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Kirtland Temple: The Biography of a Shared Mormon Sacred Space

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David J. Howlett. *Kirtland Temple:
The Biography of a Shared Mormon Sacred Space.*

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014.

Reviewed by Elwin C. Robison

David J. Howlett, a professor and member of the Community of Christ, opens up a view of the Kirtland Temple that is not often considered by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Howlett chronicles the various ways that the Kirtland Temple has been a point of conflict and confluence, influencing the interaction between faith traditions stemming from Joseph Smith's religious experiences.

In the first section of the book, Howlett summarizes the history of the Kirtland Temple, the groups who worshipped there, and the activities that brought meaning to their worship. In the second section, Howlett selects three themes for discussion: the "Kirtland curse," the Lundgren tragedy, and the construction of the new Independence Temple by the Community of Christ. In the final section, he looks at temple pageants, the evolution of temple tours, and recent conflict over LGBT worship in the temple.

Howlett's study demonstrates that congregants who have worshipped in the temple after 1880 have claimed rich spiritual experiences. As the early RLDS members worked to "restore the temple to its original physical condition, they believed that they had restored themselves to their ancestors' spiritual condition" (46). In the early twentieth century, they conducted at the temple and its grounds week-long "grove meetings" or "reunions" for the purpose of spiritual revival (58). Many plays and pageants have been performed around the theme of the Kirtland Temple, and Howlett gives helpful context to the theatrical approaches of different faiths that desire to "possess" the temple (even if only in the metaphorical sense). The book effectively contrasts these productions, and paints a picture of the different ways the temple has been viewed by LDS and RLDS members (132–43).

Chapter 5 recounts the story of Jeffery Lundgren, a principal guide at the Kirtland Temple in the 1980s. Many people of both LDS and RLDS faiths interacted cordially with him during his years as a temple guide; I was also given my first tour of the temple by Lundgren (he seemed odd to me, but not more than others I have known with myopic interests in Christian eschatology). Unbeknown to many around to him, Lundgren came to see himself as “the Destroyer,” and he later committed mass murder in an effort to cleanse his flock before initiating his plan to seize the temple. While this gruesome history is not central to the book, it is a valuable glimpse into the anatomy of extremism and the conditions that allow it to develop.

Chapter 4 gives extensive coverage to the “Kirtland curse.” In 1841, Hyrum Smith wrote a letter urging the Saints to leave Kirtland and come to Nauvoo. He wrote that a scourge was upon that land, and that only the children of the Ohio Saints would “build up Kirtland” (80). The quantity of coverage given to this subject seems out of place in a book on the temple. I resided in the region through many of the years the “curse” was discussed; its role in the contested space of the temple seemed at most limited to a small subset of Latter-day Saints. Some LDS leaders in the late 1960s and 1970s concluded that the “curse” needed to be lifted for the faith to grow in Ohio. No doubt this interpretation was effective at channeling the enthusiasm for missionary work and perhaps for channeling interest in restoring historic Kirtland properties (94). Those raising awareness about the “curse” were often not native to the area, and they perhaps unwittingly dismissed the valiant efforts of local Latter-days Saints to establish the faith in northeast Ohio during the 1950s and 1960s.

Methodological challenges are inherent in some of the source material available to Howlett. He quotes from temple tour comment cards, which is problematic because one can miss the center and only see the fringe of opinion. More problematic is the use of comments by Internet “trolls.” Certainly everyone can find offensive, narrow-minded, and virulent discourse on any and every subject on the Internet. While Howlett’s research for the most part appears thorough, I question whether such sources should be considered in a scholarly study that seeks to understand the common ground between religious faiths.

While interpretation of events can be a matter of context, the record itself should not be dismissed due to context. Howlett’s statement that “no record of the vision [of the Kirtland Temple design] has survived” (19) does not take into account the full historical record. While Howlett is

correct in that the vision was not included in official Church publications, Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams produced a set of drawings and wrote a description of the building based on the vision.¹ I would argue that the drawings and description constitute an important contemporary record of the vision. Another incongruity is Howlett's statement that "the vast majority of the 1836 Mormons at Kirtland had no knowledge of Smith's experience" of the vision recorded at the Kirtland Temple dedication (25, 162). I do not take exception with his opinion that not all fully understood the implications of the keys that were given to Joseph Smith during the vision, but the conclusion that few had knowledge of the experience does not match the historical record. As just one example, the mother of Mary Ann Stearns Winters showed her the "place on the pulpit" where the Savior and other prophets stood.² If a lay member and her four-year-old daughter knew of the vision, can we not assume that many others did as well? Also, while the statement that only full tithe payers are admitted to LDS temples is correct (41), that is only one requirement among many. Latter-day Saints must show their willingness to live a Christlike life by being honest, being faithful to spouse and family, and striving to serve their neighbors. By singling out tithing, it sounds like one pays admission to enter a temple.³

Howlett dwells often on the concept of "contested space," and perhaps the most interesting point of contested space I encountered in the book was Howlett's reaction to the *This is Kirtland!* theatrical production created by Latter-day Saints. His reaction, and my reaction to him, acts as something of a microcosm that demonstrates the ongoing challenge of creating civil interfaith dialogue. Howlett begins generously: "*This is Kirtland!* was a very entertaining play; it was filled with dancing, witty dialogue, and toe-tapping songs that I sang in my head for days afterward." At one point, however, Joseph Smith and his wife Emma sing a love duet. Howlett recounts from his field notes how he felt like standing up and yelling, "Hypocrite! You cheated on your wife in this time period when you were sleeping with Fanny Alger!" (142). First, Howlett assumes that a relationship with Alger is a fact, while

1. Elwin C. Robison, *The First Mormon Temple: Design, Construction, and Historic Context of the Kirtland Temple* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1997), 8.

2. Mary Ann Stearns Winters (1833–1912), MS 119, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

3. Howlett references this observation on tithing to Laurel B. Andrew, a scholar who has never entered an operating LDS temple.

in reality there are no documentary sources proving such a relationship. More to the point, upon reading Howlett's reaction, I found myself wanting to stand up and yell back, "So father Abraham was a hypocrite? And what about my ancestors who entered into plural marriages, loved each other, and taught their children to love God and their fellow man? Are they hypocrites too?" Judging by our immediate reactions, clearly we can find contested space in many elements of the shared history of the Mormon faith traditions. Notwithstanding this, I appreciate hearing Howlett's honest reaction to the play, for it opens the way for an increased sensitivity and better understanding of how those of other faith traditions might perceive various events.

If visitors to the Kirtland Temple were to read Howlett's book, they would have a greater appreciation of the space they were encountering. The book provides room for LDS readers to understanding other faith traditions without compromising their own beliefs. If all involved show a mutual respect for the tenets of others, the Kirtland Temple will continue as a spiritual place of refuge for many, as it was originally intended to be. While Howlett cannot speak for every member of the Community of Christ or Restoration Branch traditions, he has presented a framework within which a better understanding of the Kirtland Temple can occur from the perspectives of various Mormon belief systems.

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