Wilford Woodruff and the Rise of Temple Consciousness among the Latter-day Saints, 1877-84

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The St. George Temple under construction, 1876. Wilford Woodruff served as temple president when it was completed in 1877. (Photograph by Jesse A. Tye, courtesy of Church History Library.)
Historical evidence demonstrates that during the time Wilford Woodruff served as president of the St. George Temple, 1877–84, a profound change of attitude and a new understanding toward temple work developed among the Latter-day Saints. These years—highlighted as they were with completion of the St. George Temple; the introduction of endowments for the dead; the canonization of section 110 in the Doctrine & Covenants; and the construction of the Salt Lake, Manti, and Logan Temples—were critical to the formation of a new and rising temple consciousness and a growing sense of uniqueness among a people then undergoing a good deal of scrutiny and opposition from America at large.

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As most students of Mormon history know, temple building did not begin in St. George, Utah. Joseph Smith, Mormonism’s founding Prophet, instructed the Saints to build temples in Missouri; Kirtland, Ohio; and Nauvoo, Illinois. During the Saints’ later exodus west, Brigham Young, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, allowed for baptisms for the dead at the Missouri River and also allowed for eternal marriages and sealings to be performed for members of the Mormon Battalion at Willard Richards’s octagon at Winter Quarters in 1847, realizing, as Charles C. Rich put it, that “priesthood is greater than the Temple.” One of Brigham Young’s first acts upon arriving in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 was to identify the site upon which a new temple would be reared, a work of construction that for various reasons would take forty years to complete. In the meantime, under Brigham Young’s direction as President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, baptisms for the dead and marriage sealings and endowments for the living were conducted, first in the Council House in Salt Lake City from 1851 to 1854 and later in the Endowment House on Temple Square from 1855 to 1887.

However, the fullness of temple ordinances could not be administered until a temple was built. Said Elder Orson Pratt in March 1877, “The Endowment House in which we had officiated in the ordinances was only temporary; but now [that the St. George Temple was completed] it was no longer acceptable for that purpose, for our condition was such as to make it imperative on our part to build temples. . . . Many blessings never conferred upon any peoples in former temples had been reserved to be revealed in this dispensation of the fullness of times.”

Meanwhile much of the time, energy, and financial resources of both the Church and its growing membership went into
missionary work and the gathering of tens of thousands of new converts to Zion, settling and colonizing the Great Basin kingdom, subduing the harsh climate and terrain, and defending the peculiar principle of plural marriage against growing American hostility. Because of these priorities, temple construction and ordinances lagged behind. By the end of the 1860s, however, with the coming of the transcontinental railroad, Mormonism’s age of splendid isolation was quickly coming to an end. With worldly or so-called “Gentile” influences increasing dramatically, Mormon cooperatives, the United Order, Relief Societies, and schools of the prophets multiplied all over Deseret in an effort to withstand the coming cultural and economic shocks. Couple these factors with Brigham Young’s sharpening sense of his own mortality, and one sees his restlessness and reinvigorated desire to push temple building forward. This, at least in part, explains his announcement in 1871 to build the St. George Temple, which was constructed between 1874 and 1877, and his subsequent decision to build the Manti and Logan Temples, which were finished in 1884 and 1888 respectively.

What revitalized, if not revolutionized, temple work at St. George was the introduction of the ordinance of endowments for the dead, and with it, the expectation that patrons would return to the temple over and over again for the redemption of deceased family members and friends. The very first endowments for the dead given in Church history occurred on January 11, 1877, a watershed moment in Latter-day Saint history. Woodruff, a member of the Twelve and first president of the St. George Temple, said of the moment: “This was merely a key to me. Light burst upon my understanding. I saw an effectual door open to me for the redemption of my dead. And when I saw this I felt like shouting Glory Hallalulah to God and the Lamb.” Elaborating further
on the new dimensions that endowments for the dead would bring to temple work, he said: “And this door which is open for the redemption of the Dead in this manner will accomplish great and important Results, for it is now being Carried out in a great many instances in the Temple of the Lord, and will Continue to be more and more unto the end. . . . By this labor in redeeming our dead by Proxy much Can be accomplished. Our dead Can be redeemed. This principle has given me great Joy unspeakable at the thought that I Can live on the Earth to behold my Numerous friends redeemed who are in the spirit World.”

Elder Orson Pratt put this new development into historical perspective when he said the following:

By and by we will have Temples, with a great many things contained in them which we now have not; for with them, as with all other things, the Lord begins little by little; . . . He gave the pattern of these things in Kirtland, Ohio, as the beginning; but there were not rooms for the washings . . . such as were prepared in the Nauvoo Temple. Why; Because we had greater experience, and were prepared for greater things. There was no font in the basement story of the Kirtland Temple, for baptismal purposes in behalf of the dead? Why not! Because that principle was not revealed. But in the Nauvoo Temple this font was prepared. . . . We have, of late, constructed a Temple at St. George. Blessings have been administered in that Temple, that were totally unknown in the two former Temples, namely, endowments for the dead.

Elder Erastus Snow, in speaking to this matter of progression or development in temple ordinances and of his belief in the principle of recurring revelation, acknowledged that baptisms for the dead and endowments for the living had been performed in
Nauvoo. But, he said, “It was revealed here in St. George to the Prophet Brigham [Young] that there should be variations in the temples to be built. This was given . . . in response to the question ‘Oh Lord show unto thy servants if we shall build all temples after the same pattern? The answer came, ‘Do you all build your houses after the same pattern? Do you after increasing your families build after the same pattern used when your family is small? So shall the growth of the knowledge of the principles of the Gospel among my people cause diversity in the pattern of Temples.” Part of the “diversity” Snow referred to pertained to changes in the interior layouts of temples to allow for large companies or groups of temple patrons to go through the temple at the same time.

Over 120,000 baptisms and confirmations for the dead had been performed since the 1840s in Nauvoo and Salt Lake City, and such ordinances are foundational to the concept of the plan of salvation. But these ordinances entailed only the possibility of the remission of sins for the dead, not the more fulfilling, more complete higher covenant of exaltation represented in the ordinances of the endowment, eternal marriage, sealing of deceased couples, and sealing of deceased children to parents as part of the required “intergenerational linkage”—the sealing of deceased families to their predecessors. For the early Saints, these higher ordinances constituted a more complete understanding of redemption of the dead. Lucy B. Young, after having spent the day of July 4, 1877, doing such temple work, “expressed the great pleasure she felt . . . in the temple redeeming the dead. Her heart was full in the prospect of being received by them with open arms, as all would be by those who could not do the work for themselves. She desired to live to redeem hundreds of her dead.”

Shortly before his death, Brigham Young preached that what was happening in the St. George Temple surpassed anything he
had ever before seen in Kirtland or Nauvoo. “I have been spending the winter at St. George,” he said in April 1877. He continued:

Our temple there is finished, which is the first completed Temple built to the name of the Most High, in which the ordinances for the living and the dead can be performed, since the one built by Solomon in the land of Jerusalem, that we have any knowledge of. . . . We enjoy the privilege of entering into a Temple, built to the name of God, and receiving the ordinances of his House. . . . We also enjoy the privilege of administering for our fathers and mothers, our grandfathers and grandmothers, for those who have slept without the Gospel. . . . And now that we have succeeded so well in building one Temple, we feel encouraged to continue our labors in the same direction until we shall have built and finished others.\(^8\)

That Woodruff was a key transitional figure in advancing a newer, broader, and deeper understanding of temple work, one that included specifically endowments for the dead, is clear. Believing that “it takes just as much to save a dead man as a living man,” Woodruff interpreted the experiences immediately following the dedication of the St. George Temple as nothing less than new revelation. “We have labored in the St. George Temple since January,” he said in Salt Lake City in September 1877, “and we have done all we could there; and the Lord has stirred up our minds, and many things have been revealed to us concerning the dead.”\(^9\)

Specifically, he referred to performing endowments for the dead, both friends and family members. In his now-famous vision in which the founding fathers of America and other spirits gathered around him in the temple, Woodruff describes the spirits as saying, “You have had the use of the Endowment House for a number of years, and yet nothing has been done for us.”
According to Woodruff, “The thought never entered my heart, from the fact, I suppose, that heretofore our minds were reaching after our more immediate friends and relatives.” He went on to predict that “when we shall have built the Temples now contemplated, we will then begin to see the necessity of building others . . . and Temples will appear all over this land of Joseph.—North and South America—and also in Europe and elsewhere.”

John Taylor, who eventually succeeded Brigham Young as President of the Church, freely recognized the influence that Woodruff, his junior colleague in the Twelve, was having on these matters. “Brother Woodruff has been operating a long time in the Temple at St. George,” he said in November 1877, “and you have perhaps heard him testify of visits that he has had from the spirit world, the spirits of men who once lived on the earth, desiring him to officiate for them in the Temple ordinances. This feeling is planted in the hearts of the people.” He also said on the same occasion, “The Lord has shown us that we must build temples in which to officiate for them. We have commenced to do so, and our fathers have already commenced to feel after us, manifesting themselves by dreams and visions, and in various ways to those most interested in their welfare.”

The canonization of section 110 was likewise an important milestone in the history of Mormon temple worship. The account of Christ’s appearance in the Kirtland Temple in 1836, along with Moses, Elias, and Elijah had earlier been published as part of the History of the Church, but it was not inserted in scriptures until the publication of the 1876 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Orson Pratt figured large in preparing this edition. Four years later, in 1880, George Q. Cannon presented, in conference, the decision to incorporate this and other sections into the Doctrine and Covenants as official scripture.
Like the dawn, this new and expanded understanding of temple work came gradually—among both leaders and lay members. Again from President Taylor, speaking shortly after the death of Brigham Young: “There has been a feeling working gradually upon the minds of the Saints that many could not comprehend, nor tell where it came from, and that is to build Temples.” He further pointed out the earlier developments in the Kirtland and Nauvoo temples, stating that as time went by, “we began to feel after our fathers behind the vail, and they likewise began to feel after their children. . . . You heard through brother Woodruff how many more administrations there had been for the dead than for the living. This is because Elijah has been here and has delivered the keys that turn the hearts of the children to the fathers, and we are beginning to feel after them. Hence we are beginning a Temple here [in Salt Lake City], one in Sanpete, another in Cache Valley, and we have one already built in St. George.”¹⁴ In fact, President Taylor went so far to describe this time of lock turning and of reinvigorated temple work as “the commencement of a [new] epoch.”¹⁵

A SENSE OF ENORMITY AND OF URGENCY

Traveling north from St. George in the spring of 1877, President Young hastened to dedicate sites for the construction of new temples in Sanpete and Cache Valleys. If temples were on the drawing board before the completion of the St. George Temple, afterwards the importance of constructing new temples took on a new sense of urgency. At a time of economic hardship and national opposition, the Church would call on its membership of some 125,000 people scattered across some twenty stakes in Utah Territory to make the financial sacrifices needed to erect these buildings.
The era from 1877 to the late 1880s, therefore, became one of temple building. The Manti and Logan temples each cost over $400,000 and required the labors of over five hundred men called to construct them. These numbers included countless painters, stonemasons, roof layers, and carpet makers who had helped complete the St. George Temple. These laborers were sent to Manti and Logan to ensure a kind of temple quality control. Women in St. George sewed quilts, draperies, and clothing for the other temples, and scores of temple workers and laborers who had been called from as far away as Nephi, Lehi, Springville, Salt Lake City, and Logan returned to their homes, disseminating the spirit of temple work along the way. As a Sister Sandring of Lehi said in 1883, “I feel that since I have been here I have received light and understanding day by day. There seems to be a spirit hovering over this place which I have never felt anywhere else. The Temple of the Lord is here.”

For Mormon women, the opportunity to return to the temple often for extended ordinance work stimulated a whole new feeling of how the sisters could be involved. Speaking in a meeting in the spring of 1878, a Sister Morse “felt the work in the Temple nearest her heart. We cannot go out to preach”—missionary work was then the domain of men only—“but we can go to the temple to redeem the dead. We are the first saviors on Mt. Zion.”

Indeed it would take hundreds of temples, if not hundreds of years, it seemed, to do the full work of redeeming the dead. President Franklin D. Richards, speaking in Fillmore in 1877, commented on “the magnitude of the work to be performed,” for “not only were they to receive the ordinances for themselves, but they were required to officiate for their ancestors back to the remotest period of their history.”
The enormity of the work involved appeared even more daunting when numbers were thrown into the mix. “We have got to enter into those temples and redeem our dead—not only the dead of our own family, but the dead of the whole spirit world,” said President Woodruff in 1880. “Our numbers are many compared with former dispensations . . . [but] few when compared with the twelve or fourteen hundred millions of inhabitants who dwell in the flesh. Still, with the help of God, we have power to redeem the world. This is our work.”

Woodruff’s phrase “This is our work” strengthened the perception among the Latter-day Saints that they were a uniquely called and chosen people, separated from and gathered out of the nations to perform a work not given to others. In time, temple work, as much as any other Mormon practice, would come to characterize what it meant to be a Latter-day Saint. Or as one person put it, “No one can steal our labors.” President Taylor said, “It is a message of life to the people. . . . We become, then, saviors in that respect here upon Mount Zion; and hence the nations of the earth have their representatives here, who are representing these different nations in the Temples of the Lord of Lords.”

The Church’s ongoing and intrepid missionary efforts and the subsequent “gathering to Zion” were increasingly tied to temple work, wherein “these men become saviors of their own nations.”

Returning to St. George after a period of exile in the mountains of Utah and Arizona to escape federal marshals, President Woodruff rejoiced in his time of temple construction. “I have never read or learned of the building of three or four temples in any one dispensation before this,” he noted. However, in the past eighteen hundred years of apostasy, “52 generations, as we count them, a thousand million people had passed through the vail of death. All those have to be officiated for in a temple. It takes as
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much to exalt a dead person as to exalt a living one.” Such work would take years, extending inevitably into the Millennium.

This sense of enormity added to the feeling of urgency, if not fear, that permeated Mormon thinking in the antipolygamy raids of the late 1870s and 1880s. The passage of the Edmunds Bill in 1882, which disenfranchised many Mormons found guilty of cohabitation, only intensified the sense of foreboding. What if the temples they had sacrificed so much time, money, and energy to build were closed—or worse, taken over by the government?

President George Q. Cannon, speaking in 1877, drew a lesson from Church history and the destruction of the Nauvoo Temple. “I am glad that it was burned and purified by fire from the pollution our enemies inflicted upon it, . . . and I would prefer that this Temple [St. George] should never be completed, and that we should never build another, than to see these holy places built by God’s commands, pass into the hands of our enemies and be defiled by them.”

Indeed, these feelings were expressed in anti-American rhetoric by Church leaders and lay people of this era. The predictions of inevitable calamity and God’s chastisement of the nation found in the pages of President Woodruff’s diaries are full of emotion. The following may suffice to illustrate this sentiment:

The American Government will be broaken in peaces like a potters vessel and Swept from off the face of the Earth, and Cast down to Hell, Because of their wickedness Murders whoredoms and abominations [July 5, 1877].

So I say as an Apostle of the Lord . . . I will not desert my wives and my Children, and Disobey the Commandments of God for the Sake of accommodating the public clammers of a generation steeped in sin and ripened for the damnation of
Hell. I would rather go to prison and to Death [February 22, 1879]  

Edmunds Bill Passed. . . . The Nation is taking a Stand against God, against Christ and against the Church the Kingdom and Zion of God on the Earth. They are ripening in iniquity and turning the last keys that will seal their Condemnation [March 14, 1882]  

Despite these dire warnings concerning the Church’s enemies, many felt their temples might be closed. Minerva Snow, president of the St. George Stake Relief Society, commented in 1879 on this feeling of uncertainty: “We did not know what was before us, that we should do all we could while we had the privilege.”  

If at the highest Church levels there yet persisted a tone of defiance, at the local quorum and auxiliary levels there seems to have been a sense of peaceful resignation and an abiding faith that would somehow work out as God directed. In early 1882, Emerline Winsor said she “thought we were blessed in having the privilege of working in the Temple and hoped our enemies would not deprive us of that blessing.” Anna L. Ivins said, “whatsoever our enemies were permitted to do would be for the best, if we would only live our religion,” and despite the Edmunds Bill, “they could only do what the Lord wanted them to do. We need trials to make us more united.”  

“WE SHOULD FIX TODAY WHAT OUGHT TO BE FIXED”  

With members of the Church returning to the temple more often, what impact would such recurring attendance have on them as a covenant-making people? On their personal behavior
and forms of conduct? What impact on their sense of mission and as a people? These are admittedly difficult, if not impossible questions to answer, but it is certain that the living saw temple work as much a blessing for them as it was for the dead. As temple worker William G. Perkins phrased it, “The more you labor in the Temple, the better it will be for you.”

Temple recommends and worthiness interviews became a mandatory rite of admission. “No recommend should be given to any persons not worthy,” instructed President Woodruff in February 1879. President Joseph Fielding Smith urged that “no person should be recommended to a temple unless they are first baptized for the renewal of their covenants,” although this was left to the discretion of the local bishops. At least one local bishop, C. A. Smith, associated temple attendance with living the Word of Wisdom and said that “men who smoke and chew tobacco should not be permitted to go into the Temple.”

Clarence Jackson, a longtime temple recorder, said he hoped to “continue to conduct myself as to continue my labors in the Temple.” Henry Mitchell asked, “Are we prepared to enter into what we have heard? Did not every man and woman covenant that all they had was on the Alter? Let us try to save ourselves.” And from Sister R. Church: “We all had something to try us, but if we have the Spirit of Latter-day Saints and are faithful to our covenants, all things will be easy for us. We here in St. George have privileges above those around. When we are troubled we can go into the temple and enjoy that heavenly influence. The wicked can go no further than the Lord will permit them.”

John D. T. McAllister, President Woodruff’s right-hand man, his counselor in the temple presidency, and later the first president of the Manti Temple, perhaps summarized the change temple attendance was expected to have on the Saints’ personal conduct
when he said, “Brethren and Sisters coming to the temple should come properly recommended. . . . We should fix today what ought to be fixed.”

TEMPLE WORK AS A GUARD AGAINST OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

Reference has already been made to temple work and temple consciousness as a guard against encroaching secularism. Less often mentioned is the recurring effort to separate salvation for the dead from seeking after the dead, that is, to separate Mormon theology from Spiritualism. As early as 1853 and the laying of the cornerstone of the Salt Lake Temple, Church leaders had differentiated between temple work for the dead and the rising popularity of Spiritualism and its forms of séances and communing with the dead. The loss of so many hundreds of thousands of lives during the American Civil War only added to the growing popularity of Spiritualism in America. The Godbeite movement in Salt Lake City, opposed as it was to Brigham Young’s economic policies, found theological expression in Spiritualism. Elder Amasa Lyman of the Quorum of the Twelve was eventually excommunicated from the Church because of his conversion to this practice.

As much as any other, Elder Erastus Snow, so beloved in St. George, warned against Spiritualism, which he saw as a counterfeit form of spirituality. “We find men and women seeking communication with the unseen world,” he said in a stake conference in Provo in 1877, “with spirits of departed friends, and receiving spiritual manifestations in various forms. In the days of the Prophet Joseph Smith there were only a few who entertained any faith in such manifestations, but now they are numbered by millions. What has all this effected? Has it produced any more
unity in the world than existed before? Is there an increase of happiness or aught that is praiseworthy? The differentiation between Spiritualism and spirituality is an interesting distinction in light of the members’ feelings that they are sometimes influenced by deceased ancestors.

Also interesting is how Church leaders and members perceived Darwinism and the rising clamor concerning scientific claims for evolution in light of temple doctrine and its call for redemption of all the human race as far back as Adam. To say the very least, there was a doctrinal disconnect and a profound philosophical incompatibility between Mormonism’s rising sense of salvation for the dead and the rush among many to believe in a whole new form of man’s evolutionary development. As Elder Erastus Snow indelicately said at a conference in Beaver, Utah, in 1878, “How much satisfaction these philosophers have in the contemplation of their grandfather monkeys, we are left to conjecture; but such are the theories put forth by some of our modern philosophers.”

The point is that Latter-day Saint temple work in the 1870s and 1880s also came to be defined, shaped, and understood in contrast to contemporary theories that were fostered in a moral, scientific, and philosophical culture very different from what the Church had experienced in Nauvoo and Kirtland.

CONCLUSION

With the completion of the St. George Temple and the introduction of endowments for the dead, both Church leaders and lay members began to view temple work in a new light. There developed a whole new attitude toward temple worship, a sense of what was now expected and in what proportions, and a sense of urgency. Women as well as men had new opportunities for temple work not
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seen before. What happened in St. George soon spread to Manti, Logan, and Salt Lake. It was, to repeat President Taylor’s phrase, a “whole [new] epoch.” I leave the last word to Jacob Tobler, who said in St. George in October 1878, “Since the Temple had been completed we could see and know more of the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.”

NOTES

3. Orson Pratt, remarks given at Parowan, Utah, March 27, 1877, as cited in Journal History of the Church, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
6. Erastus Snow, remarks given in St. George, UT, November 20, 1881, St. George Utah Stake General Minutes (hereafter referred to as St. George General Minutes), Church History Library.
7. Lucy B. Young, in St. George Utah Stake Relief Society Minutes and Records (hereafter referred to as St. George Relief Society Minutes), July 5, 1877, Church History Library.


16. For example, in June 1884, President Erastus Snow called David Milne “to go and superintend the painting work of the Manti Temple.” Milne labored there until its completion five years later in 1889. St. George Utah Stake Melchizedek Priesthood Minutes and Records, 2:265 (hereafter referred to as St. George Melchizedek Priesthood Minutes), Church History Library.

17. St. George Utah Stake Relief Society Minutes, February 1, 1883.

18. St. George Utah Stake Relief Society Minutes, April 4, 1878.


29. St. George Utah Stake Relief Society Minutes, March 6, 1879.

30. St. George Utah Stake Relief Society Minutes, March 2 and September 4, 1882.

31. St. George Utah Stake Melchizedek Priesthood Minutes, December 29, 1877.

32. St. George Utah Stake General Minutes, February 1, 1879.

33. St. George Utah Stake General Minutes, October 16, 1881.

34. St. George Utah Stake General Minutes, November 5, 1881.

35. St. George Utah Stake General Minutes, December 15, 1883.
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36. St. George Utah Stake Melchizedek Priesthood Minutes, 80.
37. St. George Utah Stake Melchizedek Priesthood Minutes, July 28, 1877.
38. St. George Utah Stake Relief Society Minutes, February 2, 1882.
43. Saint George Utah Stake Melchizedek Priesthood Minutes, October 26, 1878.