

The Topography of Zion

Right at the beginning, when Israel first escaped from under the thumb of Pharoah, God arranged a parable in the historical record. The parable tells us about the structure of the family of God, about how Israel approaches God's presence, and also tells us about the physical topography of the coming Zion. The symbolism is simple but profound.

Exodus 24

(God) said to Moses, "Climb the mountain to GOD, you and Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. They will worship from a distance; only Moses will approach GOD. The rest are not to come close. And the people are not to climb the mountain at all."

There are three levels described here. The congregation stayed at the bottom of the mountain, outside the Lord's presence; a smaller group (including four named individuals, Joshua,¹ Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu) ascended part way up the mountain and had an interaction with the Divine, but only one individual ascended to the summit and had a fulsome encounter with God. One way to characterize this stratification is that the higher on the mountain you are, the more perfect your worship.

The price that is paid to arrive at each of these levels is sacrifice. Moses fasted for forty days; he left behind all worldly sustenance, and relied wholly on God to succor him. Meanwhile, the crowd of Israelites at the bottom of the mountain were content to party. Their sacrifice was less than perfect.

Exodus 32

And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.

Presumably, those who were invited to come part way up the mountain, made an intermediate level of sacrifice.

This stepwise approach towards God is echoed and enshrined in the architecture of Moses' tabernacle. In Moses' tabernacle there is a courtyard, where the congregation gathers and where bloody, earthy sacrifices are offered; there is a holy place, where a priestly class officiates, and more refined offerings are made;² and there is a Holy of Holies, where the High Priest, all alone, comes into the presence of God.

¹ Although Joshua is not named in this verse, Exodus 24:13 suggests that Joshua too ascended partway up the mountain.

² Exodus 30:9

Although the tabernacle was essentially two-dimensional, it represents a three-dimensional ascent up the mountain of the Lord.³ The pattern was preserved in the architecture of God's house because, apparently, it is a timeless description of the way in which Israel slowly rises up to meet God. It was there in Israel's first tabernacle, and a form of this three-level approach to God is still found in modern Mormon temples. The baptistry is found in the basement, further washings take place on the ground floor, and entry into the symbolic presence of God happens on the upper floor.

In the holy place in Moses' tabernacle, the place where select members of the priestly class did their labors, there are two pieces of "furniture" that provide additional insight into the family of, and the ascent towards, God. The altar of incense was made of shittim wood covered with gold. Shittum, or as we would say, Acacia, was used because it was resistant to decay and structurally sound, and also because the acacia tree was often the only bit of green in an otherwise barren landscape.



Although the acacia was terribly thorny, one can imagine the relief of a wanderer taking shelter from the blistering sun beneath its canopy.

The gold that covered the shittum wood is obviously precious, and brings to mind the luster of heavenly glory. The altar of incense is usually described as having 4 horns, one on each of its four corners. Horns in scripture symbolize strength, abundance, and fertility. And they are receptacles of the oil of the Holy Spirit.⁴

³ Denver Snuffer Podcast 32: Temple 1, paragraph 6

⁴ 1 Samuel 16:13



Now, it seems self-evident that the design elements of the altar of incense – elements decreed by God’s own voice⁵ – must symbolize something. Is it likely that God would be so particular about its construction if none of the details had any deeper meaning? If they do have deeper meaning, then what might these details symbolize? Since the Tabernacle of Moses was both God’s house on Earth and a representation of God’s house in Heaven, perhaps the “adornments,” the “bits and bobs,” found in God’s house represent individuals in God’s family. House of course can refer to both a physical edifice as well as a family.

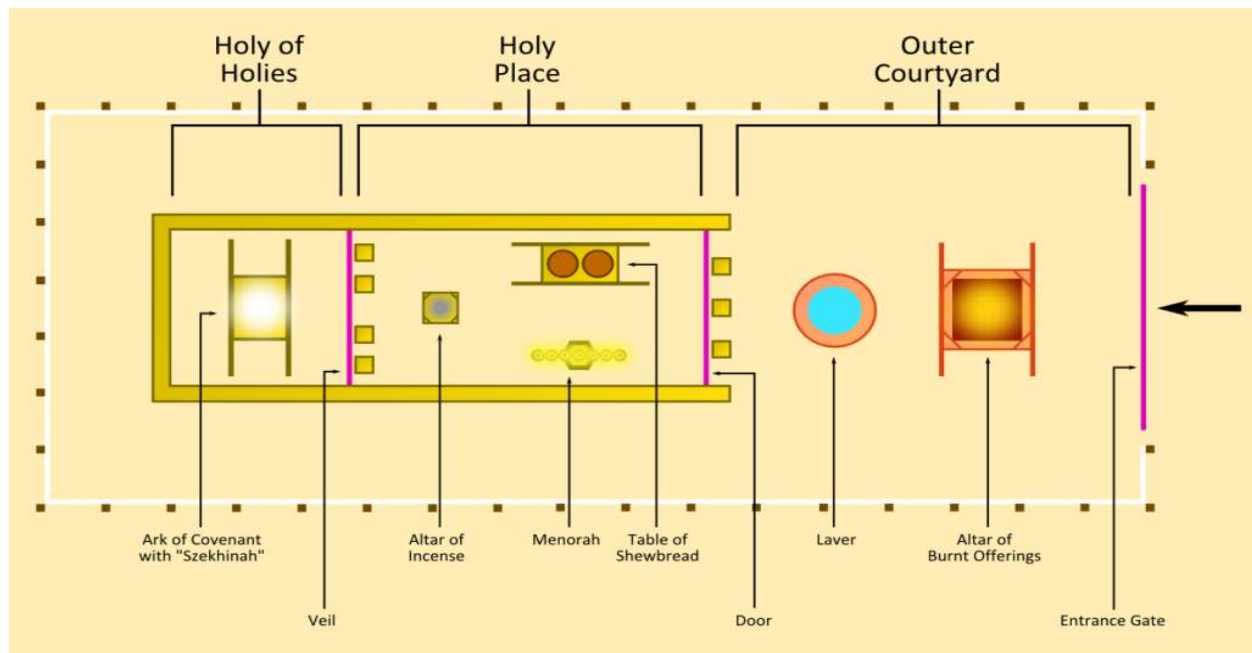
A line from the musical *Oliver* might be *apropos*.

“Consider yourself at home, consider yourself part of the furniture,”

Taken together, the materials and design of the altar of incense may well bring to mind the four corners of the earth: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and John. These four in particular, in all the earth, resisted, like acacia, the rot of earthly things. They shine with the luster of heaven, as if clothed in gold: they are seraphim, the burning ones. They are precious, strong, fertile, “green” in a desiccated world. They offer shelter to wanderers in the wilderness. They are a forbidding, thorny “tree” in one sense, and a welcome respite in another – as they are tasked with supervising God’s plan. They are structural elements in the tree of life, which provides a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. If any mortal men deserve a shout out in God’s house it is these four.

Now, if the altar of incense does indeed represent these four great angels, then it is appropriate that the location of the altar is immediately in front of, and closest to, the Holy of Holies: these four are closest to God. And it is appropriate that the incense that is burned on this altar rises up like the bole of a tree, and then fans out on the ceiling like the branches of that tree.

⁵ Exodus 30: 1-5



(The) flame, the coals, the incense put upon it (the altar) ... build a column of smoke that reaches the roof, and it spreads out rather like the Tree of Life that it symbolizes.⁶

It is interesting to note that there are also four ingredients that make the incense that God requires be burned on this altar.

Exodus 30

And the Lord said unto Moses, Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense: of each shall there be a like weight. And thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy.

These four ingredients, and no others, are to be used to make the incense – and they are holy. Each of the ingredients is the gum or resin of a plant. The plants' life-blood, if you will. So, do the four plants represent the four great angels as well? And does the resin exuded by the plants, or in other words the sacrifices made by these four angels, pay homage to the blood spilled by the Savior in his great sacrifice?

A second piece of furniture found in the holy place also likely represents individuals in the house of God, namely, the candelabra or menorah. It is located on the left side of the Holy

⁶ Denver Snuffer podcast 32: Temple 2, paragraph 54

Place, as one faces the veil, farther away from the Holy of holies. The menorah famously has seven branches.

Genesis 25

And thou shalt make a candlestick of pure gold: of beaten work shall the candlestick be made: his shaft, and his branches, his bowls, his knops, and his flowers, shall be of the same. And six branches shall come out of the sides of it; three branches of the candlestick out of the one side, and three branches of the candlestick out of the other side.



As with horns filled with the “oil of the spirit,” the seven bowls atop the candlestick were also filled with oil. Literally and symbolically, they light the way.

The scriptures are replete with references to groups of seven who have a central role in guiding God’s people through a dark world.

At Adam-ondi-Ahman, the great patriarch was surrounded by seven lesser patriarchs who no doubt continued Adam’s work after his death. When Noah braved the flood, he was accompanied by seven other individuals. On the Sea of Tiberias, Christ welcomed seven who would continue the Lord’s work after his ascension. (T&C, The Testimony of St. John 12:15) When the brother of Jared journeyed across the great deep, he sailed in one of the barques, and was accompanied by seven others. (NC, Ether chapter 2) When Nephi sailed to a promised land, there was a patriarch and matriarch: a dyad, and there were seven other named individuals.⁷

⁷ Laman and Lemuel were not faithful in continuing Lehi’s efforts, but as placeholders to communicate the idea that Lehi too followed the pattern of one plus seven, they are adequate.

The pattern seems unmistakable. In every dispensation there is a patriarch, and there are seven others tasked with lighting the way for Israel.⁸ When Israel first became independent, God appears to have enshrined the symbol of the seven branched candelabra, filled with the oil of the spirit, as a way of communicating to Israel that there would be seven that would act as guides for their dispensation.

Now it appears that Moses organized his dispensation with four close assistants (Joshua, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu) to mirror God's four great angels. But instead of seven, Moses arranged to have *seventy* other assistants. As dispensation head he was no doubt entitled to organize the structure of his "house" as he saw fit.⁹ And, to be fair, Moses dealt with a far larger cohort of God's people than any patriarchal figure other than the Lord himself. So perhaps he needed the help. The Savior also chose seventy to assist in the work.

So, let's summarize before we continue. Moses' tabernacle is a reflection of the mountain of the Lord. Its architecture symbolizes the ascent of Israel up this mountain. There are three tiers in which Israel finds itself in this ascent. The Lord has appointed His house with "furniture" that may tell us something about the occupants (and the type of people) found in the various levels in His house. And the patriarchs of various dispensations have recorded their stories in a way that tells us that they organized their dispensations to reflect Heaven's pattern.

To continue. Even in Nauvoo, God preserved the pattern of the first tabernacle.

God commanded that a holy place be built; it was located on a high bluff. A second edifice, the Nauvoo House, was built on a lower plane, but was still meant to be holy.¹⁰ It was built overlooking the river, where the masses traded and trafficked and pursued worldly concerns. The three levels are apparent. But, here too was the pattern of one, four, and seven: one high priest; four called to provide structure; and seven more invited to assist in the labors.

An edifice, the Nauvoo House, was decreed by the Lord. Joseph, the High Priest, was foremost of those offered an eternal inheritance there.

T&C 141:18

And now I say unto you, as pertaining to my boarding house which I have commanded you to build for the boarding of strangers, let it be built unto my name and let my name be named

⁸ In the eight boats that carried the brother of Jared and his friends and family, there were 16 stones, touched by the finger of God, given to light the way. The stones were no doubt real, but were they also a metaphor for eight dyads, one dyad in each of the boats, who knew the Lord and who provided comfort and guidance to the passengers on each of the boats?

⁹ A Prophet's Prerogative. Appendix to the T&C

¹⁰ T&C 141:18 And now I say unto you, as pertaining to my boarding house which I have commanded you to build for the boarding of strangers, let it be built unto my name and let my name be named upon it

upon it, and let my servant Joseph and his house have place therein from generation to generation, for this anointing have I put upon his head.

Four others were to oversee the building of the house.

T&C 141:20

(L)et my servant George Miller, and my servant Lyman Wight, and my servant John Snider, and my servant Peter Haws organize themselves, and appoint one of them to be a president over their quorum, for the purpose of building that house.

And seven more were invited to sacrifice that they might have an everlasting inheritance in that house: Vinson Knight (vs. 23), Hyrum Smith (vs. 24), Isaac Galand (vs. 25), William Marks (vs. 26), Henry G. Sherwood (vs. 27), William Law (vs. 28), Robert D. Foster (vs. 38).

These seven were offered an inheritance “from generation to generation.” Let us note that as a timeshare arrangement this is totally unworkable. Imagine the throng of the descendants of these seven men that would lay claim to a room in the Nauvoo House on nice weekends during the peak season! There is not nearly enough room to accommodate them in all of Nauvoo, let alone in the Nauvoo House. Fortunately, Heaven is more expansive. And the Lord used the Nauvoo House and the sacrifice of building it as a training exercise for building a mansion on high.

All the talk of money by the Lord in section 141 is not a grubby attempt by Joseph to separate the rubes from their rubles, it is the Lord offering these men the opportunity to sacrifice, in order that they might accomplish a work and qualify for a place of honor in the house of God. In the event, these men largely failed. Denver said of them that they lost their birthright. Though he apparently did not include all of them in that assessment.¹¹

All of this leads us to an obvious question. What comes next? If Israel’s first tabernacle suggested a three-tier organization with a High Priest, a group of four, and a group of seven, as fixtures in that organization, and if that pattern was preserved up until Nauvoo, then will we again see this pattern in our future? Will the Lord’s words in section 141 fall to the ground unjustified? Isaiah, for one, seems to suggest that the pattern will repeat.

Isaiah 2

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.

¹¹ Private conversation with McKay Platt.

Here we find mountains, and hills, and nations which flow to them like the Mississippi flows below the Nauvoo Temple and the Nauvoo House. And then again there is *this* three-tier forecast as well.

T&C 35:8

But before the great day of the Lord shall come, Jacob shall flourish in the wilderness and the Lamanites shall blossom as a rose. Zion shall flourish upon the hills, and rejoice upon the mountains, and shall be assembled together unto the place which I have appointed.

There is rejoicing on the Mountain, flourishing on the hills, and blossoming in the wilderness. Or, as the account of the rod of Aaron has it:

Numbers 17:8

And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds.

Buds, blossoms, and fruit were found on Aaron's rod, which was preserved in the Ark of the Covenant. Three levels of maturity, or three tiers that are saved in the House of God.

So. What about our day? Will there be a three tier Zion? Is there one, and seven, and four in our future? The High Priest is now apparent to any with eyes to see. The seven will become apparent, but have already been prophesied for the end-times.

*The seven who gathered at Adam-ondi-Ahman were mortal because they were born outside of God's presence. And they were restored again into God's presence at the meeting at Adam-ondi-Ahman. The fact is that that same thing that was in the beginning will be in the end of the world also. That's the covenant; that's the promise; that's the destiny; and God will surely fulfill that.*¹²

Of the four, we can only say at this point that the pattern repeated throughout the centuries suggests that the end-times servant will organize his house to reflect God's house. But as a guess I would suppose that these four are individuals that might be known because they have already seen the Father. And, as a guess, I would suppose that Denver (or the Lord) meant more than was said when we were told the story of Denver leading eleven (deceased) members of his family into the house of the Lord to assist them with their eternal progression.¹³ Eleven being of course the sum of four and seven.

¹² Denver Snuffer Podcast 28: Adam-ondi-Ahman

¹³ The Second Comforter, one of the vignettes at the beginning of the chapters.



And what of the physical topography?

Let's begin with the mountain. There will be one. Nothing will look down on the temple. So, unless the temple is floating in the air, it's got to be built on top of a mountain. There must be a valley, a place for the New Jerusalem, a place reflecting in some ways the outer courtyard of the tabernacle, where throngs gather and earthy things are done. There must be a place to attend to worldly concerns while coming to know the Lord.¹⁴

And between these two tiers there must be a waystation that reflects the Holy Place. A place between. A new Nauvoo House where weary travelers making the trek from the valley floor to the mountain top, can eat, and rest, and wash themselves before being taught in the temple of God. I suppose that the end-times servant will be offered an everlasting inheritance in this house, just as Joseph was offered an everlasting inheritance in the Nauvoo House. I suspect that we will not call this edifice the Nauvoo House, but that it will have a new name. Perhaps the House of David.

So, a valley floor with crops and flocks and orchards and homes. A climb, perhaps even an arduous climb up the mountain: a climb that reflects the hard slog that takes place over eons as we ascend the mountain of the Lord. A climb that is itself part of the instruction on how we approach God. And in the midst of the climb, for a time, we find shelter and succor in the House of David, before continuing on to the throne of God.

¹⁴ T&C glossary. The New Jerusalem.

Isaiah 1:5

(A)nd it shall come to pass in the last days, when the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills, and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, and he will teach us of his ways and we will walk in his paths.

This paper is my best thinking on this subject, but it includes suspicions, suppositions, and guesses.

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