

Of the Temple

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEMPLE

A temple, good or bad, is a scale-model of the universe. [I believe] the first mention of the word *templum* is by Varro, for whom it designates a building specially designed for interpreting signs in the heavens—a sort of observatory where one gets one’s bearings on the universe.

“What Is a Temple?” *CWHN* 4:357-58

The contemplation of the unbroken continuity of life “from eternity to eternity” is the very purpose and function of the temple.

Message of Joseph Smith Papyri, 7

Ancient writers assure us repeatedly that the temple is the earthly type of Zion, a holy place removed from contact with the outer world, set apart for ordinances from which the world is excluded. While it is in the world, the temple presents a forbidding front of high gates, formidable walls, narrow doors, and frowning battlements, dramatizing the total withdrawal of Zion from the world and its defensive position over against it. Zion itself, of course, is absolutely impregnable and unassailable since the world has no access to it. Should the world get too close, Zion withdraws.

“What Is Zion?” *CWHN* 9:27-28

We know now that there are three worlds: the telestial, in which we live; the celestial, to which we aspire; and in between them another world, called the terrestrial. It is of neither the celestial nor the telestial. According to the ancients, this world is represented by the temple, the in-between world where the rites of passage take place.

“The Meaning of the Temple,” *CWHN* 12:27-28

If the temple represents the principle of order in chaos, it also represents the foothold, you might say, of righteousness in a wicked world. Someone once asked me concerning the Egyptian ordinances contained in the Joseph Smith manuscript, “Is this stuff relevant to the modern world?” My answer was, “No. It is relevant to the eternities.” The modern world is as unstable as a changing isotope, but the temple has always been the same. The ordinances are those taught by an angel to Adam.

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Whether in Kirtland, Far West, Nauvoo, or the valleys of the West, the [Saints’] hearts have been set on activities and observances that, in terms of modern-day progress and success, make no sense at all. The whole temple economy is grotesquely out of place in the present world; there is nothing the least bit practical about it. It is a school to wean us away from the things of the world.

Abraham in Egypt, 250

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It is the actual work done within the temple that most perfectly exemplifies the temple idea. For here, all time and space come together; the barriers vanish between this world and the next; between past, present, and future. What is bound here is bound beyond, and only here can the gates be opened to release the dead who are awaiting the saving ordinances. . . . Here the records of the race are assembled as far back in time as they go for a work performed by the present generation to assure that they and their kindred dead shall spend the eternities together in the future. All time becomes one and the worlds join hands in this work of love, which is no mere mechanical bookkeeping.

“What Is a Temple?” CWHN 4:368

TEMPLE ORDINANCES

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The LDS endowment was not built up of elements brought together by chance, custom, or long research. It is a single, perfectly consistent organic whole, conveying its message without the aid of rationalizing, spiritualizing, allegorizing, or moralizing interpretations.

Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, xii

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The Mormon endowment, like the Egyptian, is frankly a model, a presentation in figurative terms. As such it is flexible and adjustable; for example, it may be presented in more languages than one and in more than one medium of communication. But since it does not attempt to be a picture of reality, but only a model or analog to show how things work, setting forth the pattern of man’s life on earth with its fundamental whys and wherefores, it does not need to be changed or adapted greatly through the years; it is a remarkably stable model, which makes its comparison with other forms and traditions, including the more ancient ones, quite valid and instructive.

Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, xiii

The ordinances are mere forms. They do not exalt us; they merely prepare us to be ready in case we ever become eligible.

“The Meaning of the Temple,” *CWHN* 12:26

Ordinances are more than just symbols—they go beyond that. They can be as simple as a drawing of something that actually is. They always have a double nature: they are or mean something that is real.

You see that as soon as you try, in music and art, to give religious experience a third dimension. The gospel actually *has* that third dimension, of course. But the whole purpose of music and art, and literature too, is to produce the *illusion* of a third dimension, to produce the illusion that there is depth in the picture. That’s what art does. [When ancient painters discovered perspective, people were scandalized—it was a form of deception.] On a two-dimensional canvas you can produce a third dimension. It’s like looking up into the heights of St. Peter’s: you can see the angels floating on the clouds, and you get the illusion of ascending up to heaven.

But that’s the point: it’s all an illusion, a trick of art, you see; and it will always backfire if you try to do that with the gospel, which is the real thing. That’s why I think we’re wasting our time, mostly, to try heightening religious experience by using such devices in the Church. Once you know the real thing, everything else is an anticlimax. The ward choir can never achieve the same effects as a choir of angels, and yet these things go together.

I was truly amazed when I went to the Kirtland Temple. Look at the work that went into it! It looks like nothing much on the outside but not so on the inside: the workmanship, the design, the way the whole thing is conceived, the scope of it all, the size, the proportions—simply astounding! There is something legitimate there. I can see that the Lord, and not just an angel, has deigned to appear there, knowing how the poor people have worked their heads off for these very same things. And it is really so. They are actually working in a third dimension there. It’s more than just dream and illusion. It’s totally unlike these ugly gothic, neogothic churches all over the place, these massive pretentious buildings. But of course, they are not genuine. They are imitation gothic. They try to take you back to the Age of Faith, to the Middle Ages.

“Conversation with Hugh Nibley,” 22

Temple ordinances . . . put you into an eternal . . . order of things, which the world will not understand. And if you try to make them vulgarized down here and treat them as if they belong to *this* universe of discourse, then you spoil them.

“The Faith of an Observer,” 27

So universally is religious ritual today burdened with the defects of oddness, incongruity, quaintness, . . . mere traditionalism, obvious faking and filling in, contrived and artificial explanations including myths and allegories,

frankly sensual appeal, and general haziness and confusion, that those regrettable traits have come to be regarded as the very essence of ritual itself.

In contrast we find the Latter-day Saint rites, though full, elaborate, and detailed, to be always perfectly lucid and meaningful, forming an organic whole that contains nothing incongruous, redundant, or mystifying, nothing purely ornamental, arbitrary, abstruse, or merely picturesque.

“What Is a Temple?” *CWHN* 4:369

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No rites offer a richer variety of profound associations than those dealing with water. For water is not only a *symbol* of cleansing, cooling, refreshing, and reviving: it actually *does* all those things, at one and the same time, along with which it is par excellence the medium of passage. Halfway between solid matter and tenuous spirit, it enables bodies to move from one place to another in a state of effortless motion and silent suspension, visibly hovering between the solid earth below and the empty sky above.

Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 94

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Sleep, like water, is one of those things in which reality and symbol meet and fuse. It is both the rest of the body and the freeing of the spirit.

Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 147

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The garment represents the preexistent glory of the candidate. When he leaves on his earthly mission, it is laid up for him in heaven to await his return. It thus serves as security and lends urgency and weight to the need for following righteous ways on earth. For if one fails here, one loses not only one’s glorious future in the eternities to come, but also the whole accumulation of past deeds and accomplishments in the long ages of preexistence.

Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 268

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One of the most puzzling episodes in the Bible has always been the story of Jacob’s wrestling with the Lord. When one considers that the word conventionally translated by “wrestled” (*yeaveq*) can just as well mean “embrace,” and that it was in this ritual embrace that Jacob received a new name and the bestowal of priestly and kingly power at sunrise, the parallel to the Egyptian coronation embrace becomes at once apparent.

Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 243

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All the arts and sciences began at the temple. Dance, music, architecture, sculpture, drama, and so forth—they all go back to the temple. One thing that has impressed me is that the early Christian art and early Jewish art is almost uniformly bad; it's terrible. It's so bad in a world of great artistic heritage that it must have been deliberate. They knew that all one could hope for was to indicate the indescribable in symbolic ways. Don't try to give us heaven by secular means. That's what they tried to do in the Baroque. They poured it on, and no matter how magnificent it was, it always fell flat.

Letters to Smoother, etc., 104

In Wulf Barsch's paintings there is a sense of deep concern, an ominous and brooding feeling of admonition and warning. This I find disquieting until I remember that that is exactly the effect the reading of the scriptures has on me. The pictures do not tell a story—there is nothing trivial, contrived, clever, or cute about them; they seem more like a solemn summing-up, with something of both suspense and finality about them. For Plato true art must have *spoudaiotes*, usually rendered "high seriousness." Its opposite is blasphemy; which does not mean thundering denunciation, solemn deprecation, or consuming wrath, but the very opposite—it means not taking holy things seriously, being too stupid or insensitive (*blax* means both) to value anything beyond the business of business.

Was there ever an artist less inclined to show off than Wulf Barsch? He does not hesitate to try again and again to get through to us, not seeking novelty, but fighting for expression and perfectly willing to stay with a problem. It is that, I suppose, that gives his work the sense of deep sincerity that demands to be taken seriously. Strangely enough, with all his moving solemnity, I find some of his things intensely romantic. The constant dialogue of the poplar and the palm is right out of the most ancient traditions of romantic poetry, whether Barsch is aware of it or not, with echoes from the Patriarchal romances of Genesis. The poplar is the tree of the pioneers, marking their farms on all the benches and valleys from the red sands of Moencopi to the plains of Alberta. It is becoming rare as business supplants the noble windbreaks with billboards. And the palm evokes the wandering tribes of Israel (the palms of California are never convincing), for it is their hope and succor in the desert.

"From the Earth Upon Which Thou Standest," *CWHN* 12:552-54

THE TEMPLE IN ANTIQUITY

Ancient civilization was "hierocentric"—centered around the temple. The everyday activities of farming, trade, and war were all ritually bound to the cycle of the year and the cosmos. The great periodic rites were of a dramatic nature, but they were nonetheless real. A coronation is the purest ceremony; yet for all that, it is still real recorded history. A war or migration, though only too real to its victims, would be carried out with strict ritual propriety, according to the religious rules of the game. It is hard for us to understand this ritualizing of history, but once it was a very real thing, and one can still find it miraculously surviving among the Hopi.

So when the ancient myths from all over the world show us the same situations and the same adventures and monsters recurring again and again, we may look upon this endless repetition not as discrediting the historicity of those events and situations but as confirming it. These myths tell about such things happening because that was the type of thing that did happen, and the ritual nature of the event guaranteed that it should happen not once but over and over again.

“Myths and the Scriptures,” *CWHN* 1:43-44

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The hierocentric concept that all good things have been conveyed to mankind from above through the divinely appointed operations of holy shrines and persons is immensely appealing even in the abstract. But transcending all theory is the fact, obvious enough to the ancients if not to us, that all the basic institutions of civilization—political, economic, artistic, literary, . . . and scientific—*did* take their rise at the temple.

“Sophic and Mantic,” *CWHN* 10:319-20

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Men seem unable to leave the dream of a hierocentric state alone. . . . We cannot blame people if they yearn for (1) the grandeur, color, and unity of the great assembly, (2) the lofty and uncompromising certainty of universal kingship, (3) the sense of refuge and well-being in the holy shrine, (4) the high and independent life of a chivalrous aristocracy, (5) the sheer authority of the institutions established and maintained by force. These are the strengths of the hierocentric state. Its weakness is that it doesn't exist.

“Hierocentric State,” *CWHN* 10:133-34

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The archives were known in Egypt as the House of Life, housing the writings upon which the life of all things ultimately depended. It was a powerhouse humming with vital electricity, transmitting cosmic forces from heaven to earth, a place of deadly peril to any mortal not holding the necessary priestly credentials.

“Genesis of the Written Word,” *CWHN* 12:469

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The House of Life where the books were copied and studied had from the earliest times the aspect of a university, a super graduate school. There it was that all questions relating to learned matters were settled. The place was always part of the temple, and the books contain the earliest *poetry*, for *poiema* means “creation” and the business of the Muses at the temple was to sing the creation song with morning stars.

Naturally the hymn was sung to *music*, and some scholars would derive the first writing from musical notation. It was performed in a sacred circle or *chorus*, so that poetry, music, and the *dance* go out to the world from the temple, called by the Greeks the Museon, or shrine of the Muses.

The creation hymn was part of the great dramatic presentation that took place yearly at the temple, dealing with the fall and redemption of man, represented by various forms of combat, making the place the scene of the ritual *athletic* contests sanctified throughout the world. The victor in the contest was the father of the race, the priest-king himself, whose triumphant procession, coronation, and marriage took place on the occasion, making this the seat and source of *government* (the king was always crowned in the temple rather than the palace).

Since the entire race was expected to be present for the event, a busy exchange of goods from various distant regions took place, the booths of pilgrims serving as the market booths for great fairs, while the necessity of converting various and bizarre forms of wealth into acceptable offerings for the temple led to an active banking and exchange in the temple courts; the earliest "money" from the shrine of Juno Moneta at Rome is temple money. Since the place began as an observatory and all things were tied to the calendar and the stars, *mathematics* flourished and *astronomy* was a Muse.

History was another Muse, for the rites were meant for the dead as well as the living, and memorials to former great ones (believed to be in attendance) encouraged the production of a marvelous art of portraiture, of *sculpture* and *painting*, which would have flourished anyway as architectural adornments, since the design and measurements (the *middot*) of the temple structure itself as a sort of scale model of the universe and cosmic computer were all-important; the *architecture* of the hierocentric structure was of primary concern.

And since from that central point all the earth was measured and all the lands distributed, *geometry* was essential: "In the Beginning the One God promised Horus that he should inherit the land of Egypt, which was written in the Books by order of the Lord of All. . . . At the Division of the Lands it was decreed in writing."

The writings produced and copied in the House of Life were also discussed there, giving rise to *philosophy* but concerned largely with cosmology and natural science. In short, there is no aspect of our civilization that does not have its rise in the temple, thanks to the power of the written word. In the all-embracing relationships of the Divine Book everything is relevant. Nothing is really dead or forgotten; every detail belongs in the picture, which would be incomplete without it. Lacking such a synthesizing principle, our present-day knowledge becomes ever more fragmented, and our universities and libraries crumble and disintegrate as they expand. Where the temple that gave it birth is missing, civilization itself becomes a hollow shell.

"Genesis of the Written Word," CWHN 12:472-73

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In Egyptian rites everything is in motion; they respect the Heisenberg principle, for they never try to make any two temples, tombs, texts, vignettes, or reliefs exactly alike. It is the modern world that mass-produces on fixed and static patterns.

Every system, no matter how dynamic, must have certain unchanging constants to give it structure: with Einstein, it was the speed of light; with the Egyptians, it was the unchanging identity of the individual. Life was an endless series of exciting episodes through which the individual passes, undergoing many changes to match every changing environment, but he never loses his identity. It is our modern dynamic faith that binds the individual to a single stereotype and gives him only one life, chopped off at both ends as neatly as a piece of dough in an ITT bakery.

In the more exalted realms of higher thought, however, modern thinking moves steadily closer to the Egyptians. For just as it is not possible for us to visualize the incredible forces and particles of a universe describable only in terms of mathematics, so the Egyptians wisely did not attempt to visualize the ultimate, but stuck to models to explain themselves. The whole Egyptian ritual cycle is figurative: "Behold, all things have their likeness," was their motto, "... both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath: all things bear record of me" (Moses 6:63).

Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, xiii

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Egyptian love of life ... runs through everything, along with a lively recognition of the individual as the representative and vessel of that life. A constant concern of the Egyptian is that his own personal name be recorded, remembered, and repeated on earth and in the beyond. This is no mystic absorption into the blessed nothingness which men farther East and centuries later disciplined themselves to accept. Emptiness and negation held no charm for the Egyptian. This desire for individual eternal life finds expression in three constantly recurring motifs, rarely missing from any significant monument: (1) the family ... , (2) eternity ... [and] (3) cosmology. ... Need we point out that the principal teachings of the Mormon Temple are also concerned with family, eternity, and cosmology?

"There Is Always Egypt," 12

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The three motifs that confront us wherever we turn in temple and tomb are eternity, family, and cosmos. As to family, the gods themselves do not appear in solitary splendor in the great temples, but always have the rest of the family along, as the individual in his tomb wants to be seen in the intimate and loving company of his wife and children; whether gods, kings, or commoners, they hold hands and embrace in an easy and affectionate manner.

"The Greatness of Egypt," 14

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An important feature of Egyptian architecture of temple, tomb, and even palace is a door, sometimes shown as a curtain or lattice, through which a spirit can pass, a means of communication between two worlds; and the literature is full of ceremonial and mythical doors and gates and instructions on how to pass them.

"The Greatness of Egypt," 18

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If we attempt to untangle the probably historical from the fanciful, we soon discover the common ground on which they meet and fuse: it is *ritual*. Myths arise as attempts to explain ritual doings, whose meaning has been forgotten—"What mean these stones?" After much discussion back and forth, the consensus now emerges that it is the rites and ordinances that come first. This should have been clear from the outset, since myths and legends are innumerable while the rites and ordinances found throughout the world are surprisingly few and uniform. ...

Such indeed has always been the Latter-day Saint position. Adam first performed an ordinance and when asked to give an explanation of it replied that he knew of none “save that the Lord hath commanded me.” Then it was that the true explanation came forth from the mouth of a heavenly instructor.

“Myths and the Scriptures,” *CWHN* 1:42

THE BLESSING OF THE TEMPLE

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The Christian world has been perennially haunted by the ghost of the temple—a ghost in which it does not believe. If the least be said for it, the temple has never lost its power to stir men’s imaginations and excite their emotions, and the emotion which it has most often inspired in Christian breasts has certainly been that of envy, a passion the more dangerous for being suppressed. The temple has cast a shadow over the claims and the confidence of the Christian church from early times, a shadow which is by no means diminishing in our own day. If we seem to have labored the obvious in pointing this out, it is only because the obvious has been so long and so resolutely denied or ignored in high places.

“Christian Envy of the Temple,” 414

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Five days a week between three and four o’clock in the morning, hundreds of elderly people along the Wasatch Front bestir themselves to go up and begin their long hours of work in the temple, where they are ready to greet the first comers at 5:30 a.m. (At that time, long before daylight, the place is packed, you can’t get in, so I virtuously wait until later, much later, in the day.) Whatever they may be up to, here is a band of mortals who are actually engaged in doing something which has not their own comfort, convenience, or profit as its object. Here at last is a phenomenon that commands respect in our day and could safely be put forth among the few valid arguments we have to induce the Deity to spare the human race: thousands of men and women putting themselves out for no ulterior motive. There is a touch of true nobility here.

What draws them to the temple? There is no music, pageantry, or socializing to beguile the time; none of us begins to grasp the full significance of what is going on, yet nobody seems bored. Why is that?

I can only speak for myself, harking back to the subject of hints, those countless impulses with which our perceptors are being bombarded by day and night. For thousands of years the stars have gone on sending us their hints, broadcasting unlimited information if we only knew it; now at last we are reacting to a narrow band on the informational spectrum, putting clues together in a way the ancients never did. But also we are beginning to suspect that there were times when the ancients reacted to another band of the spectrum which is completely lost on us. The temple, as the very name proclaims, is a place where one takes one’s bearings on the universe. What goes on there is confidential and must remain so until both the Mormons and the outside world are in a better position to understand it.

Meanwhile, I write this almost fifty years to the day since the bewildering experience of my own endowment; I have just returned from the temple again where this day I made a most surprising and gratifying discovery. If I

went to the temple five times and nothing happened, I would stop going. But I've gone hundreds of times, and the high hopes of new knowledge with which I go up the hill every week are never disappointed.

"An Intellectual Autobiography," xxvii-xxviii

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We live in Vanity Fair today, and the temple represents the one sober spot in the world. . . . It is my testimony that the gospel has been restored, and the Lord intends to fulfill his purposes in these days. And whatever we ask him for, he will give us. This I tell my family without any reservation whatever. I have never asked the Lord for anything that he didn't give to me. Well, you say, in that case, you surely didn't ask for much. No, I didn't; I was very careful not to ask for much. We don't want to be spoiled brats, do we? We ask for what we need, for what we can't get ourselves, and the Lord will give it to us]. Don't worry. But he also wants us to get in and dig for the rest.

So I pray and hope that the Lord may inspire and help us all to become more engaged—more involved—in the work of these latter-days and visit the temple often and become wiser all the time, because he intends to give us more revelations through that instrumentality.

"The Meaning of the Temple," *CWHN* 12:38