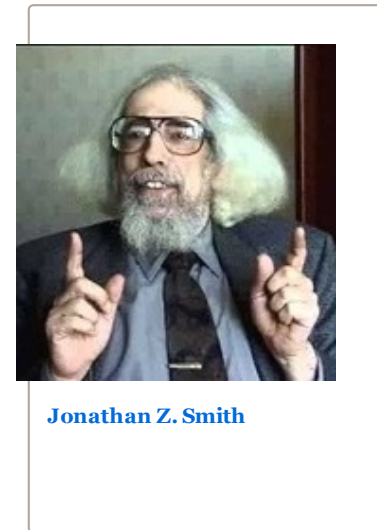


Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process for marking interest. ...It is this fundamental characteristic...that explains the role of place as a fundamental component of ritual: place directs attention....[This] understanding of ritual is best illustrated by the case of built ritual environments—most especially crafted constructions such as Temples. When one enters a Temple, one enters marked-off space...in which, at least in principle, nothing is accidental; everything, at least potentially, demands attention. The Temple serves as a focusing lens, establishing the possibility of significance by directing attention, by requiring the perception of difference.^[1]



Jonathan Z. Smith

Sacred spaces, Smith stresses, are built and constructed, not inherently sacred. Further, with their power to mark difference, to facilitate ritual, and ultimately to push ritualists to pay attention and become aware of the significance of the space, sacred places—whether physical or even just imagined—tend to hold deep cultural meaning.^[2]

In what follows, I would like to consider what the Tabernacle, as a textually constructed sacred space, may have meant to the ancient Israelites.^[3] Drawing, in particular, on the literary relationship in the text between the construction of the Tabernacle and the first creation story of the world in the beginning of Genesis, I would like to suggest that central to the conception of the Tabernacle as sacred place was a fundamental idea about order in the world.

Tabernacle—Creation

Interpreters have long noticed explicit literary connections between the creation of the *mishkan*, or, Tabernacle in Exodus 25–40 and the creation of the world in Genesis 1–2. Most strikingly, as Nahum Sarna puts it, “the account of the construction of the Tabernacle is ...laced with phrases and expressions that unmistakably echo the Genesis creation story.”^[4]

Tabernacle	Creation
Moses saw all their work, and behold, just as the Lord had commanded it, they had done it, and he blessed them. (Exod 39:43)	“God saw all He had made, and behold, it was very good...” (Gen 1:31) “And God blessed them...” (Gen 1:28).
וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־כָּל־הַמְּלָאכָה וְהִנֵּה עָשׂוּ אֹתָהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה וְהָיָה כִּן עָשׂוּ וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה:	וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה־טוֹב מְאֹד... וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים...
Moses completed the work, (Exod 40:33)	The heaven and earth were completed... And God completed, on the seventh day, the work he had done. (Gen 2:1-2)
וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמְּלָאכָה:	וַיְכַל הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ... וַיְכַל אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה...

A possible extension of this parallel has been suggested by Peter Kearney, who shows that the first section dealing with the Tabernacle before the sin of the golden calf, Exodus 25–31, has been constructed in seven parts, with each section marked by new announcements of God speaking to Moses (“And God spoke to Moses...”). The seventh of these sections is the command to observe the Sabbath in Exodus 31:13–17.^[5] The first exposition of

the Tabernacle's making, in Kearney's analysis, mirrors the seven-day structure of Genesis 1:1–2:3, which also culminates in the Sabbath.

In multiple ways, then, the biblical accounts of Tabernacle's construction create literary linkages with the account of creation at the beginning of Genesis. These connections provide one important interpretive key to what made the Tabernacle meaningful as a sacred space in the ancient Israelite understanding.

The Centrality of Order

Order in Creation

This connection between Tabernacle and creation suggests the centrality of the concept of order. As has often been pointed out in biblical scholarship, the six days of creation in Genesis 1 unfold in an extremely orderly manner. The repeated language each day, “God said...Let there be...It was so...God saw...God called...it was evening and it was morning...,” even with the variations that exist between days, highlights the regularity of the process and the high degree of structure in the created world.

As parts of the world are separated and created, it becomes more and more clear that there are distinctive types or parts of the world, each with its own place: light and darkness; land and sky; water, air, and dry land; types of living things in the water, air, and land; types of vegetation; male and female. The structuring of the six days of creation into two symmetrical parts, as can be seen in the chart on page 12 of the *Jewish Study Bible*, further underscores the order that exists in the universe as it comes into being: lights (sun, moon, stars of day 4) parallel light (day 1); fish and birds (day 6) fill the sky and the waters separated from the sky (day 2); and land animals and humans fill and consume the land and plants (day 3).^[6] In the creation, God sets each element in its proper place and into a well-structured system of spaces, objects, and beings; God organizes the universe into an ordered place.

Order in Sacrifices

The ritual that takes place in the Tabernacle—typical of many types of ritual—is also structured and orderly. The calendrical regularity and rule-governed precise repetition of the sacrifices can be seen in particular in Numbers 28–29, where the repetitive language and organization of the passages highlights these features of the rituals. To a lesser degree, the same features of regular repetition, structure, and order, appear in the description of the Day of Atonement ritual in Leviticus 16.^[7]

The structure and order associated with Tabernacle sacrificial ritual may be related to the affirmation of power and power structures in Ancient Israel. The ritual events in the Tabernacle—and later Temple—may have served the political interests of Priests, Levites, and other leaders, such as the tribal heads, who are mentioned in the orderly and structured passages in Numbers 7, among others. But I believe there is more to the idea of order embedded in the structure and ritual of the Tabernacle.

Ordering Our Environment

In her classic work on ritual and purity, *Purity and Danger*, the British anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that rituals of purity and impurity, like the effort to remove dirt, are “positive efforts[s] to organize the environment,” or a “re-ordering [of] our environment.”^[8] Perhaps this idea can be extended to the Tabernacle and the ritual it houses—not only rituals of purity and impurity but all of its ritual. The Tabernacle can be seen as a place of ritualized order, which mirrors the orderliness of the created universe.

These ordered worlds, that the Torah describes as having existed in the initial moments of time and subsequently in the Tabernacle, are not real—they are imagined. As Jonathan Z. Smith writes, “ritual represents a controlled environment where the variables (i.e. accidents) of ordinary life have been displaced...ritual is a way

of performing the way things ought to be.”^[9] While Smith does not spell this out explicitly, he implies that “marked-off” sacred space can be a focal point for the ideal, for the way things ought to be, or as Adam Seligman et al. put it, for the “subjunctive universe” created by ritual.^[10]

The real world is a complex, chaotic place. The Tabernacle in part represents the perfect orderliness that for many people is the way the world “ought to be.” It is a place that captures the primal organization of the world when first created by God in seven days. The ritualized, rule-bound, repeated, formal, and invariant quality of the ritual performed there helps create this subjunctive “as-if” idealized orderly world within the Israelite sacred space.^[11]

The Implied Message of the Tabernacle

The ideal orderliness of the universe to which the Tabernacle is connected may suggest further nuances to what the Tabernacle as sacred place represented and meant to ancient Israelites. If God who creates such an ordered universe is majestic and all-powerful, the Israelite sacred space recalls and highlights these characteristics and perhaps imbues the people as a whole with some part of the divine qualities.^[12] Moreover, the connection to the universal cosmos hints at the far-ranging importance of the Israelite sacred place, its worship, and the people who worship there: these are the fulfillment of the creation of the entire world.

Beyond indicating the importance of the people of Israel, each of these qualities may have a prayerful purpose as well: to remind God of the cosmological centrality of Israel and to entreat God to exercise divine power and majesty and fulfill the biblical covenantal promises of protection and blessing.

Finally, as Nahum Sarna points out, the construction of the Tabernacle on the first day of the first month—the New Year—may indicate its meaning as a site for re-creation.^[13] The Tabernacle (and later the Temple) and the rituals conducted there, in Sarna’s words, “afforded every Israelite the possibility of spiritual renewal and moral regeneration.”^[14]

Conclusion

The world was and indeed is a morally and spiritually complicated place. It is filled with chaos, evil, ambiguity, and often an absence of control. The possibility for renewal, for harkening back to the ideal orderliness of creation, and for establishing God’s power and majesty provide an opportunity to escape from the problems of the world into the real or imagined orderly sacred place. Such an ideal world was likely meaningful for our ancient Israelite ancestors and can perhaps be meaningful in a similar way for us today.

Dedicated in honor of my daughter, Tirza, on the occasion of her bat mitzvah this Shabbat.

Naftali S. Cohn is Associate Professor of Religion at Concordia University in Montreal. He received a PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from the University of Pennsylvania and rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (Yeshiva University). His book, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis*, was recently published by Penn Press. His research and teaching interests range from the cultural history of the ancient rabbis expressed in the Mishnah—with special focus on ritual and gender—to the representations of Jewishness in pop culture.



Bio Photo by David Ward

[1] Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 104.

[2] Smith, throughout *To Take Place*, focuses on thoughts, but ritual places and rituals acts impact emotions and bodies as well, and this contributes further to the cultural importance of sacred spaces.

[3] My analysis does not presume that the Tabernacle corresponds in a simple way with any of the Israelite sacred places, but I believe that the textual descriptions are suggestive of what early sanctuaries and possibly the (first) Temple meant as physical spaces to the ancient Israelites.

[4] Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 213. See references to earlier scholarship there. And note that the second and possibly first of these connections is pointed out in the midrash in Tanhuma *Pekudei* (standard edition, section 2; see also *Bemidbar Rabbah* 12:13). Here I do not touch on the wider connection between the Tabernacle and the Sabbath, noted by the early rabbis (Mekhilta *Shabbata* 2; Mishnah *Shabbat* 11:2, 12:3).

[5] Peter J. Kearney, “Creation and Liturgy: The P Redaction of Exod 25–40,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89 (1977): 375–87. The sections are as follows: (1) Exod 25:1–30:10; (2) Exod 30:11–16; (3) Exod 30:17–21; (4) Exod 30:22–33; (5) Exod 30:34–38; (6) Exod 31:1–12; (7) Exod 31:13–17. These seven speech acts made to command the Tabernacle’s construction thus mirror the speech acts that shape the seven days of creation, though the language is not identical. Kearney’s observation is somewhat reminiscent of the move in *Midrash Tanhuma* to connect each of the seven days of creation with elements of the Tabernacle and language used to describe the elements.

[6] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12. For earlier scholarship demonstrating this point, see for instance, Bernhard W. Anderson, “A Stylistic Study of the Priestly Creation Story,” in *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology*, edited by George W. Coats and Burke O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 148–62.

[7] For more on the significance of repetition in the description of the Tabernacle, see Amy Cooper-Robertson’s TABS essay, “[Repetition and the Tabernacle: Eternity in the Face of Change.](#)”

[8] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2–3.

[9] Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” *History of Religions* 20 (1980): 124–25. This essay is also published in idem, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 53–65.

[10] Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.

[11] Ritualization and the qualities of ritual I mention are highlighted by Catherine Bell in *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 138–69.

[12] These ways of thinking of the orderly creation are discussed—and significantly complicated—in Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[13] Note that in the Bible, this means our month of Nissan, not Tishrei. As the first month, it is by definition the start of the year.

[14] Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 214.

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