



10-1-1997

Symbols in Stone: Symbolism on the Early Temples of the Restoration Matthew B. Brown and Paul Thomas Smith

Joseph Fielding McConkie

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



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McConkie, Joseph Fielding (1997) "*Symbols in Stone: Symbolism on the Early Temples of the Restoration* Matthew B. Brown and Paul Thomas Smith," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 37 : Iss. 4 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol37/iss4/16>

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

MATTHEW B. BROWN and PAUL THOMAS SMITH. *Symbols in Stone: Symbolism on the Early Temples of the Restoration*. American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 1997. xi; 194 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Joseph Fielding McConkie, Professor of Ancient Scripture, Brigham Young University.

Symbolism is the language of the temple; it is a rich and expressive language designed both to instruct and to bind into one the Saints of all gospel dispensations and all cultures. It is the universal language of faith. Symbols enable us to speak with an eloquence not found in words.

In like manner, our temples are “symbols in stone,” built to lift our eyes to heaven even as they lift our spirits above the mundane world in which we live. Built according to a heavenly pattern, a temple represents not just a fortress where we take refuge from the world, but also the high mount known to the ancient prophets, from which they obtained a panoramic view of earth’s history and learned of their role in it. Here it was that they could pass through the veil to obtain the mind and will of the Lord.¹

Brown and Smith center their book, *Symbols in Stone*, on the symbols with which the Kirtland, Nauvoo, and Salt Lake Temples have been adorned. Before doing so, however, they provide a scriptural and prophetic description of the temple yet to be built in the New Jerusalem.

Symbols in Stone is very readable and informative. Illustrations and photographs are used effectively, and the book itself is attractively designed. For most readers, the chapter on the Kirtland Temple will be the most informative because the craftsmanship and symbols with which it was adorned are not well known. The sections on the Nauvoo and Salt Lake Temples will be more familiar. Here the authors discuss the symbolism of the different stones and designs on the exterior of the temple. The authors’ interpretation of these symbols is insightful, but perhaps it should be noted that it is neither necessary nor desirable that everyone see precisely the same interpretation of a symbol. Like a work of art or the wonders of nature, symbols will not affect each of us in

the same way. Some may sense and feel one thing, others another. Different perspectives enrich us all.

The book's purpose, to consider the "symbols that adorn the temple's exterior" (ix), gets lost in the chapter on the temple to be built in the New Jerusalem. This chapter is a potpourri of more sensational things. Our attention is centered on the return of Christ, the color of his robe, the ushering in of the Millennium, the stakes of Zion, and the great council at Adam-ondi-Ahman. Though these are matters of interest to all of us, they have little if anything to do with the architectural and exterior symbolism of the temple to be built in Jackson County.

Each chapter has an extensive array of endnotes. They range in number from 18 in the first chapter to 146 in the chapter on the Kirtland Temple. In total, about 50 of the 176 pages of text are devoted to endnotes. This is unusual for a book intended for general readership. These notes contain accounts of dreams and visions combed from journals, along with tantalizing tidbits like the design of Moroni's garments and a description of Adam and Eve. Virtually none of the material in the endnotes deals with temple symbols. They are spice for those whose taste buds require it. The work loses little without them.

Indeed, an important caution ought to be given to the reader, centering in the more than two dozen instances in which dreams, visions, and revelations found in private journals are cited to sustain one point or another. The reliability of such sources is at best questionable. These include quotations from a "recent convert to the Church" (28), "a young missionary" (74), and "a young English girl" (108). In other instances names are given, but they are virtually always someone the reader could not be expected to be acquainted with.

The sharing of personal dreams and visions is very tender ground. "It is my conviction," observed Elder Boyd K. Packer, "that experiences of a special, sacred nature are individual and should be kept to oneself."² On the same subject, President Harold B. Lee said, "It never ceases to amaze me how gullible some of our Church members are in broadcasting sensational stories, or dreams, or visions, or purported patriarchal blessings, or quotations, or [something] supposedly from some person's private diary."³ Similarly,

Joseph Fielding Smith said, “If you have had a vision or manifestation, it is your duty to keep it to yourself; it is not for the church, and I advise you not to repeat it.”⁴ Years before, his father, Joseph F. Smith, said, “We can accept nothing as authoritative but that which comes directly through the appointed channel, the constituted organizations of the priesthood, which is the channel that God has appointed through which to make known his mind and will to the world.”⁵

The liberal use of dreams and visions found in personal journals to reinforce a point is hazardous because we have no means of measuring the spiritual stability of the persons involved. It would be hard to suppose that those who recorded them did so with the idea that what they were writing would be made public or that it would be used in a work like the one being reviewed. Much of the material quoted in *Symbols in Stone* clearly fits the description of the kind of thing the Brethren have warned against.

Brown and Smith set out to teach us about the symbols that adorn our temples, and they do it well. In the process, however, they pander to the sensational. Their work is a little like a cake with too much frosting. Scrape off the frosting, and it is a good cake.

NOTES

¹See, for example, Richard G. Oman, “Exterior Symbolism of the Salt Lake Temple: Reflecting the Faith That Called the Place into Being,” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 4 (1996–97): 7–68.

²Boyd K. Packer, “Revelation in a Changing World,” *Ensign* 19 (November 1989): 15.

³Clyde J. Williams, ed., *Teachings of Harold B. Lee: Eleventh President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 399.

⁴Joseph Fielding Smith, “Of Dreams and Visions,” *Improvement Era* 46 (November 1943): 666.

⁵Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 42.