

What Old Testament Temples Can Teach Us about Our Own Temple Activity

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Temple worship is not unique to the present dispensation. The Lord directed his people in Old Testament times to construct these holy structures, and even from the beginning of this earth's history, mortals have felt the need of establishing sacred sanctuaries where they can get away from worldly concerns and receive instruction pertaining to the eternities. Elder John A. Widtsoe believed that "all people of all ages have had temples in one form or another." There is ample evidence, he was convinced, that from the days of Adam "there was the equivalent of temples," that in patriarchal times "temple worship was in operation," and that even after the Flood "in sacred places, the ordinances of the temple were given to those entitled to receive them."¹ Elder Joseph Fielding Smith likewise explained that the Lord taught the fullness of the gospel to Adam and his posterity and gave them the law of sacrifice as a means of pointing their attention forward to his own infinite Atonement. An understanding of temple worship in Old Testament times can broaden our perspective and thus help us appreciate our own temple service even more.

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Specifically, temples have two essential functions: “A temple . . . is characterized not alone as the place where God reveals Himself to man, but also as the House wherein prescribed ordinances of the Priesthood are solemnized.”²

The Lord Revealed Detailed Specifications for His Sacred Sanctuaries

Moses’ tabernacle. In all ages the Savior has revealed the patterns according to which his sacred houses were to be built. Exodus chapters 25–27 contain the divine revelation of the tabernacle’s design and functions. The Lord specifically instructed Moses to construct the tabernacle and its furnishings “after the pattern” he would show him (Exodus 25:9).

The tabernacle itself was to be a tent measuring ten by thirty cubits, or about fifteen by forty-five feet. Inside the tabernacle’s entrance, which faced the east, was the main room measuring twenty cubits, or about thirty feet, in length. This room was known as the “holy place” (Exodus 26: 33).

The innermost room of the tabernacle, the *Most Holy Place* (Exodus 26:34) or “Holy of Holies,” was a perfect cube which measured approximately fifteen feet in height, width, and depth. It was separated from the Holy Place by a veil of “fine twined linen” adorned with cherubim, which were “traditional guardians of kings and thrones elsewhere in the ancient Near East,”³ embroidered in blue, purple, and scarlet (Exodus 26:1).⁴ A latter-day revelation (D&C 132:19) speaks of angels as guardians along the way to exaltation in the kingdom of God. Hence the veil may have symbolized the division between God and humans.

Into this most sacred room was placed the ark of the covenant, a chest of acacia wood overlaid with gold, which measured about three feet nine inches in length and two feet three inches in height and width (see Exodus 25:10). It contained the tablets of the law given to Moses on Mount Sinai and so was a tangible reminder of God’s covenant with his people. It also held a pot of manna as well as Aaron’s rod that had bloomed miraculously—two other reminders of God’s special blessings.

Solomon’s Temple. When the children of Israel ended their wanderings and settled in the promised land, they were in a position to build a permanent temple. Eventually, after Israel had grown in strength, King David’s thoughts turned to building a temple to the Lord: “I dwell in an house of cedar,” the king lamented, “but the ark of God dwelleth [only] within curtains” (2 Samuel 7:2). The Lord, however, declined David’s offer: “Thou shalt

not build a house for my name, because thou hast been a man of war, and hast shed blood" (1 Chronicles 28:3). Thus, as Elder Talmage pointed out, "it was not enough that the gift be appropriate, but that the giver must also be worthy."⁵ Nevertheless, the Lord assured David that his son, Solomon, who would succeed him as king, would be permitted to build the temple (see 1 Chronicles 28:6).

Solomon commenced building the temple in the fourth year of his reign (see 1 Kings 6:1). As had been the case with Moses building the tabernacle, the Lord gave Solomon specific instructions: "And the word of the Lord came to Solomon, saying, concerning this house which thou art in building, if thou wilt walk in my statutes, and execute my judgments, and keep all my commandments to walk in them; then will I perform my word with thee, which I spake unto David thy father" (1 Kings 6:11–12).

Solomon's Temple was twice as large as the tabernacle (see 1 Kings 6:2). President Brigham Young insisted that "the pattern of this Temple, the length, and breadth, and height of the inner and outer courts, with all the fixtures thereunto appertaining, were given to Solomon by revelation, through the proper source. And why was this *revelation-pattern* necessary? Because that Solomon had never built a Temple, and did not know what was necessary in the arrangement of the different apartments, any better than Moses did what was needed in the Tabernacle."⁶ The record in 1 Kings is very precise in giving the dimensions of the temple's various features, suggesting that these facts were significant.

The temple itself consisted of two main rooms, as had the tabernacle—the main hall and the inner sanctuary (1 Kings 6:16–20). Surrounding the temple on three sides was a series of small "chambers" on three levels (1 Kings 6:5–6).

Ezekiel's temple vision. Ezekiel chapters 40–44 record a vision of the gathering of Israel and of another great temple which would be built at Jerusalem in the future. Sidney B. Sperry, after whom this symposium is named, spent much of his career studying the prophets of the Old Testament and concluded the following concerning Ezekiel's vision of the latter-day temple: "It would appear to me after studying all of the chapters which in any way give clues to the use of the sacred structure, that no provision is made in it for any but the most simple rites, and these are not those of the sacred endowments as we know them."⁷ Still, there are concepts Ezekiel emphasized that can enhance Latter-day Saints' temple worship.

In this vision, a measuring rod was provided so Ezekiel could know the temple's precise dimensions (see Ezekiel 40:5). He was also shown a temple similar to the one built by Solomon. This new structure was to be surrounded by an outer court and an inner court, with the sacrificial altar at the center of the latter. Each court was to be a perfect square: the symmetry of these concentric courts may have reflected divine order. These two courts and the ten-foot-thick walls that surrounded them emphasized that the temple was removed from the outside world and worldliness.

Ezekiel also saw "waters" flowing out from under the temple. He noticed that the further they flowed, the deeper they became, until they entered and "healed" the Dead Sea (see Ezekiel 47:1-12). Likewise in our lives, the impact of temple blessings increases as we return again and again to the Lord's house. *The Interpreter's Bible* links Ezekiel's description with the Arabic tradition that "the sacred rock at the sanctuary at Jerusalem" is thought of "to be from paradise, and it is affirmed that all sweet waters issue from the rock, there to divide and flow to all parts of the world."⁸ This vision may also be linked with the "pure river of water of life" that John the Revelator saw flowing from the throne of God (Revelation 22:1).

Kirtland Temple. The Lord has also been involved in designing his holy houses in the present dispensation. In the spring of 1833, the Lord gave information about the house to be built at Kirtland in which he would "endow [his Saints] with power from on high" (D&C 95:8). The temple was not to be built "after the manner of the world" (D&C 95:13) but after the pattern he would reveal. It would have two large rooms, one above the other in the inner court or main body of the temple. Notice how the phrase *inner court* echoes descriptions of Old Testament temples. The Lord promised to reveal the design to three appointed brethren (see D&C 95:13-17). Truman O. Angell, one of the supervisors of temple construction, later testified that the Lord's promise to show the building's design was literally fulfilled. On an occasion when Joseph Smith invited his counselors in the First Presidency to kneel with him in prayer, the building appeared before them in vision. "After we had taken a good look at the exterior, the building seemed to come right over us," testified second counselor Frederick G. Williams. Later, while speaking in the completed temple, he affirmed that the hall in which they were convened coincided in every detail with the vision given to the Prophet.⁹

Nauvoo Temple. A few years later, the Prophet Joseph Smith invited interested individuals to submit designs for a second temple at Nauvoo.¹⁰ Several designs were received, but none suited him. When William Weeks, a recent convert who was an architect and builder from New England, came in with his plans, “Joseph Smith grabbed him, hugged him and said, ‘you are the man I want.’”¹¹ As had been the case with the Kirtland Temple, the Prophet testified that the basic plan for the Nauvoo Temple had been given to him by revelation. On a later occasion, for example, Weeks questioned the appropriateness of placing round windows on the side of the building. Joseph Smith, however, explained that the small rooms in the temple could be illuminated with one light at the center of each of these windows, and that “when the whole building was thus illuminated, the effect would be remarkably grand. ‘I wish you to carry out *my* designs,’” the Prophet insisted. “‘I have seen in vision the splendid appearance of that building illuminated, and will have it built according to the pattern shown me.’”¹² The Nauvoo Temple followed the general plan of the earlier temple in Kirtland, with two large meeting halls (one above the other) with arched ceilings. The temple would also include a baptismal font in the basement and facilities for other sacred ordinances on the attic level.

Salt Lake Temple. Concerning the Salt Lake Temple, President Brigham Young declared:

I scarcely ever say much about revelations, or visions, but suffice it to say, five years ago last July [1847] I was here, and saw in the Spirit the Temple not ten feet from where we have laid the Chief Corner Stone. I have not inquired what kind of a Temple we should build. Why? Because it was represented before me. I have never looked upon that ground, but the vision of it was there. I see it as plainly as if it was in reality before me. Wait until it is done. I will say, however, that it will have six towers, to begin with, instead of one. Now do not any of you apostatize because it will have six towers, and Joseph only built one. It is easier for us to build sixteen, than it was for him to build one.¹³

President Young described his vision to the temple’s architect, Truman O. Angell. Drawing on a slate in the architect’s office, President Young explained: “There will be three towers on the east, representing the President and his two Counselors; also three similar towers on the west representing

the Presiding Bishop and his two Counselors; the towers on the east the Melchisedek [*sic*] Priesthood, those on the west the Aaronic priesthood [*sic*]. The center towers will be higher than those on the sides, and the west towers a little lower than those on the east end. The body of the building will be between these."¹⁴

After describing his vision of the six-towered temple, President Young continued, "The time will come when there will be one [tower] in the centre of Temples we shall build, and, on the top, groves and fish ponds. But we shall not see them here, at present."¹⁵ Some temples built in the twentieth century, including Hawaii, Los Angeles, and Oakland, would represent a fulfillment of this prophecy, as would the Conference Center across the street from Temple Square.

Los Angeles Temple. Just as the tabernacle and Solomon's Temple had their entrances toward the east, that is also the preferred direction for latter-day temples to face. In October 1954 the statue of the angel Moroni was hoisted to the roof of the Los Angeles Temple and coated with twenty-three-karat gold. President David O. McKay, who frequently visited the temple and followed "with avid interest each phase of the work," made it a point to be present when the statue was placed on the temple's tower.¹⁶ According to the architectural plan, the angel was placed to face the front of the temple, which was toward the southeast. President McKay, however, asked the temple architect to have the statue turned so that it faced due east.¹⁷ While in ancient times, temple doors often opened toward the sunrise and may have reflected the Garden of Eden, which was entered from the east,¹⁸ in the latter days the temple entrance is symbolic of watching for the Lord's Second Coming, which has been compared to the dawning in the east of a new day (see Matthew 24:27; Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:26).

Ogden and Provo Temples. In 1967, plans were announced to build the Ogden and Provo Temples, and Emil B. Fetzner was named as the architect. A few days later, he and Fred Baker of the Building Committee flew to Europe on Church business. In New York, they boarded a plane for the overnight trans-Atlantic flight. After the midnight dinner, they proceeded to discuss the great assignment to design the two temples. Brother Fetzner recalled: "All of a sudden it was in my mind as if I were walking through a building, and I started to describe to Brother Baker what I was seeing—the recommend desk, the inner foyer, the locker room, and then on the upper floor the

sealing rooms. But the most important thing was on the floor above the sealing rooms. There was a central room surrounded by a cluster of six ordinance rooms.”¹⁹ Before they knew it, it was daylight, and the plane was landing in Frankfurt; they had been discussing the temple all night long. Fetzer later testified that this “unique and fundamental modification of Temple design concept was more than my own thinking. It was a direct inspiration given to me by the Holy Spirit.”²⁰

Only the Finest Materials and Workmanship Were to Be Employed

Even though the tabernacle of Moses was to be portable, it was nevertheless to be made of the finest materials available. It was to be the house of the Lord, comparable to our modern temples. To this end, the Lord directed Moses to call on the people for an offering of such materials as gold and silver, fine linens, and precious stones (see Exodus 25:1–7).

The tabernacle’s framework was of the most precious wood available, overlaid with gold and covered by fine linens and costly skins. Gold was used in the innermost chamber to enhance the feeling of reverence, in contrast to the silver and bronze employed in the outer room and outside court. Nevertheless, President Boyd K. Packer reminded us, “It is not the building itself but the visitations of the Spirit that sanctify. When the people stray from the Spirit their sanctuary ceases to be the house of the Lord.”²¹

Like the portable tabernacle in the wilderness, the permanent temple that Solomon built in the promised land was made with the finest possible materials and craftsmanship. Because the Israelites lacked experience in erecting such a magnificent structure as the temple was to be, Solomon turned to King Hiram of Tyre, who supplied architects, artisans, and cedar wood. Unusual steps were taken to preserve the spirit of reverence surrounding the temple, even during its construction: for example, the limestone was prepared far away at the quarry so that no sound of hammers or other iron tools would be heard at the building site (see 1 Kings 6:7). This specific precaution may hark back to the Lord’s earlier instructions that Moses should make an altar of unhewn stones (see Exodus 20:24–25). Interestingly, however, Solomon’s altar would not be made of stone.

With the aid of Hiram’s craftsmen, several large objects of bronze were prepared for the area immediately in front of the temple. One was the altar,

which was twenty feet high and more than thirty feet square at its base (see 2 Chronicles 4:1). Another was the “molten sea” or large font of bronze, which measured over thirty feet in diameter, weighed over twenty-five tons, and had a capacity of at least twelve thousand gallons. It was mounted on the backs of twelve oxen, three facing toward each of the cardinal points of the compass (1 Kings 7:23–26).²² These twelve oxen were symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel.²³

In his discussion about Solomon’s Temple, James E. Talmage noted that “the temple workmen numbered scores of thousands, and every department was in charge of master craftsmen. To serve on the great structure in any capacity was an honor; and labor acquired a dignity never before recognized.” He concluded that “the erection of the Temple of Solomon was an epoch-making event, not alone in the history of Israel, but in that of the world.”²⁴

Similarly, in the present dispensation, God’s people must be willing to sacrifice in order to provide these holy sanctuaries. For example, the dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple acknowledged, “We have done this work through great tribulation; and out of our poverty we have given of our substance to build a house to thy name” (D&C 109:5). Later, the revelation directing construction of the Nauvoo Temple invited, “Come ye, with all your gold, and your silver, and your precious stones, and with all your antiquities; and with all who have knowledge of antiquities, that will come, may come, and bring the box tree, and the fir tree, and the pine tree, together with all the precious trees of the earth; and with iron, with copper, and with brass, and with zinc, and with all your precious things of the earth; and build a house to my name, for the Most High to dwell therein” (D&C 124:26–27). Among Latter-day Saint architects and contractors, the phrase *temple quality* has come to represent the highest standards for materials and workmanship.

Temple Dedications Were Times of Rejoicing

After seven and a half years, Solomon’s Temple was completed. Its dedication was a milestone in the history of Israel and a spiritual feast for the people. King Solomon, the leaders of all the tribes, and a throng of people representing “all the congregation of Israel” gathered in the court directly in front of the temple (see 1 Kings 8:1–5). As the ark of the covenant was taken into the Most Holy Place, God’s glory filled the house like a cloud, and after the people offered sacrifices, the king dedicated the temple to the Lord: “I have surely built

thee an house to dwell in," he prayed, "a settled place for thee to abide in for ever" (1 Kings 8:13). King Solomon concluded his dedicatory prayer by petitioning: "The Lord our God be with us, as he was with our fathers: let him not leave us, nor forsake us: that he may incline our hearts unto him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments" (1 Kings 8: 57–58). At the conclusion of the days of dedication, the people left in a similar manner to that of the faithful in later dispensations, "joyful and glad of heart for all the goodness that the Lord had done" for them (1 Kings 8:66).

In the present dispensation, the dedication of the Kirtland Temple was likewise a joyous occasion climaxing a season of remarkable spiritual outpourings.²⁵ The dedicatory prayer, given by revelation (D&C 109), set the pattern for prayers at subsequent temple dedications. It was written out and then read by the Prophet, perhaps so that it would be delivered word for word in each of the two dedicatory services. The prayer covered a variety of concerns. The Prophet prayed that "thy glory may rest down upon thy people, and upon this thy house, which we now dedicate to thee, that it may be sanctified and consecrated to be holy, and that thy holy presence may be continually in this house" (D&C 109:12). He also prayed for "the nations of the earth" and their leaders and for the gathering of Israel (D&C 109:54, 61). The Prophet concluded his prayer of dedication by asking the Lord to bless the General Authorities and their families and to help his work roll forth in preparation for the glorious Second Coming (see D&C 109:68–76).

Subsequent temple dedicatory prayers have included ideas similar to those revealed by the Lord at Kirtland. Supplications for protection were typical, but several of the prayers reflected unique local circumstances. For example, Provo's dedicatory prayer petitioned, "Let that great temple of learning—the Brigham Young University . . .—be prospered to the full. Let Thy enlightening power rest upon those who teach and those who are taught."²⁶

Dedicatory prayers have been followed by the sacred Hosanna Shout, which is an expression of joyous praise. The word *hosanna* literally means "save now."²⁷ In ancient times, this shout was typically given out of doors and included the waving of leafy tree branches. In modern times, white handkerchiefs have been substituted, as the Hosanna Shout has generally been given indoors. It has been a regular part of every temple dedication and has been rendered on a few other occasions, including the 1892 placing of the Salt Lake Temple capstone, the 1930 centennial general conference, and the

2000 dedication of the Conference Center adjacent to Temple Square. The shout is also reflected in the chorus of “The Spirit of God.” This hymn has been sung at the dedication of every temple, often in conjunction with a choir singing the “Hosanna Anthem” composed for the Salt Lake Temple’s dedication.²⁸

Preparation Essential for Serving in the Temple

Old Testament scriptures emphasized that those who participated in temple worship needed to be prepared. Specifically, the priests who officiated had to be ordained or consecrated. Each time they entered the temple they were washed with water and clothed in “holy garments.” On certain occasions they were also anointed with pure olive oil. The Lord directed, “And thou shalt bring Aaron and his sons unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and wash them with water. And thou shalt put upon Aaron the holy garments, and anoint him, and sanctify him; that he may minister unto me in the priest’s office” (Exodus 40:12–13; compare Exodus 29:4–7). This anointing had special meaning because ancient people attributed life-giving powers to olive oil: “[it] was associated with prosperity, wealth, cleansing, healing, and purity and symbolized the Spirit.”²⁹ It was used as an ingredient in cooking, as a source of heat and light, and as a medicine.³⁰ Some ancient people even identified the olive tree with the tree of life.³¹ Furthermore, kings and queens were customarily anointed with olive oil as part of their coronation. Hence the anointing with this oil in the temple could have reminded the worshipper of his or her potential to become a king or queen in the kingdom of God.

The “holy garments” worn by the priests included white linen breeches or trousers, a “coat” and a “girdle” (translated as “tunic” and “sash” in many modern English versions), and “bonnets” (“hats” or “caps” in Hebrew) (Exodus 28:40–42). Their whiteness suggested cleanliness, purity, or heavenliness. In addition, the high priest wore other garments with colored embroidery, including an *ephod* (a long, intricately woven apron), a robe, and a *mitre* (a crown or turban); the ephod supported the breastplate containing the Urim and Thummim (see Exodus 28:4–7, 22–30, 39).

The high priest’s hat also had a pure gold plate just above the forehead bearing the inscription “Holiness to the Lord” (Exodus 28:36–38).³² This phrase is also inscribed on all Latter-day Saint temples, suggesting the purpose and spirit of the holy work done there. President James E. Faust admired

how this phrase not only appeared on the facade of the Salt Lake Temple but also adorned even its doorknobs. For him, this meant that “the days of our lives will be greatly blessed as we frequent the temples to learn the transcending spiritual relations we have with Deity. We need to try harder to be found standing in holy places.”³³

Sacred Ordinances in Old Testament Times

From the beginning of scriptural history, God instructed his people to sacrifice the “firstlings of their flocks.” An angel informed Adam that these offerings were a “similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father” (Moses 5:5–7). Other Old Testament patriarchs, including Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, continued the practice of erecting altars and offering sacrifices (see Genesis 8:20; 12:7–8; 13:18; 26:25; 33:20; and 35:7). After Jacob saw his dream of the ladder reaching into heaven and received great promises from the Lord, he named the place where he received this vision *Bethel* (which in Hebrew literally means “the house of God”), and he referred to it as “the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17). Commenting on this, Marion G. Romney wrote, “Temples are to us all what Bethel was to Jacob. Even more, they are also the gates to heaven for all of our unendowed kindred dead. We should all do our duty in bringing our loved ones through them.”³⁴

The Lord specified to Moses that such altars should be constructed of stones in their natural state—not shaped by human tools (see Exodus 20:24–25). Because these altars were thought of as being places between heaven and earth, they may appropriately be regarded as forerunners of the holy houses in which the Lord promised to communicate with his people.

The Old Testament describes in detail the sacrifices and other performances associated with the lesser or Aaronic Priesthood and with the Mosaic “law of carnal commandments,” but it says nothing about any higher ordinances. Still, the tabernacle’s furnishings and ordinances taught the children of Israel how they must prepare in order to return to the presence of God. The altar of sacrifice was the most prominent object in the tabernacle’s courtyard; constructed of acacia wood and overlaid with bronze, it stood nearly five feet tall and measured nearly eight feet square at the base. It was here that the people complied with the Lord’s commands to make animal sacrifices and other offerings, which served as a reminder of his great future atoning sacrifice and reemphasized the vital principles of obedience and sacrifice. Between

the altar and the tabernacle was the *laver*, or large bronze water basin, in which the priests washed their hands and feet before entering the tabernacle or before officiating at the altar (see Exodus 30:18–21). In this ritual we see the symbolism of becoming clean in order to progress back to God’s presence.

Elder Mark E. Petersen believed that these sacred rites helped define the hallowed nature of the tabernacle: “The tabernacle was but a forerunner of the temple,” he explained, because “sacred ordinances were performed therein.”³⁵

By the time of Solomon’s Temple, these rites had experienced further development. As Old Testament scholars William J. Hamblin and David R. Seely put it, “Temple worship focused on a complex series of animal sacrifices for thanksgiving, atonement, and purification from sin.” During the three major feasts of the year—Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles—“the people celebrated and renewed their covenantal relationship with God.”³⁶

Modern revelation affirms that both the tabernacle of Moses and the Temple of Solomon were built so that “those ordinances might be revealed which had been hid from before the world was” (D&C 124:38). Even though Moses and the higher priesthood had been taken from the Israelites as a whole (see D&C 84:24–27), Latter-day Saint writers have offered the opinion that the Lord’s people in Old Testament times nevertheless had access to ordinances linked to the Melchizedek Priesthood, probably even including some temple ordinances. “One has only to read the scriptures carefully, particularly the modern scriptures,” stated Sidney B. Sperry, a respected Latter-day Saint scholar of the scriptures, “to discover that temples [or other holy sanctuaries] must have been built and used in great antiquity even in the days of the antediluvian patriarchs.”³⁷ He reasoned that the Lord’s requirements for exaltation, and therefore the need for temples, were the same then as they are now.

Speaking at the opening of the St. George Temple, Brigham Young declared that Solomon had built his temple “for the purpose of giving endowments,” but President Young then acknowledged that “few if any” of these ordinances were actually received at that time.³⁸ Additionally, a revelation given through Joseph Smith indicates that the ancient patriarchs and prophets held the sealing power (D&C 132:39). He taught that Elijah was the last to hold these keys before the coming of the Savior.³⁹

The nature and extent of these ancient ordinances as well as the exact location inside the temple buildings where they were performed have been the

subject of much conjecture. For example, the purpose of the small chambers surrounding Solomon's Temple is not specified, but there have been suggestions that they could have been used for various sacred purposes as well as for storage of clothing and other items used in temple service. W. Cleon Skousen offered particularly specific opinions, which many scholars consider speculative, on where he believed the endowment was received in the tabernacle of Moses and Temple of Solomon.⁴⁰

"Such ordinances are sacred and not for the world," Elder Joseph Fielding Smith concluded; therefore, no detailed account of them has been made available. "There are, however, in the Old Testament references to covenants and obligations under which the members of the Church in those days were placed, although the meaning is generally obscure."⁴¹

Although vicarious service for the dead was not inaugurated until New Testament times, Latter-day Saints believe that ordinances for the living were available during earlier dispensations. The verb *wash* is used in reference to sacred rituals performed anciently (see, for example, Exodus 29:4, 30:18, 40:12). Elder Joseph Fielding Smith was convinced that Old Testament washings included baptisms (the word *baptism* was introduced in New Testament times from Greek roots).⁴² Even though these Old Testament baptisms were only for the living, latter-day temple fonts used in baptisms for the dead have been patterned after the sea in Solomon's Temple.⁴³

The Temple as a Place of Revelation

Dr. Hugh Nibley, a noted Latter-day Saint scholar, spent years researching what various ancient religions understood temples to be. That which makes a temple different from other buildings is not just its sacredness, he concluded, but rather its unique function. The earliest temples were regarded as "meeting-places at which men at specific times attempted to make contact with the powers above."⁴⁴ In this respect they resembled sacred mountains, which originally had been similar places of "contact between this and the upper world."⁴⁵ These ancient peoples thought of the temple as being the highest point in the human world, the best place to observe and learn the ways of the heavens. Consequently, many ancient temples were built atop mountains, but even if they were physically in the valley, they were still regarded as spiritual peaks where one could be closest to God. In a very real sense the temple represented a halfway place between heaven and earth.⁴⁶

Ziggurats in Mesopotamia, as well as Mayan pyramids in ancient America, had the function of supporting the temples built on top of them and elevating them closer to heaven. Consequently, the prominent stairways up their sides came to symbolize the pathway leading from the human to the divine world. Perhaps the best known of these Mesopotamian ziggurats was the Tower of Babel (see Genesis 11:1–9). Although the builders' motives were materialistic and selfish, the name of this tower does reflect a true function of temples. In the ancient Babylonian language (as well as in modern Arabic), the syllable *Bab-* meant "gate," while the suffix *-el* was a widely recognized reference to "deity." Hence the name *Babel* literally means "the gate of the god."⁴⁷

The tabernacle that the Lord commanded Moses to build was to serve both purposes mentioned by Elder Talmage: in addition to being a place for ordinances, it was also to be a place of revelation. The Lord directed his people to "make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). He specifically promised to appear above the ark of the covenant, whose solid-gold lid was topped with two cherubim (see Exodus 25:18–22). The Hebrew name of this lid, *kappōret*, is related to the verb *kappār*, meaning to cover, expiate, atone, or forgive, and it is translated as "mercy seat" in the King James Bible. The Greek Old Testament calls this object the *hilasterion*, which is the same word used to refer to Christ's Atonement. This is also the word used in the New Testament to refer to Christ as the "propitiation" (or reconciliation) for sin (see Romans 3:25).⁴⁸ Appropriately, the author of the Atonement promised to reveal himself above the object bearing that very title. Hence the ark with its mercy seat powerfully represented God's atoning love. Jesus subsequently fulfilled the promise to manifest himself: "And it came to pass, as Moses entered into the tabernacle, the cloudy pillar descended, and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the Lord talked with Moses . . . face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Exodus 33:9–11).

As had been the case with the tabernacle of Moses, the innermost room of Solomon's Temple was the most sacred area. Its Hebrew name *debbîr* may shed light on the nature of this holiest place. Some Bible commentators have associated *debbîr* with a Semitic root referring to the back or rear part, hence the translation "inner sanctuary" in the revised Standard and New International Versions.⁴⁹ Others have linked this name with the Hebrew word *dābbar*, meaning "to speak," perhaps referring to the fact that this was the place in the temple

where the Lord would speak to his people. This may be why the King James translators called this room the “oracle” (meaning place of revelation).

Worthiness and Admission

People sometimes ask why Mormon temples are not open to just anybody. The Old Testament provides a key to answer this question. As the Israelites pitched their camp, the twelve tribes were arranged around the tabernacle as if to provide a protective shield from the outside world. This layout of the ancient tabernacle grounds emphasized its sacredness and separation from the world. At the innermost was located the tribe of Levi, which included those with priestly authority (see Numbers 2–3). The open “court” surrounding the tabernacle, measuring approximately 75 by 150 feet, was enclosed by a wall of fabric panels approximately eight feet high, and it represented an additional protection (see Exodus 38:9–12).

Admission to these holy precincts was progressively more restricted as one approached the ark. While all worthy Israelites could enter the open courtyard, only the priests were allowed in the tabernacle’s outer room. Only one man, the high priest, was permitted to enter the inner Most Holy Place, and he could do so only once each year—on the Day of Atonement, or *Yom Kippur* (see Leviticus 16:29–34). The Apostle Paul later explained that this foreshadowed the Savior’s atoning sacrifice: just as the ancient high priest entered the earthly tabernacle once each year and offered a blood sacrifice “for himself, and for the errors of the people,” even so Christ, the great “high priest of good things to come,” entered into the heavenly tabernacle and “by his own blood . . . obtained eternal redemption for us” (Hebrews 9:7, 11–12, 24).

Interestingly, the phrase *Holy of Holies* does not occur anywhere in the Latter-day Saint standard works. The King James Bible’s Most Holy Place is translated from the Hebrew *qōdesh haqqōdāshīm*, which is related to the verb *qadash*, meaning “to separate, reserve, or set apart for sacred purposes.” Hence *qōdesh haqqōdāshīm* is a Hebrew phrase literally referring to “that which is holy among all things that are holy.” This type of construction implies the superlative as in Christ’s title “King of Kings, and Lord of Lords” (Revelation 19:16). Wycliffe’s 1382 Bible used the phrase “holi of halowes,” while the King James Bible employed the phrase “most holy place.” Milton was first to use the present wording “Holy of holies” in 1641, thirty years after the King James Bible

had been published.⁵⁰ In recent years the New English Bible and the Jewish Publication Society's Old Testament have also used the term "Holy of Holies."

The Temple of Solomon was similarly set apart from the outside world by a "great court" and by an "inner court of the house of the Lord" (1 Kings 7:12). At least one passage (2 Kings 20:4) also mentions a "middle court." We are specifically told that this temple's innermost room was the *qodesh ha-qadashim*, or Holy of Holies (see 1 Kings 6:16).

As has been seen, Ezekiel's vision was of a temple separated from the world by two courts and a thick wall. A similar plan for a future ideal temple is found in the Temple Scroll, which is the longest of the Dead Sea Scrolls and which dated from just before the time of Christ.⁵¹ Though this scroll is not to be regarded as inspired scripture, it does to some degree reflect concepts revealed in earlier centuries concerning temples. The Temple Scroll's plan provided for an even greater separation of the temple from the wicked world. It was to be surrounded by a protective low fence or balustrade, an inner court, a middle court, an outer court (nearly a half-mile square), and finally a 150-foot-wide moat. The scroll's greatest emphasis is on the need for personal purity on the part of all who would enter the temple. Elaborate laws of purification governed the temple and its surroundings. Even the whole city where the temple was located was to be kept holy and pure.⁵² This was consistent with the Lord's desire that his people should be "a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).

The Psalmist referred to the need to be worthy to enter the temple: "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" (Psalm 24:3-4). Elder Robert D. Hales likened these questions to a temple recommend interview. He concluded that "worthiness to hold a temple recommend gives us the strength to keep our temple covenants."⁵³

Conclusion

A study of Old Testament temples confirms that the Lord has been involved in designing these holy structures and that they should be built of the finest materials available. This practice has remained in place in modern times. The precise extent of temple ordinances and where they were performed in Old Testament times is not fully known, but the Bible makes clear that

those who served in the temple needed to prepare for this sacred experience. Similarly, we prepare for temple activity by keeping the commandments and praying for the Spirit, looking forward to being in the Lord's house. Because the temple was to be a place of communication between God and man, it had to be kept pure; this brought certain restrictions on who would be considered worthy to enter these holy precincts. In like spirit, we respond to searching questions during our temple recommend interviews to assure our own spiritual preparedness. Even though parallels between present and ancient practices are not always exact, a study of Old Testament temples does enhance our understanding of our own temple service.

Notes

1. John A. Widtsoe, "Temple Worship," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, April 1921, 52.
2. James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 17.
3. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 106.
4. See Bible Dictionary, "tabernacle," 778–80.
5. Talmage, *The House of the Lord*, 6.
6. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 2:30; emphasis in original.
7. Sidney B. Sperry, *The Voice of Israel's Prophets: A Latter-day Saint Interpretation of the Major and Minor Prophets of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1961), 231.
8. George Arthur Buttrick and others, *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 6:326.
9. Truman O. Angell, autobiographical sketch, MS 3, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, quoted in Marvin E. Smith, "The Builder," *Improvement Era*, October 1942, 630.
10. For an excellent discussion of the Nauvoo Temple and its construction, see Don F. Colvin, *Nauvoo Temple: A Story of Faith* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2002).
11. F. M. Weeks to J. Earl Arrington, March 7, 1932, quoted in J. Earl Arrington, "William Weeks, Architect of the Nauvoo Temple," *BYU Studies* 19, no. 3 (Spring 1979): 340.
12. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 6:196–97; emphasis in original.
13. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:133.

14. "Who Designed the Temple?" *Deseret News Weekly*, April 23, 1892, 578.
15. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:133.
16. Francis M. Gibbons, *David O. McKay: Apostle to the World, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 342–43, 357–58; see also Joseph Lundstrom, "Angel Moroni Statue Lifted to Top of LA Temple Steeple," *Church News*, October 23, 1954, 4.
17. "Now Faces East," *Church News*, February 5, 1955, 13.
18. Holzapfel, Pike, and Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament*, 224.
19. Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 270.
20. Emil Baer Fetzer, "The Sacred Twin Temples: Ogden Temple Provo Temple," in *Completed Writings of Emil Baer Fetzer*, by Emil Baer Fetzer and June Seyfarth Fetzer (n.p.: published by the authors, 2003), 4.
21. Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 94.
22. Bible Dictionary, "Temple of Solomon," 782–83.
23. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 103–4.
24. Talmage, *The House of the Lord*, 6–7.
25. See Richard O. Cowan, *Temples to Dot the Earth* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2011), 33–45.
26. "Provo Temple Dedicatory Prayer," *Church News*, February 12, 1972, 5.
27. Bible Dictionary, "Hosanna."
28. Lael J. Woodbury, "The Origin and Uses of the Sacred Hosanna Shout," *Sperry Lecture Series* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 18–22.
29. Holzapfel, Pike, and Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament*, 197.
30. Holzapfel, Pike, and Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament*, 152.
31. Truman G. Madsen, "The Olive Press," *Ensign*, December 1982, 57–58.
32. See *Encyclopedia Judaica* 13 (Jerusalem, Israel: Keter Publishing House), s.v. "priestly vestments," 1063; see also Moshe Levine, *The Tabernacle: Its Structure and Utensils* (Tel Aviv: Soncino Press, 1969), 124–140.
33. James E. Faust, "Standing in Holy Places," *Ensign*, May 2005, 67.
34. Marion G. Romney, "Temples—the Gates to Heaven," *Ensign*, March 1971, 16.
35. Mark E. Petersen, *Moses, Man of Miracles*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 96.
36. William J. Hamblin and David Rolph Seely, *Solomon's Temple* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 27–28.
37. Sidney B. Sperry, "Some Thoughts Concerning Ancient Temples and Their Functions," *Improvement Era*, November 1955, 814.
38. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 18:303.
39. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960), 4:211.
40. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Third Thousand Years* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 302–3; W. Cleon Skousen, *The Fourth Thousand Years* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 222–25.

41. Joseph Fielding Smith, "Was Temple Work Done in the Days of the Old Prophets?" *Improvement Era*, November 1955, 794.

42. Smith, "Was Temple Work Done in the Days of the Old Prophets?," 794.

43. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 103–4.

44. Hugh Nibley, "The Idea of the Temple in History," *Millennial Star* 120, no. 8 (August 1958): 231; this article was republished in pamphlet form by BYU Press in 1963 under the title "What Is a Temple?"

45. G. Contenau, *Le Deluge Babylonien* (n.p., 1952) 246, quoted in Nibley, "The Idea of the Temple in History," 231.

46. Nibley, "The Idea of the Temple in History," 231.

47. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Babel," accessed January 30, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/14210?redirectedFrom=babel#eid>.

48. *Oxford English Dictionary*, "mercy-seat," accessed March 18, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/116715?redirectedFrom=mercy-seat#eid>.

49. George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 4:540.

50. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "holy of holies," accessed March 18, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/87833?redirectedFrom=holy+of+holies#eid1477026>.

51. For background information on the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Temple Scroll in particular, see James VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010); see also Donald W. Parry, "The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 2 (2010): 1–27.

52. See Yigael Yadin, "The Temple Scroll," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *New Directions in Biblical Archaeology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 156–66; Jacob Milgrom, "The Temple Scroll," *Biblical Archaeologist* 41, no. 13 (1978): 105–120.

53. Elder Robert D. Hales, "Coming to Ourselves: The Sacrament, the Temple, and Sacrifice in Service," *Ensign*, May 2012, 35.