

Seeing God in His Temple: A Significant Theme in Israel's Psalms

Andrew C. Skinner

The Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, contains several episodes in which God appears to mortals. Such an appearance is called a theophany (from the Greek *theophaneia*, “God appearance”). Theophanies were not everyday occurrences, and passages such as Exodus 19:5–11 imply that they resulted from obedience, covenant keeping, and faithful devotion to God: “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: . . . And the Lord said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them to day and to morrow, . . . for the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai” (Exodus 19:5, 10–11).

While several other passages establish that theophanies occurred throughout the Old Testament, Exodus 29:42–46 tells us that after the Exodus from Egypt, the Lord said that he would appear to the Israelites mainly in the *’ohel mo’ed* (the tent of meeting, or tabernacle) once it was established:

For the generations to come this burnt offering is to be made regularly at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting before the Lord. There I will

Andrew C. Skinner is a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

meet you and speak to you; there also I will meet with the Israelites, and the place will be consecrated by my glory. So I will consecrate the Tent of Meeting and the altar and will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests. Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God. (NIV, Exodus 29:42–46)

Later, the First Temple in Jerusalem, Solomon's Temple, served this purpose—bringing worshippers into direct contact with Deity.

Thus a significant theme for the Psalmist,¹ as expressed in several of Israel's canonical psalms, was the idea that worshippers could come into the presence of God in his holy house in Jerusalem and see him face-to-face. As Professor Mark Smith of New York University put it, "Seeing God' is the preeminent image [in the Psalms] for the experience of God in the temple (Psalms 17:15; 42:2; 63:2; 84:7; cf. 11:7; Job 33:26), and this is described as an experience of brilliant light or is expressed metaphorically by comparing God with the sun (Psalm 84:7, 11)."² If Margaret Barker is correct that "seeking the face/presence of the LORD had been at the heart of the temple cult [temple beliefs and rituals],"³ the Psalter simply reflects this core message.

This should not surprise us, after all, since we know that there is a profound connection between the temple and many of the psalms—Israel's ancient hymns—as scholars both in and out of the Latter-day Saint community have noted. One scholar explains, "Many of the Psalms . . . though also sung at home or in the synagogue . . . were originally designed or later adapted for use in (or in connection with) the Temple."⁴ Barker has stated flatly that "the Psalms were the hymns of the Temple."⁵ Sigmund Mowinckel has emphasized that the psalms were centered in, and an important part of, Israelite and later Jewish temple worship.⁶ Thus we should expect to find some discussion of one of the temple's central purposes—bringing worshippers into God's presence—in ancient hymns of Israel that were composed in or for the temple. In fact, several of the psalms express the spiritual journey of Israel's ancient pilgrims to find God, culminating in "the speaker in some psalms [asking] the face of God be allowed to shine upon him (Psalm 31:16)."⁷ Therefore, in addition to looking at some examples of theophany in the Old Testament and some specific psalms about the great quest to see the face of God in the

temple, we will consider *who* worshipped in the First Temple in order to see God.

Examples of Theophany

Ancient Israel's belief that mortals could enter God's presence and see him face-to-face is as old as the existence of Israel itself. We know this from the culminating experience of Jacob, the immediate father of the Israelites, when he wrestled with a divine messenger for a blessing:

And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob.

And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.

And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there.

And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. (Genesis 32:27–30)

Even before Jacob had his life-altering experience, “the Lord appeared to Abram”—Jacob's grandfather and the father of multitudes—and commanded him to walk before the Lord in perfection (Genesis 17:1; see also 12:7; 18:1). The Lord spoke to Moses face-to-face as a man speaks to a friend (see Exodus 33:11). And Moses along with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel “saw the God of Israel” (Exodus 24:10); this experience recalls that of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple (compare Exodus 24:9–11 with D&C 110:1). During Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, the Lord said of Moses: “With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold” (Numbers 12:8). Deuteronomy refers to Moses as a prophet “whom the Lord knew face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10).

The experiences of other witnesses attest to the real possibility of seeing God in mortality, especially in the temple. Amos, a prophet from the eighth century BC, straightforwardly stated that he “saw the Lord standing upon the altar” (Amos 9:1). Likewise, the great seer Isaiah declared emphatically that he saw the Lord, which humbled him immeasurably (see Isaiah 6:1). Additionally,

see 1 Samuel 3:21 and 1 Kings 3:5–15, where the Lord’s appearances to young Samuel and King Solomon are both associated with the tabernacle or temple. Enough preexilic examples can be marshaled to show that, though perhaps it was not common, there were several occasions when mortals enjoyed God’s presence and saw him.

Indeed, in certain passages we even see the Israelites being encouraged, if not commanded, to seek the Lord’s face. One of these is all the more interesting because it comes from a psalm of David not recorded in the Psalter but in the book of Chronicles, where the historical context for the psalm is presented. This psalm was uttered by King David after the ark of the covenant was brought safely to Jerusalem before the actual temple structure was built. David had prepared a special place to represent the temple, and it was ready for the ark.

So they brought the ark of God, and set it in the midst of the tent that David had pitched for it: and they offered burnt sacrifices and peace offerings before God. . . .

Then on that day David delivered first this psalm to thank the Lord into the hand of Asaph and his brethren.

Give thanks unto the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people.

Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him, talk ye of all his wondrous works.

Glory ye in his holy name: let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord.

Seek the Lord and his strength, *seek his face continually*. (1 Chronicles 16:1, 7–11; emphasis added)

The whole of the psalm recounted in 1 Chronicles 16:8–36 seems to be an amalgamation of three other canonical psalms (1 Chronicles 16:8–22 corresponds with Psalm 105:1–15; 1 Chronicles 16:23–33 with Psalm 96:1–13; and 1 Chronicles 16:34–36 with Psalm 106:1, 47–48). While this may well mean that 1 Chronicles 16 was composed later than the psalms it resembles, I believe that 1 Chronicles 16 preserves the authentic historical setting for Psalm 105. First Chronicles 16 also contains the injunction to “seek his [the Lord’s] face continually” (compare v. 11 and Psalm 105:4)—an injunction

that perfectly fits the temple setting and the language of theophany in the canonical psalms.⁸

The Place of God's Dwelling

Of all the texts in the Old Testament, psalms of theophany, or of promised theophany, lay out most clearly the requirements for the unparalleled privilege of seeing God—perhaps because certain psalms connect that privilege with a specific locale, the Jerusalem temple, and define the temple as the Lord's dwelling place. Psalm 68:16, for example, speaks of the temple as “the hill which God desireth to dwell in; yea, the Lord will dwell in it for ever.” The “hill” on which the temple was constructed was, of course, Mount Moriah (2 Chronicles 3:1).

Many biblical passages refer to the temple not as *built* on a hill or mountain, but *as* the hill or mountain of the Lord. Ezekiel 20:40 equates the expression “mine holy mountain” with the Lord's temple. Isaiah 2:2, a passage well known to Latter-day Saints, calls the Jerusalem temple, in Hebrew, the *har bet Yahweh*, literally “the mountain of the house of Jehovah.” And Psalm 99:9 encourages all of righteous Israel to “exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy hill.”

The belief that the temple was God's holy house dates back to the origins of the First Temple. Following King Solomon's dedicatory prayer over the temple, the Lord himself accepted the structure in these words: “I have heard thy prayer and thy supplication, that thou hast made before me: I have hallowed this house . . . to put my name there for ever; and mine eyes and mine heart shall be there perpetually” (1 Kings 9:3).

According to the Chronicler, as part of his acceptance of the temple, the Lord himself encouraged his people to seek his face, and he promised them an associated blessing. He declared:

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

Now mine eyes shall be open, and mine ears attent unto the prayer that is made in this place. (2 Chronicles 7:14–15)

Clearly the Lord expected his people to seek his face in the temple. It was his dwelling place, a place of effectual, fervent prayer, and the place from

which God himself would answer his people and in which he would dwell among them (note the parallel function of the tabernacle as described earlier in Exodus 29:42–45).⁹

In the Psalmist's worldview, God's earthly temple paralleled a heavenly temple. For he said, "The Lord is in his holy temple (*b^eheikhal qad^esho*); the Lord is on his heavenly throne" (Psalm 11:4; translation mine). Here I believe the Psalmist is using antithetical parallelism to compare God's two dwelling places. The holy structure on earth called the temple (*heikhal*) has its counterpart: God's heavenly residence, his divine throne.

The Hebrew word *heikhal* is a well-known noun which is most often used to refer to the Jerusalem temple. Occasionally, it is translated as "palace" (1 Kings 21:1; 2 Kings 20:18). The term *heikhal* is a loan-word from the earlier Sumerian word *e-gal*, "large house, palace"¹⁰—the residence of the "big man," or king. Thus, even when the word *heikhal* clearly referred to God's holy temple in Jerusalem, it carried the connotation of a palace. Hence, we come to understand and appreciate that the Lord's earthly temple was also his earthly palace, home to his earthly throne. Just as God had a heavenly throne, so too he had an earthly throne in Zion, as the Psalmist declared (Psalm 9:11). Therefore, the Psalmist, one of the Heavenly King's earthly subjects, declared in a psalm which speaks of God's enthronement in his temple-palace,

Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.

Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.

Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory. Selah. (Psalm 24:7–10)

In another psalm, the Psalmist declared that he *had* seen God in his sanctuary and there beheld his power and glory (Psalm 63:2). Indeed, God was so great that even the mortal "king shall rejoice in God" (Psalm 63:11).

Temple Pilgrimages

Psalm 63 is also noteworthy as it relates to worshippers making pilgrimages to the Jerusalem temple. Three times a year, all males of the covenant were commanded to make a pilgrimage to the temple to “appear before the Lord God”—at the spring Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover), seven weeks later at the Feast of Harvest (Weeks), and at the fall Feast of Ingathering (Tabernacles), according to Exodus 23:14–17.

I believe that over time, this passage came to be read differently from its original meaning, thus obscuring the powerful truth that God intended for mortals to strive to see his face. In this fundamental revelation about the liturgical calendar, Moses was told that there were three sanctuary festivals every year that *every* male of the covenant must observe. The King James Version of Exodus 23:17 reads, “Three times in the year all thy males shall appear (*yērā’eh*) before the Lord God.” This is the standard translation. But it may be legitimately argued that the Hebrew word *yērā’eh* should be vocalized slightly differently (*yir’eh*) and that this passage should actually read, “Three times in the year every male of yours *will see the face of Lord.*” The Samaritan Bible supports this reading (using a *Qal* form of the verb instead of the traditional *Nifal*),¹¹ and it harmonizes well with the collection of texts we have been exploring. I believe Deuteronomy 16:16 should be read this way as well: “Three times in the year every male of yours *will see the Lord your God* in the place that he will choose.”¹² The place God first chose was, of course, the portable temple called the tabernacle, and he later chose the Jerusalem temple. Thus, seeing the face of the Lord was no inconsequential concept in ancient Israel. Its importance seems to have been lost in certain passages or, at the very least, downplayed over time. Thus, if the emended reading is correct, the original commandment to go to the temple to see the face of God was given to all, suggesting that all were at least to *strive* in righteousness to come into God’s presence—if not to be wholly successful in that quest.

We have very little contemporary data about the details of these sanctuary festivals in First Temple times, how they were actually observed, the role of individual pilgrims, or how priests and Levites were expected to mediate between man and God. Most all of the information about these pilgrimage feasts comes from later rabbinic sources. Scholars have extrapolated the activities of pilgrims at the temple in preexilic times from sources from the

Second Temple period or later. Especially interesting is the glimpse we get of active participation on the part of the pilgrims themselves in the festivals, as well as the place of the psalms in all three pilgrimage festivals. During the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover), “each Israelite slaughtered his own offering, and priests caught the blood in gold and silver vessels. Meanwhile, Psalms 113–18, the Hallel psalms, traditionally the psalms for pilgrimage, were sung.”¹³ Upon arriving at the temple court during the Feast of Harvest (Weeks), the pilgrims were “met by the song of the Levites who are said to have sung Psalm 30.”¹⁴ Daily during the Feast of Ingathering (Tabernacles), “there was a procession around the altar; worshippers carried a branch in one hand and a piece of fruit in the other, and Psalm 118 was sung.”¹⁵

Always the activities of the three pilgrimage festivals were accompanied by the singing of psalms and a feeling of joy centered on the temple. Each of the pilgrimages culminated in the experience of the temple, a feeling captured by one of the pilgrimage psalms:

I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord.
 Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem.
 Jerusalem is builded as a city that is compact together:
 Whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, unto the testi-
 mony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the Lord.
 For there are set thrones of judgment, the thrones of the house
 of David.
 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.
 Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces.
 For my brethren and companions' sakes, I will now say, Peace be
 within thee.
 Because of the house of the Lord our God I will seek thy good.
 (Psalm 122:1–9)

Before entering the temple, the pilgrim was further elevated in purity through priestly rituals, “which provid[ed] a transition to the holy realm of the temple.”¹⁶ Inside the temple precinct, pilgrims would see architecture designed to enhance the feeling of holiness and closeness to God by symbolically replicating the Garden of Eden. All the temple walls were carved with “figures of cherubims and palm trees and open flowers,” with “doors of olive tree” (1 Kings 6:29, 31). It seems that the pilgrim in the temple attempted to

recapitulate symbolically the activities of the first inhabitants of the Edenic paradise, walking in the presence of God and feasting on the fruit of every tree of the garden (except one).¹⁷ One Psalmist may have even drawn upon the recaptured setting of Eden in the Jerusalem temple when he described his successful quest to enter the divine presence: “I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with the riches of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you” (NIV, Psalm 63:2–5).

From one perspective, “the experience of the temple was paradise regained.”¹⁸ The culmination of that experience—encountering God—was enhanced by the architectural designs in the temple.

Requirements for Worshippers

Certain psalms indicate that not everyone was permitted to enter the temple. There were requirements governing who could worship in the temple and thus seek to enjoy God’s presence: “For the Lord is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face” (NIV, Psalm 11:7). We might even say that *only* upright persons will see the Lord’s face, for that is the message of the passage. The Hebrew word translated in this psalm as “upright” is *yashar*, which derives from a root that originally meant “to be straight,” “honest,” or “right.”¹⁹ The Lord’s intent in this verse is not hard to discern.

Perhaps the best known of the psalms that describe the prerequisites for a personal encounter with God is Psalm 24, quoted in part above. Among the many scholarly treatments of Psalm 24, I still think that some of the older discussions are the best. Sigmund Mowinckel avers that Psalm 24 contains the “laws of the sanctuary,” which are the “special rules and special demands as to the qualifications of those to be admitted” into the temple.²⁰ Psalm 24 is one of the so-called psalms of ascent or procession, sung by the Levites and priests as devotees went up to the temple to worship and participate in sacrifices offered there.

Biblical commentator Franz Delitzsch referred to this psalm as “preparation for the reception of the Lord who is about to come [into his temple].”²¹ According to his scheme, the psalm was to be sung antiphonally, by a “chorus of the festive procession,” starting out with verses 1 and 2 when the pilgrims were below the hill of the temple. Separate voices responded

to the chorus with the critical questions and answers found in verses 3–4. The chorus in turn replied with verses 5 and 6 as the procession moved up the hill. Then, upon arriving at the gate of the temple, the chorus sang verses 7–10.²² Psalm 24 reads:

The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.

For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods.

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place?

He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.

He shall receive the blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

This is the generation of them that seek him, that seek thy face, O Jacob. Selah.

Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.

Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.

Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory. Selah. (Psalm 24:1–10)

Though the King James Version of Psalm 24:3 uses the words “hill of the Lord,” the Hebrew literally translates to “who shall go up to the *mountain* of Yahweh,” a reference to the Lord's mountain house, as we saw in Isaiah 2:2. And the phrase “who shall stand in his holy place” refers directly to the temple; a section of the Jerusalem temple was explicitly called “the Holy Place.”²³

The implication of the King James Version of Psalm 24 is that one could encounter God in the temple if worthy. Though the flow is a bit garbled, the text seems to be saying that “the generation of them that seek him [the Lord] . . . shall receive the blessing from the Lord [whose face they seek].” This was likely understood against the backdrop of several other psalms showing that when the Lord's face shines on a person, blessings—especially salvation—come (see

Psalms 4:6; 31:16; 67:1–2; 80:3, 7, 19; 119:135). The Psalmist's many petitions for God's face to shine upon him and his people seem to be part of a long-standing belief in God's anthropomorphic reality.

The problem is that the version of Psalm 24 preserved in the King James Bible appears to have something missing in verse 6, near the name Jacob. From the context provided in the rest of the verses, it is not Jacob's face that is sought but the Lord's. The Septuagint (LXX) points out much more explicitly (especially verse 6) that the ultimate purpose of going up to the temple was to "seek the face of the God of Jacob." And that opportunity rested on specific requirements of worthiness:

Who shall go up to the mountain of the Lord, and who shall stand in his holy place?

He that is innocent in his hands and pure in his heart; who has not lifted up his soul to vanity, nor sworn deceitfully to his neighbor.

He shall receive a blessing from the Lord, and mercy from God his Saviour.

This is the generation of them that seek him, that seek the face of the God of Jacob. . . .

Who is this king of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is this king of glory. (LXX, Psalm 23:3–6, 10)²⁴

Here the unobscured objective of the pure in heart is to see God in his temple. Why the Septuagint is clearer on this point is open to debate. Perhaps this clarity reflects the translator's interpretation of how the Hebrew text was supposed to be understood. Or perhaps the Hebrew manuscripts from which the LXX was translated truly did preserve the superior reading compared to other manuscript versions. Given available evidence, it seems not only possible but likely that different Jewish communities had slightly different versions of the same Old Testament books: the Babylonian community had one version, the Palestinian community had another version, and the Egyptian community had still another.²⁵ Whatever the reason, given all the scriptures we are able to examine, it is apparent to me that the LXX gives us the language and meaning that was originally intended.

In parallel fashion, Jesus Christ used the doctrinal foundation of Psalm 24 to make the same promise, in his Sermon on the Mount, to the pure in heart: they would see God (Matthew 5:8). In both cases, the condition upon which

the promises rested was clean hands and a pure heart. It becomes even more apparent that Jesus based his promise on Psalm 24 when we compare the wording of the psalm in the Septuagint with the Greek New Testament wording of Matthew 5:8. The Septuagint phrase “pure in his heart” (*katharos te kardia*), used in the singular in verse 4, is equivalent to the phrase “pure in heart” (*katharoi te kardia*), used in the plural by Jesus in Matthew 5:8.

In First Temple times, it seems that both the outward actions and the inward thoughts of the worshipper had to conform to a holy standard for the person to gain entrance into the temple precinct. Hands were stained by such things as idolatry, murder, theft, adultery, Sabbath breaking, and mistreating others. The heart was corrupted by evil or impure thoughts. Ritual purity must also have been a concern, and thus participation in cleansing rituals to remove ritual impurity could also probably be expected of prospective temple attendees. Note the dozens of *mikvaoth*, or ritual baths, that archaeologists have uncovered around the precinct of the Second Temple.

The worthy temple worshipper in ancient Israel was also a member of the covenant community. Undoubtedly reflecting requirements from the First Temple period, Ezekiel included in his description of a glorious future temple the requirement of covenant membership for entering the temple: “Thus saith the Lord God; No stranger, uncircumcised in heart, nor uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter into my sanctuary, of any stranger that is among the children of Israel” (Ezekiel 44:9).

None of the other Old Testament theophanic passages we have examined place restrictions on who may worship in the temple. Neither do they provide many particulars concerning the ultimate quest of coming into the presence of God in the temple. Priests oversaw the sacrificial system and acted as mediators between man and God, but no detailed explanation of their role in guiding worshippers to see God is given in these passages. The language of all theophany texts in the Psalter is democratic. We know gradations of holiness existed—among classes of people as well as in the temple itself. Yet the language of the Psalter does not discriminate; all are invited to seek the face of God.

Some prominent biblical scholars, including Hermann Gunkel, Sigmund Mowinckel, K. Galling, and J. Begrich, have argued that during the existence of the First Temple, priests stood at the temple gates and ensured the worthiness of worshippers, and hence the sanctity of the temple, by posing questions

to those seeking entrance.²⁶ Hans-Joachim Kraus suggested a similar, though reverse, scenario. The worshippers stood outside the gates of the temple and asked, “Who is worthy to enter the temple?” Then, “from the inside a priestly speaker answers them with the declaration of the conditions of entrance.”²⁷ These conditions are found in other psalms beside Psalm 24.

Psalm 15 is another temple entrance hymn that presents qualifications required of those who seek the Lord in his sanctuary. It begins with a question directed to the Lord himself: “Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill?” (v. 1). The Lord’s answer encompasses a series of requirements which seem very much the equivalent of an ancient certification of temple worthiness—a temple recommend, if you will, in Latter-day Saint parlance. The NIV Bible provides a helpful translation:

He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart
 and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman,
 who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the Lord, who keeps his oath even when it hurts,
 who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken.
 (NIV, Psalm 15:2–5)

It has been asserted that these attributes were individual qualifications that formed a ten-part requirement. In sum, according to Psalm 15, a worshipper in ancient Israel who desired to enter the temple was one who

1. walked with integrity,
2. worked righteousness,
3. spoke truth,
4. despised reprobates,
5. had sworn to do no evil,
6. had not slandered (“trip on his tongue”),
7. had done no evil to his neighbor,
8. had not lifted up a reproach against his relative,
9. had not charged interest for his money,
10. and had not taken a bribe against the innocent.²⁸

The number ten appears to have been used purposely by the Psalmist because of its symbolic value. It connoted wholeness, completeness, and correctness. The number ten was used symbolically in a number of other biblical passages, including, for example, the Ten Commandments, the ten plagues, tithing, and the parable of the ten virgins.²⁹ In Psalm 15, the number ten may have served another significant purpose in this confession of temple worthiness, according to Peter C. Craigie. He proposed that temple worshippers were required to recite from memory, using their ten fingers as memory devices, the “moral conditions prerequisite to participation in [temple] worship.”³⁰ Psalm 15 seems to have recorded an ancient confession of faith and a pledge of worthiness that certified the uprightness of the temple participant or worshipper—priest, Levite, or Israelite.

Here one is reminded of the purity requirements demanded of ancient Egyptians who desired to enter the sacred space of their temples. Egypt was another intensely temple-oriented culture, closely associated with Israel. The Egyptians believed that their gods dwelt in temples just as the Israelites believed that the true and living God dwelt in his temple. Egyptian temples served as “mansions of the gods” and “portals to the divine.”³¹ Also, in Egypt, as in Israel, the identity between palace and temple is generally assumed. That is, the temple was likewise regarded as the throne room of deity. The declarations of purity required for entry into the temple comprised the Negative Confession in the Book of the Dead 125. A portion of the Negative Confession, an affirmation of uprightness stated as denial of any wrongdoing, reads as follows:

Hail to thee, O great god, lord of the Two Justices! I have come to thee, my lord, I have been brought that I might see thy beauty. . . . I have come to thee, I have brought thee justice, I have banished deceit for thee.

I have not done evil to men.

I have not illtreated animals.

I have not sinned in the temple. . . .

I have not blasphemed the gods.

I have not done violence to the poor.

I have not done what the gods abhor.

I have not defamed a slave to his master.

I have not made anyone sick.
 I have not made anyone weep.
 I have not slain.
 I have not given orders to slay.
 I have not made anyone to suffer. . . .
 I am blameless.³²

In Egypt, as in Israel, the temple was the place to see the face of the gods. According to Egyptologist John Gee, the Negative Confession constituted a list that certified the purity, capacity, and authorization of someone to enter the temple. It amounted to, in Professor Gee's words, "the ancient Egyptian equivalent of the modern temple recommend."³³

Of course, the ancient Egyptians did not possess the priesthood, and their temples were not sacred precincts of the true and living God. But they understood very well the connection between the requirements of purity in thought and action and the ability to enjoy the presence of the gods. Their understanding of this principle, along with their attempt to imitate the powers of the ancient order of the priesthood, dates from the distant past, as the Patriarch Abraham's memoir in the Pearl of Great Price indicates (see Abraham 1:26).

Our Latter-day Dispensation

All of this sounds more than familiar to Latter-day Saints acquainted with their own temple theology and the requirements for temple entrance and worship. The concept of the temple as the place where the Lord may be seen face-to-face is one of the superlative doctrines restored by Joseph Smith. In his biography of the Prophet, eminent historian Richard Bushman commented on this aspect of the Restoration: "In the temple . . . Joseph hoped his Saints would face God as Moses' people never could. At the completion of Solomon's temple, God came in a cloud of glory. A fall 1832 revelation said that when the Kirtland temple was finished, 'a cloud shall rest upon it, which cloud shall be even the glory of the Lord.'"³⁴

Indeed, a major part of Joseph Smith's ministry seems to have been devoted to helping latter-day Israel understand that the promise of seeing the Lord face-to-face in the temple was literal and real, just as ancient Israel's leaders and writers believed. But in presenting the authenticity and literal nature

of this promise, both Joseph and the ancients were merely echoing the Lord himself, as we shall see.

In preparation for the building of the Kirtland Temple, the Lord emphasized to the Prophet the need for complete purity, using language about seeing the Lord face-to-face that sounds as if it were culled from something written by Israel's ancient Psalmist. The Lord said:

And inasmuch as my people build a house unto me in the name of the Lord, and do not suffer any unclean thing to come into it, that it be not defiled, my glory shall rest upon it;

Yea, and my presence shall be there, for I will come into it, and all the pure in heart that shall come into it shall see God.

But if it be defiled I will not come into it, and my glory shall not be there; for I will not come into unholy temples. (D&C 97:15–17)

Several other passages in modern revelation hold up the promise of a face-to-face encounter with the Lord. But the requirement upon which the promise is predicated is uniform: purity. “Verily, thus saith the Lord: It shall come to pass that every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and calleth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am” (D&C 93:1).

Joseph Smith's emphasis on seeing God in the temple was not just a radical departure from the Christianity of his day—it was revolutionary. As Professor Bushman indicates, in an era when “many Christians were sloughing off the Hebrew Bible and taking their Gospel solely from the New Testament,” Joseph was, by divine instruction, elevating and theologically enthroning temple themes from the Old Testament.³⁵ Joseph and the Psalmist, particularly, were at one.

The emphasis on purity as a requirement for temple participation in early Mormonism, as it was in certain psalms, is well exemplified in a comment by W. W. Phelps regarding the coming dedication of the temple: “We are preparing to make ourselves clean, by first cleansing our hearts, forsaking our sins, forgiving every body, all we ever had against them; anointing washing the body; putting on clean decent clothes, by anointing our heads and by keeping all the commandments. As we come nearer to God we see our imperfections and nothingness plainer and plainer.”³⁶

Praise and Petition

Above all, the biblical psalms are full of praise for God's goodness, greatness, righteousness, mercy, and loving-kindness (see, for example, Psalm 36:5–7). As a result, the Psalmist especially exulted in the opportunity to come into the Lord's presence, for "in [the Lord's] presence is fulness of joy" (Psalm 16:11).

The Psalmist was convinced that beholding the face of the Lord in righteousness would completely satisfy his soul. In contrast to the "men of the world," who "have their portion in this life," meaning wealth and worldly power, the Psalmist proclaimed, "I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied" (Psalm 17:14–15). Mitchell Dahood has noted that a "beatific vision, the face to face meeting with God, is clearly intended."³⁷ It was not metaphor.

The Psalmist declared, furthermore, that the countenance of the Lord made one "exceeding glad" (Psalm 21:6). "In [*his*] light shall *we* see light" (Psalm 36:9; emphasis added).

For these reasons, the Psalmist sought one thing above all others, had one overarching request of the Lord—that he "may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of [*his*] life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple" (Psalm 27:4).

Is this not the request of all true disciples in every age when the Lord's temples have been available? And can we not appreciate and relate to what ultimately kept the Psalmist faithful and motivated? For, he confessed, "I had fainted, unless I had believed *to see* the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord" (Psalm 27:13–14; emphasis added).

In these two verses do we not find something of an ultimate message for all those who worship in the Lord's temples in modern times? And is not the continued plea of the Psalmist our plea as temple-going Latter-day Saints?

When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek.

Hide not thy face far from me; put not thy servant away in anger: thou hast been my help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation. (Psalm 27:8–9)

This request becomes all the more significant in our discussion when we realize that the Psalmist uttered these words only three verses after he petitioned the Lord to be allowed to spend the rest of his days in the temple (see v. 4). Seeking the face of the Lord and seeking to be in the temple were twin thrusts of the same quest. In Psalm 42:2, the Psalmist longs to come to God in the temple: “When will I go and see the face of God?” (*māthai ’abō’ v’e’ērā’eh p^enē ’elōhim*).³⁸

Conclusion

Given all that we have examined, it is impossible for me to believe that seeking the face of God was a minor theme in the Old Testament or a passing fancy in the mind of the Psalmist. Rather, the Psalmist and other biblical writers seem, at times, to be consumed by this idea. Isaiah, for instance, regards his vision of the Lord in the temple as the apex of his call to be a prophet. “I saw also the Lord,” he said, “and his train filled the temple” (Isaiah 6:1). In this vein, after discussing at great length “what the language of ‘seeing God’ or ‘seeing God’s face’ refers [to]” in the psalms, Mark Smith concludes: “What the psalmists experienced of the divine in the temple was too great to reduce to natural phenomenon. . . . Perhaps the psalmists experienced God just as Moses, Isaiah, and Ezekiel did . . . human in form and dazzling in light.”³⁹

I think we should take very seriously the idea that in the minds of many biblical writers, especially the Psalmist, seeking the face of the Lord was *the* quest of mortality and that it was against the backdrop of this belief that the Psalmist encouraged every true follower of God to “seek the Lord, and his strength: *seek his face* evermore” (Psalm 105:4; emphasis added).

Jesus Christ renewed and revitalized this quest when he, quoting the Psalmist, promised the pure in heart that they would see God (Matthew 5:8). The Prophet Joseph Smith restored this quest and reported it to be the ultimate blessing of temple attendance within a religious system that began as a face-to-face encounter with Deity in an open-air, wooded temple called the Sacred Grove (D&C 97:15–17; Joseph Smith—History 1:14–17; see also D&C 93:1; 88:67–68). Thus, the belief of the ancient Psalmist—that God may be seen in his temple—is our conviction as well.

Notes

1. Hereafter I use *Psalmist* to refer to the author or authors of the particular psalm or psalms under discussion, not to suggest that all psalms were composed by a single author or that psalms, once written, were never edited by others.

2. Mark S. Smith, "The Psalms as a Book for Pilgrims," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology* 46, no. 2 (April 1992): 162. Smith is Skirball Professor of Bible and Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University.

3. Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 6. Though some of Barker's positions regarding ancient Israel's history have been called into question, several scriptures support her view on this point.

4. John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2009), 43.

5. Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven* (London: SPCK, 1991), 45.

6. Sigmund Mowinkel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:89–90.

7. Smith, "The Psalms as a Book for Pilgrims," 162.

8. First Chronicles 16 has also been used to support the argument that the Levites acted as the final compilers of the Psalter in the postexilic period since this chapter places the three sections of the canonical psalms "into the hand of Asaph and his brethren" (1 Chronicles 16:7)—a Levitical group. See Mark S. Smith, "The Levitical Compilation of the Psalter," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 103 (1991): 258–59. This hypothesis also points to the temple, given the inextricable link between the temple and the Levites.

9. It is argued by interpreters that the author of Kings shaped and presented his material to speak to the needs of the exiled community of Israel while the Chronicler wrote for the restored community of Israel who had returned from exile. Perhaps some would dismiss the credibility of 2 Chronicles 7:14–15 on this basis. However, I believe that this passage does reflect a historical core—that at the dedication of the First Temple, God encouraged the Israelites to seek his face. I believe that Chronicles here is in harmony with several other scriptural writings that extend an invitation of theophany and that the language of the Psalmist about seeking the face of God develops from God's invitation at the First Temple dedication.

10. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and others, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:244–45.

11. The *Qal* form or stem of the Hebrew verb denotes action in the active voice; the *Nifal* form denotes action in the passive voice ("to see" versus "to appear"). Nearly 70 percent of verbs in Hebrew are *Qal* forms.

12. This is also the reading proposed by Margaret Barker in *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 146.

13. Smith, "The Psalms as a Book for Pilgrims," 157.

14. Smith, "The Psalms as a Book for Pilgrims," 158.

15. Smith, "The Psalms as a Book for Pilgrims," 158.

16. Smith, "The Psalms as a Book for Pilgrims," 160.

17. The typology of feasting in God's presence in the temple is laid out in more detail in Smith, "The Psalms as a Book for Pilgrims," 161–62.
18. Smith, "The Psalms as a Book for Pilgrims," 161.
19. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 1:449.
20. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1:177.
21. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, n.d.), 1:332.
22. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, 1:332–33.
23. Alec Garrard, *The Splendor of the Temple: A Pictorial Guide to Herod's Temple and Its Ceremonies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregal, 2000), 21, 73.
24. Translation from Lancelot C. L. Brenton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 711.
25. This notion is gathered from a variety of sources. See Karen H. Jobs and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 177; Frank M. Cross Jr., "The History of the Biblical Text in Light of Discoveries in the Judean Desert," in *Qumran and the History of the Biblical Text*, ed. Frank Moore Cross and Shmaryahu Talmon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 177–95; and Frank Moore Cross, "The Evolution of a Theory of Local Texts," in *Qumran and the History of the Biblical Text*, 306–20.
26. Moshe Weinfeld, "Instructions for Temple Visitors in the Bible and in Ancient Egypt," in *Egyptological Studies*, ed. Sarah Israelit-Groll, Scripta Hierosolymitana 28 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), 230–31, cited in Donald W. Parry, "Who Shall Ascend into the Mountain of the Lord? Three Biblical Temple Entrance Hymns," in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks, (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 735.
27. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 227.
28. Parry, "Who Shall Ascend into the Mountain of the Lord?," 732–33. Professor Parry follows the thinking of Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 150.
29. Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregal, 1969), 243–50.
30. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 151.
31. Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 7.
32. Sabatino Moscati, *The Face of the Ancient Orient: A Panorama of Near Eastern Civilizations in Pre-Classical Times* (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 126.
33. Personal conversation with John Gee, research professor, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University.
34. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 217.
35. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 312.
36. Quoted in Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 314.

37. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I: 1–50*, Anchor Bible 16 (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 99.

38. My translation.

39. Mark S. Smith, “‘Seeing God’ in the Psalms: The Background to the Beatific Vision in the Hebrew Bible,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (April 1988): 173, 182–83. Professor Smith’s comment appears in a detailed article responding to the late Professor Mitchell Dahood’s thesis, in his three-volume Anchor Bible commentary on Psalms, that “numerous passages in the Psalter point to an ancient Israelite belief in the ‘beatific vision’ . . . that some psalms indicate a hope in ‘beholding God throughout eternity, in afterlife.’”