



1-1-2015

David J. Howlett, *Kirtland Temple: The Biography of a Shared Mormon Sacred Space*

Reviewed by Jeanne Halgren Kilde

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Kilde, Reviewed by Jeanne Halgren (2015) "David J. Howlett, *Kirtland Temple: The Biography of a Shared Mormon Sacred Space*," *Mormon Studies Review*. Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol2/iss1/12>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mormon Studies Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Book Reviews

David J. Howlett. *Kirtland Temple: The Biography of a Shared Mormon Sacred Space*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014.

Reviewed by Jeanne Halgren Kilde

WHILE THE TERM *ENIGMATIC* IS TOO STRONG a descriptor, the Kirtland Temple is definitely something of a puzzle for scholars of religion and religious architecture. Erected in Kirtland, Ohio, between 1833 and 1836 under the direction of LDS Church founder Joseph Smith, the temple is both similar to and quite unlike Christian churches of the period or region. Its blend of Classical and Gothic architectural vocabularies was not uncommon, yet its white bottle-glass (or pebble-dash) stucco seems to have been unique for the region. Its lower level worship room filled with box pews would have felt familiar to Christians of the period, but the two banks of tiered pulpits rising like stair steps facing each other from opposite ends of the room were unprecedented in Christian churches, as were the great curtains (or “sails”) that hung from the ceiling to segment the large room into smaller ones. Moreover, the function of the temple in Mormon history, particularly with regard to the LDS-RLDS schism, while not exactly shrouded in mystery, has been the subject of more speculation than serious historical inquiry. Lastly, this building, erected by the founder of Mormonism, has not been owned by the LDS Church for generations, yet it remains an important historical stop for LDS pilgrims following the path of the early church.

David J. Howlett’s work goes far in solving some of these puzzles; indeed, it goes well beyond them. *Kirtland Temple: The Biography of a Shared Mormon Sacred Space* offers a well-researched and

information-packed history of the building in question along with a groundbreaking analysis of the complex and changing relationship between the LDS and the RLDS churches, as well as a valuable commentary on the nature of the complicated category of “sacred space.” The author accomplishes all this by using the Kirtland Temple itself as a lens—or prism—to disentangle several themes related to the meanings, practices, and events associated with this unique building. His analysis is made richer through the deployment of several theoretical concepts borrowed from such authors as Pierre Bourdieu and Jonathan Z. Smith, and by the coinage of a new concept derived from the research and analysis: “parallel pilgrimage.” The result is a work that not only advances Mormon history but also provides an illuminating case study that contributes to our general understanding of religious space, the development and function of religious identity, and the relationships among religious groups.

Howlett’s use of the building as a tool to raise questions places this work on a divergent path from much of religious history, which has often focused on the intellectualist aspects of theologies, creeds, or moral codes rather than on religious practices or cultus. *Kirtland Temple* is a model for overturning this paradigm. The focus on the building necessitates investigating practices (what people *do* in it) as well as ideas (what they think about it). Through the rituals and performances associated with the temple, both LDS and the RLDS members have constructed a host of understandings of the building that have, in fact, changed over time. These understandings of the building, Howlett demonstrates, have both reflected and contributed to how each group has understood its own identity, Mormonism, and each other. Indeed, what emerges from this study is a complex story of LDS and RLDS identity formation and transformation grounded in dialogue, contestation, and, occasionally, cooperation. The building itself unites the two groups in a complicated material relationship that Howlett helpfully terms “parallel pilgrimage.” While both groups see the temple as religiously significant, the reasons for its importance are quite different for each group. Moreover, those reasons have shifted over time. For decades LDS and RLDS members

have been visiting the same site—that is, pilgrimaging to it—but they have been understanding it in very different, parallel ways.

The central theme linking the Kirtland site, which eventually included not only the temple but also a number of other nearby historic buildings and two visitors' centers, to practices and to ideologies is that of "contestation." Howlett deploys the work of several scholars to illuminate how disputes over certain spaces function to sacralize them. As two or more groups dispute their claims over the control and meaning of such spaces, the stakes rise and the sites are perceived as increasingly vulnerable and holy. In the case of the Kirtland Temple, Howlett explores how RLDS adherents used the building in the late nineteenth century to legitimize their new denomination, citing it as the only temple designed by the Prophet Joseph Smith at the command of God himself and thereby ascribing a kind of "hypersacrality" to the building (p. 110). In contrast, the LDS people developed a counternarrative of decline, arguing that although the building once was holy, it had become fallen space, desanctified by the occupation of the theologically erroneous RLDS people, a narrative that was intensified in the late twentieth century by rhetoric describing the building as cursed. Such divergent meanings have been at the heart of, and at the same time have augmented, disputes over the ownership of the building that continue to this day.

Processes of alterity, then, or defining one's position, here theological, in relation to a perceived other, constitute a reigning theme throughout this book. To investigate those processes, Howlett turns to a variety of practices and performances associated with the buildings, including the work and activities of both RLDS and LDS religious leaders and everyday practitioners, the narratives of tour guides who are charged with articulating Mormon history at the site, the experiences of RLDS and LDS pilgrims who visit this central site of early Mormonism, the horrific actions of one shockingly aberrant zealot, and the activities of the general public. Howlett makes good use of nontraditional source material in these investigations. Discussion of two plays produced, respectively, by RLDS and LDS members serves as a means of comparing the two groups' outlooks, the former strongly influenced by liberal Protestantism while

the latter is focused on in-group creed and missionizing. Additional discussion of the performative and ideological aspects of the guided tours allows exploration of how these were transformed between 1959 and 2012. As a former tour guide for the RLDS Church, Howlett augments this discussion with his firsthand observations of how pilgrims and tourists navigate the temple and historical sites and interact with the guides and with the religious messages of the two groups.

Central among the tensions that Howlett perceives within these practices and between RLDS and LDS pilgrims and leaders are competing claims to Mormon identity, authenticity, and orthodoxy. His analysis carefully illuminates a number of specific points of contention that, owing to the need to share this space, are continually being negotiated. Raised in the RLDS Church, Howlett is well aware of the fact that his positionality could easily compromise his presenting a balanced interpretation and may draw suspicion from some LDS readers. His treatment of LDS perspective, however, is generally balanced and even empathetic at points. He is particularly compelling, for instance, in his treatment of how LDS members have at various times interpreted, rhetorically and theologically, the central paradox of why Joseph Smith's original temple is not controlled by the LDS Church. He also addresses RLDS problems, developing, for instance, critical analyses of the ideological schism within the RLDS Church in the 1980s and the subsequent tragic shooting of a family by a fundamentalist RLDS leader in 1989. While the fundamentalist movement remains, the RLDS leadership shifted distinctively toward liberal Protestantism and ecumenism in the 1990s, with the group adopting a new name, Community of Christ, along with a distinctive peace and justice theology. LDS leaders, Howlett shows, while viewing these moves as taking the RLDS Church further from "true Mormonism," have also found some common ground upon which to work with RLDS leaders, particularly regarding the historic sites. Yet, he concludes, such cooperation, while admirable, is delicate, and the balance is easily tipped back toward conflict.

Highly informative with regard to religious practice, contestation, and identity, Howlett's treatment of the materiality of the building is less

comprehensive in comparison. For instance, Smith's opposing banks of pulpits is closely examined for their ideological and theological functions and practical use by the priesthood, but their use for religious services after the LDS people departed Kirtland, and particularly by contemporary RLDS members, is not discussed in detail. Neither are other physical aspects of the space—lighting, acoustics, seating, heating, cooling, or remodeling—examined. No floor plans are provided (although architectural elevations depicting the interior from two directions are), and only one interior photo, taken during a hymn service in 2008, is included in the book.

Nevertheless, *Kirtland Temple* provides an enlightening case study of the processes of contestation and negotiation in the development of sacred space and religious identity. Readers interested in these processes or in Mormonism itself will derive great benefit from this well-written and engaging book.

Jeanne Halgren Kilde is the director of the religious studies program at the University of Minnesota. She is the author of *When Church Became Theater: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, 2002) and of *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship* (Oxford, 2008).

Todd M. Compton. *A Frontier Life: Jacob Hamblin, Explorer and Indian Missionary*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Anne Hyde

TODD COMPTON'S EXPANSIVE NEW BOOK, *A Frontier Life: Jacob Hamblin, Explorer and Indian Missionary*, covers a period and subjects I care about: the early and mid-nineteenth century and Native people, Mormons, and Western exploration. Jacob Hamblin and his entire family were amazing