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Jewish Place and Placelessness: Historical and Academic Challenges (or “What the Study of Jewish Space and Place Suggests to Me about the Aztecs”)

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This article explores ways in which insights developed within the field of Jewish geography raise important challenges both for the general history of religions and for more tightly focused studies of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican sacred space and architecture. Of particular concern are the ways in which Jonathan Z. Smith's exposure of the serious limitations of applying Mircea Eliade's famous model of sacred space to the specifics of Jewish sacred geography give Americanist scholars pause to reconsider the application of those familiar Eliadean categories to the case of the Aztecs' main temple and ceremonial precinct.

Let me preface my remarks today and say a little something about the back door through which I have sneaked into a conference on Jewish geography by describing myself as a historian of religions, that is, a scholar involved in the general and comparative study of religion, and one who has a special enthusiasm for thematic issues related to sacred space and sacred architecture in whatever historical context they may occur. I cannot, however, especially in my present company, make any claim at all to expertise in regard to the particulars of the Jewish tradition. To the contrary, my own research has focused preeminently on pre-Columbian Middle America (or Mesoamerica)—in other words, it is the ruined old monuments of Toltecs, Aztecs, Mayas and other such indigenous American peoples which have the tightest hold on my imagination—and so while I resign myself to novice status in regard to the Jewish context, I am an interested novice nevertheless.

With that warning, those of you who now expect me to make the Jewish-Mesoamerican connection by waxing poetic about the Maya as one of the Lost Tribes of Israel may be disappointed by my rather more prosaic agenda. I intend instead to explain very briefly what I have learned from your field lately, or, in other words, I'd like to discuss a couple of important ways in which recent studies of Jewish sacred space and architecture have shed light on the study of sacred space and architecture in the general comparative history of religions, and specifically on our understandings of pre-Columbian American sacred geography.

I take as my point of departure the challenge issued by Jacob Neusner for a productive reciprocity between scholars of Judaism and scholars of the general history of religions. Neusner, on the one hand, challenges Jewish specialists to make their work more accessible to general historians of religions; he says, "There is no reason for the study of Judaism to be treated as a set of special cases and matters so technical that only initiates can follow the discussions—or even want to."¹ And on the other hand, Neusner challenges historians of religions (like myself) to modulate their own categories and interpretations in light of the insights deriving from specific Jewish studies.² This sort of cross-disciplinary exchange has an especial appeal for us pre-Columbian Americanists who, consigned to examining fragmentary archaeological ruins and even more scarce and fragmentary written sources, find in Jewish studies of sacred geography a depth and subtlety that we are only beginning to approach. I am thus admittedly taking more than I can return (at least for the time being). Accordingly, I have added to this paper the peculiar subtitle, "What the Study of Jewish Sacred Space and Place Suggests to Me about the Aztecs."

Among historians of religions concerned with sacred space none has been remotely so influential as Mircea Eliade. For two generations Eliade's plenipotent model of "sacred space"—originally derived from his studies of Hinduism and the ancient Near East, specifically Babylon, and explicated most poignantly in such works as *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1955), *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958), and *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959)—has provided the dominant paradigm for historians of religions studying matters of ritual, space, and religious geography.³ The estimable heuristic potency of Eliade's theory notwithstanding, the incautious tendency has been

¹Jacob Neusner, quoted in Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 19–20. Jonathan Smith similarly considers that Judaism constitutes an especially fertile point of departure for comparative studies of religion because of "... the peculiar position of Judaism within the larger framework of the imagining of western religion: close, yet distant; similar, yet strange; 'occidental' yet 'oriental'; commonplace yet exotic" (p. xii). For similar remarks also see pp. 19 and 36.

²Neusner has expressed these sentiments in a number of publications. See, for instance, Jacob Neusner, "Judaism in the History of Religions" in J. Helfer, ed., *On Method in the History of Religions* (Middlebury, 1968) and Jacob Neusner, "Alike and Not Alike: A Grid for Comparison and Differentiation" in Jacob Neusner, ed. *Take Judaism, for Example: Studies toward the Comparison of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Smith comments on the uneven response to Neusner's challenge for reciprocity between Jewish Studies and the history of religions in *Imagining Religion*, p. 36.

³See, for instance, Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), chapter 1; Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), chapter 10; and Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

to elevate his insights and terminology to the status of universality, and then to apply this model wholesale to any and all historical contexts—seizing here on a “mythical archetype,” there on a “hierophany,” and everywhere on “axis mundi.”

While Eliade’s detractors have been vastly outnumbered by his supporters (at least until recently, and, at least in regard to this issue of sacred space), one critic, a historian of religions specializing in Hellenistic religions—Jonathan Z. Smith—beginning in the early 1970s with a series of essays published as *Map is Not Territory* and continuing through his most recent tour de force in iconoclasm, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (1987), has waged an effective and sustained attack against the universality of Eliade’s theory of sacred space.⁴ The richest source of controverting evidence in Smith’s revisionist enterprise has been the Jewish experience of space and place—particularly the traumatic Jewish experience of the destruction(s) of the Temple and the “placelessness” of exile, historical circumstances for which he considers Eliade’s general model woefully inadequate.⁵

Smith’s polemical remarks not only constitute a significant contribution to the study of Jewish sacred geography, they rattle one of the most honored paradigms in the discipline of the history of religions and challenge every scholar who has extrapolated

⁴Smith considers that Eliade’s model of sacred space derives from (and is generally applicable to) Near Eastern urban, agricultural, literate, hierarchical, bureaucratized, imperialistic slave cultures (including ancient Israel), but that it is definitely not universally applicable to all historical contexts. Expressing his discontent with the adequacy and generalized application of Eliade’s model of sacred space, Jonathan Z. Smith says:

Scholars have been insufficiently attentive to the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ with respect to the adequacy of this self-serving ideology for interpreting the realia of such societies; the model may not be extended, as it has by many historians of religions, to the hunting and gathering world of primitive man. Therefore I would insist, on both theoretical and methodological grounds, that the model is flawed with respect to those societies where it is applicable and illegitimate when it is universalized for all archaic or primitive societies (*Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978], p. xii).

For Smith’s earliest direct challenge to Eliade’s model of sacred space see his “The Wobbling Pivot,” in *Map is Not Territory*, pp. 88–103.

Smith’s polemic against Eliade finds a more recent exposition in *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), chapter 1.

⁵By way of noting the inadequacy of Eliade’s model to explain Hellenistic Judaism, Smith says: In my research, the phenomenon of exile proved to be particularly fruitful both for the understanding of the counter-locative elements of religious rebellion and incongruity which I term the utopian view of the world as organized by a salvific figure and for the particular interpretation of the history of Mediterranean religions during the Greco-Roman period in which the phenomenon of exile was characteristic of many religious traditions (*Map is Not Territory*, p. xii.).

He explores the problem of exile in a series of studies in chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 of the same volume.

Eliade’s general model into some far-flung historical context (and this applies to a legion of interpreters, myself included) to rethink once more the appropriateness of the privileged categories of “hierophany,” “axis mundi,” and “mythical archetype.”

Choosing, for expedience sake, the Great Temple or “Templo Mayor” of the Aztecs as my primary exemplum—any number of specific places could have served this purpose⁶—let me proceed in two strokes: first by interpreting that great pre-Columbian Aztec pyramid in standard Eliadean fashion, and then second, by reconsidering and amending that interpretation in light of Jonathan Smith’s studies of Jewish sacred space and place. Serious considerations of the Jewish situation raises a number of very crucial questions, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Models of Eliade and Smith

Mircea Eliade’s Model of Sacred Space (a “locative” world view; attachment to place)

- 1. **hierophany:** manifestations of the sacred, the heterogeneity of space.
- 2. **axis mundi:** symbolism of the center, pivot of the four quarters.
- 3. **ritual context:** reiteration of mythical archetypes, maintenance of cosmic harmony.

Jonathan Z. Smith’s Alternative Model (a “utopian” world view; freedom from place)

- 1. **sanctification:** the arbitrariness of place, social position not geographical location [e.g., the location of the Temple at Jerusalem].
- 2. **periphery:** as sacred as the center, creation of alternative religious techniques [e.g., the experience of exile and diaspora].
- 3. **ritual context:** an assertion of difference, reflection on incongruity [e.g., the temple visions of Ezekiel 40-48].

Three interrelated concepts are foundational to Eliade’s familiar model of sacred space. First is the notion of “hierophanies,” or manifestations of the sacred. According to Eliade, space is not neutral and homogeneous; one space is *not* like another space.⁷ Rather space is hierophanic and heterogeneous; the sacred manifests itself throughout the landscape, but not evenly; some places—typically high mountains, springs, caves, lakes, and so forth—are more powerful and intrinsically more sacred than other places. In other words, for Eliade, the entire landscape of mountains, valleys, streams, and

⁶At this point I am informed by Jonathan Smith’s discussion of the essential role of “exempli gratia” or “exempla” in the task of the historian of religions. See Smith, *Imagining Religion*, pp. xi–xii.

⁷On the notion of heterogeneous and hierophanic space, see, for instance, Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, chapter 1.

rocks is checkered with hierophanies, or "hot spots" if you will, where the sacred has made itself more available. It falls then to *homo religiosos*, that is, religious human beings, to search around, to locate these especially potent places and to orient themselves and their architecture with respect to them.

Eliade's notion of hierophanic space would seem to find a perfect analog in the Aztec foundation legends, stories that tell about the Aztecs' beginnings as a people and that describe their ancestors as a small, rootless tribe of hunters, consigned to wandering for generations in the deserts of northern Mexico until such time as they happen upon an eagle sitting on a cactus with a snake in its mouth.⁸ Eventually, after centuries of roaming, so the story goes, the ancestral Aztecs sight this prophetic eagle-cactus-snake configuration on an island in Lake Texcoco and, confident that they have at last found their fore-ordained "place" in the world, their peregrinations end; they settle down, construct their principal temple on this auspicious spot, and begin their meteoric rise to imperial dominance of the entire Valley of Mexico. In other words, interpreted in good Eliadean fashion, the site of the great Aztec temple was *discovered* rather than created or constructed. Moreover, this specific location was preeminently sacred not by virtue of anything that the Aztecs did, but rather because they found it, a hierophanic spot where the sacred had manifested itself, a place more religiously potent than any other, simply waiting to be discovered.

A second essential component of Eliade's model of sacred space is his notion of the "axis mundi," the axis of the world, the cosmic pillar, or the symbolism of the center. According to Eliade, orientation is always orientation with respect to a sacred center. Producing countless examples of cities, villages, temples and archaic house structures organized according to a central pivot and four quarters, Eliade emphasizes the nearly universal human tendency to conceive of one's homeplace as the center of the world, the navel of the universe.⁹ Given this kind of concentric, bull's-eye-like, center and periphery model of the cosmos, Eliade suggests that the access to the sacred that human beings crave is not possible from the periphery; centers or axis mundis derive their unique prestige by providing openings to the sacred, channels of communication with the divine, points of ontological transition between the earthly realm, the heavenly realm, and the netherworld.

⁸For a sensitive discussion of the Aztec foundation legends and the siting of their capital city of Tenochtitlan, see David Carrasco, "City as Symbol in Aztec Thought: The Clues from the Codex Mendoza," *History of Religions* 20 (February 1981): 199–220.

⁹See Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, pp. 12–17, among other places, for an exposition of his notion of "the symbolism of the center." Not inconsequentially, Eliade begins Volume One of his three-volume *History of Religious Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) with a discussion of the sense in which the shared vertical posture of human beings leads almost automatically to the experience of space oriented around a "center" (p. 3).

Following this line of argument, the site of the Aztec's Templo Mayor is not simply a hierophanic spot where the sacred has manifested itself, but it is conceived as the center of the world, the single spot where the sacred is most available, most receptive to petition, and most interactive in the affairs of human beings.¹⁰ The citizenry living in the periphery of the Aztec empire, the people of the geographical fringes and edges, while afforded local and domestic centers of their own—Eliade's model does allow for a multiplicity of centers—are, nevertheless, compelled to journey to the Templo Mayor, the preeminent center of the world, for a truly intense confrontation with the sacred. The periphery is, in other words, religiously as well as geographically marginal and somehow qualitatively "less sacred."

A third essential component of Eliade's model has to do with the relationship between sacred space and ritual—what people do at these hierophanic centers and why they do it. For Eliade, the fundamental mode of religiosity is imitation rather than innovation; and thus ritual is preeminently about the faithful reiteration of mythical archetypes.¹¹ Eliade considers that the *homo religiosus* recognizes a complex system of correspondences between the heavenly realm and the earthly—"on earth as it is in heaven," so to speak. Accordingly, buildings are sacred insofar as they mirror the structure or the organization of the universe at large, and rituals are efficacious insofar as they reiterate or imitate the activities of mythical, archetypal figures. In other words, Eliade would have us believe that *homo religiosos* have a fundamental confidence in the unity and harmony of the cosmos, and thus organize space and the ritual activities in that space in such a way that they do their part to maintain the larger cosmic harmony.

This notion of the ritual reiteration of myth provides, among other things, a very convenient explanation for that most gory of ceremonial activities at the Aztec Templo Mayor—ritual human sacrifice. The most famous Aztec myths describe the birth of their patron deity, Huitzilopochtli, on the summit of the primordial mountain of Coatepec.¹² According to this myth, Huitzilopochtli, loosely translated as the "the Hummingbird on the Left," emerged from his mother's womb dressed in the full regalia of a warrior, armed to the teeth; his first act in the world was to slay his 400 brothers, after which he decapitated and dismembered his sister, Coyolxauhqui, and threw her

¹⁰For an elaborate exploration of the Templo Mayor with respect to the categories of "center" and "periphery," see Johanna Broda, David Carrasco, and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery in the Aztec World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

¹¹Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, chapter 1.

¹²For an exposition of the myth of the birth of Huitzilopochtli, see, for instance, David Carrasco, "Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor" in Broda et al., *Great Temple*, pp. 124–162.

severed head and limbs down the side of the primordial mountain of Coatepec. (The situation is fairly complicated, but suffice it to say that this archetypal slaughter was conceived by the Aztecs as heroic and appropriate, rather than despicable.) In any event, to follow Eliade's agenda, when the Aztecs led their human sacrificial victims up to the summit of the Templo Mayor—the temple that they conceived as the earthly counterpart to the primordial Mount Coatepec—and then slashed open the victims' chests and cast their dismembered body parts down the steps of the pyramid temple, they were faithfully re-enacting the mythical exploits of Huitzilopochtli, and so fulfilling their responsibility to maintain cosmic harmony. They were doing their part, so to speak, to keep an orderly universe orderly.

Thus, while Eliade's work has almost nothing to say explicitly about the Aztecs, his general model provides an exceedingly seductive way of explaining Aztec religious motivations and sensibilities, and I could provide you with a short but distinguished list of Mesoamericanist scholars who have taken just this tack.¹³

Turning now to Jonathan Smith's work on Jewish sacred space and place, while similarly uninterested in things Mesoamerican, he nevertheless, provides a radical challenge to the supposed universality of Eliade's famous model, and in so doing forces Americanists to reconsider the slick application of those principles to the Aztecs. To state it bluntly, if Eliade's general model does not hold up against the Jewish materials, might it not be the case that it is distorting our interpretation of the Aztec historical context as well? Following Smith's lead and exercising a more skeptical attitude then, let me go back over these three foundational Eliadean concepts—hierophany, the symbolism of the center, and ritual as the reiteration of mythical archetypes—noting Smith's objection to each in regard to the interpretation of Jewish sacred geography, and then offering a quick intimation about how that objection might ripple into one's interpretation of the Aztec case.

First, basing his opinion particularly on his investigations into the Temple at Jerusalem (but on several other circumstances as well), Jonathan Smith rejects Eliade's concept of "hierophany," and appeals instead to Jacob Neusner's notion of "sanctification" to argue in a variety of subtle ways that sacred places are, in the main, *constructed* rather than discovered. Dubious of Eliade's insistence on the heterogeneity of space, Smith emphasizes again and again the "arbitrariness of place"; one place *is* like another

¹³For instance, the articles by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Johanna Broda and David Carrasco in Broda et al., *Great Temple* all make explicit (and creative) attempts to apply Eliade's general categories to the specific case of the Aztecs. For other explicit applications of Eliade's model to pre-Columbian Mexico, see Doris Heyden, "An Interpretation of the Care Underneath the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan, Mexico," *American Antiquity*, 40 (2) (1975): 131–147; and Doris Heyden, "Cares, Gods and Myths: World-View and Planning in Teotihuacan," in *Mesoamerican Sites and World Views*, ed., Elizabeth Benson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1981), pp. 1–40.

place; no place is intrinsically more sacred than another.¹⁴ Arguing that there is no biblical warrant for the specific siting of the Temple, he maintains that “There is nothing inherent in the location of the Temple of Jerusalem. Its location was simply where it happened to be built. . . .”¹⁵ He contends that the location of the Temple was a matter of royal prerogative (that is, human prerogative); it was built at a place of royal choosing rather than at a spot where the sacred had manifested itself in some special manner. The complex mythology of the Jerusalem Temple site and the site’s special associations with creation, with Adam, with Cain and Abel, with Noah, Abraham, Moses and so forth are all developed, according to Smith, after the fact.¹⁶ In his words:

. . . the Temple of Jerusalem was the focus of a complex, self-referential system. It could, in principle, have been built anywhere else and still have been the same. . . . It required no rationale beyond the obvious one that, once having been declared a temple and accepted as such (by YHWH, king, priests and people), it became a place of clarification—most particularly of the hierarchical rules and roles of sacred/profane, pure/impure. In an apparent paradox, its arbitrariness, its unmotivated character, guaranteed its ordering role. There was nothing to distract from the system.¹⁷

Thus in regard to the Aztec’s supposed “discovery” of their sacred place on the island in Lake Texcoco, Smith’s thesis about the arbitrariness of place would lead us to believe that the prophetic eagle of the Aztec foundation stories could have landed anywhere (or nowhere), with or without a snake in its mouth, because, in all probability, the location of the temple was owed primarily to the pragmatic site selection of the ruling elite. From Smith’s perspective, the really significant religious act would not have been the discovery of some intrinsically potent spot where the sacred had manifested itself, but rather the sanctification of any spot, the consensual ritual endorsement that this arbitrary place would heretofore be sacred.

Second, in a particularly iconoclastic set of arguments, Smith rejects entirely Eliade’s esteemed notion that religious orientation is typically orientation with respect to “centers,” axis mundis, or pivots of the four quarters; and thus at the same time Smith calls into question the intimation that the people of the geographical periphery are largely denied access to the sacred except via the center. In this regard, the Jewish experiences of the destruction of the Temple and of exile are particularly instructive. Smith argues that the famous symbolism of the center (to which dozens of historians of

¹⁴See for instance, Smith, *To Take Place*, pp. 22, 27–28, 45–46, 103–105, 108.

¹⁵Smith says: “. . . there is no biblical aetiology for the location of Jerusalem’s temple, except for the brief, late, post-exilic accounts in 1 Chronicles 22.1 and 2 Chronicles 3.1” (*To Take Place*, p. 83).

¹⁶See Smith, *To Take Place*, p. 84.

¹⁷Smith, *To Take Place*, pp. 83–84.

religions working in all sorts of historical contexts have appealed) does not adequately describe even the Babylonian context from which it was originally derived, let alone any other geographical context.¹⁸ In Smith's surprising rebuke he says,

There is no pattern of the 'Center' in the sense that the pan-Babylonians and Eliade described it in the ancient Near Eastern materials Without examining each and every instance, it cannot be claimed that the pattern of the 'Center' is a fantasy, but it is clearly far from a universal (or even dominant) pattern of symbolization. At the very least, the burden of proof has shifted to those who will claim that a particular cultural construction represents a 'Center.' The 'Center' is not a secure pattern to which data may be brought as illustration; it is a dubious notion that will have to be established anew on the basis of detailed comparative endeavors.¹⁹

Smith's radical critique of the symbolism of the center keys on the vivid and well-known passage wherein Eliade describes how a tribe of Australian aborigines, the Achilpa, constantly on the move, carried with them a sacred pole that served as their "mobile center," the portable axis mundi or cosmic pillar which provided them access between the earthly and heavenly realms.²⁰ But then one unfortunate day this venerable pole was accidentally broken, and because the pole provided the sole access between the earthly aborigines and their celestial ancestors, the tribe (supposedly) simply lay down beside the broken pole and died—as Eliade explains, there could be no life without a center; in his words, "seldom do we find a more pathetic avowal that man cannot live without a 'sacred center' which permits him to 'cosmosize' space and to communicate with the transhuman world of heaven."²¹ Smith notes the parallel between the catastrophic snapping of the Achilpa's sacred pole and the similarly catastrophic destruction of the Jewish Temple at Jerusalem, yet in the wake of the destruction of the Temple, the People of Israel, quite obviously, did not lie down and die.²² (Elsewhere,

¹⁸Smith's research in regard to Judaism and elsewhere leads him to believe that the symbolism of the center is less likely to denote a point of intersection and easy access between the heavenly and earthly realms, than a "scar" or a "navel" left behind when heaven and earth were forcibly separated in creation; Smith says, "it is the disjunctive rather than the conjunctive which is to the fore" (*Map Is Not Territory*, pp. 98–99). For an even more sustained criticism of Eliade's notion of the symbolism of the center, see Smith, *To Take Place*, pp. 17ff.

¹⁹Smith, *To Take Place*, pp. 16–17.

²⁰See Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 32–34.

²¹Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 51–53; quoted by Smith, *To Take Place*, p. 2.

²²Smith makes explicit the comparison between the broken pole of the Achilpa and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple: Like the Achilpa's sacred pole, which Eliade constantly reminds us of ([Eliade:] 'for the pole to be broken denotes catastrophe, it is like the end of the world, reversion to chaos'), the disruption of the Center and its power is a breaking of the link between reality and the

by the way, Smith expresses his deep skepticism that the Australians so speedily surrendered their lives.²³) Rather, in the experience of exile and diaspora, the Jews developed a very creative, though profoundly different, set of religious strategies than those observed in the Temple context. Displaced from their traditional center, they exploited the sacred potential of the periphery. In regard to this dexterous adaptation Smith writes,

Rather than a God who dwelt in his temple or would regularly manifest himself in a cult house, the diaspora evolved complicated techniques for achieving visions, epiphanies or heavenly journeys. That is to say, they evolved modes of access to the deity which transcended any particular place.²⁴

In Smith's terminology, the diasporic Jews very successfully shifted from a "locative" world view to a "utopian" world view.²⁵

In any event, Smith's contention that the symbolism of the center is preeminently political (and sociological) and only secondarily geographical and cosmological,²⁶ and even more his demonstration that the periphery can be, in its own way, equally as sacred as the center, have important ramifications for the interpretation of the Aztec Templo Mayor. Where Eliade's model suggests that peoples on the periphery of the Aztec empire were subservient to the center not only politically but also religiously (because access to the sacred is possible only at a center), Smith's demonstration of the positive and very creative Jewish response to the experience of exile and disconnectedness from the center (the geographical center, in any event) forces us to reconsider the relationships between Aztec center and periphery. There is every possibility that the

world, which is dependent upon the Sacred Land. Whether through error or exile, the severing of this relationship is a cosmic disaster (*Map Is Not Territory*, p. 118).

²³Following a rigorous critical reexamination of Eliade's discussion of the story of the breaking of the Achilpa's sacred pole, Smith concludes, among other things, that this is actually an account of something that happened in the mythical time rather than literally in history (as Eliade implies) (*To Take Place*, pp. 3–10).

²⁴Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, p. xiv.

²⁵Smith, *May Is Not Territory*, contains a whole series of essays which explore his fundamental distinction between a "locative" world view and a "utopian" world view; perhaps the most clear exposition of this distinction comes in the final essay of that collection, "Map is Not Territory."

²⁶Smith summarizes his point about the sociological rather than geographical character of "place" by saying:

... place is not best conceived as a particular location with an idiosyncratic physiognomy or as a uniquely individualistic mode of sentiment, but rather as a social position within a hierarchical system. What we are concerned with is the connotation of *place* that always accompanies its use as a verb in English and is revealed in phrases such as *keep your place* (*To Take Place*, p. 45).

pre-Columbian native Americans living at the geographical edges and fringes of the Aztec empire (about whom we have considerably less information than about the urban elite), far from being religiously marginalized and impoverished, had complex, fulfilling spiritual strategies of their own which operated quite independently of the activities of the state cult at the Templo Mayor.²⁷

Third and finally (at least for the present discussion), Smith's studies of the Jewish context (and elsewhere) lead him to a vigorous critique of Eliade's familiar notion that ritual is typically concerned with the faithful reiteration of mythical archetypes and the maintenance of cosmic harmony. In this regard, Smith's analysis of the temple visions of Ezekiel 40–48 provides his premier exemplum.²⁸ Pursuant to his notion that the Temple at Jerusalem constituted the focus of a completely artificial, humanly constructed, self-referential system which could, at least in principle, have been located anywhere in the physical geography, Smith considers that the ritual context created by the Temple provided a totally controlled environment, a meticulously ordered ambience, a kind of bubble of sacrality if you will, wherein the ritual participants were afforded a salutary opportunity to reflect upon their situation in the world. Moreover, where Eliade emphasizes ritual performance as a reiteration of mythical precedents, a kind of responsibility to participate in and celebrate the essential order and congruity of the universe, Smith argues, by contrast, that Jewish ritual (and ritual in general) is fundamentally an occasion for people to reflect on the incongruities of life, the problems, the inequalities, the "differences" in human existence. In Smith's words,

Ritual is, above all, an assertion of difference . . . ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension with the way things are. . . . Ritual thus provides an occasion for reflection on and rationalization of the fact that what ought to have been done was not, what ought to have taken place did not.²⁹

Smith finds an important clue as to the more specific nature of the content of these ritual reflections on "issues of difference and incongruity" in the temple visions of Ezekiel 40–48, in his assessment, "perhaps, the most articulate [of all biblical texts] in

²⁷See David Carrasco, "Myth, Cosmic Terror, and Templo Mayor" in Broda et al., *The Great Temple*, pp. 124–162 for a subtle discussion of the complex relationship between center and periphery in the Aztec empire.

²⁸On the temple visions of Ezekiel 40–48, see Smith, *To Take Place*, pp. 48 ff.

²⁹Smith, *To Take Place*, p. 109. Smith provides an earlier exposition of this theory of ritual as reflection on incongruity in an article entitled "The Bare Facts of Ritual" (in *Imagining Religion*, pp. 53–65).

offering a coherent ideology of place: of temple and city, with the focus on temple.”³⁰ Smith feels that it would be mistaken to identify the “temple” in Ezekiel with any specific historical building. Alternatively, his detailed exegesis concludes that Ezekiel 40–48 is, “an endeavor in mapping the social configuration of an ideal cultic place. It is a social map, rather than artifacts of mortar and stone with which we [and presumably Ezekiel] are concerned.”³¹ To condense Smith’s intricate analysis into a couple of quick lines, he finds in Ezekiel more evidence for his thesis that “place” is about “social position” rather than geographical location, and that Jewish Temple ritual is concerned with the articulation of social hierarchy—that is, showing people their different “places” within the hierarchical structure of the world—rather than with the celebration of cosmic order.

Accordingly then, to return one last time to the Mesoamerican context and to the troubling circumstance of Aztec human sacrifice, Smith’s convincing demonstration that very often temple rituals (and ritual in general for that matter) are less about faithfully reiterating myths than they are about human reflections on the problematic nature of existence, and especially human reflections on the inequities of one’s respective “place” within a hierarchical social order, gives us pause to reconsider our previous interpretation of this ritual killing. Smith’s persuasive, if seemingly less happy, theory of ritual exposes the naiveté of presuming, à la Eliade, that the very diverse participants in the spectacle of human sacrifice at the Templo Mayor—the visiting dignitaries, the peasant spectators, the ritual practitioners and even the sacrificial victims—would all have embraced the grand collaborative effort of faithfully reiterating Huitzilopochtli’s primordial slaughter of his brothers and sister with equal enthusiasm. Smith’s work demands that we appreciate more fully the sociopolitical dimensions of Aztec human sacrifice, the dimensions of coercion, intimidation, and hierarchy, as well as the cosmological and mythological dimensions to which Eliade’s work directs our attention.³² Moreover, Smith’s emphasis on ritual as providing occasions to reflect on incongruity gives us pause to reconsider the whole tenor of Aztec spirituality, and to consider the very real possibility that human sacrifice at the Templo Mayor was not a celebration of cosmo-mythological order (as Eliade’s locative model tempts us to believe), but rather provided these pre-Columbian Americans an occasion to reflect, in a most gorily spectacular fashion, on the fact that there is something profoundly wrong

³⁰Smith, *To Take Place*, p. 48.

³¹Smith, *To Take Place*, p. 48.

³²Actually, given the Marxist materialist bent of many Middle American archeologists, the socio-political dimensions of Aztec human sacrifice have been more well appreciated than the cosmological and mythological dimensions; to that extent then, Smith’s line of interpretation is actually more conventional than Eliade’s.

in their world, that things are not as they should be, but that they are unable to rectify them. In short, to enjoin Smith's basic locative/utopian distinction a final time, the Aztecs may actually have been involved in a mode of apprehending sacred space that was less like ancient Israel's "ideology of Holy Land" (that is, a locative orientation emphasizing attachment to center and to homeplace) than like the "utopian" orientation of the post-exilic Jewish diaspora, an orientation that aspired to transcendence of this world rather than fulfillment within it.³³

In any event, to conclude succinctly if abruptly, the study of Jewish sacred space and place settles nothing in regard to the Aztec experience of space and architecture. It is, though, deeply unsettling. Jewish studies provide no answers for the Americanist, and the long leap from Jewish history to Mesoamerican, quite obviously, is one that should be attempted only with the greatest reservations. Nevertheless, Jewish studies of space and geography, deeper, eminently more well staffed, and exponentially more well endowed with primary textual sources than their pre-Columbian counterparts, have informed (and I'm sure will continue to inform) in very productive ways the manner in which we Mesoamericanists and practitioners of the general history of religions frame our questions. In the spirit of Jacob Neusner's challenge to reciprocity with which I began, I thank specialists in Judaism for your contributions to my work and, at the same time, I hope that it is not too unreasonable to imagine a day when we Americanists can begin to contribute to the manner in which you frame your questions about Jewish sacred space, architecture, and geography.

³³See Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, Preface.