

THE COSMIC RING-DANCE OF THE ANGELS
An Early Christian Rite of the Temple

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Abstract

In examining what can be reconstructed of the liturgy of the First Temple, and its apparent restoration in early Christianity, no loss can be more significant — or more poignant — than the loss of the sacred choral ring dance of prayer, which was seen to mirror the cosmic circle dance of the concourses of angels, in their concentric heavenly spheres — a dance which had the effect of opening up a conduit, from the Holy of Holies, up through the planetary spheres, to unfold a view of God Most High upon his celestial throne, in the highest Heaven, as chronicled in the experiences of such ancient prophets as Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the apostle John on Patmos.

The experiences of the nineteenth-century prophet Joseph Smith, from his initial theophany to his translation of the experiences of Lehi and the Lord Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon, to the Pentecostal experiences surrounding the dedication of the Kirtland Temple in 1836, combine with his restoration of the ancient circle of prayer to bolster our understanding of the Biblical record, and provide a greater understanding of this ancient rite of the Temple.

THE COSMIC RING-DANCE OF THE ANGELS
An Early Christian Rite of the Temple

In examining what can be reconstructed of the liturgy of the First Temple, and its apparent restoration in early Christianity, no loss can be more significant — or more poignant — than the loss of the sacred choral ring dance, which was seen to mirror the cosmic circle dance of the orders or the concourses of angels, in their concentric heavenly spheres — a dance which had the effect of opening up a conduit from the Holy of Holies, up through the planetary spheres, and unfolded a view of God Most High upon his celestial throne, in the highest Heaven. Perhaps the best way to encapsulate the principle inherent in the Ring Dance is William Sullivan’s statement, “To be the master of time, one must first be master of space, space laid out from the navel of the earth.”¹

Bowing to the time constraints of our format today, I would like to briefly attempt three things. I would like to establish that there *was* such an early Christian rite; I would like to discuss something of its cosmic framework and purpose, and briefly discuss some instances in which forms of the circle dance exist in both Eastern and Western Christian traditions today.

The ancient sacred choral ring dance, or “prayer circle,” though memory of it is *almost* totally extinguished in the West today, is well-attested in the early Christian sources, and is still in evidence in some form in Eastern Christianity. Evidence of it is found in the Old Testament, in Babylonia and Assyria, and in ancient Egypt. Although *knowledge* of the circle dance in the liturgy has been almost totally forgotten, it turns out that *evidence* of the ancient sacred ring dance is scattered about, and is — we find — nearly ubiquitous. In order to understand — and to recapture in some way — the ancient ring dance of the Temple, we must re-construct its context, both in the form of its cosmos

¹William Sullivan, *The Secret of the Incas* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1996), p. 122.

and the music of that cosmos. Not only is the ancient liturgical circle dance to be found in early Christian apocrypha and the writings of the early Church fathers, not only is evidence of it to be found in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, it is to be found in the writings of the anti-Deuteronomist prophet Nephi, who fled Jerusalem just before its destruction in the 6th century, B.C. Our discussion will culminate in a perhaps surprising latter-day restoration of the ancient prayer circle of the temple in an unexpected place.

The scriptural text which anchors our discussion is Matthew 11:16-17:

But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows,
And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.²

The word here translated “danced” is the Greek ὀρχήσασθε *oorcheésasthe*, from a root which refers to a dance in ranks, or in a circle. It is the sacred ring-dance of the temple.

We need go no further than the second-Century Acts of John to find evidence of the ring-dance in early Christianity. There, we read, concerning the Lord Jesus,

Now before he was taken by the lawless Jews, who also were governed by (had their law from) the lawless serpent, he gathered all of us together and said: Before I am delivered up unto them let us sing an hymn to the Father, and so go forth to that which lieth before us. He bade us therefore make as it were a ring, holding one another’s hands, and himself standing in the midst he said: Answer Amen unto me.³

Nicoletta Isar explains that “a special place in Christian tradition is played by the Gnostic and apocryphal text from the Acts of John, known too as the “hymn of the Dance”.⁴ The text continues,

He began, then, to sing an hymn and to say:

²See also Luke 7:32.

³Acts of John, Ch. 94.

⁴Nicoletta Isar, “The Dance of Adam: Reconstructing the Byzantine χορός,” *Byzantine Slavica Revue Internationale des Etudes Byzantines*, LXI [2003], p. 193.

Glory be to thee, Father.

And we, going about in a ring (or circling him), answered him: Amen.⁵

As the prayer continues, we find this:

I would be washed, and I would wash. Amen.

Grace danceth. I would pipe; dance ye all. Amen.

I would mourn: lament ye all. Amen.⁶

In my undergraduate days, I had the privilege of taking a class from Professor Hugh Nibley, a scholar of such magnitude that after he spoke at the SBL meetings in 1974, Harvard's noted Jesuit scholar George MacRae said, "It is simply obscene that a person knows this much."⁷ In his last years, we had some delightful personal conversations. I learned much about the circle dance from Dr. Nibley.

Although, as Professor Nibley said in 1978, "Conventional Christianity, following Augustine, has always denied that there was any significant teaching of Christ not included in the New Testament, for to admit such would be to admit serious gaps in their own knowledge,"⁸ even Augustine himself, "in his 237th Epistle [quoting] a slightly different version, calling it 'a hymn . . . commonly found in the apocryphal writings,'"⁹ "labors to show line by line that the hymn is not heretical (as the Bishops of Nicaea found it 350 years later) but that each statement can be duplicated

⁵Acts of John, Ch. 94.

⁶Acts of John, Ch. 95. Hugh Nibley notes that the word here translated "mourn," *kopsasthe*, means "inflict blows [cuts] upon yourselves" (See Hugh Nibley, "The Early Christian Prayer Circle," *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1987), p. 46.

⁷Boyd J. Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), p. 326.

⁸Hugh Nibley, "The Early Christian Prayer Circle," *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], pp. 46- 47.

⁹Hugh Nibley, "The Early Christian Prayer Circle," *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], p. 46.

somewhere in the scriptures.”¹⁰ Professor Nibley shows that the Pricillians “believed it to be ‘the hymn of the Lord which he recited in secret to his disciples, the holy Apostles, according as is written in the Gospel: After he recited a hymn, he ascended the mountain’.”¹¹

Hugh Nibley cites record of an “actual performance of such a rite” in a Syriac text, “The Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ as delivered orally by him to us the Apostles after his Resurrection following his death,”¹² as told by Clement of Rome. Cyril of Jerusalem described such a “prayer circle” in detail.¹³ The Gospel of Bartholomew spoke of a similar prayer circle, in which Mary herself officiated in the circle.¹⁴ After arranging the apostles in a circle, Mary “spread out her hands to heaven,” and “began to call upon the Father in an unknown language . . .”¹⁵ The prayer generated such power that Jesus himself appeared in their midst.¹⁶

The doctrine and practice of the sacred circle-dance as a vehicle for prayer is well-known in the old texts and indisputable, and Dr. Nibley reminds us that “The further back we go the more prominent becomes the rite in the church.”¹⁷ We have Clement of Alexandria saying “I will show you the Word and the mysteries of the Word and describe them . . . This is the mountain beloved of

¹⁰Hugh Nibley, “The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], p. 47.

¹¹Hugh Nibley, “The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], p. 47.

¹²Ignatius Ephraem II Rahmani, ed., *Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi* (Moguntiae: Kirchheim, 1899), cited in Hugh Nibley, “The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], p. 47 (see Nibley’s note 5, p. 87).

¹³Hugh Nibley, “The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], p. 48. See Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* [2005], p. 520. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Chaechesis 19: Mystagogia (Lessons on the Initiatory Ordinances) 1-5*, in PG 33:1065-128.

¹⁴Hugh Nibley, “The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], p. 49, citing A. Wilmart and E. Tisserant, “Fragments grecs et latins de l’evangile de Barthélemy,” *Revue Biblique* 22 (n.s. 10) (1913): 321. See Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, I:543-544.

¹⁵Hugh Nibley, “The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], p. 49.

¹⁶Hugh Nibley, “The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], pp. 50-51; Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, I:545.

¹⁷Hugh Nibley, “The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], p. 47.

God. On it rejoice God's daughters . . . to the accompaniment of constantly repeated choral dancing . . . Then shalt thou dance in a ring together with the angels, around Him who is without beginning or end, the only true God . . ."¹⁸ E. Louis Backman comments that such words "must not be regarded as referring only to that which awaits in the future a person inducted into the Christian mysteries. These remarkable final words should also, perhaps mainly, be interpreted quite literally. If you are inducted into the Christian mysteries, then you must perform a ring-dance round the altar, with the sacrament, not only with the other novitiates but also with the angels! For they are present and participate in the mystery."¹⁹ William Hamblin and David Seely remind us — and it bears remembering — that "Many of the parallels between the rites practiced in Solomon's Temple and Christian church liturgy are so commonplace that their origins in Temple ritual are seldom recognized by modern Christians."²⁰ They note that early Byzantine churches had a veil, preceding the iconostasis, which paralleled the Temple veil, and note that the "'nine [angelic] orders in heaven' parallel the 'nine [priestly] orders in the Church,'"²¹ the nine canonical hours,²² and, we might add, the nine ancient concentric heavens.²³

Where did the angels dance? In heaven. It is a cosmic dance. Lucian says that the prototype of the dance is the universe, noting, "Dance was performed in a circle around the altar to reflect the

¹⁸E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952), p. 19.

¹⁹E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952), p. 19.

²⁰William Hamblin and David Rolph Seely, *Solomon's Temple: Myth and History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p. 114.

²¹William Hamblin and David Rolph Seely, *Solomon's Temple: Myth and History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p. 114.

²²<http://www.fisheaters.com/hours.html>.

²³This leads to a discussion of the "nine maids of the island mill" in *Hamlet's Mill* (see pp. 24-25, 205), but there is not space for that discussion here.

motions of the cosmos, particularly the zodiac or the planets around the sun.”²⁴ Gregory Thaumaturgus (210-260 A.D.) in referring to Jesus Christ, says, “The ring-dance of the angels encircles him, singing his glory in Heaven and proclaiming peace on earth.”²⁵

The Cosmic Dance

There is an implication here that the ring-dance has the effect of raising the initiate to heaven.

As Hugh Nibley said it so succinctly, “there is no stirring above until there is a stirring below . . .”²⁶

According to Alissa Sorenson,

The work of Curt Sachs classifies tribal dances as mimetic or imageless. If the action portrays an event, in order that nature or the gods may be moved to imitate the action, the dance is called mimetic, because the movement portrays an image. Mimetic dance is a form of sympathetic magic.²⁷

Lois Ellfeldt tells of a ninth-century B.C. record, in cuneiform, The Poem of Creation, found in Babylonia and Assyria, referring to “solemn dance rituals and processions,”²⁸ which were celebrated at the new year, “as they celebrated the renewal of nature in order to assure the perennial return of cosmic order.”²⁹ *The dance was meant to preserve or renew cosmic order.*³⁰ It was a recurring renewal of the bonds of the Cosmic Covenant.³¹ The dance of the cosmos has been traced

²⁴Lucian, “The Dance,” cited in Bryce Haymond, “The Genesis of the Round Dance,” <http://www.templestudy.com/2008/01/31/the-genesis-of-the-round-dance-part-2/>.

²⁵Quoted in Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952), p. 22.

²⁶Hugh Nibley, “The Ancient Christian Prayer Circle,” *Mormonism and Early Christianity* [CWHN 4], p. 59, quoting *Zohar*, Lech Lecha, 88a.

²⁷Alissa Sorenson, “Dance in the Northern Tradition,” <http://www.friggasweb.org/dancetxt.html>, citing Joan Cass, *Dancing Through History* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1993), p. 11. See Curt Sachs, *World History of the Dance* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1937).

²⁸Lois Ellfeldt, *Dance, from Magic to Art* (Dubuque, Iowa: W. C. Brown Co., 1976), p. 54.

²⁹Lois Ellfeldt, *Dance, from Magic to Art* (Dubuque, Iowa: W. C. Brown Co., 1976), p. 54.

³⁰This ties into the preservation of the cosmos by way of the “Cosmic Covenant.” See Margaret Barker, “The Book of Enoch and the Cosmic Covenant.”

³¹Lois Ellfeldt, *Dance, from Magic to Art* (Dubuque, Iowa: W. C. Brown Co., 1976), p. 54.

back to ancient Egypt. According to Lois Ellfeldt, “Ranging around a fixed altar, which represented the sun, priests clad in brilliant costumes made signs for the zodiac with their hands, while turning rhythmically from east to west, following the course of the planets.”³²

There are a number of references to the sacred cosmic dance in Egypt. Hugh Nibley has said that the Egyptians’ “constant preoccupation of endlessly repeated rites was to achieve unlimited, everlasting stability . . . It was by the operation of the spirit alone that things could be effectively preserved from annihilation.”³³ The rites of the temple were necessary to keep chaos (the ancient Chaos, the *tohuwabohu*, “without form and void” [or “empty and desolate”] of Genesis) at bay, and preserve order, or *cosmos*.

Nicoletta Isar says that “With the creation of the universe the dance too came into being, which signifies the union of the elements. The round dance (χορός) of the stars, the constellation of planets in relation to the fixed stars, the beautiful order and harmony in all its movements, is a mirror of the original dance at the time of creation.”³⁴ We find a number of references to the circle dance in early Christianity. According to Honorius, “In their ring dances they thought of the rotation of the firmament; in the clasping of their hands the union of the elements; in the sounds of song the harmony of the planets; in the gestures of the body the movements of the celestial bodies . . .”³⁵ We

³²Lois Ellfeldt, *Dance, from Magic to Art* (Dubuque, Iowa: W. C. Brown Co., 1976), p. 55.

³³Hugh Nibley, “The Meaning of the Temple,” *Temple and Cosmos* [CWHN 12], p. 13.

³⁴Nicoletta Isar, “The Dance of Adam: Reconstructing the Byzantine χορός,” *Byzantine Slavica Revue Internationale des Etudes Byzantines*, LXI [2003], p. 183.

³⁵Quoted in Margaret Fisk Taylor, *A Time to Dance: Symbolic Movement in Worship* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1967), p. 90.

do not have time to read references to the ring dance chronicled by Basilius of Caesarea,³⁶ Pindar,³⁷ Plato,³⁸ and others.

Of the circle dance of prayer in the Old Testament context, Philo says that the Israelite band which was delivered through the Red Sea consisted of “both men and women, together . . . forming one *chorós* sang hymns of joyful thanks to God the Savior, Moses the prophet leading the men, and Miriam the prophetess, the women.”³⁹

In the Testament of Job — which Professor Nibley says, “lays special emphasis on temple ordinances” — we read, at the very beginning, “Job tells his three virgin daughters and seven sons to form a circle around him (the second son’s name is Choros): ‘Make a circle around me, and I will demonstrate to you the things which the Lord expounded to me, for I am your father Job who is faithful in all things.’”⁴⁰

At this point I must offer an apology, for seeming to jump from place to place and not make more nearly complete explanations. We have an half hour to cover the material. My full paper runs to an hundred pages. Thus, we must here ignore the elements of the Crucifixion embedded in the circle dance. We must pass over the actual form of the ring dance, and the language of its prayer, including “the mystery of the vowels.” We must pass by many fragments of the ancient ritual circle

³⁶Quoted in E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952), p. 24.

³⁷Nicoletta Isar, “The Dance of Adam: Reconstructing the Byzantine χορός,” *Byzantine Slavica Revue Internationale des Etudes Byzantines*, LXI [2003], p. 185.

³⁸Nicoletta Isar, “The Dance of Adam: Reconstructing the Byzantine χορός,” *Byzantine Slavica Revue Internationale des Etudes Byzantines*, LXI [2003], pp. 186-187.

³⁹Quoted in Margaret Fisk Taylor, *A Time to Dance: Symbolic Movement in Worship* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1967), p. 75, quoting Eusebius, *VC*, II, xix.

⁴⁰*Testament of Job* 1:2, translated by Hugh Nibley, “Abraham’s Creation Drama,” *Eloquent Witness* [CWHN 17], p. 466.

dance scattered through history, through texts and practices both sacred and profane, such as the dance of winding the May-pole with the ritual red-and-white streamers, redolent of the ritual combat from which it derives (you will all be familiar with the red and white dragons which fought beneath Vortigern's tower in the Arthurian legends). We must here neglect the dance in ancient Britain, in both earliest Christianity and so-called Pagan dances. We must even pass by the enigmatic *circle* on Salisbury Plain, to which Geoffrey of Monmouth gave the name "The Giants' Dance."⁴¹ We must, today, hurry past some references to the ring dance in 3 Enoch,⁴² 1 Clement, the Dead Sea Scrolls,⁴³ the Psalms,⁴⁴ Job,⁴⁵ Plutarch,⁴⁶ Clement of Alexandria,⁴⁷ and assorted Gnostic references.⁴⁸

With a great deal of regret, and for lack of time, we must pass by, with only a mention, a most fascinating survival of the ancient circle dance, the Byzantine *chorós*, a great chandelier, patterned on the ancient cosmos, which hangs below the dome of the church, and is whirled at Easter;⁴⁹ and the circle dance which was performed by the clergy within the rings of the great pavement labyrinth in Chartres cathedral.⁵⁰ Please be assured that those items are covered at length in the longer paper.

The Ancient Cosmos

⁴¹Geoffrey of Monmouth, *British History*, book viii. chap. 10.

⁴²Hugh Nibley, "The Early Christian Prayer Circle," *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], p. 65.

⁴³Hugh Nibley, "The Early Christian Prayer Circle," *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], p. 67.

⁴⁴See Hugh Nibley, "Abraham's Creation Drama," *Eloquent Witness* [CWHN 17], p. 463.

⁴⁵Job 38:3, 7.

⁴⁶Hugh Nibley, "The Early Christian Prayer Circle," *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], pp. 68-69.

⁴⁷Hugh Nibley, "The Early Christian Prayer Circle," *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], p. 69.

⁴⁸E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (London: Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1952), pp. 15-16.

⁴⁹Margaret Barker, e-mail message to Frederick M. Huchel, December 13, 2008. Mrs. Barker's informant was Father Maximos Lavriotes, of Mount Athos.

⁵⁰<http://www.labyrinthos.net/chartpics.htm>. Emphasis mine.

We have noted that the sacred ring dance is a cosmic dance. It is to be understood within the context of the ancient, pre-Copernican cosmos. The ancient cosmos of the circle dance is sometimes called the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmos. It is the cosmos which is based in and contained within a matrix of circles and spheres. This is the cosmos which was literally *seen* in the *sky* by the ancients, from the Babylonians to the Renaissance. It is the cosmos which the Church said was the cosmos of scripture, and the scientists held was not the cosmos of physical reality. Sadly, the matter was allowed to degenerate into an argument over whether or not earth was the center of the universe. The real issue of the geocentric cosmos was this: every one of the prophets who experienced what is variously called the “Throne Theophany,” the “Prophetic Experience,” the “Ascent Vision” and “Die Himmelsreise der Seele,” saw and described the *geocentric* cosmos, with the fiery *canalis mundi*, the seven planetary spheres, and the orders of angelic sentinels, accompanied by the music of the spheres. If they were *prophets* — and their experiences as they described them — then the sacred geocentric cosmos exists in some physical reality. For purposes of understanding scripture, the temple, and the sacred Ring Dance, the church was right, and Galileo was not so much technically *wrong*, as not relevant to the experiences of the ancient seers.

I say again, the geocentric cosmos is the cosmos which was then — and is now — *actually seen* in the sky. The viewer is at the center of *his* cosmos. The temple lies at the center of *its* cosmos. The circle-dance necessarily takes place at the center of the cosmos of the participants. The cosmos of the circle-dance is the ancient, sacred, geocentric cosmos, the cosmos embodied in St. Peter’s Basilica, in the cathedral at Chartres, in Stonehenge, and in Westminster Abbey.

In the ancient sacred model, earth (in other words, the viewer, the participant, the initiate) is at the center of the cosmic sphere. The sacred earth is composed of four “elements”: land, water,

air, and fire — each linked to one of the angels of the four corners of the earth. Though their names vary in the texts, we will use Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel. The earth lay at the center of a series of concentric crystal spheres. Each of the ancient seven planets — visible to the naked eye — was borne in its revolutions on one of the crystal spheres: Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. These are the ancient “seven heavens” of Paul’s reference in Second Corinthians.⁵¹ The eighth sphere was the sphere of the fixed stars: the ancient hosts of heaven. You can step outside on a clear night and see how it appears as a dome (an hemi-sphere) overhead: The firmament, the ancient *firmamentum*. Above the eighth heaven was the *nonu caelum*, the ninth heaven, whose motions accounted for the critically important but little understood Precession of the Equinoxes. The Tenth heaven dealt with the motions of the zodiacal constellations, the ecliptic, the celestial equator, and so on. Above all those concentric spheres was the *Caelum Empyreum Habitaculum Dei et Omnium Electorum*: The Empyrean or fiery heaven, the habitation of God and all the Elect.

The Music of the Spheres

We must, frustratingly, be here negligent of the *sounds* made by the planets: the music of the crystal spheres. We can see, however, remnants of an earlier understanding in the names of the notes of our musical octave: DO (*Dominus*, the Lord God), RE (*Regina Caelum*, the Queen of Heaven, the Moon), MI (*Microcosmos*, the Earth), FA (*Fates*, the Fates, the planets), SOL (*Sol*, the Sun), LA, *Via Lactea*, the Milky Way), SI (*Siderea*, the sidereal heavens, the stars), and back to DO.⁵²

⁵¹2 Corinthians 12:2.

⁵²See William Sullivan, *The Secret of the Incas*, p. 338. See also Joscelyn Godwin, *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth: Mysticism in Music* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1995), p. 170. Jamie James (*The Music of the Spheres: Music, Science, and the Natural Order of the Universe* [New York: Grove Press, 1993, p. 81) gives an alternative, deriving the names of the notes from an hymn to St. John: “*Ut queant lasix; Resonare fibris; Mira*

As the planetary spheres rotated, it was believed in those far-off times, they set off vibrations. Each planet had its own specific set of vibratory patterns. The interactions of those vibrations produced a cosmic harmony: the music of the spheres.⁵³ Anciently, it was said, the music was audible to men on earth, but sin dulled the senses, and mankind lost the heavenly music. C. S. Lewis knew it,⁵⁴ and so did Shakespeare's Lorenzo, in *The Merchant of Venice*:

There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.⁵⁵

It is the music which accompanied the creation hymn,⁵⁶ when the morning stars sang together, as chronicled in Job.⁵⁷ It is the music of the hymn sung by the angels in Isaiah's temple vision.⁵⁸ The "new song" mentioned in Psalms and Isaiah, is a song of renewing the cosmic covenant,⁵⁹ and

gestorum; *Famuli tuturum; Solve polluti; Labi[i] reatum, Sancte Iohanes.*"

⁵³See Philo, "The Confusion of Tongues," 55-57; Philo, "The Migration of Abraham," 103-106; Philo, "On the Creation," 53-57, and, interestingly, Procopius of Caesarea, "Buildings," I.i.35. I am indebted to Margaret Barker for pointing these out, and to Professor John F. Hall of Brigham Young University and his research assistant Jonathan Harmon for copies and checking translations. In attempting to visualize the harmony of the crystal spheres, one cannot help but think of Benjamin Franklin's "glass armonica," which produces music by the vibration of crystal bowls.

⁵⁴A derivative of that belief is inherent in the designation of earth as "the silent planet" in C. S. Lewis science-fiction novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*, the first volume of his "space trilogy"

⁵⁵William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 5, Scene 1.

⁵⁶Hugh Nibley, "The Meaning of the Temple," *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present*, [CWHN 12], pp. 22-23.

⁵⁷Job 38:7.

⁵⁸Isa. 6:3, Rev. 4:8. See William Hamblin and David Rolph Seely, *Solomon's Temple: Myth and History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p. 114.

⁵⁹From the Hebrew **שָׁדָד** *chadash*, to polish a sword (hence to *cut* a covenant), and **שִׁיר**, *shir*, "to go around" (as in the dance). Interestingly, in 1 Samuel 6:7, *chadash* is used of a threshing wain, bringing to mind two images of the constellation Ursa Major: as the sword (Excalibur) and as Arthur's wain (cf *Hamlet's Mill*).

in the Apocalypse it is the song of Creation⁶⁰ (the Greek word can be translated “chant”), sung by the *choros* of dancers; it is a song from the same psalter as the joyous shout of the sons of God at the Creation,⁶¹ which takes the participants back to Holy of Holies, or the First Day of Creation, where all things are new. It is *that* music which is the accompaniment for the circle dance.

The Crystal Organ

It seems, to me, that the deep percussion of the drums and the repetitive drumming of the feet in dances such as those of the Hopi, especially their stamping on the “foot-drum” built into the floor of their underground kivas, to call the attention of the spirits below, are meant to open up the conduit to the nethermost of the three temples spoken of by Varro, “one in heaven, one on earth, and one beneath the earth.”⁶² The conduit to “the Above” is opened with the sacred hand gestures, including making “signs for the zodiac” as we have mentioned earlier.⁶³ If the music of the nether temple is the deep drumming, then the music of the heavenly temple must be the music of the spheres. If the idea of music made by the vibration of crystal spheres seems far-fetched, we need go no further than Benjamin Franklin’s “Glass Armonica,” (or crystal organ) of 1761 (a vast improvement and refinement of an earlier instrument, known — interestingly — as a seraphim). The Armonica consists of a series of nested crystal hemispheres, the ethereal sound of which was often described as “heavenly,” and was said to have healing powers.⁶⁴ Both Mozart⁶⁵ and Beethoven⁶⁶ composed

⁶⁰The Greek *καινήν kaheenos* means “new, fresh, newly-created.” Perhaps the “new song” is, in some sense, the song of *opening* the Way.

⁶¹Job 38:7.

⁶²Varro, *De Lingua Latina* VII, 8, as cited in Hugh Nibley, “What is a Temple,” *Mormonism and Early Christianity* [CWHN 4], p. 358.

⁶³See above, p. 8, text at footnote 32.

⁶⁴This is the account of Princess Izabella Czartoryska of Poland: “I was ill, in a state of melancholia, and writing my testament and farewell letters. Wishing to distract me, my husband explained to me who Franklin was and to what he owed his fame . . . Franklin had a noble face with an expression of engaging kindness. Surprised by my

works for the Armonica. Perhaps a reasonable simulation of the music of the spheres *is* available to our earthbound ears.

Piercing the whole geocentric complex, from earth to the *Emypreum*, was the pole, like a skewer, an axis on which the entire matrix revolved — like an axle — each sphere in its own time and season. Outside the outermost sphere, at the top of the entire cosmos, sat God upon his throne. When Isaiah and Ezekiel and John on Patmos saw the heavens open, they saw a fiery conduit, which I call the *canalis mundi*, open up along the polar axis, to reveal God on his throne. Lehi, an anti-Deuteronomist prophet who fled Jerusalem in 600 BC, had a vision in which he “saw the heavens open, and he . . . saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.”⁶⁷ The purpose of the circle dance was a “stirring below” to invoke a “stirring above.” Two-way travel was then possible between the Holy of Holies below and the realm of God, above.

The Form of the Dance — and Its Music

So, what was the actual *form* of the Circle dance of prayer? What composed its musical notation and its dance-step? I am persuaded, from the collective weight of all the traditions I have studied, that the actual singing and dancing of the Sacred Circle is not so much the lively music and exuberant dance-step of such celebrations as the Greek wedding dance, though it is, as we have said,

immobility, he took my hands and gazed at me saying: *pauvre jeune femme* [‘poor young lady’]. He then opened an armonica, sat down and played long. The music made a strong impression on me and tears began flowing from my eyes. Then Franklin sat by my side and looking with compassion said, ‘Madam, you are cured.’ Indeed in that moment I was cured of my melancholia. Franklin offered to teach me how to play the armonica — I accepted without hesitation, hence he gave me twelve lessons.” (Z. J. Lipowski, “Benjamin Franklin as a psychotherapist: A forerunner of brief psychotherapy,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 27 [1984], 361-366. p.362).

⁶⁵For instance, the Adagio in C (K617a/K356), and Adagio and Rondo (K617).

⁶⁶Notably the “‘Melodrama’ for armonica and narrator.”

⁶⁷1 Nephi 1:8. See Hugh Nibley, “The Heavenly Prologue,” *Ancient Documents and the Pearl of Great Price* (Chapter 17), pp. 6-7.

a participatory dance, a solemn chant — by the members of the circle itself — of such music as that explained to us by John Wheeler from the Jewish tradition, or something akin to Gregorian Chant of the Roman Catholic tradition. The steps would be slow and solemn and repetitive, like those I have witnessed in sacred ritual dances of the Hopi Indians of the great American Southwest. It is, after all, a dance of prayer. The music to which the sacred dance is performed in the temple, Psalm 150 tells us, is played by both stringed and wind instruments.

The theology of the music of the dance was articulated by no less a figure than Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger: “The cosmos is praying with us . . . It is precisely this cosmic dimension that is essential to Christian liturgy . . . It is always a cosmic liturgy. The theme of creation is embedded in Christian prayer. It loses its grandeur when it forgets this connection.”⁶⁸ He adds, “The music made by man must . . . be taken from the inner music and order of the universe, be inserted into the ‘. . . song’ of the ‘fraternity of the spheres’. The beauty of music depends on its conformity to the rhythmic and harmonic laws of the universe. The more that human music adapts itself to the musical laws of the universe, the more beautiful it will be.”⁶⁹

We come now to the objective of the Circle Dance of Prayer. It was to open up a conduit, not only through *space*, but also through *time*, and take the participants from the veil of the Temple, up through the heavens, and back to the First Day of Creation,⁷⁰ from the throne atop the Sacred Ark,

⁶⁸Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (Ignatius Press, 2000), pp. 70, 76, quoted in David Clayton, “The Art of the Spheres: Discovering Mathematical Ideals in Christian Abstract Art.”

⁶⁹Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (Ignatius Press, 2000), p. 152.

⁷⁰See Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven* (London: SPCK, 1991), pp 76, 132; Margaret Barker, e-mail message to this writer, November 13, 2006.

to the celestial throne of God, surrounded by numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising,⁷¹ where the Sons of God shouted for joy, and the morning stars sang together.

The Prayer Circle in our Time

We have mentioned one survival of a remnant of the ancient circle dance into the present day: the swinging or whirling of a great chandelier, a direct descendant of the Byzantine χορός, which hangs from the dome of the monastery church on Mount Athos, and which Father Maximo Lavriotes says is set in motion at Easter.

We come, now, to describe an event which is not common to the religious traditions of all present today. It is from my own Christian tradition. Just after the Vernal Equinox, in the year 1820, young Joseph Smith went into a grove of trees on his father's farm, to pray for wisdom, having learned that he might do so from James 1:5. He described what happened: "I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me."⁷² That was the official version. In an earlier account, he said, "a pillar of fire appeared above my head. It presently rested down upon me . . . A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame . . ."⁷³ This person, as we would guess from John's vision on Patmos, was God himself. It is the experience Moses had on Sinai, and which was had by others of the ancient prophets.

Joseph Smith called the religion he founded a "restoration" of that given by God to Adam, to Enoch, to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses, and set up by the Lord Jesus Christ in his mortal ministry.

⁷¹1 Nephi 1:8.

⁷²Joseph Smith—History:16.

⁷³Joseph Smith, 1835 account. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Volume 1: Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), p. 127.

As part of the Restoration, Joseph built a temple. In form, it followed the ancient Solomonic pattern.

Without having access to the Patrologia or the early Christian apocrypha in frontier America, Joseph Smith built a temple — according to the ancient pattern — and during its dedication, numerous attendees — who had surely read no early Christian apocrypha — described the fiery pillar they saw not only within the temple, but extending through its roof and into the sky.⁷⁴ Individuals who participated in that Pentacostal time within the temple described an experience which is fully consistent with being inside the whirling fiery conduit described in earlier scriptural tradition.

Describing a meeting held on January 21, 1836, in the Kirtland Temple, the official *History of the Church*, in the words of Joseph Smith, records, “The heavens were opened, and angels ministered unto us . . . the gift of tongues fell upon us in mighty power, angels mingled their voices with ours, while their presence was in our midst . . .”⁷⁵ The months and weeks surrounding the dedication of the Temple was a Pentacostal time. Near the time of the dedication, Prescinda Huntington recorded that “. . . we enjoyed many very great blessings, and often saw the power of God manifested. On one occasion I saw . . . walking upon the temple . . . angels clothed in white covering the roof from end to end . . . This was in broad daylight, in the afternoon.”⁷⁶ This coming and going of the angels is of the same cloth as Jacob’s dream of the ladder, and the angels ascending and descending,⁷⁷ an example of the opening of the heavens and the setting up of the *canalis mundi*. Prescinda Huntington described what was called “The Pentacost” at the Kirtland Temple, when

⁷⁴Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols., (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932-1951) 2:428, hereinafter cited as *HC*.

⁷⁵Joseph Smith, *HC* 2:382-383.

⁷⁶Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge & Crandall, 1877), p. 207.

⁷⁷Genesis 28:12.

“There was poured out . . . abundantly the spirit of revelation, prophesy and tongues. The Holy Ghost filled the house; and along in the afternoon a noise was heard. It was the sound of a mighty rushing wind . . . To many it seemed as though the roof was all in flames.”⁷⁸

The *History of the Church* records,

. . . a noise was heard like the sound of a rushing mighty wind, which filled the Temple, and all the congregation simultaneously arose, being moved upon by an invisible power; many began to speak in tongues and prophesy; others saw glorious visions . . . the Temple was filled with angels . . . The people of the neighborhood came running together (hearing an unusual sound within, and seeing a bright light like a pillar of fire resting upon the Temple), and were astonished at what was taking place.⁷⁹

Inside the temple, besides finding themselves in the company of angels, the speaking in tongues and prophesying, healing of the sick, and the sound of the rushing mighty wind, it was reported by many in the temple that “cloven tongues like fire sat upon many of them and they prophesied and spoke with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.”⁸⁰ We have an account of one man who was inside the temple — and clearly within the hollow, fiery pillar which stretched up through the temple and out through the roof and up into heaven:

. . . the Spirit of God rested upon me in mighty power and I beheld the room lighted up with a peculiar light such as I had never seen before. It was soft and clear and the room looked to me as though it had neither roof nor floor to the building and I beheld the Prophet Joseph and Hyrum Smith and Roger Orton enveloped in the light . . .⁸¹

This description — and others — of the Kirtland Temple Pentecost are wholly consistent with beholding — and in this case being inside — the whirling fiery pillar, the open conduit, the

⁷⁸Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge & Crandall, 1877), p. 208.

⁷⁹HC 2: 428.

⁸⁰Joseph Heinerman, *Temple Manifestations*, p. 31, citing Erastus Snow Sketch Book, LDS Church Historical Department archives.

⁸¹Harrison Burgess, *Labors in the Vineyard: Twelfth Book of the Faith-Promoting Series*, p. 67.

canalis mundi which opened from the temple up through the spheres to the throne of God on High,⁸² although I know of no scholar or commentator, including those within my own tradition, who has made that connection.

There are a number of accounts of people inside the temple hearing the heavenly music.⁸³

Clearly, the Pentecostal experience of the Kirtland Temple can be seen well within the milieu of the opening up of the *canalis mundi* from the temple to heaven. Then we come to the rites, the ritual, the liturgy (Mormons use the term “ordinances”) of the Temple. Though — since it is a rite of the temple — Mormons are under covenant not to discuss the details of those ordinances, still it is not out of place — since it has been mentioned in LDS sources in print — to note that the prayer circle was restored as a part of LDS temple worship,⁸⁴ dating from the Kirtland Temple in 1836,⁸⁵ and the Nauvoo Temple in 1843,⁸⁶ where Prayer Circles were held as part of the temple service.⁸⁷ The specifics of the Latter-day Saint prayer circle are not discussed, though they do include dressing

⁸²See also D&C 110:1-16.

⁸³Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge & Crandall, 1877), p. 208. See also Victor J. Rasmussen, ed., *The Manti Temple* (Manti, Utah: Manti Temple Centennial Committee, 1988), p. 56.

⁸⁴See D. Michael Quinn, “Latter-day Saint Prayer Circles”, *BYU Studies*, Vol. 19 [Fall 1978], pp. 79-105.

⁸⁵School of the Prophets minutes, October 10, 1883. LDS Church Archives.

⁸⁶See D. Michael Quinn, “Latter-day Saint Prayer Circles”, *BYU Studies*, Vol. 19 [Fall 1978], p. 84.

⁸⁷Heber C. Kimball (kept by William Clayton), December 21, 1845, LDS Church Archives. For LDS Church-sanctioned descriptions of the temple ordinances, see James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord*. There have many printings of the book, one of the most recent being by Covenant Communications, 2006 (using the original 1912 text). The description of the ordinances is on pp. 56 ff. See also Glen M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, A People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, and Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), pp. 235-241, 255-265. See also, Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Utah* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), pp. 357-357 (reprint of 1889 original, which was approved and recommended in a November 1, 1884, letter of the First Presidency. See Franklin D. Richards diary, May 9, 1889).

in sacred clothing,⁸⁸ the offering up of ritual gestures,⁸⁹ and what Brigham Young — speaking at the public cornerstone-laying of the Salt Lake Temple — referred to as “the key words, the signs and tokens, pertaining to the Holy Priesthood,”⁹⁰ and other details which would be quite familiar to those who participated in the early Christian circles, as evidenced in the literature we have cited, above.

My own Christian religious tradition continues, today, the temple tradition of very early Christianity.

Summary and Conclusion

When the pieces of the puzzle are put together, the experiences of Isaiah, Ezekiel, John, Lehi, and Joseph Smith complement one another, and prove to be descriptions of the same phenomenon: the *canalis mundi*. The experiences of Joseph Smith, from the Latter-day Saint religious tradition, serve to bolster the Biblical record, and add to our understanding of the sacred ring dance of the temple, and the theophany which is a result — indeed it is the object — of the sacred ring dance of prayer, which opens a conduit from the Holy of Holies up through the planetary heavens with their concourses of singing angels, to the throne of God on High.

At the outset, we set out to do three things: to establish that the sacred circle dance *was* an early Christian temple rite; to set out its cosmic framework and purpose, and briefly discuss instances in which forms of the circle dance exist in both Eastern and Western Christian traditions today.

⁸⁸Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball, Jr., *Spencer W. Kimball: Twelfth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977), p. 207; William Clayton’s *Journal* (Dallas, Texas: S. K. Taylor Publishing Company, 1973), p. 203 (Facsimile reprint of a 1921 original, published by the Clayton Family Association by the Deseret News, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1921).

⁸⁹See Hugh Nibley, “The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, [1987], p. 82.

⁹⁰Brigham Young, “Necessity of Building Temples—The Endowment,” *Journal of Discourses*, 2: 31 - 32 [April 6, 1853].

The ancient sacred dance, whether known as the circle-dance, the ring-dance, the *chorós* or the prayer circle, is well-attested in the early Christian sources. It is found not only in the New Testament, but the Old, and in other cultures, such as ancient Egypt. Dancing had its origin in the temple,⁹¹ and the circle-dance is a simulation of the dance of the angels in heaven, more specifically the orders of angels which guard the heavenly spheres, as they move in their concentric circles, wheels within wheels. I repeat, “To be the master of time, one must first be master of space, space laid out from the navel of the earth.”⁹²

It is a rite of the Temple, and best understood in the tradition of the sacred Ascent or Throne Theophany. Its theology partakes of sacred and solemn elements of both the crucifixion and the resurrection, as a *mysterion*, in the context of deeper, secret “mystery rites” withheld from the multitude, and reserved to the private areas of the Temple, where only the ritually-pure were considered worthy to participate.

Though knowledge of the sacred circle dance has all but completely disappeared in the western liturgy, it is still present in places in the east, most notably on Mount Athos, where the Byzantine *chorós* can still be found. Even though the sacred ring-dance itself has been lost, we find through understanding its form and origin that evidence of the temple dance is to be found virtually all around us in scattered historical fragments which litter the cultural landscape. Among these are the May-pole, the labyrinths of the European cathedrals, and the Great Pavement of Westminster Abbey.

⁹¹Hugh Nibley, “What is a Temple?” *Mormonism and Early Christianity* [CWHN 4], p. 362; Hugh Nibley, “Genesis of the Written Word,” *Temple and Cosmos* [CWHN 12], p. 472.

⁹²William Sullivan, *The Secret of the Incas* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1996), p. 122.

The tradition of the ancient religious circling dance is alive and well among one of the most ancient of the North American Indian cultures: The Hopi, in their cycle of ritual dances which delineate the circle of the year.

We also find, perhaps to our surprise, that a little-known (and even less understood) Christian religious tradition in America has as part of its history a restoration of the temple and its sacred circle, and the ancient ascent-vision which opened up the spiral conduit from the Holy of Holies to the throne of God in heaven.

What we thought lost has been within our grasp all the while.
