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A Guide to Scriptural Symbols Joseph Fielding McConkie and
Donald W. Parry

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JOSEPH FIELDING MCCONKIE and DONALD W. PARRY. *A Guide to Scriptural Symbols*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990. 193 pp. \$10.95.

Reviewed by Steven C. Walker, professor of English, Brigham Young University.

A Guide to Scriptural Symbols is precisely what its title claims: not the only guide, not the definitive guide, not the most thorough guide, but a useful general guide to the basic meanings of scriptural symbols. Introductory in its intent, this reference book is targeted specifically for Latter-day Saints. Its tendency toward overview rather than detail, summation rather than explication, and tradition rather than investigation make it a helpful book for general students of the scriptures—missionaries, Sunday School teachers, and most Latter-day Saint readers.

While the rest of the Christian world has been plumbing the meanings of types and symbols for so many centuries as to make that manner of reading second nature, McConkie and Parry's approach will be, for many Latter-day Saint readers, a new and eye-opening experience. Latter-day Saints tend to read the scriptures realistically and historically—the most productive approach if we must read them in only one way. But our attentiveness to the historical dimension of scripture has caused us to ignore another of its crucial aspects—symbolic implications.

Reference books to this unfamiliar and complex subject map a precarious path between two precipices. On the one hand lies the danger of so little information about the symbols that the reader becomes lost. On the other hand lurks the less obvious but perhaps more serious danger of too much information, of burying the reader in an avalanche of symbolic interpretations. McConkie and Parry's guide paces itself carefully between those dangers. The book leans strongly, but probably wisely, in the direction of a simplicity which will likely be appreciated by its intended Latter-day Saint audience. Its definitions of symbols are far from complete, suggestive rather than definitive, leaving the reader open to more individualistic implications of a particular symbol.

Such restraint will be for many readers the book's major strength. The authors stick consistently to Latter-day Saint precedent—usually scriptural precedent—although invitation to speculation beckons on every side. *A Guide to Scriptural Symbols* works a lot like the recent Gospel Doctrine manuals, where deliberately shorter lessons urge greater reader involvement. A typical example will demonstrate that “less is more” approach:

Eve: The name *Eve* signifies life and speaks of a great posterity and offspring. “And Adam called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living; for thus have I, the Lord God, called the first of all women, which are many” (Moses 4:26). (47)

This entry, like most entries in McConkie and Parry’s guide, is notable for its succinctness, for its reliance upon scriptural sources, and for its refusal to elaborate.

Those very strengths of the book for the beginning reader of symbols, however, are likely to frustrate a reader who wants more depth. For example, *Armageddon*, a biblical symbol on which volumes have been written, is relegated in *A Guide to Scriptural Symbols* to no more explication than “a Hebrew name meaning ‘mount of destruction’”—

a place found in Israel where literally scores of battles have taken place throughout history. It is also, therefore, the prophetic name of the area where the final great religious battle will focus during the immediate period before Jesus Christ makes his appearance in power and great glory. (16)

Such an entry will cry out to some readers for rehearsal of those “scores of battles,” for detail of the events surrounding the climactic struggle, and for indication of where it is to be fought.

The guide, in short, is short; it could have been more thorough. By the time the authors have separated out “Symbols, Names, and Titles for Deity” and “Symbolic and Theophoric Names”—which might well have been another book, leaving room for more development of this one—there are barely one hundred pages for defining the symbols in almost two thousand pages of scripture.

The problem of limited scope exists not only within entries, but also among them. Why these entries and not others? Why is no mention made—to give only a representative sample—of the following:

—archer, eunuch, fool, gentile, queen, orphan, whore, widow, wife, usurer

—hart, kine, leopard, leviathan, ram, seal, sparrow, swine, viper

—apple, almond, aloes, gourd, grapes, loaf, wheat

—burial, crucifixion, demons, idol, latter days, plague, tempest

—back, face, foot, legs, skin, teeth

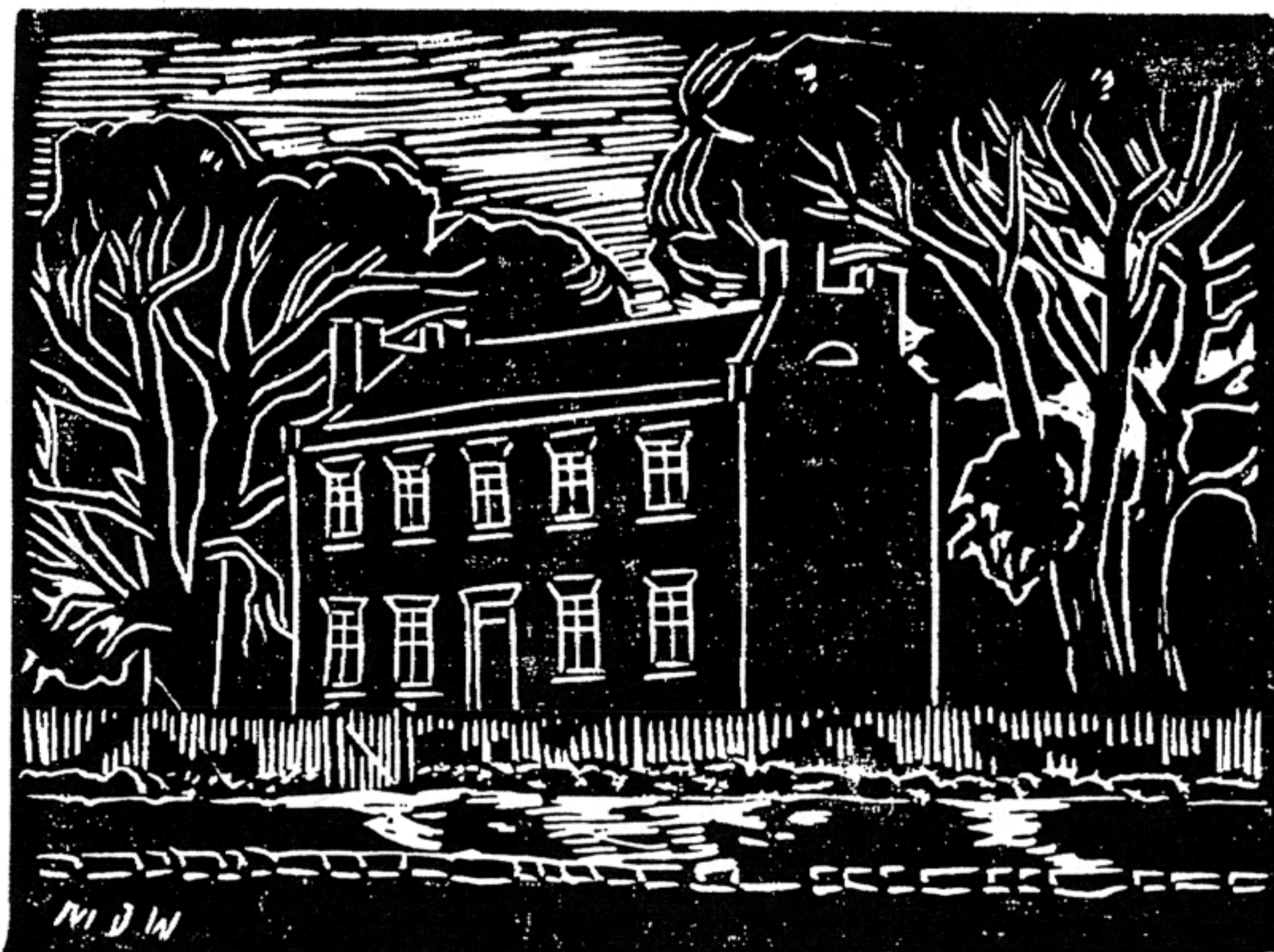
—war, wedding, well, west, white, winter, womb.

The authors were trapped between the precipices of general overview and so much information as to overwhelm their readers.

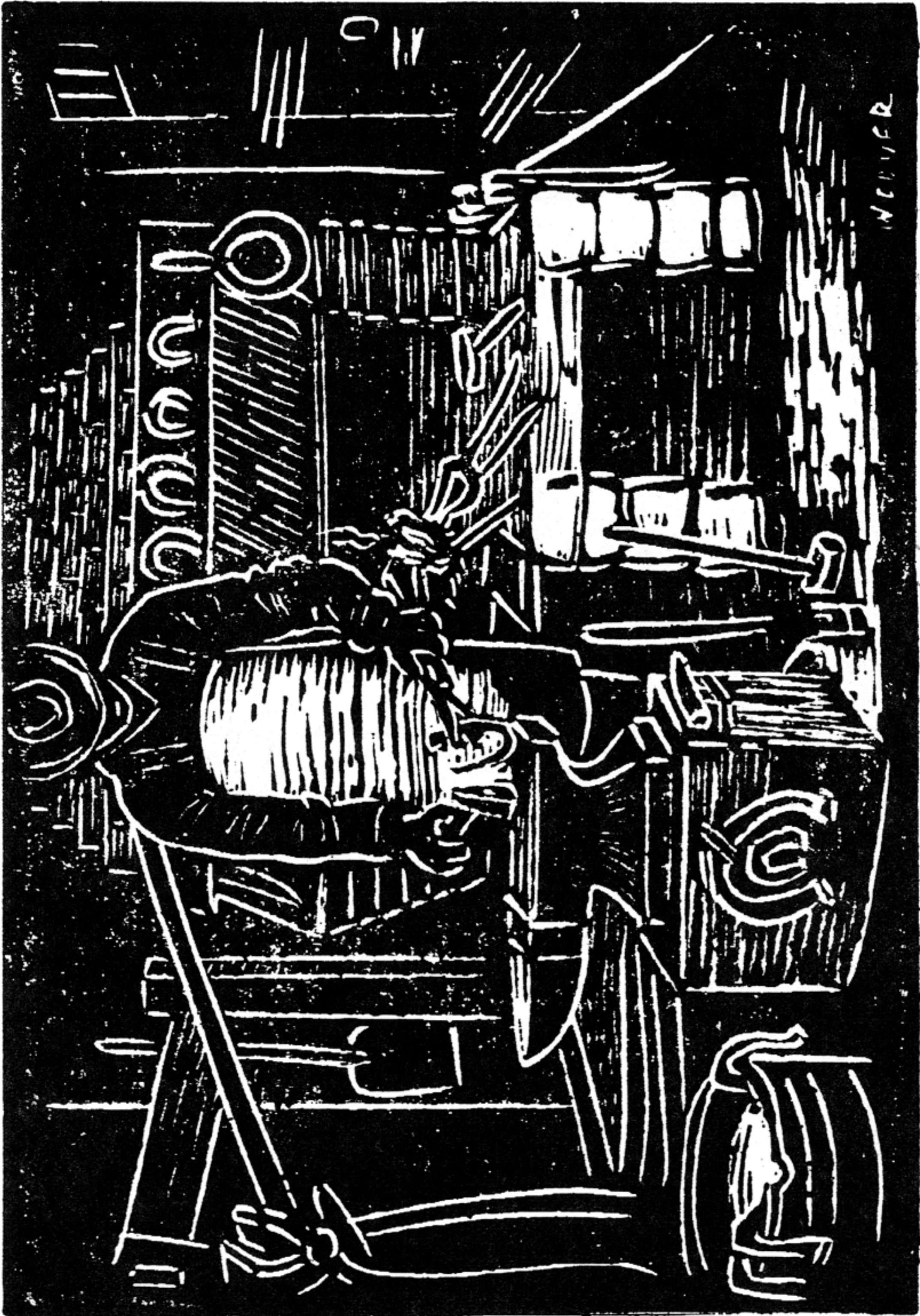
Even though the book could say much more on its subject, it has the virtue of speaking clearly to its audience. Although the entries would be easier to find if Bookcraft separated them and perhaps bolded them for easier location, the entries themselves are always easy to read, simple and straightforward in style. And it should be noted that there is more to McConkie and Parry's work than meets the eye. Many books of this type are three or four times as long with no appreciable gain in actual information. The guide's careful cross-referencing eliminates much need for repetition. And some articles pin down their subjects for a Latter-day Saint reader so well that extra words would be simply extraneous. *Ladder*, for example, seems hard to improve on:

The ladder seen in vision by Jacob represents progression from the telestial kingdom (or this earthly existence) upward into the celestial kingdom. Standing at the head of the ladder is God, who waits for those who have successfully endured the rigors of their journey (Gen. 28:12–19; and *Teachings*, 304–5). (75–76)

I recommend the book as an introduction to scriptural symbols for Latter-day Saint readers. Much as I would like to see a more inclusive sequel by McConkie and Parry, *A Guide to Scriptural Symbols* does the limited job they intended.



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