

THE CONCEPTION OF THE HAWAII TEMPLE
by
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If you take a moment to think about it, it is quite remarkable that the Hawaii Temple was constructed when it was. From the time the Latter-day Saints arrived in the Mountain West, no temples had been constructed outside that area. There were no temples in England, Switzerland, or Germany. And there were none in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Dallas or Denver. Why, in 1915, would the Church choose to construct a temple in a tiny village on a small island in the Pacific? That question is the focus of my remarks this morning. Stated another way, I would like to discuss what was right about Hawaii and Laie and the Hawaiian Latter-day Saints that allowed this temple to be built.

I believe LDS temples mark to some degree the culmination or maturity of Mormonism in the areas where they are built. I realize that arguments could be raised with this assertion, but for the most part it is true. The Church goes through various developmental stages before a geographical area is ready for a temple. The Church starts with individuals, gains families, develops groups and branches, matures through district and mission organizations to wards and stakes. As the population of the Church grows in an area it becomes possible to support a temple. Usually this happens after stakes are created. Hawaii partially fits this pattern. It had gone through the stages from individuals to groups to branches, but in 1915 there were no stakes in Hawaii. Hawaii's first stake was still twenty years away. Nevertheless, Mormonism was sixty-five years old in Hawaii when the decision to construct a temple was made. In comparison with many other missions of the Church, the Hawaiian Mission was old and well established.

By 1915, many Hawaiian Mormons were third generation members. They had strong testimonies of the gospel and were experienced in leading the Church. It is true that the missionaries from "Zion" held a large share of the most responsible positions, but hundreds of Hawaiian priesthood holders had served missions by this time and many were currently serving as branch presidents and in other important and less visible callings. Further hundreds of Hawaiian sisters had worked in and led the auxiliaries of the Church. The local members were ready or were willing to make themselves ready to receive the blessings of the temple.

What was the status of the Hawaiian church in 1915? There were 9,443 members (118 converts were made that year), 353 of which held the Melchizedek Priesthood. There were 62 branches and 11 districts with 52 meeting houses; 46 missionaries were presently in the field. Obviously, a number of the branches and districts were presided over by local members. All the auxiliaries of the Church--Primary, Mutual Improvement Association, Sunday School and Relief Society--were organized. In 1913 the missionaries

calculated that 22 percent of the Hawaiian population was LDS.¹

Then, as today, Laie, the gathering place, played an important role in the life of the mission. There is a very close relationship between the concept of gathering to Zion and the construction of temples. Going up to the mountain of the house of the Lord was more than a figure of speech. Part of gathering was partaking of the blessings of the Holy Endowment. By 1915, Hawaiian Saints had been looking to Laie as their local Zion for fifty years. It was the spiritual center of the Church as well as the geographical focus of the Saints. It seems natural that the leaders of the Church, especially President Joseph F. Smith who was so familiar with Laie and the needs of the Hawaiian members, would consider Laie a worthy Zion in which to erect a House of the Lord.

But Laie had not always been as ready for the construction of a temple. It had gone through many years of near failure financially before it became profitable. In fact, the Laie plantation did not provide enough jobs until the 1890s to support the size community that would be necessary to sustain a temple. The mission of Samuel E. Woolley, building on the accomplishments of many other mission presidents, members and missionaries, was the turning point in the growth of the plantation.

President Woolley, whose mission began in 1895 and ended in 1921, was an energetic leader. He believed in the original idea and philosophy of the Laie community: the purpose of the settlement was to help the Hawaiians both temporally and spiritually. For many years the population of Laie had remained static, because the land would not provide a living for many more than the ninety to one-hundred employees and their families. Woolley could see that if Laie were to grow as a gathering place, the plantation would have to be larger. Accordingly, he brought existing properties under cultivation and bought new land, continuing this process until he was released.²

One of the most important capital improvements Woolley made at Laie was the installation in June 1898 of a steam-powered water pump. By 1930 this pump, and four others that had been acquired, had a capacity of around eight million gallons daily.³ The expansion of land made it possible for the population of Laie to grow gradually. By the early 1920's Laie had nearly one thousand people. By 1930 there were 432 people employed in various parts of the operation. From 1900 until the early 1920's the plantation paid its own way every year and supported the financial needs of the mission as well.⁴

Under President Woolley's watchful eye and skillful leadership, the

¹Mission Financial and Statistical Reports, by year, Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, hereafter cited as CA.

²The main source for the years 1895 to 1915 is Samuel E. Woolley, Journals, CA.

³Antoine R. Ivins, "Laie Plantation," CA.

⁴Margaret Comfort Bock, "Church in the Hawaiian Islands," p. 90.

erstwhile small-time farming enterprise of the nineteenth century grew into a major twentieth-century operation. The sugar crop of 1894-95 was 339 tons. Woolley's best crop, 3,103 tons of sugar--an almost tenfold increase--was produced in 1917-1918, while the temple was under construction.⁵

Most of us probably would not think of the success of the plantation as part of the temple story. I'm confident that if the plantation had not succeeded, the building of the temple would have been delayed for years, maybe even until our day.

The progress of the mission during the first two decades of this century was remarkable in many ways. Not only did the Saints move forward temporally, but they also entered a new era of spiritual strength.

Although Laie had been the pride of the Church in the islands prior to 1900, it was after this date that the little community became a showplace. They had found and planted trees that were hardy enough to withstand the brisk winds of the north shore, along with many varieties of shrubs and flowers. The roads were paved and kept clean. By 1913, there were eighty LDS families living here, and many non-member Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Portuguese farmers and gardeners as well.

Life in Laie was modest. Yearly rent was twenty-five cents per family. This charge was levied only to remind the residents that the land was owned by the Church. But there was another "cost" that contributed much to the environment of Laie. In a 1911 address, President Woolley said, "History says this land was a place of refuge in ancient times, and I want it to continue so to be The price of a house and lot at Laie is proper living."⁶

The Saints in Laie and Hawaii took their religion seriously and loved their leaders faithfully. They had enjoyed the special attention of President Joseph F. Smith while he lived in Laie in the 1880s and on a number of other occasions when he visited Hawaii. He had taught them, encouraged them, lifted them and wept with them on many occasions. Indeed he was their special friend in the councils of the Church.

But President Smith shared his love for the Hawaiian members with another leader of the Church. President George Q. Cannon of the First Presidency, although he had not returned to Hawaii until fifty years after the founding of the mission, deeply loved and cared for the people of Hawaii. It was his words that evidently first started the Hawaiian members thinking seriously about a temple of their own. I say seriously, because there is some indication that the subject had been discussed in Laie for some time. In a 1916 Improvement Era article, Elder John A. Widtsoe of the Quorum of the Twelve, mentioned that since the founding of Laie in 1865, "many persons have

⁵Ivins, "Laie Plantation."

⁶Hawaiian Mission, General Minutes, April 6, 1911, p. 8, CA.

foreseen the coming of a temple at Laie."⁷ In his dedicatory prayer, President Heber J. Grant expressed gratitude to Heavenly Father that "the promise made in a dream to thy servant William W. Cluff, by the Prophet Brigham Young, that the day would come when a temple should be erected in this land, is fulfilled before our eyes."⁸ I'm not sure what this refers to.

Nevertheless, in December 1900, President Cannon visited Hawaii to participate in the jubilee celebration. He spoke many times during the festivities and a number of times in different parts of the islands following the Honolulu celebration. On three occasions he touched on subjects that are of special significance to us today.

On Sunday, December 23, he spoke to the Saints at Laie Branch concerning the blessings the Lord still held in store for them. Having heard President Cannon speak, President Woolley wrote:

He said if they would be faithful enough that the time would come when some would be given the power to seal husband and wife for time and eternity so that their children would be born under the New and Everlasting Covenant.⁹

President Cannon was moved to discuss the same subject a week later in Honolulu. Taken together, these expressions of President Cannon gave rise to the tradition that he had prophesied that a temple would be built in Hawaii. In fact, in 1916, Elder Widtsoe wrote of President Cannon's words saying, "he declared that he believed the time was near when the temple ordinances would be enjoyed by the people of the Hawaiian Islands."¹⁰

The second revelatory clarification occurred at Lahaina, Maui. On the morning of December 27, President Cannon, in company with President Woolley, Elder Cluff and others, started out to find the place where Nalimanui had lived when she offered a young Elder Cannon food and shelter. President Cannon wrote:

I wanted to find the site of this house and the garden where I sought the Lord in secret prayer and where He condescended to commune with me, for I heard His voice more than once as one man speaks with another, encouraging me and showing me the work which should be done among this people if I would follow the dictates of His Spirit. Glory to God in the highest that He has permitted me to live to behold the fulfillment

⁷John A. Widtsoe, "The Temple in Hawaii: A Remarkable Fulfilment of Prophecy," Improvement Era 19 (Sept. 1916): 955.

⁸Heber J. Grant, "The Dedicatory Prayer in the Hawaiian Temple," Improvement Era 23 (February 1920): 284.

⁹Woolley, Journal, December 23, 1900.

¹⁰Widtsoe, p. 955.

of His words.¹¹

The third experience took place at Waikapu, Maui. It concerned the Latter-day Saint teaching that the island peoples are descendants of Abraham through Lehi and are heirs to all the blessings of Abraham and his posterity. This idea had been accepted by Latter-day Saints ever since the time of Elder Cannon's first mission (1850 to 1854), but the knowledge that it had its inception through him was not well known until President Cannon explained it to the Saints at Waikapu on December 28, 1900. President Woolley wrote that Cannon "told them they were of the seed of Abraham, he knew it because the Lord told him so at Lahaina."

That the Hawaiians were of the House of Israel through Lehi's line was affirmed by Brigham Young, Joseph F. Smith, and Heber J. Grant. President Grant mentioned the origins of the Polynesian peoples in his dedicatory prayer of the temple. Being of the lineage of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the people of Polynesia were heirs to the blessings of the Priesthood and thus of the temple. As has been mentioned in previous meetings of this organization, a number of Hawaiians migrated to Salt Lake City for the specific purpose of participating in endowment work.

At this point I'd like to mention something I've been thinking about for years. When I was on my mission here in 1959 and 1960, I found myself wondering why the Lord had paid so much attention to the Polynesians. At that time there was only one temple in the islands, but to my way of thinking the Lord was putting what seemed to me an undue amount of attention on the islands of the sea. After I returned to school, I studied Asia in considerable depth. Again I wondered why the Church would spend so much money translating and printing the Book of Mormon into Cook Island Maori, Tahitian, Samoan and so on, when India had so many languages with so many millions of speakers. In all the Pacific the Polynesians account for less than a million people.

When President Kimball announced the construction of temples in Tahiti, Tonga and Samoa the question again entered my mind, Why so much attention to these islands when so many nations have so many more people? A partial answer is of course that the people of these islands have embraced the gospel and crave the blessings of the temple. But are the Polynesians really more righteous than others and thus so deserving of these special blessings? I'm not sure, although I do believe the Polynesians tend to have faith in the Lord more easily than some of the rest of us. If the present Polynesians don't fully merit the special attention showered on them, then how do we account for this phenomenon?

I believe the best answer to my questions is that the Lord made covenants with the ancestors of the present Polynesians. We're all aware of the special covenants mentioned in the Book of Mormon regarding the descendants of Laman. The problem here is that it is not at all clear that the Polynesians are Lamanites. Hagoth, we know, was a Nephite. Do the Polynesians descend from someone other than Hagoth? Or partly from him and

¹¹George Q. Cannon, Journal of Travels to the Hawaiian Mission Jubilee, typescript of dictation taken by Clawson Y. Cannon, CA. See also Woolley, December 27, 1900.

partly from others? I don't know and I'm not sure anyone else does. A great number of explanations are possible. I have noted in my research that with the exception of President Kimball, all of the other presidents of the Church referred to the Polynesians as descendants of Lehi, not as Lamanites. Just how do they fit?

When I was doing research for my book, Unto the Islands of the Sea, I found a most provocative letter written by the First Presidency of the Church, dated February 6, 1911. Joseph F. Smith's imprint shows through very clearly. The occasion for the letter was a great conference or Hui Tau which was being held at least partly to honor a Maori chief named Tamahau. The First Presidency was unable to accept an invitation to attend in New Zealand and sent a fourteen page letter instead. Included in its pages is a most interesting statement regarding the origins of the Polynesian peoples and their place in the House of Israel. The First Presidency wrote:

But here, beloved brethren and sisters, let us pause a moment and raise the question in your own minds, why you, in common with others in your race inhabiting the isles of the sea, were to be more blessed and favored of the Lord than the rest of the remnant of the House of Israel inhabiting this, our land of America? Was it because of any desire on the part of our Heavenly Father to bestow blessings upon you, upon your brethren and sisters of Samoa, Hawaii, Tahiti and other places, over and above those of your brothers and sisters, also of the House of Israel, living on the American continent? No, it was simply because of your forefathers, who were first moved upon to occupy the isles of the seas, and who did so under the immediate overruling hand of the God of your fathers, were better than the rest of their brethren who occupied this continent, because they were more obedient and more faithful, the Lord, in His superior wisdom, directed their course away from this continent to their island homes, that they might be separated from their more wicked disobedient brethren, that they might not be left to be preyed upon and destroyed by the more wicked part of the House of Israel whose descendants still roam upon this continent in a fallen and degraded state, and who, because of their acts of wickedness, are not prepared to be redeemed from their fallen condition by the preaching of the gospel, and this on account of their forefathers who love darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil, and who rejected from time to time the men whom God raised up to preach the gospel of repentance to them, and who stoned them and killed them and treated them even as their brethren treated Jesus and the apostles on the other continent. This, dear brethren and sisters, is the key of your preservation as a nation, also to the preservation of your brothers and sisters of the other isles of the sea before mentioned, and this is the secret of the overruling hand of providence which has been over you all from that time until you received the gospel through the preaching of the elders, and until the present time. This is the reason why you of the isles of the sea are more highly favored and blessed of the Lord than your brethren, also of the remnant of the House of Israel, who remained on this continent. . . . And we repeat, the reason that few of the islands of the sea have been more highly favored and blessed in the Lord than those of your brethren of this continent is because of the worthiness of your forefathers who were lead away and separated from their brethren of this continent, and because of the blessing of the Lord which has attended

you, their children, from that time to the present.¹²

The children of Polynesia, then, have been blessed and favored of the Lord because of the worthiness of their forefathers. Wouldn't it be interesting to know what kinds of special covenants the Lord made with the ancestors of the Polynesians. I would speculate that they were promised that in the latter days their descendants would receive the fullness of the gospel, the priesthood and the saving ordinances of the temple. This would be in harmony with many of the promises found in the Book of Mormon.

In Elder Widtsoe's article he says,

In truth, however, the promise of a temple in Hawaii did not come as a surprise to President Woolley, and others familiar with the history of the Hawaiian Mission. Throughout Holy Writ, both modern and ancient, the people who dwell on the islands of the sea are especially mentioned, and promised that they shall hear and receive a fullness of the gospel. In time, it seemed to all who labored in the Hawaiian Mission, it certainly would be made easily possible for the thousands who entered the Church to receive the rites given in the temples, and thus to enjoy a fullness of the gifts of the gospel.¹³

By today's standards, there were hardly enough members of the Church in Hawaii in 1915 to populate two stakes, to say nothing of justifying the operation of a temple. But population was not the only issue involved in the decision to build a temple in Hawaii. After President Cannon's visit in 1900, temple work was discussed frequently in mission and other conferences. President Woolley regularly encouraged his people to live lives of purity so they could enter the temple someday. In April, 1915, President Woolley addressed the Saints in conference:

Have we searched out our genealogies? Are we prepared for a temple to be built? . . . Who knows but what the Lord wants to build a temple in this land? I tell you that there are people here today who if they continue in the work of the Lord, shall enter into the temple or other temples; and the time will come, in my judgement, that a temple will be built here.¹⁴

Two months later, President Joseph F. Smith selected a temple site at Laie and dedicated it to the Lord. The date was June 1, 1915. Following dinner in Lanihuli House, the mission home, President Smith invited Elder Reed Smoot and Bishop Charles W. Nibley to walk with him over to the chapel. Lanihuli House stood where the temple president's home now stands and the old chapel stood approximately where the temple is. They walked up behind the chapel and there President Smith explained the reason for their retreat

¹²First Presidency Copy Books, CR 1-20 Reel #42, CA.

¹³Widtsoe, "The Temple in Hawaii," p. 955.

¹⁴General minutes, Hawaiian Mission Conference, April 3, 1915, CA.

together. Elder Reed Smoot recounted President Smith's words:

"I feel impressed to dedicate this ground for the erection of a Temple to God, for a place where the peoples of the Pacific Isles can come and do their temple work. I have not presented this to the Council of the Twelve or to my counselors; but if you think there would be no objection to it, I think now is the time to dedicate the ground. . . ." Never in all my life did I hear such a prayer. The very ground seemed to be sacred, and he seemed as if he were talking face to face with the Father. I cannot and never will forget it if I live a thousand years.¹⁵

At general conference in Salt Lake City the next October, President Smith presented the Hawaiian Temple proposition to the Church. In explaining the designs of the brethren in building such a structure, he said it was being built "so that the good people of these islands may reach the blessings of the House of God within their own borders. . . ."¹⁶

When the plans for the temple were announced, Polynesian members of the Church all over the Pacific began making preparations to attend the temple. In New Zealand, Tonga, Samoa, and French Polynesia, mission presidents encouraged the members to work, earn, and save, and look forward to the time when they could partake of the blessings of the temple.

The Latter-day Saint population in Hawaii and the Pacific was not large in 1915, but the Lord had his eye upon this special part of his vineyard. Conditions were right. A gathering place had been established, the Church was on firm financial ground, many of the Hawaiian Saints had already shown their faith by traveling to Utah to receive their endowments (the colony of Iosepa was the result of such activity), local members were deeply involved in the leadership of the Church and the Church had advanced as far as it could go until a stake was formed. Add to this the special love President Joseph F. Smith held in his heart for the Hawaiians and their cousins of Polynesia and it is easy to understand why the Lord saw fit to bestow such a remarkable blessing on this little place.

¹⁵Joseph Fielding Smith, The Life of Joseph F. Smith, p. 421.

¹⁶Conference Reports, (Salt Lake City), October 1915, pp. 8-9.