

A Trial by Fire: The 2003 Destruction of the Apia Samoa Temple

Richard O. Cowan

The devastating fire that destroyed the Apia Samoa Temple was a unique event in Latter-day Saint history. Church members had commonly assumed that dedicated temples were somehow immune from destruction. This notion was bolstered by such statements as President Brigham Young's declaration that the Salt Lake Temple would "endure through the millennium."¹ Furthermore, temple dedicatory prayers often petitioned divine protection against natural or manmade forces. For example, when President Gordon B. Hinckley dedicated the Apia Samoa Temple in 1983, he prayed, "May the structure in all of its aspects be preserved from the ravages of nature and any vandalism or defilement of man."² Therefore, the tragic event on an otherwise beautiful tropical evening in Samoa tested even the legendary faith of the Polynesian Latter-day Saints.

The destruction of the temple in Nauvoo, Illinois, is a well-known event in Church history, but the Saints had abandoned this temple in 1846.³ However, other active temples

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1. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-Day Saints' Book Depot, 1865), 10:254.
 2. "In Samoa: 'Promises unto Isles,'" *Church News*, August 14, 1983, 4–5.
 3. Don F. Colvin, "The Fate of the Temple," in *Nauvoo Temple: A Story of Faith* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2002), 253–88.

have been damaged. When lightning destroyed the original stubby tower atop the St. George Temple soon after its dedication, it was replaced by a taller tower that President Brigham Young had favored all along.⁴ In 1917 fire gutted the southeast corner stairway in the Logan Temple, destroying some artwork and causing smoke and water damage in adjacent areas.⁵ Then in 1962 an intruder sought to blow open one of the Salt Lake Temple's main east doors. Even though the blast damaged only the door's handle and broke a few windows, many members were surprised that such a thing could have happened to the temple.⁶

Latter-day Saints gratefully cite examples of temples being preserved. Major earthquakes caused little or no damage to the temples in Mexico City and Los Angeles even though other nearby structures collapsed.⁷ The Manila Philippines Temple was preserved when rebel forces occupied the temple grounds adjacent to a military base during an attempted coup.⁸ Church leader Matthew Cowley often spoke about the Polynesian Saints among whom he had served as a missionary and as a mission president. He attested that their faith was "the simple faith of a child, a faith not beclouded by psychology or any of the learning of men but a simple faith in God and the promises He had made through his Son Jesus Christ."⁹ This background

4. Janice F. Demille, *St. George Temple: First 100 Years* (Hurricane, UT: Homestead Publishers, 1977), 88.

5. Nolan P. Olsen, *Logan Temple: The First 100 Years* (Logan, UT: the author, 1978), 176–77.

6. "Detonation of Plastic Explosive Damages Front Door of Salt Lake Temple," *Church News*, November 17, 1962, 4.

7. "California Earthquake Damages Chapels, Members' Homes," *Ensign*, March 1994, 74–75.

8. Dallin H. Oaks, "Miracles," *Ensign*, June 2001, 14–16.

9. "Among the Polynesians," *Improvement Era*, November 1948, 756.

of beliefs about temples and the faith of Polynesian Saints provides perspective for the unanticipated and unprecedented destruction of the original Apia Samoa Temple and the reaction that followed.

Original Apia Samoa Temple

During the late 1970s, President Spencer W. Kimball challenged Church members to “lengthen their stride” in temple activity. He announced plans to construct five new temples, including the first temples in Latin America and Asia, as well as one in Samoa. A 1977 announcement called for a temple in American Samoa, which would serve the Latter-day Saints living in Samoa, Tonga, French Polynesia (Tahiti), and Fiji.¹⁰ Its unique design included a rounded roof and a slender spire.¹¹ But a dramatic acceleration in temple construction came in April 1980 when the First Presidency announced that seven new temples, including four in the Pacific, would be built. Instead of a temple in American Samoa, there would now be temples built in Papeete, Tahiti; Nuku‘alofa, Tonga; Apia, Western Samoa; and Sydney, Australia. By increasing the number of projected temples from one to four, Church leaders substantially reduced the travel required of Saints from these scattered island groups.

These new Pacific temples were comparatively small, Tahiti’s having an area of about 7,500 square feet and the other three Pacific temples having a floor space of just over 13,500 each. Though small, the temples were efficient. Hence, they would have a greater capacity than many earlier,

10. “Temple Planned for Samoa,” *Church News*, October 15, 1977, 3; “Peaceful Island Setting to Surround Unique New Temple,” *Church News*, June 3, 1978, 4.

11. “Peaceful Island Setting to Surround Unique New Temple,” 4, 9.

larger temples. The First Presidency emphasized that these temples would be of such a quality that they would “be pleasing to all” and yet could be constructed “at a cost that will not be burdensome for members to bear. The character and beauty of the new temples [would] be in keeping with their sacred purpose.”¹² Furthermore these buildings were designed in “families,” rather than individually, to cut planning costs. For example, the designs of the new temples in Samoa, Tonga, Australia, and Tahiti were similar. Architect Emil Fetzer explained that a group of temples would follow a basic plan “with perhaps some slight modifications to make [the] outward appearance fit the local culture.”¹³ Although their initial design did not include towers, this feature was soon added to the plans. Each temple would be topped by a golden figure of Moroni, the last prophet of the Book of Mormon, which would become a familiar adornment on Latter-day Saint temples. The earlier design for the single temple in American Samoa had not included the angelic figure atop its spire.

Local Church members played a key role in building their temple. Stakes throughout Samoa were assigned in rotation to supply workers each day. This involvement in construction strengthened the Saints’ feelings about the temple. Placing the statue of the angel Moroni on the temple’s tower posed a particular challenge because there were no cranes tall enough available on the islands. Therefore, workmen using ropes and pulleys had to lift the statue into place. A large crowd gathered to witness this event. Each workday began with prayer, so “it was no surprise to the onlookers when the crew who was carrying the goldleafed statue on their backs paused for a

12. John L. Hart, “7 New Temples to Be Erected,” *Church News*, April 5, 1980, 3.

13. “Temple Starts Set in Early ’81,” *Church News*, July 12, 1980, 3.

word of prayer before pulling it to the top.” They prayed “to have power enough to lift and hold the 600-pound angel, that the scaffolding would remain strong and bear the weight, and that the crew would hear and follow the instructions as they came.” For the Samoan Saints, the successful placement of the angel Moroni on the tower “was a dramatic demonstration of prayers being answered.”¹⁴

A spirit of excitement mounted as the Apia temple neared completion in 1983. Church leaders and members hosted a traditional open house and arranged special tours for government leaders. “It will now be possible for the members of the Latter-day Saints Church to worship and to observe all the requirements of their faith right here in Samoa,” the head of state in Western Samoa declared. “I pray that this temple will be an everflowing source of spiritual blessing for all those who will worship in it.”¹⁵

President Hinckley, then Second Counselor in the First Presidency, dedicated the temple. Upon arriving in Apia, “he received a traditional Polynesian welcome” as a plumeria lei was placed about his neck.¹⁶ The dedicatory services were characterized by an outpouring of love and deep emotions. The Saints were often so overcome by spiritual feelings that they found it difficult to speak. They resonated spiritually with this thought expressed in the dedicatory prayer: “Thy work here has grown and multiplied. Stakes of Zion have been established and thy children have come to be recognized for their faith and their virtue. Houses of worship, scores of them, and schools of

14. R. Carl Harris, *Building the Kingdom in Samoa: 1888–2005* (Heber City, UT: Harris Video Cases, 2006), 286–89.

15. “Island’s Leaders Impressed by Samoa Temple,” *Church News*, July 31, 1983, 3.

16. Gerry Avant, “Members Rejoice at Samoa Rites,” *Church News*, August 14, 1983, 3.

learning have been built upon these lands, for the blessing of thy sons and daughters who live here.”¹⁷

Reflecting on the dedication of temples in the Pacific, President Hinckley recalled, “Through ancient prophets the Lord promised that in the latter days he would remember his people upon the isles of the sea. We have witnessed a marvelous fulfillment of these promises.”¹⁸ The new temple quickly became a landmark in Apia. “For many Samoans, the presence of the LDS Temple was aesthetically pleasing to the eye,” a writer in a local newspaper reflected. “Thousands drove past it every day, whether to work, enroute to the airport or heading home. With Mt. Vaea as a backdrop, the temple was truly one of Samoa’s revered landmarks.” According to the reporter, the temple “attracted a significant number of new members” as annual convert baptisms grew from 1,313 to 1,648 during the temple’s construction.¹⁹ In the following months, regional representative Eugene Reid noticed that families who attended the temple were happier and more united, meeting attendance and tithing payment increased, and members took their testimonies more seriously.²⁰ For the next two decades, the temple would be a source of spiritual blessing to the people of the Samoan Islands.

Devastating Fire in 2003

In the spring of 2003 the 14,560-square-foot temple closed for remodeling. During the preceding weeks, the number of sessions had about doubled to accommodate all who wished

17. “In Samoa: Promises unto Isles,” *Church News*, August 14, 1983, 4–5.

18. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 1983, 72.

19. “Rising from the Ashes: New Temple Brings Hope to Samoa’s Mormons,” *Le Samoa*, April 27–May 4, 2005, 9.

20. Gerry Avant, “A Year Later, Temples Are Big Influences,” *Church News*, August 5, 1984, 12.

to visit the temple before its closing. Anticipated improvements included additional office space, a new baptismal font on the backs of twelve oxen, and a general upgrade throughout the building. By early summer, the renovation was on schedule and Church members expected the temple to open in October. On July 9, Church leaders held a “big meeting” to plan for that joyous occasion.²¹ That evening, however, fire broke out in the temple.

Workmen in the temple first detected the fire as early as about 6:30 p.m. They tried to extinguish the fire, but it spread too quickly. Firemen were called just after seven o’clock. At 7:25, Richard Chadderton, manager of the nearby Church Service Center, “saw smoke swirling around the temple” and a glow of flames in the celestial room. A fire truck finally arrived about ten minutes later.²² Missionary Stephen Merchant, who lived in one of the adjacent temple missionary apartments, saw the fire engine arrive just as he finished dinner. As he rushed out to see what was going on, he could see smoke pouring from the temple eaves. Merchant could tell the fire had been burning for some time because he could hear a loud crackling noise.²³ About this same time, Samoan member Mika Lolo had also finished dinner when he heard the sirens approaching. As he stepped outside, he saw the fire trucks rush in, so he ran to see what was happening. At first Lolo thought the gymnasium or some other school building was on fire, but when he got closer he learned that it was the temple. He could see flames coming from the front part of the temple and could feel the heat. “I was just speechless

21. Mathew Lemisio, “Tragedy for the Mormons,” *Samoa Observer*, July 10, 2003, 3.

22. Jason Swensen and Sarah Jane Weaver, “Fire Destroys Apia Samoa Temple,” *Church News*, July 12, 2003, 3.

23. Stephen L. Merchant interview by Brian Sokollowsky, Pesega, Samoa, October 26, 2003, Oral History Project, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

[and] I was crying like a baby,” he recalled. Lolo thought of the temple as “the centerpiece of the Church in Samoa.” Through his tears, he questioned, “Why?”²⁴

Because there were no fire hydrants near the temple, firemen were initially limited to the water they carried in their truck tanks. About one hundred volunteers, including members of other faiths, helped carry buckets of water and used garden hoses to try to douse the flames. Others rescued everything they could from the burning building and carried it over to the patron housing area.²⁵ One fireman, the second in command and a Latter-day Saint, commented that he had never seen “so many people there assisting.”²⁶ But most had to simply stand by and watch the devastation. Many hugged each other and wept as they prayed for a miracle. “I wanted to cry,” reflected Jerry King, the Church’s Pacific Islands public affairs director, who happened to be in Samoa that night. “I have never in my life felt so helpless about something so important to me.”²⁷ Even members of other faiths were heard to cry out, “Our temple is burning!”²⁸ For Bishop Iamafana Lameta, “the shock of watching the temple fall was enhanced” when he realized that his children “might have to endure the same hardships once exacted on his forebearers to make temple trips abroad.”²⁹

24. Mika Lolo, interview by Mary Jane Woodger, June 27, 2007; typescript in author’s possession.

25. Sister Pauga, interview by Mary Jane Woodger, July 2007; typescript in author’s possession.

26. Lolo interview.

27. Maurine Jensen Proctor, “Samoa Temple Destroyed By Fire: Eyewitness Accounts and Photos,” *Meridian Magazine*, July 11, 2003.

28. Albert Niuelui, interview by Mary Jane Woodger, July 2007; typescript in author’s possession.

29. Jason Swensen, “Precious Gift Returns to Samoa,” *Church News*, September 10, 2005, 3.

Eventually a “water cannon,” a large nozzle mounted on the cab of a bigger fire truck, was brought from the airport. By this time, however, the fire had consumed most of the temple, so this new equipment was not of much help except perhaps with the tower.³⁰ The flames burned brightly for several hours before they were subdued. The fire chief described it as “the biggest fire he had seen in this country for some time.”³¹ Employees of Westland Construction, the firm doing the remodeling, watched in “horror as the temple burned on their watch.”³²

A major concern was that the fire might spread to nearby buildings. Sister Merchant packed up precious belongings in their nearby apartment just in case the fire should spread. There had been no rain for two or three weeks, so everything was very dry. As the firemen realized the temple could not be saved, their principal concern was to keep the flames from spreading. Suddenly it began to rain. Following a period of unusually dry weather, the unexpected twenty-minute downpour thoroughly drenched the surrounding trees and buildings, preventing them from catching fire. “It was a miracle,” temple president Daniel Betham exclaimed. One eyewitness reported the rain seemed to be limited to the area just around the temple.³³

News of the fire spread quickly. Many faithful Saints could see the sickening red glow above the trees and gathered at the scene.³⁴ As groups from another part of the island were

30. Dale M. Wagstaff, e-mail to Richard Cowan, October, 3, 2007.

31. Mathew Lemisio, “Firefighters Tell of Temple Blaze Danger,” *Saturday Observer*, July 12, 2003, 1.

32. Proctor, “Samoa Temple Destroyed by Fire.”

33. Leah Elison, “Fire Investigation Under Way: Officials Suspect Samoa Temple Fire Began in New Addition,” *Daily Universe*, July 14, 2003, 5.

34. Alan Edwards, “Temple Burns—but Not Angel,” *Deseret News*, July 11, 2003.

returning home after choir practice and from an institute class, they were stopped by a member who had heard on a broadcast that the temple was burning, so they rushed to the scene. In the car, Sister Pauga prayed, “Don’t let it happen! Please! Put out the fire.”³⁵

The number of onlookers multiplied. “Please God help us,” one woman cried. “This is not happening,” she added in disbelief.³⁶ “I was so shocked,” confided sixteen-year-old Shane Faasipa, “to see the temple on fire. At that time, I felt tears coming down my cheeks. . . . I turned to one of my teachers from school . . . and asked her why the temple was on fire. She answered me in four words, ‘To Test Our Faith.’” Seventeen-year-old Rebecca Sua added, “I ran to my room and prayed to Heavenly Father to stop the fire. It started to rain but not strong enough to put out the fire. I pray that another temple will be built.”³⁷

As flames crept up the temple’s tower, the attention of many bystanders focused on the statue of the angel at its top. “The angel Moroni was an important symbol throughout the night,” said Rich Alton, a Brigham Young University graduate who lived less than a mile from the temple. “The members’ greatest hope, when it became clear there would be nothing left of the temple, was that the angel Moroni would stand tall at the end of the night.”³⁸ Brother Merchant believed that this would be for him “a sign that Heavenly Father was in charge.”³⁹ Adney Adams, a young man who had looked forward to receiving his endowment in the Apia temple, had similar feelings. As he saw the angel continuing to stand, he felt confident that

35. Sister Pauga interview.

36. Lemisio, “Temple Burns,” 1.

37. Sarah Jane Weaver, “Church Will Rebuild Apia Samoa Temple,” *Church News*, July 19, 2003, 4.

38. Proctor, “Samoa Temple Destroyed by Fire.”

39. Merchant interview.

there would be another temple. “Even though the temple is gone Heavenly Father is still there and He is always going to be there.”⁴⁰ Referring to the angelic figure, members pleaded, “Don’t let him leave.”⁴¹

The survival of the fiberglass figure of Moroni was remarkable. “I was very amazed at how much destruction, the melting of steel members, was done right below the angel,” noted William J. Naylor, a construction specialist who had been serving as project manager during the remodel. The fact that the angel was still there is amazing because “fiberglass is quite flammable. This was another miracle,” he testified.⁴²

As Brother Alton drove to work the following morning, he lamented the sight of the blackened ruins. Nevertheless he said, “My heart was warmed at still seeing Moroni atop the temple as a symbol of strength and hope in the restoration of the gospel and the restoration of the temple.”⁴³ Although stained with smoke, the statue still shone gold in the morning sun. “Thank you, Moroni, for standing up there. Thank you for giving me faith,” Sister Pauga said in her heart. A writer in *Le Samoa* concurred: “The gutted remains [were] not the main focus of onlookers, it was the serene golden statue of the angel Moroni standing defiantly unmoved atop of the smoldering structure . . . Whether you were a member or not, that imagery was hugely encouraging and emotional.”⁴⁴

In sacrament meetings the following Sunday, a statement was read from local leaders: We have suffered a great loss in the stake, we have suffered a great loss in Samoa, we have suffered a great loss in the church, and we have suffered a

40. Adney Adams, interview by Richard Cowan, June 21, 2007.

41. Proctor, “Samoa Temple Destroyed by Fire.”

42. William J. Naylor, interview by Richard Cowan, October 1, 2007.

43. Proctor, “Samoa Temple Destroyed by Fire.”

44. “Rising from the Ashes,” 9.

great loss in the world in the fire that destroyed the Samoa Temple. But the thing that is important to us is what did not burn. Every ordinance that was done in that temple is still valid and still alive; the records are still available. We did not lose them. We don't know whether the prophet is going to give us another temple or not, but we had twenty years to do a lot of work for our people and it's all there and it's all good.⁴⁵

Church leaders never announced the exact cause of the fire. Meanwhile, Samoan Saints sought to make sense of the tragedy. Many prayed for comfort and understanding. "We felt like we had lost everything," reflected Brother Fitisemanu.⁴⁶ "Because most of the members were endowed in this temple," reported Pry Sua, a local stake president, they felt that with its destruction "they were losing their communication with heaven."⁴⁷ "It's like my soul had been taken away," Mika Lolo concurred.⁴⁸ For many, the loss of the temple was a wake-up call. "It encouraged members to be more righteous, and to live righteous lives," President Sua noted.⁴⁹ Because a substantial expense was involved in going to the temple in Tonga, Samoan Saints gained a greater appreciation of having more direct access to the blessings of the temple. "We take the temple for granted," Brother Lolo acknowledged.⁵⁰ Another Church member, Brother Fitisemanu, optimistically anticipated, "Watch what the Lord is going to do for Samoa. There will be a beautiful temple [once again]."⁵¹

45. Wayne O. Ursenbach, interview by Richard Cowan, May 20, 2007.

46. Swensen, "Precious Gift Returns to Samoa," 3.

47. Pry Sua, interview by Mary Jane Woodger, July 2007; typescript in author's possession.

48. Lolo interview.

49. Sua interview.

50. Lolo interview.

51. Swensen, "Precious Gift Returns to Samoa," 3.

A Beautiful New Temple

On July 16, 2003, just one week after the fire, the Church's First Presidency announced plans to build a new temple in Samoa. It would incorporate improvements in temple design made after the original building had been dedicated over two decades earlier. The statue of the angel was retrieved and put into storage for use on the new structure.⁵² Ground was broken for the new temple on October 19, 2003. The two years without a temple were a time of reflection and introspection. "It made people sit back and realize what is important," noted Albert Niuelua, the Church's service center manager in Apia.⁵³

Many spectators gathered on January 25, 2005, to witness the angel Moroni statue being placed atop the new temple's tower. The first attempt failed because the crane was not tall enough to lift the upper part of the spire into position. The following day the cranes were attached to a lifting point lower than the statue's head. Still they were just two inches short. Bill Naylor, whom the Church had sent to Samoa to direct the rebuilding project, prayed as the crane operator made another attempt, and this time it succeeded. "I don't know how it happened," the operator said. "I got a little bit more lift out of it than I believed I could." The crowd was jubilant, and most had tears in their eyes.⁵⁴ The statue of the angel Moroni once again shone in the bright Samoan sun.

In mid-February 2005, as the rebuilding continued, the Samoan Saints felt they witnessed another manifestation of divine blessings. Hurricane Olaf was heading directly for Samoa. Bill Naylor followed the progress of the storm using

52. Sarah Jane Weaver, "Remains of Temple in Samoa Demolished," *Church News*, August 2, 2003, 4; Weaver, "Church Will Rebuild Apia Samoa Temple," 4–5.

53. Swensen, "Precious Gift Returns to Samoa," 3.

54. Naylor interview.

the U.S. Navy's Web site. "As we tracked the storm and as we saw the fierceness of the 120 mph winds accompanying it," he recalled, "we were very concerned not only for the temple, but the island in general." The temple only had a temporary roof because materials for the permanent copper roof had not yet arrived, making it watertight but not wind resistant. Forecasters anticipated a storm surge, widespread flash flooding, and "extensive infrastructure damage" as the storm reached category 5 status. Workmen boarded up windows of nearby Church buildings, but windows in the temple were still open and were too large for this to be done. When Olaf got closer to the island, with winds of about fifty miles per hour hitting the temple, it abruptly veered so Apia was spared the main brunt of its force. "It was an absolute miracle to us," Brother Naylor reflected. "We felt that the hand of the Lord was simply manifest in what happened there."⁵⁵

The 18,691-square-foot structure was completed and opened to the public August 3, 2005. Visitors admired the beauty of the new temple which already had come to be called the "Pearl of the Pacific." This quality reflected the standard required by construction supervisor Naylor, who insisted, "Perfect is good enough!"⁵⁶ The rebuilt temple was dedicated on September 4, 2005, once again by President Hinckley:

We rejoice in the knowledge that there is again in these favored islands of Samoa a sacred house. . . . Twenty-two years ago we here dedicated to Thee and Thy Son a sacred structure as a house of the Lord. In the course of renova-

55. Naylor interview; "Hurricane Spurs American Samoa to Shut Schools and Open Shelters," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin News*, February 16, 2005; "Asia-Pacific Disaster Alert," February 16, 2005, Australian-Pacific Centre for Emergency and Disaster Information (APCEDI).

56. Elder Gar Walton and Sister Leann Walton, "'Pearl of Pacific': Rebuilt Apia Samoa Temple Opens Doors to the Public," *Church News*, August 20, 2005, 6.

tion, that structure was destroyed by fire, only the second temple built by Thy people to be so destroyed. . . . This new and beautiful structure has been raised on this sacred ground. It is magnificent in all of its elements. And now, in the name of Jesus Christ and in the authority of the holy priesthood in us vested, we dedicate to Thee and to Thy Beloved Son this, the Apia Samoa Temple. . . . We pray, Father, that all who look upon this structure may recognize its sacred nature and be constrained in their hearts to acknowledge it as Thy holy house.⁵⁷

Speaking of the new temple, Dale Wagstaff, a missionary assigned to work with the temples in the Pacific, wrote: “It is very beautiful and so distinctive. It gives me the feeling of approaching the throne of God even when walking through the massive columns approaching the front door.”⁵⁸ Wagstaff, who had been an eyewitness to the 2003 destruction, recalled how “during the fire there was first disbelief, then fear and shock with great sadness, followed later with great joy beyond expression.”⁵⁹

57. Dedicatory prayer by Gordon B. Hinckley, “‘A Sacred House’ Again in Samoa,” *Church News*, September 10, 2005, 4.

58. Dale Wagstaff, e-mail to Richard Cowan, September 13, 2007.

59. Dale Wagstaff, e-mail to Richard Cowan, September 6, 2007.