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Beehive in a stained-glass window at the Church History Museum, Salt Lake City. All photos in this photo essay are © Val Brinkerhoff.

The Symbolism of the Beehive in Latter-day Saint Tradition

Val Brinkerhoff

The beehive is one of the most common and enduring symbols within Mormonism, used ubiquitously. For example, it appears in publications, logos, architecture, and as the name of one of the Young Women's classes. It is an official emblem for the state of Utah, where it is used on the state seal, the state flag, highway signs, historic money, police cars, and more. The beehive is used widely in popular culture and names of businesses in Utah. Today the beehive is seen as a symbol of industry, teamwork, and unity. But evidence shows that Church leaders in the late 1840s had a different concept in mind. For them, the beehive represented the kingdom of God. This photo essay presents uses of the beehive in its historical and sacred settings in Mormonism.

Anciently, the beehive was associated with kingdoms: a “king” bee (the dominant bee in a hive is actually female, but that was not known among scientists until the seventeenth century, and much later among the general population¹) governed a productive, cooperative society. Bees and beehives were symbols for royalty, and thus divinity, in ancient Egypt and other societies.² In the Old Testament, bees chase (Deut. 1:44), swarm (Judg. 14:8; Ps. 118:12), and sting (Isa. 7:18)—negative symbolism, but still symbolism of power. The honey they produce is a symbol of bounty and goodness, as in a land of milk and honey. In the New Testament, John the Baptist survives on locusts and wild honey, and honey is a symbol for sweetness (Rev. 10:9, 10). Early Christians carved beehives on tombs as a symbol of the immortality brought by Jesus's Resurrection.³ Christians wrote about the positive attributes of bee society, with Jesus as their leader and themselves as his hive. Ambrose⁴ and Thomas

Aquinas⁵ both equated the colony of bees with the kingdom of God. In 1259, Thomas of Cantimpré compared Christianity with bees and focused on the one king—the pope—who reigns in kindness and does not sting.⁶ Candles used at the Christian altar are made from beeswax, thus linking bees to worship. Louis XII of France (1462–1515) showed his kingly mercy by using bees in his insignia along with the phrase “The king whom we serve does not use his sting.”⁷ In Shakespeare’s *Henry V* (1599), the Archbishop of Canterbury uses bee society as the exemplar of human society, to “teach the art of order to a peopled kingdom,” with a king, soldiers, workers, and drones.⁸ Thus the bee as a symbol of kingship persisted in Western culture throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

In enlightened Europe and even more so in the young United States, the symbolism was transformed to reflect a new democratic ideology. The emphasis on the king bee was dropped, and focus shifted to each worker bee’s contribution to the community. The bee and beehive came to symbolize industry, economic well-being, and civic order. In the United States, the beehive appears in works of art, on currency,⁹ and in social and commercial publications. Michael Hunter has explained how the beehive was Americanized: “Often the American eagle would be perched on or near the beehive, making it clear that the hive represented the new republic.”¹⁰

Bees first appear in a specifically Mormon context in the Book of Mormon, published in 1830. Nephi quotes Isaiah’s use of the bee (2 Ne. 17:18, quoting Isa. 7:18), likely representing the Assyrian army that stings the children of Israel. But more important is Ether 2:3: “And they did also carry with them deseret, which, by interpretation, is a honey bee; and thus they did carry with them swarms of bees, and all manner of that which was upon the face of the land, seeds of every kind.” Here, for Mormons, bee symbolism became associated with migration to a new, promised land—a land of milk and honey.

By summer 1848, Church leaders had decided to call their new home Deseret and use the associated beehive symbol. This name and logo soon referred to not only the Salt Lake Valley but a large territory encompassing what is now all of Utah and parts of Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, California, and Arizona. Hunter reports:

On July 24, 1848, Brigham Young was returning to the Salt Lake Valley with a group of Mormons. He stopped the group somewhere in what is now Wyoming to celebrate the first anniversary of the arrival of the Mormons in the Salt Lake Valley. In his journal, Richard Ballantyne described an elaborate celebration in which the group cheered three



A window in the Conference Center in Salt Lake City.



Detail on a chair at the Beehive House, Salt Lake City.

times: “Long Live the governor of the State of Deseret”¹¹ [referring to Brigham Young].

Sometime between the day Brigham Young had first entered the Salt Lake Valley on July 24, 1847, and the day of this celebration a year later, there had apparently been some discussion among the Mormons about the creation of a new state in the Salt Lake Valley to be called the “State of Deseret,” the unique term originating from the Book of Mormon term for “swarms of bees.”¹²

Soon the Saints’ discourse in sermons, newspapers, and diaries began using this name and symbol.

The bee symbolism used in sermons from the 1850s described the godly society the Saints strove to build. For example, Heber C. Kimball said, “We are the Kingdom of God, we are STATE OF DESERET.”¹³ Brigham Young used the beehive to chastise some: “It seems that there are many drones in the hive, who are determined to tie up the hands of those who rule the affairs of this kingdom, and the quicker they are thrown out the better.”¹⁴ Parley P. Pratt spoke on heirship and priesthood in 1853 and said, “All intelligences which exist possess a degree of independence in their own sphere. For instance, the bee can go at will in search of honey, or remain in the hive. It can visit one flower or another, as independent in its own sphere as God is in His.”¹⁵ Orson Pratt in 1852 said, “And what will he do when this [world] is filled up? Why, he will make more worlds, and swarm out like bees from the old hive, and prepare new locations.”¹⁶ Bees continue to have a place in Mormon hymns, literature, and sermons.¹⁷



A note “Good Only For Produce, Live Stock, and Merchandise, at the Tithing Store House of St. George Stake, Utah,” held at the Church History Museum.



Brigham Young's safe, Church History Museum. The beehive on financial items symbolizes the Saints' consecration.

It is uncertain why Church leaders chose Deseret and the beehive over other possible names and symbols and why they came to associate the beehive with the older symbolism of the kingdom of God. Leaders included the American meaning of industry in their discourse on the beehive and Deseret, but the kingdom of God symbolism was greatly favored. Perhaps they chose Deseret because of its association with a promised land, or they liked the uniqueness of the name. They were familiar with the bee's desirable characteristics: its orderly society, the ability to sting enemies, and the contribution of many workers in the hive. Bees as pol-

linators would help the desert to blossom as the rose. The king bee could represent the prophet or a local leader as well as God. Perhaps Brigham Young or another early Saint had an affinity for beehive symbolism because of local New York culture: the beehive serves as part of



Pioneer-era drums, Church History Museum. The blue drum is inscribed “Holiness to the Lord.” On the brown drum is painted “3rd Regmt Infantry Nauvoo Legion.” Both drums feature an eagle holding the shield of the United States perched on a beehive. The brown drum adds a red silhouette of a right hand on the beehive. The combination of American and Mormon iconography evinces the Saints’ desire to have Deseret join the Union.

iconography of the city of Ithaca, New York,¹⁸ which was not far from the cradle of Mormonism. Kirtland converts, especially Isaac Morley, had been associated with the social views of Robert Owen; the Owenites believed in economic cooperation and used the bee as a symbol.¹⁹ Perhaps the Saints’ association with Freemasonry played a role;²⁰ in Nauvoo, many Church leaders, including Brigham Young, were Freemasons, and the beehive is a prominent symbol among the Freemasons. Whatever the reason for the choice, Brigham saw the Church as the kingdom of God on earth, he wanted to prepare his people for the Second Coming of the Lord, and he saw fit to draw upon the beehive and Deseret to help guide his people.

For the Saints in the nineteenth century, there was little division between sacred and secular uses of Deseret and the beehive. The name and logo appeared everywhere: on architectural features, in publications, in songs and poems, on gravestones, and much more. Not surprisingly,



St. George Temple stairway posts. Beehives often decorate entryways and doors, symbolic of entering into the kingdom of God.



Doorknob on the southern door of the east façade of the Salt Lake Temple.



Posts and stair rails at Brigham Young's Beehive House in Salt Lake City.



Beehive emblems at the Provo Tabernacle, before the tabernacle was severely damaged by fire in 2010.

the beehive appears on the Salt Lake, St. George, Manti, and other temples. The beehive logo often appears next to the words “Holiness to the Lord.”²¹

The beehive appears on wooden chests that bishops used to store records, symbolic of the role of consecration in building the kingdom.²² Brigham Young’s Beehive House features extensive usage of beehives throughout its interior, and a large beehive is found on its roof. A white beehive dome also rests atop the Joseph Smith Memorial Building, formerly the Hotel Utah.

It is interesting that by the time the Saints adopted the beehive logo, most beekeepers had stopped using the type of beehive the logo depicts. The iconic beehive made from wicker or straw in a coiled cone shape is called a skep.²³ Skeps were used in Europe for centuries, but by the late eighteenth century, beekeepers had developed better forms, such as the boxes that are still common today. It was difficult to access the honey in a skep, and often the hive was destroyed in the process. A box allowed for easier removal of the honeycomb. Clearly, the Mormon beehive logo was meant to be a symbol and not a practical instruction on how to keep bees.



Chapel in Levan, Utah.



Salt Lake Temple annex
entryway.

Brigham hoped that the State of Deseret could join the United States under that name, but even from the Mormons' initial requests for statehood, many American politicians objected to the name because of its religious connotations.²⁴ By the 1870s, the Saints finally gave up the quest and agreed to the name of Utah, mandated by Washington.

The beehive symbol persists in the name of one of the Young Women's classes. It was not until 1915 that the name Beehive was used, and all Mormon young women, age 14 to adulthood, belonged to the Beehive Girls. Young women were encouraged to achieve ranks in the Mutual Improvement Association by performing certain tasks, including beekeeping. In 1950, the class of twelve- and thirteen-year-old young women was given the name Beehives.²⁵

The meaning of the beehive symbol shifted over the decades as Mormons set aside the name of the State of Deseret and entered the American mainstream. By the turn of the twentieth century, discussion and use of the beehive stressed the idea of industry and cooperation. But as members of the Church observe the beehive in their iconography, they need to remember its meaning to Brigham Young and others, that the Saints must be dedicated to building the kingdom of God.²⁶

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of God's Holy Order, Lost Wisdom: Archetypes of the Atonement, Ascension and At-One-Ment, and Awake and Arise.

1. "In 1609, Charles Butler, an English rector, published in Oxford a book on bees in which he identifies the queen bee as a female. *The Feminine Monarchie* states, 'We must not call the Queen "Rex," the Bee-state is an Amazonian or feminine kingdom.' Yet, coming at the end of Queen Elizabeth's long reign, this did not detract from the monarchial implications of the bee symbol." J. Michael Hunter, "The Mormon Hive: A Study of the Bee and Beehive Symbols in Nineteenth-Century Mormon Culture" (master's thesis, California State University Dominguez Hills, 2004), 29–30, citing Charles Butler, *The Feminine Monarchie* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1609). [^]

2. Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 608–31, online at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=48&chapid=297#8>. Early leaders in the Salt Lake Valley may have understood some of these ancient ties to the bee through pure inspiration. See also the discussion in Val Brinkerhoff, *The Day Star: Reading Sacred Architecture* (Honeoye Falls, N.Y.: Digital Legend Press, 2009). [^]

3. Hunter, "Mormon Hive," citing Elizabeth E. Goldsmith, *Sacred Symbols in Art* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911), 284. [^]

4. "Ambrose compared the Church to a beehive, and the Christian to the bee, 'working ardently and forever true to the hive.' Interestingly, the bee later became a symbol for Saint Ambrose because his eloquence was said to be 'as sweet as honey.'" Hunter, "Mormon Hive," 21–22, quoting George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 5–6. [^]

5. "Among bees there is one king bee and in the whole universe there is One God, Maker and Ruler of all things. And there is a reason for this. Every multitude is derived from unity. Wherefore, if artificial things are an imitation of natural things, and a work of art is better according as it attains a closer likeness to what is in nature, it follows that it is best for a human multitude to be ruled by one person." Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship* 3.19, online at <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/DeRegno.htm>. [^]

6. Hunter, "Mormon Hive," 23, citing H. M. Ransome, *The Sacred Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1937), 145–46. [^]

7. Hunter, "Mormon Hive," 28. [^]

8. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, act 1, scene 2. [^]

9. See the beehive surrounded by thirteen (the number of original states) bees on the bank note issued in Charleston, South Carolina, July 6, 1789, in Hunter, "Mormon Hive," 46, citing Eric P. Newman, *The Early Paper Money of America* (Racine, Wis.: Western Publishing, 1976), 378. [^]

10. Hunter, "Mormon Hive," 45. [^]

11. Hunter, "Mormon Hive," 75, quoting Richard Ballantyne, *Journal*, May–August 1848, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, July 24, 1848. [^]

12. Hunter, "Mormon Hive," 75. Later that year, a Mormon newspaper confirmed the name of Deseret: "We learn by Mr. B. that Major Simonson has

established the Government post at Smith's Fork of the Bear River, about fifty miles from the Salt Lake City. We learn from the same source that the citizens of the Great Basin have organized a provisional Government, called the 'State of Deseret' under which the civil policy of the nation is duly administered, and will so continue until Congress shall otherwise provide by law." *Frontier Guardian*, September 5, 1849, 2, republished on the CD accompanying *The Best of the Frontier Guardian*, ed. Susan Easton Black (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2009). ^

13. Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 5:164, August 30, 1857. ^

14. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:6, September 6, 1855. ^

15. Parley P. Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:256, April 10, 1853. ^

16. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:294, July 25, 1852. ^

17. Examples abound. Here are some prominent ones. Bees are mentioned in the hymn "Joseph Smith's First Prayer." President Gordon B. Hinckley's six goals to "be" quickly became "bees" in lesson posters around the Church (Gordon B. Hinckley, "A Prophet's Counsel and Prayer for Youth," *Ensign* 31 [January 2001]: 4). Annette Murray Wells and Stephen A. Wells, "Bees, Beehives, and You," *New Era* 41 (November 2011): 30–32. M. Russell Ballard, "Be Anxiously Engaged," *Ensign* 42 (November 2012): 29–31. ^

18. The beehive appears in town insignia and in the Ithaca High School crest. ^

19. Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting for Joseph Smith's Ohio Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2009), 39. ^

20. Hunter, "Mormon Hive," 85. As many who have researched the connection between Mormonism and Freemasonry say, the fact that Mormons used Masonic symbolism does not necessarily indicate that the Mormons obtained their symbols from the Masons. The symbols in question are of ancient and widespread origin. ^

21. For example, the ceremonial spike driven by Brigham Young at the completion of the Utah Central Railroad in 1870 was inscribed with a beehive and "Holiness to the Lord." John J. Stewart, "The Railroad Builder," in *Lion of the Lord: Essays on the Life and Service of Brigham Young*, ed. Larry C. Porter and Susan Easton Black (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 284. ^

22. Hunter, "Mormon Hive," 110. ^

23. Skeys can also have straight sides, but usually have tiers decreasing in size from bottom to top. Many skeys look like baskets turned upside down. ^

24. Already by April 1850, the Saints knew that some in the United States government objected to the name Deseret: "This name it would seem, is objectionable to the Government, because it is a Mormon name, and must therefore, with its government, be discarded." *Frontier Guardian*, April 17, 1850, 2. ^

25. "History of Young Women Achievement Programs," online at <http://www.lds.org/pa/display/o,17884,7713-1,00.html>; "Timeline of General Young Women Presidents," online at <https://www.lds.org/callings/young-women/leader-resources/timeline?lang=eng#4>. ^

26. One way that the beehive is still connected closely to its sacred LDS roots is through the name of the Church's clothing manufacturer, Beehive Clothing Mills. ^