

RECOVERING THE LANGUAGE OF PURITY AFTER THE FIRST REVOLT

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My training in New Testament and religious studies has forced me to see some conversations about our shared faith trajectory differently and in ways that have not always resonated with Latter-day Saint audiences. The topic of the temple in early Christianity is one that is both complex and in need of discussion, particularly for a people who emphasizes the role of the temple in their religious experience and identity. For many believing Latter-day Saints, history or recovered history is a causative force for belief: it obligates one to believe in a tradition if the history is tangible, provable, and credible. The idea of history pushing a person to believe underlies so many of the things that I have read by Latter-day Saint scholars. The Book of Mormon presents the history of an ancient people, modern temples are patterned on ancient practices, the gospel was taught by Adam, and the list goes on and on. I do not mean to dismiss those interests nor to undermine their claim to historicity. Instead, I would like to draw attention to the fact that a person who is caused to believe by recovered or redescribed history might just stop believing or even feel forced to stop believing by the same historical record. Once a person draws upon the historical record to establish belief, then that entire record is permanently introduced into the conversation about truth claims. This is my first observation.

My second observation is that, as someone trained in religious studies as an academic discipline, the effort to affix historical claims to truth or faith positions comes at a guaranteed cost. Many who see history differently, who weigh historical evidences differently, feel cheated and misled. This common narrative highlights

a different issue, namely that the emphasis on history has made us lose sight of other genres of religious expression, such as myth, fable, magic, or even other forms of unpopular religion. The modern world divides religious literature into anachronistic categories like history, myth, and magic, but the ancient world had no such distinctions. Myth was lived history, and history was lived myth. I feel obligated as a historian of religion to include all aspects of religion in my reconstruction of the past. History—with its embedded myths, for example—was a productive means of conquering the irrational or engaging the divine parts of the human experience.

Concepts of Purity

This discussion will attempt to recover the notion of sacred space, which is defined as “the spatial mediation of religious experience” in early Christianity.¹ This definition will necessarily force the discussion to push against some older notions that currently exist. As the evidence will support, early Christianity was, in its first two hundred years, topophobic: it did not desire to build a new temple, nor did it develop a strong sense of sacred space akin to older Jewish models of sacred space. Instead, early Christians developed a sense of sacredness, purity, and even sacred space that worked with older concepts but found new forms in the transition of the Christian home as a site of worship. The criticism that might be offered for doing this recovering of the notion of sacred space in early Christianity is that the discussion might uncover interests and ideas that significantly depart from modern Latter-day Saint notions of sacred space, sacredness, and purity. However, as research has attempted to recover a continuous narrative arc of salvation-history, to borrow a term from the twentieth century, it should not be surprising that beliefs that are anomalous compared to modern beliefs are on full display.

In dealing with Chloe’s letter that documented the divisions in the Corinthian church, Paul set out to describe the harmony that existed among the various apostles and missionaries who had visited the city. He said, “Do you not understand that you are God’s temple and the Spirit of God dwells in you?”² With the temple still standing in Jerusalem, such language intentionally envisioned a new place of holiness within the community that existed outside

the temple, that functioned with new officers or priests (the apostles and missionaries), and that welcomed Gentiles. The Greek perfect verb οἴδατε (“you know”) signals a completed aspect, as though the Corinthians had previously assumed something else, such as there was another functioning temple of God. The expression was one of contrast between the previously existing and the new. Paul further pushes the new temple imagery by saying, “For the temple of God is holy, as you are.”³ This moment of conceptualizing sacred space forced the Saints to see themselves as sacred, functioning together with shared or united interests to replace the older Herodian temple. The most dramatic statement in this context comes from chapter 6: “Do you not understand that your [plural] body [singular] is a temple of the Holy Spirit that is in you, whom you have from God?”⁴ As Paul refined his vision of a new sacred space, he replaced the idea that God’s presence dwelt in the Jerusalem temple. Now the Holy Spirit, instead of God’s presence, dwells in the collective body of the Saints.

One of the fundamental reasons for the new Pauline dialectic of sacred space was that Christians were a displaced people seeking their own identity. They were pushed into homes where the sacred interacted with the mundane. Within the walls of the Christian house-turned-meetinghouse, the lower ceilings, the absence of a ritualized entrance, and the intermingling of the clean and unclean obliterated previous notions of the sacred and pushed them to think of an emerging new body as a temple, as pure, and as the receptacle of God’s Spirit. Sacred space could no longer exist in a distant and foreign homeland. Christians had to make the local become sacred, which is why eating foods offered to idols⁵ and head coverings⁶ had significant ramifications for localized holiness concerns. Although the New Testament admittedly contains only a small body of letters that document the concerns of a few individuals, they do not contain statements of longing to build new temples or to participate in the Jerusalem temple.⁷

The earliest house-church to be uncovered in Israel shows the transition of a common house to a sacred place. At the center of the main floor is a typical mosaic with geometric patterns and two fish. The floor depicts the four cardinal directions, each of which contain commemorative inscriptions indicating benefactors who had

helped build and refine the existing home. In this setting, a home that was owned by one family would have experienced the benefactions of another member of the community, who helped pay for the refinement of a mundane structure. Over time, the house would have been continually built up, expanded, and reconstructed so that it eventually only had a distant resemblance to the original home. One of the plaques in the earliest house-church thanks three women benefactors: “Remember Primille and Kuriake and Dorothea, they are ever helpful.”⁸ One of the other two placards depicts a table, probably the table used in the celebration of the Eucharist, or sacrament. This house-church was rather large by home standards, measuring fifty-four square meters, and was built around 230 CE.

Michael White’s study *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture* (1990) established an important pattern in the construction of new Christian buildings. The progression was from house-church to hallway-church (*aule*) to basilica to cathedral. None of the early forms sought to recover the sacred architecture of the Jerusalem temple. Instead, Christians found their inspiration in civic buildings from the Roman Empire. Buildings did not progress from entrance to interior on the model of mundane to sacred or from sacred to more sacred. Rather, these buildings were representations of need, a place where Christians could celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Greek- and Latin-speaking Christians had seen the massive basilicae that were often constructed adjacent to the Roman forums, and they had seen the enormous peristyle temples to the Greek and Roman gods. They chose the former, a civic building built with functionality in mind, for inspiration for their new buildings. The hall-church eventually became the cross-church, and the basilica eventually developed in uniquely Christian ways to contain places of sacred worship.

During this early period—prior to the third century—Christians created rings, articles of clothing, and daily objects that had Christian symbols on them. Clement of Alexandria described some of the parameters under which these Christian productions could exist without becoming overdone, problematic, or profane. Tertullian went so far as to discuss Christian public dress and his concern for modesty when Christians attended the games. One

scholar, Larry Hurtado, argues that the greatest efforts went into producing Christian texts, particularly codices, which became expressions of Paul's hoped-for unified body of Christian believers, who were united in text and mind.⁹ These examples of intentional religious signifying demonstrate that Christian identity was a matter of importance, and that sacredness was also connected with the Christian body. These second- and third-century Christians took Paul's counsel to heart, and they sought to develop the sense of the sacred space that their bodies had become.

Many of the trends toward the sacralizing of the body, the Lord's Supper, and ordinary spaces can be seen at the turn of the third century, around 200 CE, in the Catacombs of San Callixtus, the oldest of the Roman catacombs. These private burial spaces were adorned by frescoes of scenes from Christian imagination, and those frescoes enshrined those spaces with images of the Last Supper, which notably took place in a home. They also depicted the physical act of partaking of the bread accompanied by a person in prayer, the Lord as the shepherd (shown as a Roman-period individual), and a woman praying with outstretched hands, her name written beside her. For the conceptual development of sacred space, several important observations should be made: First, these images are all stylistically tied together by simplistic framing in red, green, or blue, which mimics the artwork of the typical Roman home. The catacombs look like the interior of a Roman home, apart from the architecture of death and the burial niches. Second, the names of individuals appear frequently in these works of art, whereas the sacred name of God is absent. Third, the sacrament and, to a lesser extent, baptism were the ordinances *sine qua non* of the early catacombs.

Returning to Paul

Paul intentionally created both a physical and spiritual sacred space when he said, "For I received from the Lord what I have given to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread, and after he blessed it and broke it, he said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' Likewise, for the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this each time you drink it, in remembrance of me.' Each time that

you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.”¹⁰ Perhaps unintentionally, Paul’s highlight of this moment in Jesus’s life forced Christians to find a place to celebrate it. The temple had no room for such an event, where male and female participants could dine together as the Lord had done on the eve of his death. These words of counsel became a prophetic voice of encouragement to speak again the very words that the Lord had spoken, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood,” thus inexorably moving toward connecting the body of the Christian believer to the body of the Lord through blood.

Perhaps the pinnacle moment in 1 Corinthians comes in chapter 6 verse 11, when Paul writes, “Some of you were these things. But you were washed, you were made holy, and you were made righteous in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” This verse is difficult to translate for several reasons. The independent clauses “but you were washed, you were made holy, and you were made righteous” are each introduced by the contrastive *ἀλλά*, which in Koine Greek signals a transition between different things.¹¹ The verse cannot be translated as “But you were washed, then you were made holy, and then you were made righteous.” Instead, these are states of the believer that happened differently for each person. A second issue is that the agent of the aorist passive verb is missing and not implied: you were washed by whom, you were made holy by whom, and so on. The new holiness achieved by the Corinthian Saints was in the name of Lord Jesus and the Spirit, but it was not specifically event-connected or connected to a distinct individual.

Idealizing God’s New People

One of the forces of causation for the emerging Christian concept of the body as holy, or the body as a temple, is the early Christian emphasis on Jeremiah 31:31–34:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will

make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.¹²

This quotation of Jeremiah occurs in the New Testament as the longest continuous quotation of any passage from the Hebrew Bible, and it occurs in Hebrews 8:8–12. The language of a "new covenant" that is purposefully connected to this passage from Jeremiah is found throughout the Pauline epistles, and it became a force for conceptual change.

Paul imagined the prophetic force of Jeremiah's statement to include a new covenant, but one that "will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors."¹³ That new covenant required a different type of sacred space than the older space known as the Jerusalem temple. The new holiness of the Christian covenant was also not directly connected to foods and ritual purity, and that was a result of the individual's relationship to the temple. Christians felt justified in being different, in defining the new covenant as they understood it in terms of Jesus's teachings, and they sought to find a new sacred space apart from old forms of worship. Paul drew inspiration from this type of language, namely the covenant language of Jeremiah combined with the sayings of Jesus, when he shared his thoughts with the Corinthian Saints: "According to my judgment, and I think that I have the Spirit of God, she is happier if she remains as she is."¹⁴ Paul encouraged the Saints to find ways to remain in harmony with unbelieving spouses so that those spouses might someday receive the blessing of Christianity. The early Christians were indeed sharing their own holiness and purity with those near them. The Old Testament would have seen this as a matter of purity and impurity, as inspired boundaries between the observant and nonobservant. The New Testament saw the indwelling of God's Spirit in the believer as a status marker of the new covenant and a reason to continue living alongside nonbelievers.

The book of Hebrews explores the relationship of the priest in the day of the new covenant, noting, "For the Law appoints men

who are prone to weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath which came after the Law appoints a Son who has forever been made perfect. The point of what we are saying is this: we have a high priest who sat down on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places”¹⁵ (Hebrews 7:28–8:2). This Christian idealization of a new sacred space in heaven is part of a replacement theology, replacing the priests of the old covenant with a mediator who guides the believer into the presence of the Majesty on high, or to encounter God through Jesus. Because the author of Hebrews sees the old priests as “weak” and categorically deficient, both functionally and lineally, he cannot conceive of a replacement to the old temple theology of the old covenant. Instead, the literal presence of God becomes the idealized sacred space, whereas the functional and present sacred space became the house-church, an edifice wherein Christians could celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

Conclusion

Early Christians channeled their energy in the development of sacred space into sacralizing homes and mundane spaces. They did not initially build new buildings, but instead they transformed older structures into sacred usage spaces. Their efforts have largely been lost, but the few remaining pre-Constantinian house-churches have a footprint of ordinary house structures, with the focal point being the locus of the Lord’s Supper, and baptism in later structures. Pauline theology indicates that the Christian body became the manifestation of God’s Spirit in life and the sacred space that had been previously occupied by the Jerusalem temple. As body theology developed over time, Christians asserted morality, beauty, and aesthetic appeal into the conversation. With the emerging body-as-sacred-space theology came a subtle repudiation of the temple in Jerusalem, its priests, and the entire establishment of ritual sacrifice. Christians in the first two centuries were strongly anti-materialistic, topophobic, and heaven-oriented.

To be clear, this survey was not meant to repudiate the Latter-day Saint concept of biblical continuity or historicity of its sacred literature. Christianity need not be a complete model of modern Latter-day Saint belief but rather only a building block. The emergence of the holiness of the Christian body is an important

contribution that needs further consideration. Modern interest in temples is wholly different from both Jewish and Christian types and practices. The modern temple is an edifice stretching backward in time to connect the living and the deceased, while the ancient temple was anticipatory of God's presence and connected the daily lives of individuals with the laws and practices of the first testament.

Notes

1. The phrase is from James Thomas Hadley, "Early Christian Perceptions on Sacred Spaces," *Material Culture Review* 80, no. 81 (2014–15), <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MCR/article/view/25558>.
2. 1 Corinthians 3:16. All translations are taken from Thomas A. Wayment, *The New Testament: A New Translation for Latter-day Saints: A Study Bible* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2019).
3. 1 Corinthians 3:17.
4. 1 Corinthians 6:19.
5. See 1 Corinthians 8.
6. See 1 Corinthians 11:2–16.
7. The late-first-century or early-second-century Christian pseudepigraphical work the *Epistle of Barnabas* 16:1 contains a direct rebuke of the Jewish temple: "Moreover, I will also tell you concerning the temple, how the wretched [Jews], wandering in error, trusted not in God Himself, but in the temple, as being the house of God. For almost after the manner of the Gentiles they worshipped Him in the temple." Translation from Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, 10 vols. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885), vol. 1.
8. Translation by author. Compare J. Andrew Overman, "The Destruction of the Temple and the Conformation of Judaism and Christianity," in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: How to Write Their History*, *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* 13, ed. F. Avermarie et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 253–77.
9. Larry Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).
10. 1 Corinthians 11:23–26.
11. Frederick W. Danker et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 45.
12. Jeremiah 31:31–34 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
13. Jeremiah 31:32 New International Version (NIV).
14. 1 Corinthians 7:40.

15. Hebrews 7:28–8:2