



2015

All That Was Promised: The St. George Temple and the Unfolding of the Restoration

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Recommended Citation

Hafen, Bruce C. (2015) "All That Was Promised: The St. George Temple and the Unfolding of the Restoration," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 54 : Iss. 3 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol54/iss3/12>

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Blaine M. Yorgason, Richard A. Schmutz, and
Douglas D. Alder. *All That Was Promised:
The St. George Temple and the Unfolding of the Restoration.*

Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013.

Reviewed by Bruce C. Hafen

This book reflects the fortunate confluence of several factors: first, Blaine Yorgason's considerable talents as a storyteller combined with the academic skills of seasoned historians Douglas Alder and Richard Schmutz; second, the inclusion of previously unpublished journal accounts from colorful and credible participants who helped build the St. George Temple; and third, the previously little-noticed historical placement of this temple, not merely as a local story, but in its concluding role as the third temple required to complete the full restoration of temple ordinances—Kirtland, Nauvoo, and St. George.

Blaine Yorgason is well known to LDS readers for his numerous novels, such as *Charlie's Monument*, *Windwalker*, and *Chester, I Love You*. Historian Douglas Alder has made many contributions to Mormon and southern Utah history, both before and since he served as president of Dixie College from 1986 to 1993. Richard Schmutz taught history at BYU before entering the construction business, which gave him a builder's perspective on constructing a pioneer temple. All three authors were associated with the St. George Temple in recent years as sealers and ordinance workers.

A 2014 review called the book “a new and needed synthesis of this fascinating—and underappreciated—theater of Mormon history.” The book draws upon several “remarkable [and previously unpublished] journals . . . and other diaries and correspondence . . . that the authors weave into a colorful and textured narrative. The [book paints] a compelling picture of pioneer life on the red dirt of the Mormon frontier—the perils of floods, the vagaries of travel, the strenuousness of labor, the power of community, the satisfaction of hard-won victories in the face

of natural austerity: these are the stuff of the early Mormon settlement in the West.”¹

The firsthand journal accounts reveal several memorable personalities and perspectives. Dixie settler Charles Pulsipher, for example, was assigned by Apostle Erastus Snow, the St. George settlement leader, to travel throughout the towns of southern and central Utah to solicit both laborers and provisions for the temple construction workers. On one occasion, Charles was in Ephraim, entreating the local Saints to provide a dozen stone masons who could help construct the temple’s sandstone walls. He stressed the urgency of needing to finish the temple while Brigham Young was still alive.

At one point, as he recorded in his journal:

Before I was aware of what I was saying I said, “Come on down and help us build that Temple and we will come up here and help you build one in San Pete,” and when I found what I had said I was surprised for I had never heard of any intention of building [a temple] in San Pete but it was said and I knew it would be done for it wasn’t my premeditated sayings so I went right on and never let on that I had said anything out of the common.

At the close of the meeting they gathered around me and said, “So we are going to have a Temple up here in San Pete, are we?”

“Yes sir.”

“Well, when did President Young tell you about it?”

“He never told me.”

“And when did you first hear of it?”

“You heard it as soon as I did.”

“And do you think it will be so?”

“Yes, I not only think but I know it will be fulfilled.”

In about four years I sent up two hands to work on the Manti Temple, thus I filled my promise. (127–28)

The book’s early chapters recount the backbreaking settlement of St. George in 1861, a region that had been described by First Presidency member George A. Smith as the “most wretched, barren, Godforsaken country in the world”²—yet President Young still named the town

1. Ryan T., “Book Review: All That Was Promised: The St. George Temple and the Unfolding of the Restoration,” *Juvenile Instructor*, <http://www.juvenileinstructor.org/book-review-all-that-was-promised-the-st-george-temple-and-the-unfolding-of-the-restoration/>, February 6, 2014.

2. George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 9:116 (September 10, 1861).

after George A.! The remaining chapters are devoted to the details of constructing the temple (1871–77), the beginnings of ordinance work there—including the first-ever endowments for the dead—and some of the early revelations to temple president Wilford Woodruff on how the work should be done.³

One of the construction stories recounts what happened when the builders discovered an underground stream of water directly beneath the proposed site. Because any water in barren St. George was a rare and precious commodity, they recommended building on a nearby location. Brigham Young declined. He directed them to dig a deeper hole, to fill and compact the bottom of the hole with large volcanic boulders, and then to build the foundation on that base—a task that took the first eighteen months of the construction time. But as it turned out, the lava rock protected the temple’s foundation not only from the water, but also from the unanticipated risk of being corroded by the alkali that was (and still is) so prevalent in the native soil (99–104).

The book’s most significant contribution to Church history is that it documents the place of the St. George Temple in the larger history of the Church. As stated by one of the book’s reviewers online, “The elevation of St. George into the company of Kirtland and Nauvoo makes for a fresh and important turn in the conventional story, a story that underscores the ongoing development of temple ritual beyond Nauvoo.”⁴

In a fifteen-page prologue, Yorgason, Alder, and Schmutz tell us why Brigham Young was so passionate about finishing a temple before he died.

Brother Brigham chose the site for the Salt Lake Temple a few days after entering the Salt Lake Valley in 1847. But after almost twenty years of constant interruptions and frustrations, he could see that it would take twenty more years to finish it—and he knew he would never live that long. Yet he felt a keen sense of urgency because of a special charge he had received from Joseph Smith.

The prologue recounts that during Joseph’s meetings with the Twelve in the months before his death in June 1844, with the Nauvoo Temple still under construction, Joseph gave them “every key, every ordinance, every principle, and every priesthood . . . that belong to the last dispensation” and then he said, “now I am free” (13). “The Lord is going to let

3. See Richard E. Bennett, “‘Line upon Line, Precept upon Precept’: Reflections on the 1877 Commencement of the Performance of Endowments and Sealings for the Dead,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 3 (2005): 38–77.

4. Ryan T., “Book Review.”

me rest awhile” (15). Regarding temple ordinances, the Prophet said that the endowment for the dead was to be administered only in dedicated temples. Then he gave this very personal charge: “Brother Brigham, this [the temple ordinance work] is not arranged perfectly; however we have done the best we could under the circumstances in which we are placed. I wish you to take this matter in hand: organize and systematize all these ceremonies” (14).

The later chapters show that President Young would ultimately carry out this task, both to oversee the temple construction and to establish the ordinance work—and yet his actual time administering or overseeing ordinances *in a temple*⁵ would be limited to forty-six days in Nauvoo and the first four months of 1877 in St. George. After dedicating that temple in April 1877, he stopped to dedicate the site for the Manti Temple on his way home. A short time later he dedicated the site for the Logan Temple, and in August his mortal life came to an end.

The book also describes the revealed guidance Wilford Woodruff received regarding the administration of temple work—the first steps in his leading role for what historian Richard Bennett describes as “the transformation of temple consciousness” in the Church between 1870 and 1898.⁶

Under Brigham Young’s direction, for example, President Woodruff and a few others first put the complete temple ordinances into written form, both for the living and the dead (282–85). And in answer to Brother Wilford’s prayer about how to perform temple ordinances for his own family, he learned that any worthy person of the same gender could stand as proxy for a deceased person (see 288–90). Before that time, the Saints and their leaders had assumed that only immediate descendants could be proxies.

The 1877 visit of the U.S. Founding Fathers to President Woodruff in the St. George Temple is fairly well known, but the book explains how this visit made a major contribution to our understanding about

5. Church members were able to receive endowments and sealings for the living in Salt Lake City, both in the Council House from 1851 to 1855 and in the Endowment House from 1851 to 1885 (Karen Lynn Davidson and Jill Mulvay Derr, *Eliza: The Life and Faith of Eliza R. Snow* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013], 86–87), but because those buildings were not dedicated temples, no endowments for the dead or child-to-parent sealings for the dead were completed in Utah until the St. George Temple was dedicated in 1877.

6. Richard E. Bennett, ““Which Is the Wisest Course?”: The Transformation in Mormon Temple Consciousness, 1870–1898,” *BYU Studies* 52, no. 2 (2013): 5–43.

the scope of the work for the dead. Prior to this event, the Brethren had assumed that Church members were responsible to perform ordinances only for their own deceased family members and close friends. But the visit of the Founders made clear that, ultimately, temple ordinances would need to be performed for everyone (303–11).

This book is well written—readable, full of insight and historical perspective, and at times downright entertaining. It makes temples and temple ordinance work more personal and accessible by showing where and how that work began in this dispensation. Its approach—deliberately directed toward the general reader—gives it more the feel of a popular history than a rigorously academic one. But as the combined strengths of its three authors suggest, it brings together the best of an engaging personal narrative style with an academically acceptable foundation, framework, and research standard.

Bruce C. Hafen is an Emeritus General Authority who served from 2010 to 2013 as president of the St. George Temple. He is a native of St. George and has a BA from BYU and a JD from the University of Utah. Before his full-time Church service, he was the president of Ricks College (now BYU–Idaho), dean of the BYU Law School, and provost and professor of law at BYU.