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Of Navels and Mountains: A Further Inquiry into the History of an Idea*

Abstract

The notion of *axis mundi* as the "center of the universe" has been an important component in the construction of universal theories concerning mythology. The primary theoretician behind the propagation of the concept was Mircea Eliade, who borrowed insights from the Pan-Babylonian school during the early part of his career in Romania in order to provide concrete evidence for the existence of a world axis. While the case can be made for the symbolism of the center in some cultural and religious contexts, it is virtually impossible to generalize about the idea. This paper provides more data to supplement J. Z. Smith's earlier critiques of Eliade's position.

Key words: *axis mundi* — Eliade — mythography — Pan-Babylonianism — navel of the earth — world-mountain

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Introduction

In an essay published in 1967, Mircea Eliade tells a story.[1] The story is about an unusually famous camel that played a central role in the late-nineteenth-century scholarly discourse concerning the religions of the Near and Middle East. Based on the fourth-century observations of Nilus, a Christian monk supposedly living in a monastery on Mt Sinai, Eliade begins with the recounting of a Bedouin commensal camel sacrifice. The graphic description provided by Nilus of the consumption of raw flesh, blood, bones, and entrails conjures up literary images of "barbarians," such as the ones in Franz Kafka's short story "Ein altes Blatt" [An Old Page].[2] Nilus's account contains all of the motifs and formulaic elements necessary for a persuasive and rhetorical personal-experience narrative, and Eliade's version of the account highlights those aspects of Nilus's vivid imagination that appeal to the dramatic sense of the reader. But Eliade's story does not end here.

Nilus's camel received a quick stamp of approval from W. Robertson Smith two years after J. Wellhausen first brought the account to light in his *Reste arabischen Heidentums* [The Residue of Arabian Heathenism]. The supposed historicity of the camel sacrifice led Robertson Smith and others to declare conclusively that Nilus's camel was the oldest known Arabian animal sacrifice and must therefore be the pivot of discussions on the origins of Semitic concepts of communion. As Eliade relates, ". . . no one seemed to doubt the authenticity of Nilus's testimony, even though a great number of scholars rejected Robertson Smith's interpretation. Thus by the beginning of this century Nilus's camel had become . . . exasperatingly omnipresent in the writings of historians of religions, Old Testament scholars, sociologists, and ethnologists . . ." (Eliade 1967, 27). Indeed, the perpetuation of "an anecdote . . . , a detail related as an 'aside',"[3] continued unabated even after K. Heussi refuted the validity of the account and its associated theories in his definitive work *Das Nilusproblem* [The Nilus Problem], published in 1921. Eliade marvels at the power that

such academic anecdotes convey, and suggests that it is highly significant that an empirically disproven hypothesis can persist beyond its functional lifespan. Why is this so? To attempt to answer this perplexing question, we need to look at the context of Eliade's retelling.

Eliade's narrative is not the story of a monk and a camel. It is rather a common-sense parable interpreting a chapter in the history of academic practice. Eliade delights in exposing the ultimate methodological folly of what he terms "cultural fashions," but not at the expense of casting aside their entire burden of meaning. He reflexively equates cultural fashion with contemporary intellectual ideology, which leads to salvation via theory: ". . . cultural fashion is immensely significant, no matter what its objective value may be; the success of certain ideas or ideologies reveals to us the spiritual and existential situation of all those for whom these ideas or ideologies constitute a kind of soteriology" (ELIADE 1967, 25). Academic praxis, according to Eliade's assumptions, is a spiritual method that enables the individual scholar to delve as deeply into his own inner, subjective world as into the objective world of outer appearances.

Indeed, Eliade's own scholarly career was a comparative search for meaning, a transformative quest leading to higher truths during which he also became the bearer of a metaphorical Nilus's camel. Eliade became ensnared in precisely the same net that he warns us about. It is ironic but true that he himself fell prey to a cultural fashion that emerged roughly parallel to the scholarly story that he tells us about monks and camels. The second story is the one that I wish to pursue in the remainder of this essay.

One of the earliest preoccupations and central concerns in Eliade's quasi-phenomenological approach to the symbolic study of the mythic is the question of space. The theme of spatial orientation, along with the related notions of time and history, dominated Eliade's thought to such a degree that he cogently argued in defense of his position concerning them throughout his academic career. Despite Eliade's prolific writing and erudition as well as his bibliomaniacal approach to religious phenomena, he has not gone unchallenged. Anglo-Saxon anthropologists such as E. R. Leach, who has discredited Eliade as being merely a mystic in a number of vehement reviews, are at one end of the critical spectrum.[4] They have focused their criticisms on Eliade's concept of universal symbolism, while a new school of what I. P. Culianu has called "new-wave anthropologists" (CULIANU 1986, 52), complain that Eliade has not paid adequate attention to extraordinary experiences such as mysticism, shamanic trance, etc.[5] Whatever the case may be, Eliade

has suffered a great deal of general criticism during his lengthy career.[6] Yet aside from a few remarkably insightful essays by J. Z. Smith,[7] no scholar to date has taken Eliade to task on specific issues. In this essay, I wish to contribute to a line of argumentation that Smith recently began by providing some of the hidden historical background to the "navel debate." I shall explore some of the early sources that led to Eliade's understanding of sacred space by focusing on his coinage of the term *axis mundi*.

Eliade's thoughts on this matter are by no means new, for there are traceable precedents. My goal here is not only to identify and describe Eliade's concept of *axis mundi*, but also to point out the major scholarly figures and theories that influenced his own formulation.[8] This task is more difficult than it seems at first, because Eliade did not necessarily mention particular works that served as exemplary models for him. Such references are also not explicit in his published journals. The search for sources of inspiration is further obfuscated when one attempts to trace references in footnotes; Eliade often merely refers his reader to one of his own prior publications. Even the most persistent and sleuth-like researcher is frustrated when a seemingly endless quest for sources leads only to fragmented citations. If one is willing, however, to struggle through the voluminous torrent of writings produced by Eliade from 1935 onward until his death in 1986, one is rewarded with some clues. If we look at the frequency with which select monographs and articles are cited by Eliade in his numerous discussions of *axis mundi*, a clear canon of works belonging to an intellectual orientation that he found peculiarly enticing, emerges. It is interesting to note here that those sources that influenced Eliade's notion of *axis mundi* in the formative period of his intellectual life remained his primary source material even after many of them were debunked by later investigators. The details will be given in the latter portion of this essay. First, a brief sketch of Eliade's overall theory of sacred space will be useful.

Eliade's Concept of the "Center" as *Axis Mundi*[9]

Eliade believes that all myths and rites disclose a "boundary situation." He defines a boundary situation as any event of encounter in which "man discovers himself becoming conscious of his place in the universe" (Eliade 1961, 34). The mythic discovery of one's place in the universe always leads to an awareness of difference, a Durkheimian distinction between sacred and profane.[10] According to Eliade, the sacred realm is conceived of as a microcosm of the world characterized from within as inhabited, organized, and orderly. The sacred world is closed off and

has limits. Beyond the sacred world there is an estranged realm that is characterized as unknown, formless, dangerous, and chaotic (ELIADE 1959b, 29–32; 1961, 38). The latter, the outside world, is the profane sphere that engulfs the sacred home territory of any given culture. Profane space is further characterized as homogeneous and neutral, a fundamental Eliadean definition of chaos.[11]

Now Eliade further states that within each sacred space, within each microcosm, there is a place that is more sacred than all others. It is a "Center" that totally manifests the sacred in the form of elementary hierophanies or as direct epiphanies (ELIADE 1958, 367–69; 1959b, 21; 1961, 39). He feels that such a central point, imbued with sacredness and power, is absolutely necessary for human action to take place. Man must therefore always ritually establish a "center" to live in. For Eliade, the act of establishing and constructing a center is an act of cosmogonic value; it is equivalent to the creation of the world (ELIADE 1958, 369–74; 1959b, 22). As such, each act of construction and consecration is a repetition of a cosmogonic act, a continuous creation of the world from the inside (ELIADE 1959a, 17–20). Eliade says that to organize space is to repeat the paradigmatic work of the gods, because they were the ones to perform the initial creative act *in illo tempore* (ELIADE 1959a, 32). Following W. Gaerte,[12] he assumes that the idea of a "center" has existed since the dawn of man, and has remained a universal ever since.[13]

The center can take a myriad of forms. In mythical geography, the landscape itself can be conceived of as a sacred space. But sacred space can also be materialized in cultic objects such as the *churinga* of certain Australian aboriginal groups, or it can be manifested in "hierocosmic" symbols such as "world trees" or "cosmic pillars." Finally, sacred space can be interiorized within the human body, as in the case of the meditations of an Indian *yogī*. In each example, regardless of its form, sacred space puts one in direct contact with the sacred: "Whether that space appears in the form of a sacred precinct, a ceremonial house, a city, a world, we everywhere find the symbolism of the Center of the World; and it is this symbolism which, in the majority of cases, explains religious behavior in respect to the space in which one lives" (ELIADE 1959b, 37–38).

"Centers" are always powerful because they constitute a point of intersection between the three regions: heaven, earth, hell. Here at the center a breakthrough is possible and communication between these three worlds is opened up. Usually, there is a vertical conduit of some sort at the center of the sacred space that acts as the channel of communication. According to Eliade, the conduit is an archetypal *axis*

mundi, an earth axis "which at once connects and supports heaven and earth and whose base is fixed in the world below" (ELIADE 1959b, 36). The universal cosmic pillar can only be at the center of the world, for the whole habitable realm of existence extends around it. Whenever an area or object is consecrated as or at the center, it takes on the quality of an *axis mundi*, an Ur-axis manifest in a number of different forms, which connects and upholds the three regions or cosmos. As Eliade puts it, ". . . cities, temples or palaces, regarded as Centres of the World are only replicas, repeating *ad libitum* the same archaic image—the Cosmic Mountain, the World Tree or the central Pillar which sustains the planes of the cosmos."[14] For Eliade, every holy place that bears witness to an incursion of the sacred into profane space is regarded as a "center," and thus an *axis mundi*. From this point of view, the ambiguity of Eliade's notion of the "multiplicity of centers" makes logical sense because of the transferable nature of the center.

Eliade has summarized his musings on *axis mundi* and sacred space in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959b, 37) as follows:

1) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space;
2) this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible;
3) communication with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the *axis mundi*: pillar, ladder, mountain, tree, vine;
4) around this cosmic axis lies the world, hence the axis is located "in the middle," at the "navel of the earth"; it is the Center of the World.

The symbolism of the center is then further associated with other religious beliefs (ELIADE 1959b, 39):

a) holy sites and sanctuaries are believed to be situated at the center of the world;
b) temples are replicas of the cosmic mountain and hence constitute the preeminent "link" between earth and heaven;
c) the foundations of temples descend deep into the lower regions.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE *WELTBERG* IN MESOPOTAMIA

The biblical scholar R. J. CLIFFORD has stated that "basic to the interpretation of the cosmic mountain [worldwide] is an understanding of religious symbolism in the Ancient Near East" (1972, 6). Why is the Near East quintessential to our comparative understanding of *axis mundi*, and what relevance does it have to Mircea Eliade's point of view? To answer these two questions, we need to go back to 1890, the year that Peter Jensen's landmark book *Die Kosmologie der Babylonier*

[The Cosmology of the Babylonians] was published in Strassbourg. Jensen's book attracted much attention among European Orientalists of the time. In it, Jensen articulated a theory destined to become the foundation of a later school of thought concerning the *Weltberg*,[15] or "world-mountain." His evidence was based on philological and archaeological material.

In a seminal passage,[16] Jensen homed in on the Sumerian word *ḫarsag*. *Ḫarsag* (or *ḫursag*) is found in passages describing temples. It often appears in the phrase *l-ḫarsag-kurkura*, which Jensen translated as "Berghaus der Länder."[17] The term *ḫarsag*, isolated from its contextual usage, only means *Berghaus* (mountain-house), and can, at best, be translated as "temple." There is thus a correlation made between temple and mountain. The temple is either built on the mountain, or the mountain itself is conceived of as being a temple, a sacred space. Jensen further introduced the associated notion of a connection between the three realms, for he claimed that philological and epigraphic evidence suggested an earthly "link" between the heaven above and the underworld below. He also cautiously asserted that there was a mountain complex in Mesopotamia that could be extended by analogy to Western Semitic and Biblical texts (CLIFFORD 1972, 190).

While Jensen's conviction of this interpretation was firm, he was very careful in his comparisons with other Asian "world-mountains." He admitted that other systems of thought conceived of world-mountains—he cited H. H. Wilson's translation of the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* as evidence for the centrality of Mt Meru in Indian mythology—but did not venture to compare these systems to any great extent (JENSEN 1890, 208–11). But by merely raising the issue, Jensen stimulated a host of scholars who later made more daring comparisons. His followers were not as cautious as he.[18]

Jensen's introduction of the study of cosmology into the scholarly galaxy of European, primarily German, Assyriological research resulted in a flurry of activity. For approximately the next forty years, the last decade of the nineteenth century and the opening three decades of the twentieth century, German Assyriologists became increasingly preoccupied with cosmology and the *Länderberg* or *Weltberg* paradigm that Jensen had established. The mythical notion of the world-mountain as a vertical "link," with heaven engulfing the apex and the underworld situated at the base, became even stronger.[19] Within the general efflorescent intellectual climate of the time, a new school emerged out of the writings and thought of Hugo Winckler, a senior contemporary of Jensen's.[20] By 1901, Winckler had worked out a comparative schema of world mythology based on Babylonian presuppositions in his book

titled *Himmels- und Weltenbild der Babylonier als Grundlage der Weltanschauung und Mythologie aller Völker* [Pictures of Heaven and World of the Babylonians as the Basis for the Worldview and Mythology of all Peoples]. The book surprisingly attracted very little attention and remained an obscure scholarly work. But it did manage to catch the eye of Alfred Jeremias, a younger Assyriologist, who quickly became the major proponent of what we have come to know as Pan-Babylonianism.[21]

Pan-Babylonianism and Comparative Mythology

Shortly after Winckler's 1901 publication, Jeremias embarked on a program to systematize the method contained therein in germinal form. Jeremias published something akin to a Pan-Babylonian textbook simply called *Die Panbabylonisten* [The Pan-Babylonianists], which gained great currency in its second edition published in 1907. Prior to this historical introduction to the general method, Jeremias had formulated and firmly grounded the Pan-Babylonian position in a book drawing upon his own area of expertise, the biblical Near East.[22] While the book's major goal is to prove that the Old Testament *Weltanschauung* derives from and is the same as the Babylonian one, *The Old Testament in the Light of the Ancient East* is a comparativist tour de force. Many of Jeremias's Near and Middle Eastern examples are accompanied by numerous citations from Greece and cultures farther to the East. In fact, one of the most significant contributions that Jeremias made to the comparative study of mythology was the development of the Greek concept of *omphalos*.[23] Jeremias emphatically made a universal statement by suggesting that every country is a microcosm containing a mountain seat of power, a "center of gravity" (=navel) that binds together the three realms.[24] What Jeremias failed to mention, however, was that the Greek concept of *omphalos* (navel) only came to be used for other disparate phenomena of "centeredness" at late dates. It only came to be used for Jerusalem during the period of the second Temple. It is now well known that the Septuagint, for example, translates *ṭabbūr ha'areṣ* in Judges 9: 27 and Ezekiel 38: 12 as *omphalos tēs gēs* (navel of the earth).[25] This late date for the use of *omphalos* in Biblical translation goes against the Ur-notion of a universal concept of navels.

The cosmic mountain/world navel complex was still paradigmatic among European Assyriologists in the 1930s, when Eliade began formulating many of his comparative ideas. The Pan-Babylonianists, with their emphasis on comparison, likeness, and universality, easily provided Eliade a neat hypothetical model for his first important monograph written in Romanian, titled *Cosmologie şi alchimie babiloniană* (1937a), to which I shall return below. But even as the Pan-Babylonianists

were picking up steam, their program began to be challenged. Clifford points out that as early as 1949, E. Dhorme questioned the concept and chose not to apply the navel theory in his important book *Les religions de Babylonie et d'Assyrie* [The Religions of Babylon and Assyria]. German specialists such as Dietz Otto Edzard also began to question the "cosmic mountain" theory on the basis of rereadings of fragmentary Near Eastern texts.[26] Such initial speculative doubts led to the eventual abandonment of the concept by most serious scholars of Mesopotamian culture.[27] By the beginning of the 1970s, the speculative doubt of the preceding decade had given way to virtually unanimous rejection. Clifford, interested in clearing up some of the misconceptions that emerged as a result of the "cosmic mountain" theory, wrote a doctoral dissertation at Harvard concerned with the apparent presence or possible absence of this tradition in Canaan. He begins his study with a statement that is worth quoting at length:

> Unfortunately, the term "cosmic mountain," as it has been used in the study of Ancient Near East religion, has been based in large measure on an assumed Mesopotamian *Weltberg*. The interpretation of Mesopotamian mythology, especially as it was worked out in the latter part of the nineteenth century in Germany, exerted considerable influence on the interpretation of the mythic fragments of the Bible and even of Ugaritic literature. The *Weltberg*, as it has been understood by an older generation of scholars, does not exist. Hence the term *Weltberg* or *Länderberg* which has come to be used of other ancient religions than Mesopotamian, must be used with extreme care.[28]

The fallacy of a universal cosmic mountain is clearly a result of Pan-Babylonianism. The school itself is historically rooted in a period of time when the cultural sciences were concerned with questions of the diffusion, migration, and independent or parallel invention of cultural traits. This was, of course, not new, for similar concerns were already present in the writings of Herodotus. The newness rested in the mode and manner in which questions were being asked. Questions gradually polarized into a debate over polygenesis versus monogenesis. Hugo Winckler, the unsuspecting founder of the Pan-Babylonian school of thought, sided with the diffusionists and argued for monogenesis. In the words of A. DE WAAL MALEFIJT (1979, 162):

> Examining myths and folktales from all over the world, Winckler became impressed by the fact that heavenly bodies often played a

> central role in them, even among people that had not the slightest notion about astrology and astronomy. He reasoned that astral myths must thus have been borrowed. Since it was in Babylonia that scientific knowledge of the heavens was most developed, this must have been the place where these myths arose and whence they spread all over the rest of the world.

Winckler was not alone. The same argument was made for Egypt. There, German scholars used the term *Urhügel* (primal hill) to describe the cosmic mountain. Yet, while a stronger, but still faulty, case can be made for a "cosmic hill" in the Egyptian context, Eliade chose not to draw upon that literature.[29]

The Pan-Babylonianists rejected independent or parallel invention because, according to them, the theory could not logically account for the overwhelming amount of systematic unity that they extracted from their data.[30] Jeremias asserted that "the Ancient-Orient [Babylonia] teaching spread over the whole world, and, exerting a different intellectual influence over every civilization according to the particular character of each, it developed into many new forms" (1911, 4). Jeremias referred to his understanding of a universal *Ur*-idea as *Völkergedanke*, a term he accused A. Bastian of appropriating in order to defend the opposite hypothesis. Even though he was a Lutheran minister, Jeremias, like other Pan-Babylonianists, shared a subjective reality in the theosophical theology of mystical oneness. In the Preface to the second German edition of *The Old Testament in the Light of the Ancient East*, Jeremias stated his religio-philosophical orientation:

> The author's [meaning himself] fundamental principle in regard to the Biblical question . . . is at one with those who seek in the Old Testament a revelation through the medium of history. For him the Israelite presentation of God and expectation of a deliverer is not a distillation of human ideas grown on various soils of the Ancient East, but is an eternal truth, in the gay mantle of Oriental imagery.[31]

This exposition of the "psychic unity of mankind" belief pervades much of the later orientation that phenomenologists of religion, including Eliade, took.

The Pan-Babylonianists were, of course, proven to be inaccurate in their dating of astrological texts; they were further incorrect in their dogmatic adherence to diffusionistic explanations of cultural traits. Yet the influence that they exerted cannot be overlooked, for Eliade himself

often spoke of the migration and diffusion of religio-cultural traits in the same manner that D. A. Mackenzie did in his 1926 publication, *The Migration of Symbols*; and the title of a recent book by urban planner W. Schneider (1963) proudly proclaims "Babylon is Everywhere"! Shall we dismiss outright the persistence and pervasiveness of the Pan-Babylonianists because of their faults? J. Z. SMITH suggests that we should reconsider some of the methodological insights that they passed on to us (1982, 29):

> On the theoretical level . . . they saw clearly the need to ground comparison and patterns in a historical process, saw clearly the need to develop a complex model of tradition and the mechanisms for its transmission, saw clearly the need to balance generalities and particularities in a structure which integrated both, saw clearly the priority of comparative systematics over the continued cataloguing of isolated comparative exempla, saw clearly the power of pattern (and hence, of comparison) as a device for interpretation.

The Pan-Babylonianists were concretely grounded in history, but many of their exponents chose to focus ahistorically on Jeremias's emphatic patterns. Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958) is a classic example of the ahistorical approach. Let us now return to Eliade, and look closer at the sources that inspired him in the earliest phases of his career.

ELIADE AND PAN-BABYLONIANISM

That Mesopotamia and its scholars intrigued and influenced Eliade's overall worldview is certain (cf. C.-M. EDSMAN 1961, 35–36). More specifically, their notions of the cosmic mountain as center or navel was directly appropriated by Eliade without strictly adhering to their methodological principles. Their impact on Eliade can be gleaned from a reading of his *Cosmologie şi alchimie babiloniană* (1937a), the work in which it seems that he first articulated his theory of *axa lumii* or *axis mundi*. In his discussion of Mesopotamia as an archaic culture, Eliade noted Babylon as a fundamental concept (*concepţia fundamentală*), a complete homology bridging the world and heaven (ELIADE 1937a, 21). To support this claim, he cited the Pan-Babylonianist Bruno Meissner, who, like Winckler and Jeremias, saw Babylon as a sacred space connecting the three regions of the universe (MEISSNER 1920–25, 1.110). Meissner, again like his predecessors, then drew a link between Babylonia and India. It is a well-known fact that Eliade was also deeply influenced by his experiences in India while he was studying in Calcutta

for his doctoral dissertation on yoga practice,[32] so I will not dwell on this point longer than to mention that a bit further along in his argument, he compares Babylon as a cosmic mountain (*munte cosmic*) with the same account of the Indian Mt Meru in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* that Jensen had used at the end of the nineteenth century.[33]

The most important section of *Cosmologie şi alchimie babiloniană* for my purpose here, is the section subtitled *Oraş Sacru—Centrul Lumii* [pp. 31–40, Sacred Town—Center of the Universe]. Here, Eliade most elaborately developed his *axa lumii* (*axis mundi*) concept, equating it with the idea of the navel. He also further constructed his analogy between Babylon and India in this section to support the universality and translocation of the concept.[34] Eliade relied heavily on a monograph titled *The Ideas of the Western Semites concerning the Navel of the Earth*, which was written by the Islamicist A. J. Wensinck in 1916. Wensinck, though not a self-proclaimed Pan-Babylonianist, was also influenced by the School's argument concerning navels and centers.[35] Wensinck accepted the Assyriologists' claim that the Eastern Semites had a conception of the *Weltberg*,[36] and added critical comments by suggesting that the Arabic, Syriac, Ethiopic, and Jewish sources were in harmony with Jensen's schema of Babylonian cosmology. He further linked the Semitic navel tradition with Indian thought by quoting distantly parallel passages in the *Ṛgveda*.[37]

A summary of the characteristics of the navel among the Western Semites as found by Wensinck will be useful here (1916, xi):

1) That of being exalted above the territories surrounding it. This characteristic appears in the form of the navel as it is commonly represented among the Greeks [i.e., as the *omphalos* at Delphi].
2) That of being the origin of the earth, as the navel is the origin of the embryo. This characteristic of the navel was so prominent in the Semitic notion of the Semitic navel that Arabic lexicographers mention it as a common metaphorical significance of the word for navel.
3) That of being the center of the earth. This is also a common characteristic of the navel of the earth in the conception of the Greeks.
4) That of being the place of communication with the nether and upper world. This characteristic is founded on simple observations of the navel and the function of the umbilical cord. It is to be noted that the primeval word for navel . . . has in Arabic the meaning of umbilical cord.
5) That of being the medium by which food is distributed over

the earth.

If we compare Wensinck's summary with that provided by Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane*, which I quoted above, some very striking parallels emerge. Eliade's concept of *axa lumii* or *axis mundi*, as explicated in the earliest source, his *Cosmologie şi alchimie babiloniană*, freely and explicitly drew on the work of Wensinck, who drew on Jensen and Jeremias in turn.

The Pan-Babylonian root for Eliade's universal concept is quite evident, even in the tertiary sources. The earth axis conceived of by Eliade as an "opening or passage connecting the cosmic regions"; "a channel of communication with heaven and the underworld"; "a cosmic axis at the navel or the center of the world"; "a microcosm of the universe"; "a place of cosmogonic acts"; and "a 'link' between heaven and earth," is an idea that is not unique to his writings. It is true that Eliade's methodology and choice of references was eclectic, but even so, he remained faithful to this "central" notion long after its constituent components had crumbled under mounting criticism. The concept has, to a great degree, been proven spurious in its original Fertile Crescent context and beyond. SMITH, in agreement with Clifford, has noted that ". . . the philological evidence the Pan-Babylonianists relied on has all but evaporated. Not one of the terms, understood by them to refer to a central mountain with its roots in the underworld and its summit in heaven, has survived scrutiny" (1987, 16).[38]

WHITHER COMPARISON?

If we accept the contemporary criticisms, interpretations, and exegesis that has resulted from more sufficient evidence based on ever-increasing sources of information and documentation, then we must seriously question the use of *axis mundi* as a universal mythological concept. What began as a potentially useful analytic model for the study of a specific culture over a century ago has been transformed into a phenomenological ideal type grounded in an inaccurate original hypothesis, and scanty worldwide empirical evidence.

This is not to say, however, that the concept of *axis mundi* does not exist somewhere in the world, in a specific context. I firmly believe that a viable argument can be developed in the Indic context,[39] but I do not claim that the same Indic homologies extend beyond its cultural sphere of encounter and influence. The symbolism of a stationary temple-building culture, for example, is not equivalent to that of a nomadic, tent-dwelling one. Here is where Eliade's concept must be applied cautiously. The concept of a mythic *axis mundi* can be a useful analytic tool or phenomenological category only if it is grounded in

specifics, not in vague examples applied within an atemporal and aspatial theoretical framework.[40]

Comparison is not an inherently invalid method to be shunned in the age of cultural relativity, for one could argue that the processes of cognition and perception are fundamental modes of comparison that establish relationships between objects. Every cognitive response that we perform, be it conscious or intuitive, is in reaction to something else, an external stimulation or an empirical "other." We only learn to understand ourselves through the mutual perception of the other, and we cannot confer meaning on the world without employing the act of comparison. But it is also our responsibility as reflexive thinkers to apply the comparative method with critical discretion. Only by balancing comparison—applying an equal amount of methodological rigor to each and every specific example that we choose to use before establishing a general statement—can we hope to achieve a mode of comparison that does justice to the specific elements involved in the process. Otherwise, comparison simply remains either an unfathomable murky domain, or an oversimplified idiosyncratic mythology, conveying meaning to only a select or initiated few. Indeed, in Eliade's case, the construction of a universal *axis mundi* lent meaning to his own subjective vision of what the world *ought* to be and how *homo religiosus ought* to act, rather than how the world really *is* and how *homo religiosus* actually *does* act. This is a normative distinction that must be considered whenever any scholar's work is analyzed as a contribution to the study of myth.[41] The method cannot be divorced from the human being responsible for its creation.

The problem that we are confronted with in comparative studies is a definitional one. We can define comparison as either a search for similarities or as a discerning of differences. Most comparativists are practitioners of the former because one of our underlying assumptions in the humanities is that the comparative enterprise is based solely on a search for similarities. R. A. GEORGES, for example, defines comparatism as ". . . a process through and by means of which one contemplates or examines two or more phenomena for the purpose of determining whether or not they are *similar*" (1986, 2, my emphasis). He goes on to state that "To be a comparatist is to ask, 'Do these phenomena I am contemplating or examining have features or characteristics which are similar?' If the answer is *yes*, then one judges the phenomena to be comparable; if the answer is *no* then one concludes that the phenomena are not comparable" (1986, 3). While Georges does not deny difference, he downplays it tremendously by viewing the essence of comparison in folkloristics as a presupposed search for similarities.

Many anthropologists would agree with Georges. As F.J.P. POOLE, paraphrasing S. F. Nadel, suggests, "[anthropological] comparison inevitably involves some mode of classification or categorization, which is predicated upon perceived similarities in various qualities or aspects of the phenomena to be compared" (1986, 414). However true this may be, it still leaves us wondering about the many differences that we encounter in the phenomenal world. Smith suggests that any comparative consideration must account for both similarities and differences, while Poole admits that ". . . the key notion of similarity as the basis of comparison is peculiarly problematic."[42] The danger in focusing on commonalities, as I have suggested above, leads to homogeneity at the expense of diversity. This was precisely the mistake that Eliade and the Pan-Babylonianists made in their comparative endeavors.

Similarity need not be the defining criterion of comparison. An equally viable and more dynamic comparative base that avoids the serious problem of extreme cultural relativism can be constructed on the basis of accounting for difference as well as similarity. Poole's own sophisticated model of comparison builds on Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances" by coupling the philosophical concept with literary metaphor and analogy. As he states, "The construction of a metaphor or an analogy involves a selection that posits a set of shared or analogous features between entities that otherwise may differ from one another in all or most respects" (POOLE 1986, 420). By playing on similarity and difference, metaphor opens up greater theoretical and methodological possibilities that Eliade was not able to envision due to his homogenizing comparative tendencies. Had he realized the potential of comparison for studying differences and incongruities, the results of his labors may have been very different. But this sort of study was out of the question for Eliade. His own subjective and experiential understanding of the universality of religious phenomena led him to become engrossed in a seductive and seemingly viable cultural fashion of his day. The *axis mundi* configuration offered Eliade a personal means of understanding man's unique role in the universe, while allowing him to participate in the scholarly discourses that he was constantly engaged in. Like Nilus's camel, Eliade's attachment to the *axis mundi* concept tells us more about the man behind the ideal than it does about the ideal itself; and herein lies the value of tracing the dialectical history of the relationship.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have attempted to supplement earlier data presented by R. J. Clifford and J. Z. Smith by partially tracing the history of an idea

that has become predominantly associated with Mircea Eliade, in hopes of demonstrating that the concept is 1) not new or original in Eliade's writings; 2) that it derives from specific historical circumstances and concrete academic discourses; 3) that it can be grounded in a specific school of thought; and 4) that it is not universal in meaning. By understanding some of the historical depth of the *axis mundi* formulation I hope that I have suggested its limitations as well as its possibilities.

NOTES

* I would like to thank Dan Ben-Amos, Peter J. Claus, and Sagaree Sengupta for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper. However, any factual or interpretational errors in this essay are my own.

1. ELIADE 1967, 26–28.

2. KAFKA 1917. Coincidentally, Kafka's story was published at the height of the Nilus controversy, and it indeed came to pass that Nilus's manipulation of literary conventions in his account provided later scholars with necessary evidence to question the authenticity of his report.

3. G. Foucard, as quoted in ELIADE 1967, 27.

4. For the most detailed critique from the Anglo-Saxon perspective, see J. A. SALIBA 1976. Saliba's study, though well documented, fails to grasp some essential Eliadean principles. Like many anthropologists, Saliba does not understand the discipline of the History of Religions, and therefore he misunderstands much of the related discourse. His criticisms are, as a result, often naive undertakings based on inaccurate citations taken out of context. His study must thus be read with caution and a critical eye.

5. H. P. Duerr, the founder of this school of thought, is himself ambiguous on this point. For a sampling of these writings, see the three *Festschrifts* compiled by DUERR: 1983a; 1983b; 1984.

6. The best general critique of Eliade is still G. DUDLEY 1977, but T. MASUZAWA 1989 contains the core of a very powerful critique of Eliade's vision of the "myth of the eternal return."

7. See SMITH 1978, 88–103; 1983, 27–48; 1987, 1–23. As my citations should show, I am indebted to Smith's writings. This essay would also not have been possible without a close reading of R. J. CLIFFORD 1972. Due to the nature of the topic, some overlap of material and citations has been unavoidable. I hope that my notes have made this explicit as often as possible.

8. Since the theoretical relationship between the Dutch phenomenologist Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade is well known, I will not discuss the obvious influence that van der Leeuw's book *Phänomenologie der Religion* [The Phenomenology of Religion] had on Eliade's later writings.

9. The major sources for his concept of the "Center" are: ELIADE 1937a, 26–50; 1958, 367–87; 1961, 27–56; 1957, 57–82; 1959, 20–65.

10. According to Eliade, space cannot be homogeneous. It must have breaks in it. There is, therefore, a natural opposition between sacred and profane space, for a break in space must occur in order to allow the world to be constituted. Only through the differentiation of space can a "fixed point" be revealed that serves as the central axis for all future orientation. See his discussion of this point in ELIADE 1959b, 20–24.

11. The implication of this point of view is that chaos is unreal for Eliade. Eliade obviously failed to see the essential tension between chaos and creation in cosmogonic myths. He therefore wrongly assumed that the sacred and profane are separate and diametrically opposed. See also the lucid criticisms on this point in SMITH 1978, 96–98.

12. See GAERTE 1914, 956–79. I will have more to say about the German influences on Eliade further on.

13. He admits that there are differences in universals both historically and culturally, for in *The Sacred and the Profane* he writes that ". . . since the religious life of humanity is realized in history, its expressions are inevitably conditioned by the variety of historical moments and cultural styles" (1959b, 62–63). But he dismisses these differences in his search for unity: ". . . for our purpose it is not the infinite variety of the religious experiences of space that concern us but, on the contrary, their elements of unity" (1959b, 63). See also ELIADE 1959a, 43.

14. ELIADE 1961, 42. The Cosmic Tree is the most widely distributed variant of the *axis mundi* theme. On the "Cosmic Tree," see ELIADE 1958, 269–330, esp. 298–300. The work that most conspicuously influenced Eliade in this regard was U. HOLMBERG-HARVA's *Der Baum des Lebens* [The Tree of Life] (1922). See also H. BERGEMA 1938 and E. O. JAMES 1966.

15. Jensen actually preferred the term *Länderberg*. It seems to be the case that later scholars who pursued this argument opted for *Weltberg* as a more convenient two-syllable word.

16. What follows is based on the discussion in JENSEN 1890, 201–12. My understanding of Jensen's thesis has been greatly enhanced by the summary and evaluation provided by CLIFFORD 1972, 9–15.

17. JENSEN 1890, 201. See also K. OBERHUBER 1990, 227. On his discussion of the equivalence of *Land* with *Erde*, see JENSEN 1890, 206. Jeremias, whose work I shall discuss below, further propagated the temple/miniature cosmos equation. See JEREMIAS 1911, 57–58.

18. H. Heine-Geldern, an older contemporary of Eliade's, propagated the similar diffusionary notion of *Universismus* (universalism) by linking architectural forms all the way from the Middle East to Southeast Asia in the 1930s. See I. MABBETT 1983b.

19. B. Meissner further developed the notion of micro/macrocosms, and coupled it with the vertical link theory. See MEISSNER 1920–25, 2.107.

20. It is quite evident that Jensen was acquainted with Winckler's writings, for he evokes his name quite often in *Die Kosmologie der Babylonier* [The Cosmology of the Babylonians]. But Winckler had not systematically worked out the details to his approach to comparative mythology. Indeed, Winckler owed an intellectual debt to Jensen in regard to the world-mountain concept. For a good biographical sketch of Winckler's life, and a solid account of his intellectual stance, see E. HIRSCHMANN 1940.

21. Thus far, I have purposely avoided mention of Ed. Stucken, Winckler's collaborator on a number of works, and to earlier thinkers who may have influenced their ideas, such as Volney, Dupuis, and Nork. I have chosen to do so in an attempt to limit my discussion of the early roots of *der Panbabylonismus* to those figures who can be hypothetically linked in a loose chain of succession whose cumulative efforts influenced Eliade's own formulation. We know, for example, that Jeremias was quite influenced by Winckler from the obituary that he wrote in his honor. See JEREMIAS 1915.

22. I am referring to the second edition of *Das Alte Testament im Lichte des Alten Orients* (1906). Throughout the discussion that follows, I will use the third edition in

English, which was revised and enlarged by Jeremias himself, since he admitted that the first two German editions contained some grave errors. See Jeremias's Preface to the third edition (1911). The additions are primarily noticeable in the sections dealing with astral mythology. See also his earlier statement on Pan-Babylonianism in JEREMIAS 1903, 25–35.

23. W. H. Roscher had also noted the presence of the navel in Semitic culture. See ROSCHER 1913 and 1915.

24. "This conception is common to the whole of the Eastern world" (JEREMIAS 1911, 55). See also his later work on this theme in JEREMIAS 1929, 87–164. It is interesting to note, however, that the second German edition (1906) does not include the term *omphalos*, which was only added to the 1911 English edition. For reasons unknown to me, SMITH (1987, 132) takes great liberty when translating the passage alluded to above by conflating the two editions, thereby equating *Weltmittelpunkt* and *omphalos*.

25. A typical modern translation of the passage in Ezekiel 38: 12 reads "the very center of the world," as in K. W. CARLEY 1974, 257. A good portion of SMITH (1987) is devoted to the importance of Ezekiel in discussions of sacred space in Jerusalem as well. For a critical discussion of these passages, see CLIFFORD 1972, 135; 183. Earlier arguments were put forth by W. CASPARI (1933) and S. TERRIEN (1970). The latter provides an excellent bibliographic overview of the history of the problem, as well as a definitive statement concerning the *omphalos* concept in the Judaic context: "The significance and the effect . . . upon nascent Judaism during the exilic and post-exilic times cannot be ascertained in a demonstrable manner, in view of the reticence of the documents" (p. 332).

26. On Dhorme, Edzard, and others, see CLIFFORD 1972, 10–11.

27. However, the *Innsbrucker Sumerisches Lexikon* [The Innsbruck Sumerian Lexicon] does provide ample evidence for "mountain" as a primary meaning of *kur*, which Kramer, most likely following Jensen, earlier suggested to be a cosmic concept. See OBERHUBER 1990, 282–85; JENSEN 1890, 201; KRAMER 1972, 76 respectively. CLIFFORD (1972), however, agrees with the critique of Kramer in T. JACOBSEN 1946, 141.

28. CLIFFORD 1972, 2–3. Smith also quotes part of this passage in his critique of Eliade's use of the Tjilpa myth of the cosmic pole. See SMITH 1987, 16.

29. For this reason, I shall not go into the Egyptian *Urhügel*, but continue to focus on Mesopotamia, the center of Eliade's inspiration.

30. See the discussion in SMITH 1982, 26–29. Jeremias clearly rejects independent invention in a footnote: "Ed. Stucken and H. Winckler have shown that the Ancient-Oriental conception of the universe, as we find it expressed in all parts of the world, entirely precludes the possibility of an independent origin . . . only transmission by a migration can satisfactorily explain [it]" (JEREMIAS 1911, 4, footnote 2).

31. The quotation is taken directly from the 1911 English edition. The original reads: "Meine grundsätzliche Stellung zur biblischen Frage . . . [ist] eins mit denen, die im Alten Testament eine Welt geschichtlich vermittelter Offenbarung suchen. Die israelitische Gottesvorstellung und Erlösererwartung ist nicht ein Destillat menschlicher auf verschiedenen Gebieten des alten Orients erwachsener Ideen, sondern sie ist ewige Wahrheit im bunten Gewande orientalischer Denkweise."

32. For the Indian influence on Eliade, see G. DUDLEY 1977.

33. See ELIADE 1937a, 23, footnote 5. We are fortunate now to have a detailed and critical study comparing the temple in Mesopotamia with its Indian counterpart. See K. H. GOLZIO 1983. Golzio pays close attention to historical context, and points out the differences between the two. I do, however, feel that Golzio relies too heavily

on P. Hacker's concept of *Toleranz und Inklusivismus* [tolerance and inclusivism] in the Indian context.

34. For his comparisons with India, Eliade relied primarily on two monographs: JEREMIAS 1929, which contains only a few fleeting comparisons, and P. MUS 1935. The latter monumental work deals with Hindu temple symbolism in Southeast Asia. Eliade was deeply influenced by Mus's book, as we know from the review that he wrote of it. See ELIADE 1937b.

35. Wensinck is, however, most influenced by the *omphalos* studies done by W. H. Roscher.

36. WENSINCK 1916, 37. He supports this by quoting JEREMIAS 1929.

37. *Ṛgveda* 3.4.4. See WENSINCK 1916. Eliade cited this same Vedic passage in support of the navel. In *Cosmologie şi alchimie babiloniană*, he also cited *Ṛgveda* 2.3, 2.7, 2.76; 9.7, 9.39, 9.72, 9.82.

38. SMITH 1987, 16. Smith further notes that *Dur-an-ki*, the celebrated passage that has been traditionally translated as the "link of heaven and earth," actually suggests the scar left from the separation of earth and sky. Hence, *Dur-an-ki* is permanently separated from, rather than connected to, the heavens.

39. I. W. MABBETT 1983a, for example, has already begun work in this direction, but it is only cursory. A much longer project should be undertaken to explicate this point.

40. This, unfortunately, still seems to be the case in more recent studies. For a classic example, published shortly after Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, see W. MÜLLER 1961. More recently a phenomenologist of religion attempts to argue that all structures are world centers: "Gott-Berg-Stadt-Palast-Zitadelle-Tempel-Mittelpunkt der Welt!" [God-Mountain-City-Palace-Citadel-Temple-Center of the World!] (G. BECKER 1987, 162).

41. See R. BAIRD 1970 for a discussion of normative elements in Eliade's belief system. See also K. HAMILTON 1965.

42. SMITH 1982 on the former, and POOLE 1986, 424 for the latter quote. On differentiation, see also the insightful remarks by J. NEUSNER 1983, 227–35; SMITH 1985, and W. E. PADEN 1988, 1–5; 15–34; 161–170.

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