

Sacred Time and the Temple

Brian M. Hauglid

Mircea Eliade, the Romanian-born scholar of mythology and religion, examined cultures and civilizations through their myths¹ and fables and found a common religious link among them, concluding that there is a unity of spiritual history in humanity.² Interestingly, Eliade's findings were often connected to the idea of the temple.³

One significant concept developed throughout his writings is that of sacred time in the temple. Here, the idea of sacred time will be briefly examined to illustrate how and why the temple transcended chronological, or profane, time in the mind of ancient man. It is hoped that this brief investigation will benefit our own understanding of the function of time in relation to the temple.

Henry Corbin makes the significant observation that there are three temples: the celestial temple, the archetypal temple, and the temple of the soul. He characterizes the archetypal temple as the bridge between the other two:

This Temple-archetype is itself a threshold, the communication Threshold between the celestial Temple and the Temple of the soul. Inasmuch as it is a material edifice, constructed in the image of the star or celestial Temple, it is the passage leading to the inner spiritual edifice. Because it leads back to the source, it is par excellence the figure and support of that mental activity designated in Arabic by the technical term *ta'wil*, that is to

say, an exegesis, a going-out of the soul towards the Soul.⁴

Anciently, to go back to the source meant going to the temple to experience sacred time. Before discussing what it meant to experience sacred time, it should be noted that sacred time is cyclical in nature and is distinctly different from our more modern conception of linear time. While cyclical time is best represented by an unbroken circle, linear time would be a horizontal line with definite beginnings and endings.

Linear time is a historical, chronological approach, in which what has happened has happened, and there is no going back. It is, in essence, irreversible. The Judeo-Christian tradition of time is also linear with definite historical occurrences and eschatological ramifications, wherein there was a beginning (creation) and there will be an end to the world as we know it, by virtue of the Second Coming, or as in the case with Judaism, a messianic figure. However, inherent even in this thinking is the idea that after death there will be a return to a higher state of existence. Perhaps this concept could best be portrayed by a circle with a horizontal line running through the middle, cutting the circle into two halves. This horizontal line would represent man's linear move through mortal time, with one end being birth and the other death. Before birth and after death, however, man exists in a cosmological eternal time represented by the circle. Doctrine and Covenants 3:2 and 1 Nephi 10:19 explain that God's work or time is one eternal round. Doctrine and Covenants 88:13 describes God as living in the "bosom of eternity" or "midst of all things."

In contrast, sacred time is reversible because the clock can move forward or backward. Why would one try to go backwards in time? Because "the experience of sacred time

will make it possible for religious man periodically to experience the cosmos as it was *in principio*, that is, at the mythical moment of creation."⁵ In other words, in sacred time it was possible, and to ancient man necessary, to go back to the archetypal beginnings to relive those first moments of creation.

Eliade calls this universal concept "the myth of the eternal return" and defines sacred time in terms of an eternal return, or

cyclical recurrence of what has been before, . . . the cyclical structure of time, which is regenerated at each new "birth" on whatever plane. The eternal return reveals an ontology uncontaminated by time. . . . Everything begins over again at its commencement every instant. The past is but a prefiguration of the future. No event is irreversible and no transformation final. . . . In a certain sense, it is even possible to say that nothing new happens in the world, for everything is but the repetition of the same primordial archetypes; this repetition, by actualizing the mythical moment when the archetypal gesture was revealed, constantly maintains the world in the same auroral instant in the beginnings.⁶

Sacred time is the *first* time, the archetypal time, the time at which all things received meaning and life through divine creation and decree. Its cyclical nature offered to man a means whereby the actual activity that was evident in those primordial moments could be reexperienced. Significantly, ancient temple worship is replete with this pattern of an eternal return to sacred time.

Much of our understanding of sacred time is due to mythology, which served as a type of sanctuary in which was housed the secrets of the universe. Myths contained the creation stories as they took place *in illo tempore*, or at the first instance, wherein primordial time was recovered into

a mythical present. Interestingly, archaic man returned to sacred time through rites and ceremonies that reenacted primal myths of the creation. Accordingly, "for archaic man, myth is a matter of primary importance. . . . Myth teaches him the primordial 'stories' that have constituted him existentially."⁷ It was an obligation on the part of the ancients not only "to remember mythical history but also to reenact a large part of it periodically."⁸ "This faithful repetition of divine models has a two-fold result: (1) by imitating the gods, man remains in the sacred, hence in reality; (2) by the continuous reactualization of the paradigmatic divine gestures, the world is sanctified. Men's religious behavior contributes to the maintaining the sanctity of the world."⁹

Experiencing sacred time through these reenactment rites projected man into the divine presence. Hence, ancient man would, in essence, be contemporary with the gods. Why? Being with the gods meant residing in the same place as the gods in a cosmological purity untainted by the coarser existence in which man then lived. And it was there that the gods could be apprehended in a degree to actually learn who they were and how they exercised their power of creation, in order that it might be imitated. Once the knowledge of the origin of things was understood, one received power to create at will. "Knowledge of the origin and exemplary history of things confers a sort of magical mastery over them."¹⁰

Myth, like the temple, served as a means whereby man could go back to the sacred time in which all things were created and participate with the gods through rites and ceremonies depicting those creative acts. Thus, by being contemporary with these divine beings, archaic man learned and received regenerative powers to control or renew his environment to create order out of chaos. This power could

be manifested over plants, animals, and even time itself. Hence, the reenactment of ancient myths was a significant setting for the return to sacred time, whereby man could become more like the gods and secure divine powers.

Creation myths portrayed in temples fulfilled a longing of ancient man to experience divineness through contact with the time that existed in the first creative moments. (An important distinction is made between two Latin terms: the Latin term for temple, *templum*, and another that was found to have an etymological relationship, *tempus*. *Templum* designates the spatial, *tempus* connotes the temporal aspect of the motion of the horizon in space and time.¹¹) Sacred time, for ancient man, evidenced a spiritual need to recapture the pureness and holiness that existed in the realm of the gods as embodied by temples. "Religious man's profound nostalgia is to inhabit a 'divine world,' [it] is his desire that his house shall be like the house of the gods, as it was later represented in temples and sanctuaries. In short, this religious nostalgia expresses *the desire to live in a pure and holy cosmos, as it was in the beginning, when it came fresh from the Creator's hands.*"¹² The temple, as a repository for sacred time, retains the original creative atmosphere first exhibited by the Creator and becomes at once a "divine world" innately infused with a sanctifying power to re-create and regenerate. This power of renewal is the ultimate aim of the eternal return to sacred time.

Ancient New Year festivals aptly illustrate three concepts that are associated with sacred time: the abolishing of past time, a return to a primordial chaos, and a repetition of the creative acts to recover order in the universe. In these festivals, the world was renewed annually, and even chronological time itself could be re-created through contact with the regenerative powers of the gods existing in sacred

time. Note the direct correlation of this festival to the temple.

The underlying meaning of all these facts seems to be the following: for religious man of the archaic cultures, *the world is renewed annually*; in other words, *with each new year it recovers its original sanctity*, the sanctity that it possessed when it came from the creator's hands. This symbolism is clearly indicated in the architectonic structure of sanctuaries. Since the temple is at once the holy place par excellence and the image of the world, it sanctifies cosmic life. This cosmic life was imagined in the form of a circular course; it was identified with the year. The year was a closed circle; it had a beginning and an end, but it also had the peculiarity that it could be reborn in the form of a *new* year. With each New Year, a time that was "new," "pure," "holy"—because not yet worn—came into existence.¹³

One example of how sacred time functioned in the ancient world is the Babylonian *akitu* festival, a New Year's ritual that took place in the temple of Marduk and lasted twelve days. Eliade discusses five parts of the ceremony that demonstrate the above-mentioned themes of an eternal return to sacred time:

1. *Regression into a mythical period before the creation.* According to the Babylonian creation myth *Enumah Elish*, before the earth was created all things were in a "marine abyss," a state of chaos and confusion represented by the god Tiamat, the sea monster. This regression to the mythical period abolished the past.

2. *A reactualization of the creation of the world.* Creation occurred when Marduk, a champion of the younger gods, defeated Tiamat in a major battle and used the torn pieces of Tiamat's body to create the cosmos. Marduk also defeated one of Tiamat's demons and from his blood

created man. This part of the ceremony was recited several times in the temple of Marduk.

3. *Participation of man through rites that make him contemporary with the creation.* Here man directly participated by performing the battle between Marduk and Tiamat, using two groups of actors. "This participation . . . projects him into mythical time, making him contemporary with the cosmogony."¹⁴

4. *A formula of creation in which the fate of each day and month is determined.* This is equivalent to re-creating the coming twelve months or, in other words, chronological time. Since there occurred an abolition of past time and a return to the original chaos, there also needed to be a repetition of the first act to create time anew. Also during this part of the ceremony occurred the "confession of sins and expulsion of the scapegoat,"¹⁵ to ensure success in the coming year.

5. *The rebirth of the world and man.*¹⁶ The result of the eternal return to sacred time in the *akitu* ceremony, finally, is to experience a rebirth or renewal of life and time. Inherent in these types of festivals is the supposition of a "'death' and a 'resurrection,' a 'new birth,' a 'new man.'" It would be impossible to find a more appropriate frame for the initiation rituals than the twelve nights when the past year vanishes to give place to another year, another era: that is, to the period when, through the reactualization of the Creation, the world in effect begins."¹⁷

As seen from the above discussion, sacred time was a significant part of ancient man's attempt to be with the gods and learn the power of renewal.

In summary, it should be evident that the concept of sacred time was a significant aspect of the ancient world. A return to the origins of things was essential to archaic man

for two important reasons: man's desire to be in the presence of the gods and to relive their creative acts. The former implies a place unlike any other—the purest and holiest because it was closest to the original act of the Creator, who brought it into existence. Here the temple symbolized this primordial paradise in which the gods were manifested and to which man aspired. Yet implicit within the latter is man's desire to be like the gods by learning, in essence, how to become gods themselves, in order to imitate divine acts to create order out of chaos as it was done *in illo tempore*. This was accomplished through literal reenactments of creation stories, some actually played out by actors.¹⁸ Also, to be in the presence of the gods, through this participatory activity, man was endowed with a regenerative power to create anew the life around him and to receive renewal himself. Even profane time was re-created through contact with the gods in sacred time. Sacred time was reversible and recoverable through these rites and ceremonies that projected man into a mythical present to reexperience rebirth and renewal, to again be in the presence of the gods and partake of their divine nature.

In conclusion, periodic recitations of the creation recovering the actual primeval time should be no surprise to Latter-day Saint temple worshipers. Though the ancient worldview of sacred time and the ancients' reenactments of the creative acts may differ in some respects to revealed truth, it is, perhaps, instructive to note some interesting parallels and insights to our own understanding of sacred time and the temple.

Notes

1. Mythology is generally treated as anything that is false, fiction or fable; however, anciently myths were used to transfer truth in the form of symbolic stories. We must be careful not to impose our modern definition of mythology upon the ancient world. Speaking of

Western scholarship in the past eighty years, Eliade says that "archaic societies" understood a myth to mean "a 'true story' and, beyond that, a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant." This is unlike the scholars of the Western world who oftentimes see a myth to be a "fable," "invention," or "fiction" (*Myth and Reality* [New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963], 1).

2. For a thorough introduction to this idea, see Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, 3 vols., tr. Willard R. Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). In his preface to volume one, Eliade says "Consciousness of this unity of the spiritual history of humanity is a recent discovery, which has not yet been sufficiently assimilated" (xvi). See also Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949); and *The Masks of God*, 4 vols. (Arkana: Penguin Books, 1959). Campbell's studies show the universality of the human experience from a common denominator found in the subconscious mind of the human psyche. Though Campbell takes a psychological approach, he also uncovers an array of interesting data through the study of many different cultures and their myths. His work explores some of the foundations laid by C. G. Jung in "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," in *Twentieth Century Criticism: The Major Statements*, ed. William J. Handy and Max Westbrook (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 205-32.

3. According to Hugh Nibley, "the boldest and clearest recent statement embracing the world landscape of culture and religion is in the works of M. Eliade, and he brings it all back to the Temple." Nibley adds, "Before Eliade your humble informant was bringing out much of the picture in a doctoral thesis which disturbed and puzzled his committee in the 1930s" (Truman G. Madsen, ed., *The Temple in Antiquity* [Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1984], 45).

4. Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, tr. Philip Sherrard (London: Islamic Publications, 1986), 134. Corbin is here speaking of the *al-Batiniyya*, a medieval Islamic sect, who, though they did not build temples, took an approach of interiorization of the soul to reach God. (This is in deference to the Sunnis, who take a much more practical approach.) The root word *batn* means belly or stomach but also can be extended to include inner, interior, hidden or secret. Here the *al-Batiniyya* would be best translated as an esoteric sect.

5. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 65.

6. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 88–90.

7. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 12. “Myth is essentially cosmological. As heaven in the cosmos is so vastly more important than our earth, it should not be surprising to find the main functions deriving from heaven” (Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet’s Mill: An Essay Investigating the Origins of Human Knowledge and Its Transmission through Myth* (Boston: Godine, 1977), 50.

8. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 12–13.

9. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 75–79.

10. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 90.

11. See Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 75–76.

12. *Ibid.*, 65; italics in original.

13. *Ibid.*, 75–76; italics in original.

14. Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, 58.

15. *Ibid.*, 61.

16. See *ibid.*, 55–58; James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 31–39; and Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (New York: McGraw-Hill Paperbacks, 1966), 21–33, for an in-depth analysis of the *Enumah Elish* creation myth.

17. Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, 69; see also KG, 313–20, for an excellent discussion of the *akitu* ceremony in relation to the coronation of the king.

18. Creation drama is a widespread concept in archaic societies, particularly in the New Year festivals. See Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, 62–73, for an examination of several ancient societies that reenacted myths. For a discussion of ritual combat that was also acted out, see Hugh Nibley’s brief, albeit insightful remarks in *Temple and Cosmos*, in CWHN, 10:73–77.