jewish and Christian hope.

It is not the purpose of this paper to give an encyclopedic account of biblical beliefs about the two mountains, but, more narrowly, to describe how Israel adapted to its own uses the belief of some West-Semitic peoples that mountaintops were divine residences and places of divine disclosure.

Israel was not unique, of course, in assigning a central place to the holy mountain and the house of the god upon it. The link between mountain and temple has been noted, for instance, by Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormons, and by Brigham Young, who observed that when people did not have opportunities to go to temples, they often resorted to mountaintops for worship. Among the Israelites and their neighbors of the first and second millennia B.C., the link between divine presence and mountaintops is a well-documented phenomenon meriting careful study. We are fortunate in having preserved for us, not only the considerable biblical witness to sacred heights, but another corpus of religious literature as well, not far removed in time or place from Israel’s world—the tablets from Ugarit of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C. Comparison of the two literatures will sharpen our appreciation of the Bible. The Ugaritic tablets are written in a West-Semitic language that has remarkable continuities with early Hebrew poetry, not only in vocabulary, syntax, and prosody, but also in themes and
concepts. Let us conveniently call the writers of those tablets "Canaanites," though there is evidence that the people of the city of Ugarit did not use the term Canaanite for themselves. The six major tablets of the Baal cycle, the three of the Keret cycle, and the three of the Aqhat cycle, together with the later Phoenician and biblical evidence, provide a reliable sampling of the ideas prevalent among Israel's neighbors about divine presence and mountains.

If one were to make a simple comparison of the religious institutions attested in the Ugaritic texts with those attested in the Bible, with no regard to their contexts, one would immediately be struck by the similarities of the two literatures. The major deities of the Ugaritic texts, El and Baal, dwell in a tent or palace on their mountains, celebrate banquets, sit in council with the other deities, issue decrees, receive embassies, and proclaim their kingship in thunder that shakes the mountains. So does the biblical Yahweh, *mutatis mutandis*.

One's first impression of striking continuities or similarities between Canaanite and Hebrew conceptions of mountains needs to be qualified by an appreciation of the discontinuities or dissimilarities between them. Only the context will provide us with a sense of the discontinuity, of the uniqueness of Israel. The context here is made up of two elements: (1) the polytheism or monotheism of the cultures; (2) the particular story involving the holy mountain, told with either mythological or "historical" emphases.

The first-mentioned determinant of the context, the polytheism or monotheism of the culture, shapes the very way people imagine the universe. In ancient Near Eastern polytheism, the ordinary religion of that time, the individual comes to terms with a variety of forces in the cosmos presenting themselves in the form of deities. Natural rhythms and events of history are perceived as the evidence of various, often competing, divine forces in precarious balance. Narratives explaining the polytheistic world (e.g., the Baal myth), are largely taken up with the conflicts among the deities and their resolutions. The mountain residences of the gods which figure importantly in the Ugaritic texts are part of the drama of cosmic conflict and
resolution, and conflict and resolution moreover that are endlessly repeated, for the deities are linked to recurring natural phenomena. In the monotheistic world of the Bible, where a single powerful deity presided, the world was interpreted independently of the conflict of natural forces. The world was attributed to a single will, not to a variety of wills presenting themselves in natural phenomena. The imagery of Israelite and Canaanite depiction of the divine could be the same, but the significance of the images would differ enormously.

The second element forming the context is the story. In the Ugaritic texts of Canaanite religion, the drama is the conflict between the higher gods of order and fertility, El and Baal along with the members of the divine assembly, and the forces of chaos, chiefly Yam (Sea) and Mot (Death). In the Hebrew story there are no competing cosmic forces since Yahweh is the only power. The drama here is an ongoing historical one in which virtually the entire emphasis is on human events. The drama is the exodus-conquest, the movement from Egypt (and Sinai) to Canaan (and Zion). The two major mountain dwellings of deity in Canaan, the quite distinct mountain of El and Mount Zaphon of Baal, seem at times in the Bible to have become the two successive mountains of the one deity Yahweh, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the procession to the land.

We turn first to the Ugaritic texts for the light they shed on the biblical texts. Two mountain dwellings of deity are prominent in the Baal myth of six tablets: the mountain where El lives in a tent dwelling and presides over the divine assembly, and Mount Zaphon, where Baal is given permission by El to build his palace after his victory over chaos.

To El, the bearded old patriarch, come the gods and their messengers with petitions and demands.

Then they (the messengers of the gods) set their face
Toward El at the sources of the Two Rivers,
In the midst of the pools of the Double Deep.
They entered the tent of El and went into
The tent shrine of the King, the Father of Years.
Another text shows the mountain as the scene of the assembly of the gods where deliberations about the world take place and where decrees are issued.

... the meeting of the divine council (pḫr mʾd).
Then the gods were sitting to eat,
The holy ones, to dine.
Baal was standing at El’s side.

El lives in paradise, where life-giving waters arise to render the earth fertile. The “sources of the Two Rivers” and the “pools of the Double Deep” are borrowings from old Mesopotamian poetry descriptive of paradise, the source of life-giving waters. From his mountain residence El issues his decree. In two texts, goddesses praise his decree as life-giving and as conferring royal rule.

Thy decree, O El, is wise,
Thy wisdom lasts forever.
A life of good fortune is thy command.

The biblical reflexes of the Ugaritic traditions of El’s dwelling are not hard to discern, especially in the material about Mount Sinai. Moses is told to make the tent for Yahweh according to the pattern shown him on Mount Sinai (Ex. 26:30; cf. 25:9, 40; 27:8; Num. 8:4), implying that Yahweh lives in a tent on the mountain. The biblical tradition calls the tent the “tent of meeting” (ʾōhel mōʾēḏ), a term applied originally to the assembly of the gods (pḫr mʾd of the Ugaritic texts), but in the Bible to the meeting between Yahweh and Moses (or the people). El’s residence as the source of all fertilizing waters is echoed in Genesis 2:10-14, which discusses the four rivers that rise in Eden, and in Ezekiel 47:1-12, describing the river that flows from the temple on the mountain. The decree of El, authoritative for gods and humans, finds its Old Testament reflex in the laws that are issued from Sinai.

A reminder that we are in a polytheistic context is found in the threats from Prince Sea that terrify and immobilize the assembly of the gods.

As soon as the gods saw them,
Saw the messengers of Yamm,
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The envoys of Judge River,
The gods dropped their heads
Onto their knees,
Down on their princely thrones.

The mention of conflict introduces us not only to the forces of chaos, Sea and Death, but to the god who is to be victor over them, Baal, the young storm god residing on Mount Zaphon. Baal is commissioned by the assembly to combat the chaotic forces, is victorious, and returns to his mountain to build the temple that will celebrate his kingship. The biblical echoes of this part of the ancient myth seem mainly associated with Mount Zion. The palace of Baal is described in the same words as the temple of the Bible, heḳdal and bêt. It is likewise the site of the victory feast (see Isa. 25:6-8; chap. 55) and of the thundering forth of his kingship. The great battle of olden days took place there (Ps. 46, 48, 76).5

Turning to the biblical texts we find many of the same phenomena of the Ugaritic texts, but now with striking new emphasis provided by the Israelite context—its monotheism and its story of exodus-conquest.

In the Bible the one Yahweh has two mountains, Sinai and Zion, and traits proper to each mountain in the Baal cycle are found in passages dealing with both biblical mountains. The apparent blending of language pertaining to the mountains of El and Baal is part of the larger phenomenon: the mixing of El and Baal language in the figure of Yahweh (e.g., Yahweh is a warrior able to tame chaotic forces and celebrates his kingship in his temple, yet he is an old patriarch who lives in a tent). The most important mode of Israelitizing the sacred mountains is through the mountains' incorporation into the national epic. Sinai is the mountain of Yahweh in the beginning, and Zion is his mountain at the end of the conquest. Yahweh is seen as moving his residence from Sinai by allowing the earthly copy of his tent, "the tabernacle of the tent of meeting" (miškan 'ōhel mō'ēd, Ex. 39:32; 40:6, 29) shown to Moses on the mountain (Ex. 25:9), to be carried to the land of Canaan.6 The descriptions of the march
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from the south in some early poetry (Deut. 33:2-5; Judg. 5:4-5; Ps. 68:8-9; Hab. 3) may state the same movement of Yahweh from Sinai to Canaan.

Yahweh, when you went forth from Seir,
When you marched forth from the mountain country of Edom,
The earth trembled,
Yea, the heavens dropped water,
Yea, the clouds dropped water.
The mountains quaked before Yahweh, the one of Sinai,
Before Yahweh, the God of Israel.

(Judges 5:4-5.)

Sinai is the mountain where God first meets Israel and its great representative, Moses. The Lord appears to Moses suddenly in a burning bush as Moses pastures his flock. Moses is charged to bring the whole people, oppressed by Pharaoh, to the same mountain to worship. In the subsequent encounters with Pharaoh, which are in effect a war between Yahweh and Pharaoh about which of the two will become the deity of the people (i.e., who will receive their ultimate allegiance), Sinai stands as the mountain which beckons the people to leave Pharaoh’s dominion and to enter Yahweh’s. In the Priestly list of stations in the wilderness journey, six are allotted to the trip from Egypt to the last station before Sinai, Rephidim, and six from Sinai to the plains of Moab.7 Sinai, which is the goal of the Hebrews while they are actually in bondage in Egypt, yields to another goal when the people are safely out of Pharaoh’s domain—the mountain of Yahweh in Canaan. When Yahweh wins the people for himself by defeating Pharaoh at the Red Sea, the people encounter Yahweh in thunder and lightning on Sinai. “There was thunder, lightning and a dense cloud upon the mountain and a very loud blast of the horn. All the people in the camp trembled. Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their places at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was all in smoke for the Lord came down upon it in fire; the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln.” (Ex. 19:16-18.) The storm theophany is a proclamation of divine sovereignty. The ten words and other laws—the way in
which the divine rule of Yahweh will be exercised over this people—are delivered to Moses on the mountain. The passages opening and concluding the encounter, Exodus 19:16-24 and 24:1-11, both contain hints that later liturgical celebration has influenced the account of the original event.\(^{8}\)

It is significant that the great tent structure which Moses is commanded to build according to the pattern which has been shown him on the mountain of Sinai is consistently portrayed, not as Yahweh’s dwelling on the mountain, but as his temporary dwelling on the journey. In other words, the tent structure that fits perfectly into the Canaanite picture of the god El seems redefined by Israel as deliberately portable. It seems deliberately detached from its original \textit{situs} on the mountain to become the moving shrine. We should note that it functions as a temple in the wilderness and appears to have the elaborate furniture and cultus that we would expect in a god’s house. In Exodus 33:7-11, the tent, which the tradition sometimes distinguishes from the tabernacle, is a place of oracle. “When Moses entered the tent (of meeting), the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the door of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the door of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, every man at his tent door. Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.” (RSV, Ex. 33:9-11.) The tent is a place of oracles or divine messages which are given to Moses on behalf of the people. Oracles or decrees will be given later in the temple at Jerusalem in the form of restatements of the Sinai law, a continuation of the practice depicted in this text. Israelite tradition, then, generally remembers the tabernacle not so much as the dwelling of Yahweh on Sinai but as the portable tent shrine that was the predecessor of the temple on Zion.

Sinai is then the site of the encounter between God and the people that made the people into Israel. The thunderous celebration of royal rule, the decrees, the tabernacle, and the tent of meeting, all part of mountain residences of deity in Canaanite lore, are now part of the movement of the exodus-conquest.

There exists perhaps no better introduction to the biblical understanding of Mount Zion than the great pre-monarchic poem
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in Exodus 15. In two matching panels the poet celebrates the victory of Yahweh with weapons of storm over the army of Pharaoh at the sea (vv. 1b-12) and the immediately following procession in which Yahweh leads his people from the battle site to the god’s sanctuary on the holy mountain (vv. 13-18).

From panel I:

v. 1 Sing to Yahweh, For he is highly exalted, Horse and chariotry He cast into the Sea

\[\ldots\ldots\]

v. 10 You blew with your breath, Sea covered them. They sank like a lead weight In the dreadful waters.

From panel II:

v. 13 You faithfully led The people whom you redeemed; You guided in your might To your holy encampment.

v. 14 The peoples heard, they shuddered; Horror seized the inhabitants of Philistia.

\[\ldots\ldots\]

v. 17 You brought them, you planted them In the mount of your heritage, The dais of your throne Which you made, Yahweh, The sanctuary, Yahweh, Which your hands created.

v. 18 Let Yahweh reign Forever and ever.\(^9\)

In this passage the storm god’s victory over Sea that established cosmic order, as well as his victorious return to his mountain house where the newly won kingship would be proclaimed, has been adapted from the Canaanite myth. Here the victory is not against Sea but against Pharaoh’s troops at the sea,
and the procession is of course the wilderness journey from Egypt to Canaan. The mountain shrine was later understood as Zion, but originally it was probably an early shrine of the pre-David period or, equally probable, Israel conceived as a mountain.\footnote{This passage reminds us that the old national story of exodus-conquest could be told with two differing emphases. One was the "historical" version, that is, the narrative prose of the Pentateuch and Joshua; the other, a more "mythic" version (with retention of a controlling historical impulse), as in Exodus 15 and some of the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 74, 77, 78, 89) and in Second Isaiah (e.g., Isa. 51:9-11).}

Though the more mythic version of the exodus-conquest is not so familiar to us, perhaps even alien to our modern way of understanding reality, it remains important because it associates creation and kingship with the mountain. In the ancient Near East, creation often involved conflict, the taming or returning to their proper place of forces hostile to humanity, such as darkness (non-light) and formlessness (typically symbolized by the unlimited ocean). Creation or cosmogony issued not in the universe in its unpeopled physicality, as we are wont to imagine it, but in structured human society (i.e., with kingship, laws, worship systems). The defeat of Pharaoh, who had prevented the emergence of Israel as a people, could be interpreted as the defeat of chaos, while Yahweh's victory was the creation of a people.

Psalms 74:12-17; 77:12-21 (EV 11-20); 78:2-38 (EV 1-37), and especially Isaiah 51:9-11 associate the redemption of Israel with creation.

Was it not you who smote Rahab?
Who pierced Tannin?
Was it not you who dried up Sea,
The Waters of the abysmal deep?
Who makes the depths of the sea a way
For the redeemed to pass over?

(Isaiah 51:9-10.)

Another text associates the conquest of chaotic waters with the creation of Israel and brings in another related theme—the acknowledgment of Yahweh's sole lordship by the other heavenly beings.
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I will recall the deeds of Yahweh.
Yes, I will recall your wondrous act from olden days.

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God, your power was over the holy ones,\textsuperscript{11}
What God is great as God?
You are the God who works wonders
You have made known among the peoples your strength.
By your arm you have redeemed your people,
The children of Jacob and Joseph.
The waters saw you, O God,
The waters saw you and were convulsed,
The very deep quaked as well.
Clouds streamed water,
The clouds thundered,

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Your way was through the sea,
Your path, through the mighty waters,
Your footsteps could not be seen.
You led your people like a flock,
By the hand of Moses and Aaron.

(Psalms 77:12-21.)

The kingship of Yahweh, the inviolability of his mountain dwelling, the triumphal procession of the victorious deity with his loyal votaries sharing in his victory—all themes associated with the palace of the deity on the holy mountain—have their roots and explanation in the Israelite understanding of the exodus, and conquest.

The kingship of Yahweh is celebrated in several psalms which glorify Zion, namely Psalms 46, 48, and 76. In these psalms the victory over enemies seems to have taken place on Mount Zion itself.

In Judah God is acknowledged,
In Israel great is his name.
Salem became his abode,
Zion, his den.
There he broke the fiery arrows of the bow,
Shield and spear and weapon of war.

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The bravest were stripped of spoil,
Stupor overcame them,
The best of the soldiers could not lift a hand.
At your blast, O God of Jacob,
Horse and rider lay stunned.

(Psalm 76:2-7.)

In another psalm the very buildings on the holy mountain remind
the beholder of the victory of Yahweh over the forces of evil.

Great is Yahweh
And greatly to be praised
In the city of our God—
His holy mountain,
The beautiful height,
The joy of the entire earth,
Mount Zion,
The reaches of the north,
The city of the Great King.
God in its citadels
Is acknowledged as a refuge.

(Psalm 48:2-4; EV vv. 1-3.)

The psalm goes on to relate how enemy kings advancing on the
holy mountain were defeated by Yahweh’s using the weapons of
storm (vv. 5-9; EV 4-8); the historicizing of chaotic forces reminds
one of Exodus 15. The psalm ends

Walk around Zion,
Circle it,
Count its towers,
Take note of its ramparts . . .
That you may tell the following generation
This is God, our God forever and ever.

(Psalm 48:13-15; EV vv. 12-14.)

The palace of Yahweh memorializes his total triumph over all
hostile forces. The temple court complex makes visible to the
worshipper the great victory that has been won and the new order
that has been introduced. “Walk around Zion, circle it, count its
towers. . . . “This is our God.” ” Psalm 29 puts it dramatically:
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Yahweh sits enthroned over Flood,
Yahweh sits enthroned as king forever.
May Yahweh give strength to his people!
May Yahweh bless his people with peace!

(Psalm 29:10-11.)

That sacred dwellings on earth, with their furnishings and rituals, make present to worshippers a heavenly reality and divine activity is largely unfamiliar in our culture. Dualism or correspondence between heavenly and earthly or between primal event and present celebration was pervasive in Canaanite and biblical civilizations and must be taken seriously. The temple on Mount Zion is the copy of the real palace in the heavenly world. It copies its form. The likeness need only be a general one, a sketch. If the copy is like the reality, then it “is” that reality; it somehow participates in it and presents it to the worshipper. In the Ugaritic texts the gods are depicted as living in palaces, eating banquets, sending messages to one another. In the biblical texts, divine activity is presented as sacral and removed from profane life. The palace of the god has become a temple, his banquet has become a sacred meal or sacrifice (sacriificium, sacrum factum, “made holy”), his message has become a sacred message. By entering the temple of Yahweh on the mountain, the worshipper is able to enter the sacral sphere and to come into touch with these realities.

Psalm 29, quoted above, portrays Yahweh as seated on Flood in victorious pose and reigning. It is followed immediately by the prayer that strength would be given to the earthly followers of the Lord, and blessing and peace. The mention of worshippers sharing in the benefits of the victorious Lord invites us to look at the way in which Israel encountered the Lord in the temple on the mountain and received the blessings of the new order.

When the people of Israel, on the appropriate feast days, were admitted to the sacred precincts of the court/temple, they would typically recite, often through singers and antiphonal response, the great deeds of Yahweh on their behalf. The “great deeds” were the national story of exodus-conquest in one of its many versions, either with a more historical emphasis or with a more mythic one (i.e., with language of creation). Israel on these occasions “remembered” those early saving deeds which
founded her. As the people remembered them in a solemn, liturgical way, those deeds and their saving power somehow became present to the congregation. The words of the recital “copy” the original deed. Somehow that deed is no longer in the far-distant past, inaccessible to the congregation. It is present. The book of Deuteronomy puts it this way: “The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive this day.” (Deut. 5:2-3.)

Not only the recitation of the national story was important, but also the place where it was to be recited. Israel celebrated liturgically on the sacred mountain in the house of the Lord. The mountain is the end of the conquest procession, the holy mountain, “the place, Yahweh, which you have made your abode, the sanctuary, Yahweh, which your hands have established” (Ex. 15:17). It is also the place where the cosmic battle of creation and the enthronement of the victorious deity in that battle took place. It is appropriately the site where the original deed should be celebrated. Israel, standing on the holy mountain in the temple precincts, somehow relives those founding events and draws strength from that reliving. “Strength” is given to the people, the people are blessed with peace, according to the words of Psalm 29.

But even outside of festal days, the šālôm of Yahweh is given to his people, a peace that is sometimes seen most concretely in the temple and the mountain, which then radiates outward to all the people. Perhaps the most concrete instrument of the blessing of Yahweh the king is the Davidic king. Psalm 72 is a prayer for the king, who is seen to dispense to all the people that righteousness and justice with which he has been endowed. Psalm 2 shows us the same king seated on the holy mountain while the enemy kings rage against him at its base.

“Let us break the cords of their yoke, Shake off their ropes from us!” He who is enthroned in heaven laughs, The Lord mocks at them. Then he speaks to them in anger, Terrifying them in his rage,
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"But I have installed my king
On Zion, My holy mountain!"
Let me tell of the decree:
The Lord said to me,
"You are my son,
I have fathered you this day."

(Psalm 2:3-7.)

Psalm 89:6-28, though it does not expressly mention the holy mountain or the temple, makes it clear that the davidic is appointed as regent over the newly ordered world and represents the kingship of Yahweh in the cosmic sense to the kings of the world.12

Sometimes the peace and blessing that has been won by Yahweh and enshrined on his holy mountain is given to the people without the mediation of the Davidic king, and sometimes it is extended even to the nations beyond Israel’s borders. A striking example of the blessings given to all peoples is the extraordinary poem found in Isaiah 2:2-4 (also Micah 4:1-4), which shows the nations united in peace around Zion.

In the days to come
The mountain of the house of Yahweh will be established
Higher than the top of the mountains.
Lifted up more than the hills.
All the nations shall flow to it,
Many peoples will come and say
"Come let us go to the mountain of Yahweh,
To the house of the God of Jacob,
That he may instruct us in his ways,
That we may walk in his paths."

The passage in Isaiah just cited speaks of the glorification of the holy mountain of God in an unspecified future time. It is eschatological, that is, it speaks of a future time when Yahweh will be totally triumphant over his enemies and will introduce a new age. The new age is in some texts portrayed as relatively continuous with present realities, as in Isaiah 1:21-26, where the ideal time of Davidic Zion will be restored. In other texts it is presented as discontinuous with the present; one example is the
restoration of creation peace under the descendant of Jesse in Isaiah 11:1-9.

Given the conception of creation or cosmogony in the ancient Near East, it is not at all surprising that the holy mountain should be the place where the new age becomes visible. It is the site of creation where forces hostile to order were quelled. Though chaotic forces could gain the upper hand for a time, people believed that the high gods of order and fertility would impose order once again. Implicit in the concept of creation was the return to the original state of creation. The Garden of Eden was a place where the man ruled over a peaceable kingdom. The man named the animals; they came at his call. There was no bloodshed or violence. Even though the man and the woman sinned (Gen. 2-3) and violence and bloodshed came into the world (Gen. 4:1-16; 6:11; 9:3), the Israelite hope was that the original state would return. A good expression of this hope is in Isaiah 11:1-9.

He will judge the poor with justice,
He will decide with equity for the poor of the land....
The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
The leopard lie down with the kid....
They shall not hurt or destroy
In all my holy mountain.

(Isaiah 11:4, 6, 9)

Genesis 2:10-14 speaks of the river in the garden which divides into four rivers that water the four quarters of the earth. In Ezekiel's vision of the new temple on the mountain in Ezekiel 47:1-12, a river rises from below the temple and flows out to make the earth fertile. The peace and harmony of the garden of God on the mountain will return in the end.

We have seen earlier that Israel told its national story with either of two emphases, one mythic and the other historical. Zion as a future goal is portrayed with either of the emphases. The mythic emphasis, which we have just looked at, speaks of Zion as the site of the new creation with the restoration of original harmony and life. The second emphasis, the historical, speaks of Zion as the goal of the procession. This is the picture more familiar to us. The children of Israel who are dispersed look...
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forward to the day of gathering when their oppressors will be defeated and they will be led home. Israel in the beginning was a people led in procession from slavery to freedom in a new land, and this movement from exile to the land and to Zion becomes a paradigm for Israel in later periods. “But Yahweh will have mercy on Jacob and again choose Israel. He will settle them on their land. Strangers shall join them and cleave to the house of Jacob.” (Isa. 14:1.) The historical exodus has become a type of a life entrusted to God. The mountain is the goal of pilgrimage, of the final rest after escape from the dominion of evil. The mountain of God in the beginning has become the mountain of God at the end.

Notes

1. For much of the documentation in what follows, see my The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972). The term “cosmic” does not refer to the once widely held opinion of semiticists that the ancients saw the whole universe as a mountain with heaven at the top, the underworld at the base, and the earth somewhere in between. Such a Weltberg is no longer generally posited by scholars.

2. This stereotyped description occurs five times in the Ugaritic texts. See further Clifford, Cosmic Mountain, pp. 48-57.


4. See ibid., pp. 55-57.

5. In the Ugaritic texts the battle between Mot and Baal takes place on Mount Zaphon, Andree Herdner, Corpus Tablettes en Cuneiformes Alphabetiques (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1963), 6.6.12-34. For further reading on Baal’s battles on the holy mountain see Clifford, Cosmic Mountain, pp. 59-60, 143-53.


7. For further reading on the list of stations, see F. M. Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 308-17.


10. For the land of Israel conceived as a mountain, see Deut. 32:13; Ezek. 17:23; 20:40; 39:2; Isa. 11:9; 14:25.
