



Courtesy of Bryce Haymond

Throughout the San Diego temple there are numerous patterns of overlapping squares that look like an eight-pointed star. Do these represent the “seal of Melchizedek,” or are they just an architectural detail?

The Seal of Melchizedek?

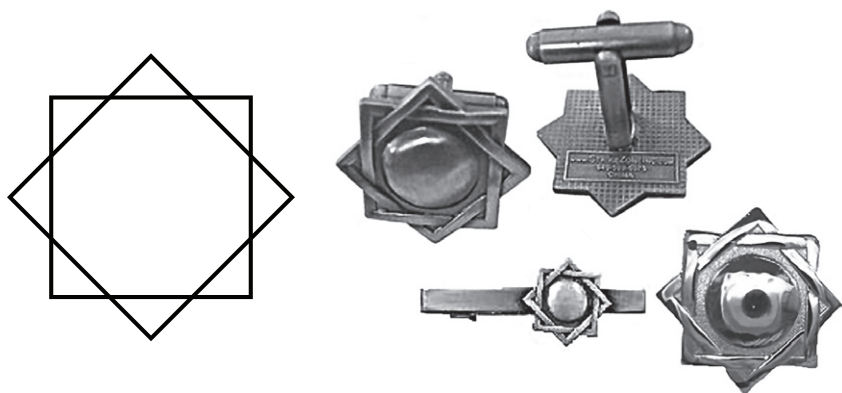
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Symbolism is the language of scripture and ritual. To be unversed in symbolism is to be scripturally and ritually illiterate. As one text notes, “Symbols are the language in which all gospel covenants and all ordinances of salvation have been revealed. From the time we are immersed in the waters of baptism to the time we kneel at the altar of the temple . . . in the ordinance of eternal marriage, every covenant we make will be written in the language of symbolism.”¹ While Latter-day Saints accept and utilize a number of symbols common to other religious traditions, we also have our own unique set of symbols foreign to most other faiths.²

In recent years Mormonism appears to have adopted a new symbol, one quickly growing in popularity. It is commonly referred to as the seal of Melchizedek and consists of two interlocked (or overlapping) squares, making what appears to be an eight-pointed star. This design, according to a growing number of Latter-day Saints, is the ancient symbol of the Melchizedek Priesthood³ and the act of making one’s “calling and election sure.”⁴ Its growing popularity among Church members is evidenced not only by its placement in or on a number of LDS temples⁵ but also by its presence in the Mormon

market, where one can readily purchase necklaces, tie tacks, or cufflinks sporting this newly adopted symbol.



The Development of the Lore

So how has this symbol made such inroads among Latter-day Saints? The story is a rather interesting one filled with both fact and fiction. The initial introduction of the seal of Melchizedek into LDS symbology came in 1992 with the release of Hugh Nibley's book *Temple and Cosmos*. In the chapter entitled "Sacred Vestments"⁶ the following picture and caption (written by illustrator Michael Lyon) appear:

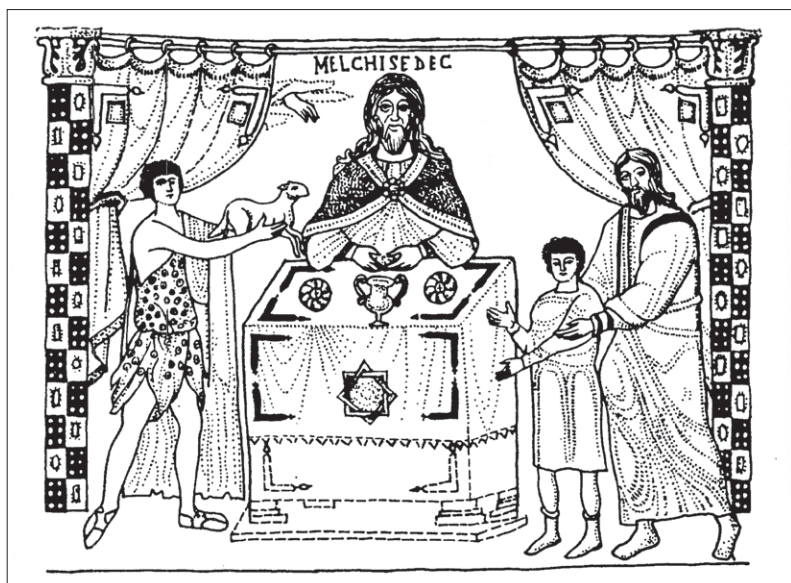


Figure 25. Another Ravenna mosaic, c. A.D. 520, shows the priest-king Melchizedek in a purple cloak, offering bread and wine at the altar (Genesis 14:18–20). The white altar cloth is decorated with two sets of *gammadia*, as well as the so-called "seal of Melchizedek," two interlocked squares in gold. Abel offers his lamb as Abraham gently pushes Isaac forward. The hand of God reaches down to this sacred meeting through the red veils adorned with golden *gammadia* on either side. The theme is the great sacrifice of Christ, which brings together the righteous prophets from the past as well as the four corners of the present world, thereby uniting all time and space.

While the caption under this picture says much about the primary theme of the mural being depicted, the sentence that has caught the attention of so many Saints—almost to the exclusion of everything else stated in the caption or the text—is this: "The white altar cloth is decorated with . . . the so-called 'seal of Melchizedek,' two interlocked squares." From this simple sentence has developed a symbol and a legend much bigger than anyone could have imagined when the line was initially penned by Michael Lyon, the illustrator of *Temple and Cosmos*.

According to the commonly repeated story, the architect of the San Diego California Temple, William S. Lewis Jr., was inspired to place the overlapping squares design throughout the temple without knowing what the symbol meant.⁷ Sometime after the temple was constructed, it was brought to his attention that the design was actually the "seal of Melchizedek" and that it was an ancient symbol for the Melchizedek Priesthood, thus showing that he had actually unknowingly been inspired in his architectural design.⁸ One website dedicated to the discussion of Latter-day Saint temples tells the story as follows:

As we stood there looking at the temple, Brother Williams—or Williamson, the missionary, told us that he heard an interesting story about the symbol that appears all over the temple. He said the architect, who is a current temple sealer, gave a fireside not too long ago. He said that the symbol that appears all over the temple in the stone, the glass, even the fence surrounding the temple, was just an architectural design. He said he thought it would be nice to have a recurring design that ties the temple together. He worked on the simple design, for about six months, toying with different designs. He finally decided on the design, two interlocking squares turned 45 degrees from each other—sometimes containing a circle in the center, sometimes not. He put it in almost every stone wall, every glass window, and even the ornamental iron fence around the temple grounds. . . . I think the missionary said that someone (I don't know if it was a general authority or someone else from

SLC) asked the architect at the temple open house where he got the design and what it means. The architect said that it was just an architectural design and didn't mean anything. The person said something like, "Oh I think there is more to it than that." The person came back to SLC, and some time later the word came back that the design was known as the seal of Melchizedek. I asked the missionary who it was in SLC that told them it was the seal of Melchizedek. He said it was Hugh Nibley. He said the architect said that if it is the seal of Melchizedek it would have saved him a lot of time if the Lord had just revealed it to him instead of the tinkering that he did to come up with it.⁹

According to some versions of this popular story, the architect "saw the symbol in a dream" and for that reason placed it throughout the temple.¹⁰ Others have said that President Gordon B. Hinckley asked Hugh Nibley to confirm that this symbol was indeed the seal of Melchizedek, an ancient token of the Melchizedek Priesthood.¹¹ One member of the Church is reported as saying Hugh Nibley told him "something like, 'Oh sure, it is the seal of King Melchizedek. . . . It was a symbol of Melchizedek's power, kingdom, and . . . a type of name of Melchizedek, like a seal in wax.'"¹²

It is certainly not the purpose of this paper to call into question what various individuals say Dr. Nibley told them. There have been others who have reported conversations with Nibley on the subject wherein he said the opposite of what he apparently told the aforementioned individuals. For example, Robert J. Matthews, former dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University and a colleague of Professor Nibley, asked him about this symbol and received a very different response than those represented above. Dr. Matthews indicated that Nibley "had little information about it as far as sources, other than the mural." Nibley thought the parallels between the San Diego temple and the mural were "simply coincidental."¹³ Another close associate of Nibley's, Michael Lyon (who has illustrated a number of Nibley's books), said, "Nibley was aware of [the eight-pointed star or interlocking square design], and his general sense of the design was this: 'It is a very interesting thing. But don't get too excited about it.'"¹⁴ Thus some who knew Nibley well relate a much different story about the symbol than others who inquired of him regarding it.

Of course, it is possible that Professor Nibley was not consistent in what he said or that he was misunderstood. Indeed, this—rather than dishonesty on the part of those who have reported conversations with Nibley—likely explains the strong contradiction between the various reports of his interpretation of the symbol. After all, Nibley himself stated, "As knowledge increases,

the verdict of yesterday must be reversed today."¹⁵ In other words, the more I know, the more I am compelled to change my mind. Hence his classic statement: "I refuse to be held responsible for anything I wrote more than three years ago."¹⁶ Nibley was not ashamed of the fact that his views changed over time. He saw it as evidence that he was learning.¹⁷ Of course, we cannot say dogmatically that Nibley changed his mind on this matter; though if we take the word of those who spoke with him about it, it seems the logical conclusion. What does seem evident is that, because of the inconsistency in his comments—and the lack of any written or public statement on this issue by Nibley—placing much credence in the varying and contradictory reports of his views on this matter is probably unwise. If we are to unravel the meaning of this symbol, we simply need to look beyond these reported comments for and against a connection to Melchizedek.

As to the design having been revealed in a dream, Lewis (the architect) has indicated that this did *not* happen. He noted that he and his architectural associates

were working hard to find a common symbol, module, or pattern to give continuity to the design, or to give a certain character to the temple. They started with a square, but they thought that was too plain and boxy. Then they started chamfering the square's corners which brought it to an 8-sided figure. When they extended the lines it became two overlapping squares. They thought that worked well and so they started using it more and more in the design of the temple. He said the more they used it the better and better it worked. Some people asked about the symbolism of the design, and he told them he didn't know if it had any particular symbolism.¹⁸

On another occasion Lewis reported, "The Lord didn't show me anything. . . . In designing the temple the Lord expected us to do everything we could to get it right . . . I spent a lot of time in fasting and prayer . . . all through the project, simply to make sure I was getting it right. And then after you've done all you can do . . . I think the Lord begins to respond if you're getting in trouble."¹⁹ Lewis also pointed out that "when the design was shown to the General Authorities in Salt Lake, . . . they didn't say anything about the interlocking squares symbol."²⁰ Thus there is no evidence that any of the presiding Brethren knew it to be a symbol of the Melchizedek Priesthood. Indeed, according to Bryce Haymond, "Once the temple was finished, Elder David B. Haight of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles escorted the media through the temple . . . Someone from the media asked him what the symbol was and what it represented, and Elder Haight . . . said that it was probably just an architectural detail."²¹

The Origin of the Term

One fact consistently overlooked by those who circulate the story of the seal of Melchizedek is that Nibley was *not* the original source for that phrase. While the comment appears in his book *Temple and Cosmos*, the author of the caption (to which the legend can be traced) was Michael Lyon, the book's illustrator.²² Lyon thought he had once seen the design in a book on Catholic symbolism, but he doubted the legitimacy of the name or title. In *Temple and Cosmos*, he used the term "so-called" to suggest caution about putting too much stock in the name or the seal's connection with Melchizedek.²³ I asked Lyon if Nibley approved his caption and the use of the phrase "seal of Melchizedek" under illustration 25 in *Temple and Cosmos*. Lyon told me:

Over the years of submitting illustrations and captions for his approval, Bro. Nibley varied in his level of interest. Sometimes he read every caption, rarely making changes and at other times he said he didn't want to be bothered. . . . For *Temple and Cosmos* I remember him telling me to go ahead and write the captions and he would look through them. I left them with him and later picked them up hoping for some editorial changes but there weren't any. . . . I remember Sis. Nibley . . . thanking me for making the captions sound as much like his writing as we . . . could manage.²⁴

Thus it seems likely that Nibley never actually examined or approved the caption, though he likely had been introduced to the mistaken connection between the symbol and Melchizedek through Lyon's innocent passing remark.

So what can we conclude thus far? There are a number of intriguing stories regarding why the architect of the San Diego temple placed the design (now commonly known as the "seal of Melchizedek") in and on the temple. Some of these stories misrepresent what Lewis himself has indicated actually happened. There are also conflicting stories as to what Dr. Nibley is said to have told various people when asked about this design. As previously noted, we know that Nibley never wrote the phrase "seal of Melchizedek" in any of his books or articles, including *Temple and Cosmos*. And we know that Michael Lyon was the source for the now-in-vogue phrase, though he personally doubts its legitimacy.²⁵ With that said, if we set aside the caption to figure 25 in Nibley's book and the accompanying stories that have become so popular, what, if anything, can we establish about the actual meaning of the symbol from historical and scholarly sources?

Associations with Melchizedek

There is nothing in the mural that connects the symbol with the man Melchizedek. Indeed, if this figure was a standard ancient symbol for Melchizedek, or his priesthood, one would expect this emblem to appear with frequency in the imagery and art of Judaism or Christianity or both. Yet the design is basically absent in traditional Jewish iconography, architecture, and symbology. While it appears occasionally in Christian art (mostly Byzantine), it would be unfair to say that it is a common Christian symbol. And where it does appear in Christianity, definitions of its symbolic meaning are inconsistent, though we can state dogmatically that they never have anything to do with Melchizedek or the Melchizedek Priesthood.²⁶

One source, which has done much to add to the popularity of the "seal of Melchizedek" among Latter-day Saints, noted that "so far we have been unable to find any non-LDS scholars who have referred to this symbol as the 'seal of Melchizedek.'"²⁷ Nor will they, because there is nothing ancient or scholarly to support such a connection. The only academic source that ever associates this design with Melchizedek is Lyon's passing comment, and even he in no way suggests that the design represents the priesthood or the temple, as a sizable number of Latter-day Saints claim. One might argue that Nibley is a second academic witness to this interpretation. However, as we have noted, his inconsistent and apparently contradictory private comments on the matter require us to place limited emphasis on these claims.

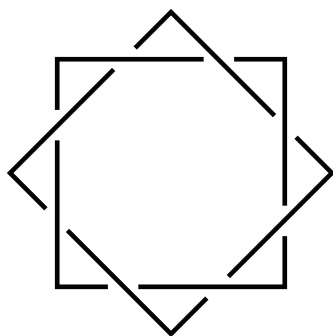
What is more significant is that, if one examines the San Vitale version of this mural²⁸ and the other murals found in that same church in Ravenna, this symbol is found nowhere on the clothing of Melchizedek. The so-called seal appears elsewhere, on the clothes of at least two people—namely, a woman (who has the symbol on her cloak) standing immediately to the right of Theodora in her entourage and a man (who has what appears to be this same emblem on his shoulder) standing immediately to the left of Justinian in his procession.²⁹ If this symbol represented the man Melchizedek, it would not make sense to place it on the clothes of other individuals depicted in the church's murals but not on Melchizedek himself. And if the design represents the Melchizedek Priesthood, it makes no sense that it does *not* appear on Melchizedek's clothes but *does* appear on the clothing of a woman.

Having established that there is nothing in scholarly or ancient sources to support the interpretation that this symbol represents Melchizedek or his priesthood, we must look at what else it might possibly represent. There are

five potential symbols in this design: (1) the gamma or right angle, (2) the square, (3) the number eight, (4) stars, and (5) the eight-pointed star. We will look at each of these respectively.

The Gamma

There is reason to question the claim that the design found on the altar cloth is indeed an eight-pointed star in the form of two interlocked squares. Note that the focus of the portion of the chapter (of Nibley's book) in which the design appears is the ancient use (on liturgical clothing and items) of the square or right angle (also occasionally referred to as an upside-down gamma). Lyon's illustration,³⁰ copied from one of the original Ravenna murals, has some fourteen squares, right angles, or gammas clearly depicted in it. The illustration was included in the book specifically to highlight the use of that symbol (i.e., the right angle), as do illustrations 23, 24, 26b, 27a, b, and e, and 28 of that same chapter. There is no discussion in that chapter, or anywhere else in Nibley's book, regarding the design, nor is it the subject of illustration 25. Knowing that the symbol being illustrated is the right angle, it is possible that the pattern commonly interpreted as two interlocked squares or an eight-pointed star may actually instead be eight right angles arranged in a circular pattern.³¹ It is thus possible that the design on the altar cloth may only be an attempt by the mural's artist to increase the number of gammas or right angles in the scene.



On a related note, Michael Lyon has suggested that the design, rather than being a star, may actually be nothing more than a rosette that “enhances [the] architectural design.” He noted that the “geometric shape . . . is easier to put . . . onto a wall or stone frieze” than is a flower.³² If that is the case, then another fascinating connection can be made. It has been suggested that

rosette designs may carry the same symbolic meaning as a series of gammas in a circle, as lexicographers note “the great variety of forms in which the mark [of the square] could appear.”³³ Curiously, a recently discovered Egyptian undergarment dating from the Greco-Roman period has “small rosettes . . . woven into the material in particular locations. There is one rosette over each breast and one on the right leg near the knee, but there is no corresponding rosette on the left leg. Across the lower abdomen, the material also has a hemmed slit about six inches long.”³⁴ Thus the design in the middle in the San Vitale mural, which has come to be known as the “seal of Melchizedek,” may instead be a rosette design made of gammas or right angles, specifically tying the design into the fourteen other gammas prominently displayed on the altar cloth. Hence, while we have no historic connection of the gamma with Melchizedek, its symbolic meaning has numerous connections with Christ.³⁵

The Square

Because a variety of meanings can be found associated with the square (or box shape) as a symbol, it is rather difficult to speak dogmatically about. In some cases it is juxtaposed with the circle (a symbol for the heavenly or the eternal), and therefore the square sometimes represents the mortal, the fallen, the earthly, or that which is limited.³⁶ None of these connotations seem applicable to the message of the Ravenna mural. On the other hand, one commentator noted that squares “in Christian tradition . . . symbolize a firm foundation.”³⁷ They can also symbolize honesty, perfection, dependability, integrity, morality, protection, and unchangingness,³⁸ all attributes of Christ. One Latter-day Saint text notes that “interlaced squares signify man’s regeneration,”³⁹ suggesting Christ’s gift of resurrection. Elsewhere it is stated that the square can symbolize “the fixation of death as opposed to the dynamic circle of life and movement.”⁴⁰ In this regard it also has connections with Christ, who died that we might live. Thus the square can quite logically be seen as a Christocentric symbol.

The Number Eight

The number eight is a very developed symbol in ancient and modern Christianity. It is traditionally associated with the concepts of resurrection, new beginnings, rebirth, renewal, and baptism.⁴¹ Because of its association with these aforementioned ideas, it is sometimes also seen as the number of Christ. Indeed, one text notes, “Eight is the dominical number, for everywhere

it has to do with the Lord. It is the number of His name, ΙΗΣΟΥΣ, Jesus,” which totals 888 in Greek gematria.⁴² This same source indicates that “other Dominical Names of Jesus are also marked by gematria and stamped with the number eight as a factor”—titles such as Christ, Lord, Savior, Emmanuel, or Messiah.⁴³ In reference to the symbolism of eight in the Resurrection, one author wrote, “Christ rose from the dead on ‘the first day of the week,’ that was of necessity the eighth day.”⁴⁴ Additionally, for all of those born in the covenant, baptism is to be performed at the age of eight (D&C 68:27). The intricately connected symbols of baptism, new beginnings, resurrection, Christ, and the number eight are natural and appropriate. In each case, Christ is the source.

In antiquity, baptismal fonts were commonly eight sided to represent new beginnings, rebirth, renewal, resurrection, and Christ. Of this fact, one source notes, “The octagon draws on the symbolism of the number eight, emblematic of renewal. Eight-sided forms were felt to mediate between the symbolism of the square, representing earthly existence, and the circle (standing for heaven or eternity).”⁴⁵ Of course, Christ is the great mediator between heaven and earth—between man and God. Thus the number eight is best seen as a symbol of Jesus and that which he has done for those who seek to follow him.⁴⁶

The Star

Anciently, stars were common symbols for angels.⁴⁷ Indeed, this is exactly how John the Revelator, Abraham, and Isaiah use the word *star* (see Revelation 1:20, 9:1, 22:16; Abraham 3:17–18; Isaiah 14:12–13; see also Numbers 24:17)—and quite possibly how Matthew intended the word to be understood in his gospel (see Matthew 2:2–10).⁴⁸ In the book of Revelation and in the Pearl of Great Price, Jesus is symbolized by a star. Harold Bayley, the noted early-twentieth-century Scottish scholar of language and symbolism, indicated that stars were common symbols for deity in many ancient cultures and religions and that the eight-pointed star is one of many star-symbols that represent the unity of the members of the Godhead.⁴⁹ Drawing on the book of Revelation, Bayley adds that “Christ . . . is described as the Bright and Morning Star.”⁵⁰ Of the use of stars in art and architecture, the *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* states, “To the Greeks and Romans the stars were divinities, a belief derived from the ancient religions of Persia and Babylon. . . . In a symbolic form the idea was absorbed by Christianity: Christ described

as the ‘bright star of dawn’ (Rev. 22:16).”⁵¹ Thus, more often than not, in religious symbolism stars are associated with the divine—sometimes angels, but often Christ.⁵²

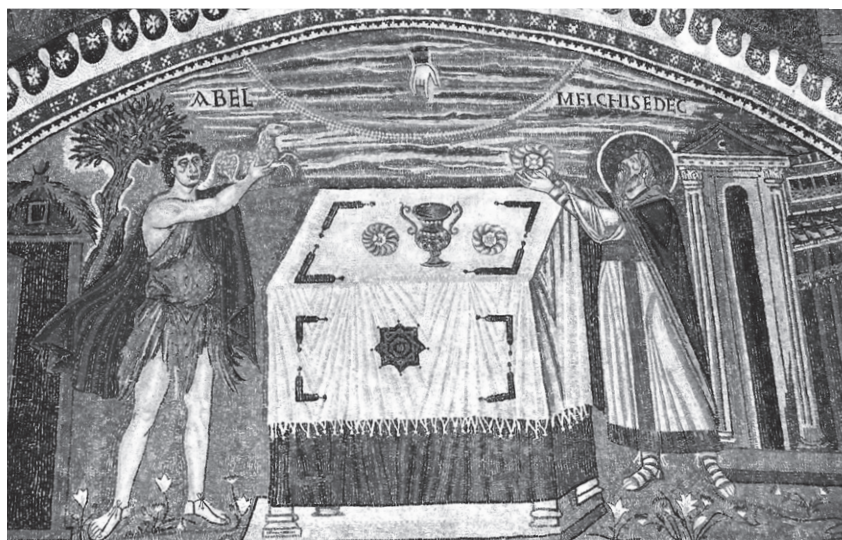
As noted, the eight-pointed star in Christianity is sometimes symbolic of the Godhead and the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.⁵³ For the Egyptians it was also a symbol of divinity or of God’s influence.⁵⁴ One Catholic text noted, “The eight-pointed star symbolizes regeneration. The number eight is traditionally associated with the idea of regeneration or baptism.”⁵⁵ Paul declares in the book of Romans that baptism is a type for the death, burial, and Resurrection of Christ—and the promise of resurrection or renewal for all who faithfully engage in that rite (see Roman 6:3–5). Thus one Latter-day Saint author wrote, “The eight-pointed star *signifies* man’s regeneration.”⁵⁶ The combination of the number eight (a symbol we have shown to be closely linked to Christ) and the symbolism of a star (also strongly tied in scripture to Jesus) suggests that the eight-pointed star is most likely a representation of the Savior.⁵⁷

The Sacrifice of Christ

When one takes all that is known from ancient and scholarly sources about the various symbolic elements of the so-called seal of Melchizedek, it appears in *all* cases to be Christocentric rather than Melchizedek-centric. At Revenna it is *not* found on Melchizedek but rather on the altar, which is a symbol for Christ’s sacrifice. It can represent honesty, perfection, dependability, integrity, morality, protection, and unchangingness—all attributes of Christ but not explicitly stated to be attributes of Melchizedek. It has strong ties to the number eight, which foreshadows resurrection, new beginnings, rebirth, renewal, and baptism. These are all symbols of Jesus but *not* of Melchizedek (or any mortal man). The “seal” appears to many to be a star (and an eight-pointed star, at that)—a common scriptural symbol for the divine or for Christ but *never* for Melchizedek. Thus symbolically everything points to Jesus, but nothing really points to Melchizedek. Indeed, even the life of Melchizedek typologically points us to Christ.⁵⁸

As we examine the murals from the churches at San Vitale and Sant’ Apollinare,⁵⁹ it becomes evident that the focus is not Melchizedek but rather Christ. In the murals at both churches, the symbol is found on the altar cloth, not on the individuals surrounding the altar. In Christianity, altars suggest the presence of God, sacrifice, and union with God. They imply the passage

from death to life and from time to eternity, which God offers to the faithful who approach the altar to sincerely worship him.⁶⁰ As one expert in symbolism noted, “The altar represents both the tomb and the resurrection, death transformed into life, the sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist [or sacrament] and Christ as the Son of Righteousness. [When an altar is made of wood,] the wood is [a symbol of] the cross, [and when it is made of stone,] the stone [is] the rock of Calvary and the raised altar is [a symbol of] both [Christ’s] ascension and Christ’s suffering on [Calvary’s] hill.”⁶¹ Thus the placement of the symbol on an altar is a definite sign to the viewer that the symbol is about Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf and *not* about the man Melchizedek.



In the San Vitale mural, Abel stands at the left side of the altar offering a lamb to God (see Genesis 4:4). God’s hand is seen extended from the sky above the altar, implying both the focus of the offering and also God’s acceptance of the same. To the right of the altar, rather than behind it, Melchizedek also makes a sacrificial offering, which is directed toward the extended hand of God. His sacrifice in the mural is a clear reference to Genesis 14:18, where Melchizedek is depicted as offering up the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Though the so-called seal is present in the mural, it is associated with neither Abel nor Melchizedek but instead with Christ and sacrifice.

In the Sant’Apollinare mural (illustrated in Nibley’s book), the symbol of sacrifice is extended. Abel still offers up his lamb and Melchizedek is found

offering up the sacrament, but Abraham is added to the mural, offering Isaac as an additional type of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf (see Genesis 22).⁶² Once again the hand of God is depicted as evidence of his divine acceptance of the sacrifices offered.

While the San Vitale mural has the names of both sacrificers prominently displayed above their heads, the Sant’Apollinare mural, because of the veil to the left and right of the altar, is much more crowded. The prominent display of Melchizedek’s name across the top gives the impression that the scene is specifically about Melchizedek. However, the symbolism makes it clear that, though Melchizedek is in the center of the picture, he is intended to be seen as one of several types for Christ. Indeed, though the *Temple and Cosmos* illustration shows Melchizedek’s name across the top of the drawing, it deletes an important feature of the mural found underneath the altar. Written across the bottom of the mural in rather corrupt Latin is a descriptive caption which, though damaged, clearly sports the names of both Abel and Melchizedek.



From what can be read of the damaged caption, we learn that the picture is intended as a typological scene, illustrating the reality that several biblical figures typify Christ, including Abel and Melchizedek, and, in light of the mural above the caption, Isaac also.⁶³ Indeed, those who know the stories of the lives of Abel,⁶⁴ Isaac,⁶⁵ and Melchizedek⁶⁶ know that each stand as an intricate typological foreshadowing of the offering or sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. The parallels between these three types are significant and sundry, and it is for this reason that the artist of the mural has depicted them together at the altar offering their respective typological sacrifices. The entire mural is a scene of sacrifice in honor of, and typification of, Christ’s ultimate sacrifice. One expert on the Sant’Apollinare mural wrote,

Noteworthy is the fact that Abel, Abraham, and Melchizedek are specifically mentioned in one of the solemn prayers of the Roman canon of the Mass: “Upon which (viz., the eucharistic offerings) do thou vouchsafe to look with a propitious and serene countenance, and to accept them, as thou wert graciously pleased to accept the gifts of thy just servant Abel, and the sacrifice of our Patriarch Abraham, and that which thy high priest Melchizedek offered to thee, a holy sacrifice, a spotless victim.” . . . The representation of the three mystical antitypes of Christ’s priesthood

in San Vitale is striking evidence of the importance of the liturgical theme in this church. . . . It must not be forgotten . . . that since apostolic times, the events narrated in the Book of Exodus were looked upon as allusions to the events of redemption. . . . The events narrated in the Book of Exodus are to be understood as “shadows and types” of the salvation of mankind.⁶⁷

This same source notes that the architectural shape of the church at San Vitale was designed to suggest to the mind of the observer that the church is a tomb—it is Christ’s sepulcher, *per se*.⁶⁸ Sacrifice is the ultimate symbol of the building and the mural in question, as is suggested by the lamb, the bread, and the boy Isaac, as well as by the sacrificial lives of the three men offering their gifts to God.⁶⁹

The Evolution of Symbols

Not surprisingly, symbols sometimes evolve in their meaning and use. For example, in the two millennia since the founding of Christianity, the cross has become the universally recognized symbol of the worldwide body of believers in the divine mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. But the fact is, the cross as a symbol predates Christianity. One noted expert in symbolism referred to it as the “universal symbol from the most remote times” and as “a cosmic symbol par excellence.”⁷⁰ The Babylonians saw it as a symbol of the four phases of the moon. To the Syrians it represented the four great gods of the elements. In pre-Columbian America it was a fertility symbol. In Egypt it was associated with Maat and in India with Agni, but in Scandinavia it was a symbol for the fertilizing power of Thor’s hammer.⁷¹ In addition to the cross’s nearly universal acceptance as a symbol, crucifixion was practiced for many centuries before the common era by many peoples. The Phoenicians, Greeks, Babylonians, Persians, and Romans all used it, and there is evidence that others such as the Celts, Germans, Carthaginians, and Britons also employed it as a form of capital punishment.⁷² Thus, as a symbol and as an instrument of death, the cross is pre-Christian in origin. Today, however, for Christians it has a rather distinct and well-established meaning, though such meanings would have stood as contradictions to the actual ancient meanings of the symbol in the Christian era.

The Star of David is another example of a symbol that has evolved in its meaning over the centuries. One text suggests that the modern Jewish Star of David is most likely a descendant of the ancient rosette, which was connected to royalty.⁷³ Before the medieval period, it was not used within Judaism, and

when it finally did find its first use in Jewry, it was the mystics or Kabbalists who utilized it. For them, it was not a symbol of Judaism or even of King David. Rather, it was a sign of protection placed on their amulets or good-luck charms.⁷⁴ Only in recent times has the Star of David become a distinctive Jewish symbol. For millennia it not only had no particular significance to Jews, but was completely absent in all things Jewish. The seven-branched menorah was the traditional symbol of Judaism and even appears on the official seal of the State of Israel.⁷⁵ The popular use of the Star of David in mainstream Judaism only started in the nineteenth century, when Jews of that period were looking for a symbol they could use “in contradistinction to the Christian use of the cross.”⁷⁶ While adopted only recently by Jews, the Star of David was used by various societies as early as the Bronze Age. It was present in Mesopotamia, India, the Iberian Peninsula, and Britain. Its initial use in Judaism was entirely decorative or ornamental, and it is absent in Jewry during Hellenistic times.⁷⁷ During the Middle Ages, Muslims and Christians used the Star of David. It is seen in a number of medieval European churches and in some early Byzantine structures. Thus, like the cross of Christianity, the Star of David of Judaism is a symbol that was borrowed from ancient societies and reinterpreted to suit the needs of a more modern people who were looking for a symbol to represent an idea important to them. Hence a “new” symbol was born.

So what of the so-called seal of Melchizedek? There is no question that the two overlapping squares (or eight-pointed star) is an ancient design.⁷⁸ However, it has no strong connection to Judaism, and its connections to Christianity are mostly in the octagonal layout of various buildings, not in symbology. The design does appear sporadically from antiquity through modernity in various religions and cultures, but with no consistency in meaning and often as a purely aesthetic device.⁷⁹ For example, the pattern erroneously called the seal of Melchizedek appears frequently in the art of Islam, with no defined meaning. It was commonly used as a marker for the end of a chapter in Arabic calligraphy and is known as the *rub al-hizb*. It is customary in a number of Arabic texts, including older versions of the Qur’an.

The symbol is often simply an architectural design, as the architect reported it was intended to be on the San Diego temple.⁸⁰ In predominantly Muslim cities it is commonly found on Mosques, votive objects, fobs, and even key chains.⁸¹ Similarly, in the Khirbet Kanef synagogue of Palestine there are two overlapping squares carved into one of its walls which, according to

one expert, likely symbolize a rosette, thus again an aesthetic design with no specific meaning.⁸² The overlapping squares appear as a pattern on the floor of the lobby of the House of Lords in the British House of Parliament, simply utilized for aesthetic appeal.⁸³ A number of flags and coats of arms employ the symbol of the eight-pointed star. For example, the Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan coats of arms employ it, as do the flags of Azerbaijan and the Azat (or “freedom”) party of Kazakhstan. Until recently, the Iraqi Boy Scouts and Girl Guides employed the eight-pointed star as part of their official logo. Each of these utilizes the symbol for its own reasons and without any cross-cultural meaning.

The glory of Christ is often represented in Eastern Orthodox iconography as “eight rays of light emanating from the body of Christ.”⁸⁴ A common way for that glory to be depicted in Orthodox art is through “two superimposed concave squares” forming an octagon.⁸⁵ In Hinduism the symbol sometimes known as the “star of Lakshmi” is an eight-pointed star, made of two superimposed squares. It symbolizes the many kinds of wealth offered to us by God, specifically the goddess Lakshmi.⁸⁶ While we could continue to list examples, it is evident that the pattern of two overlapping squares (or an eight-pointed star) is common in a variety of cultures. But there is no consistency in use or symbolic meaning, and certainly none of these faiths or cultures see the symbol as a representation of the man Melchizedek or of priestly authority.



Courtesy of Bryce Haymond

Repeated motif on the San Diego temple gate.

Conclusion

Weighing all of the evidence presented above, it seems clear to this author that the Ravenna murals made so popular by Nibley's *Temple and Cosmos* have utilized the design in question either as an aesthetic pattern, a means of multiplying right angles, or a symbol for the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. Of course, we will never be able to identify the true intention for sure, as the unknown artist of the murals left no known explanation of his objective.

What we can say for sure is that the design is not an ancient symbol of Melchizedek or priesthood authority (at Ravenna or in any ancient source). We know that it is primarily an aesthetic rather than religious design and that when it was used anciently, it never had a defined meaning.

By popularizing this image, a handful of Latter-day Saints have created a new symbol—a modern Star of David or cross. The pattern of interlocked squares or eight-pointed star has been endowed with religious meaning, and an entire folklore has developed around it to show that divine origins have been behind the symbol and its employment on certain temples.⁸⁷ Through a simple misunderstanding of a caption under a picture in a book, Mormons have unintentionally created a symbol that has erroneously been connected with Melchizedek and his priesthood.⁸⁸

Given that the interlocked squares (or eight-pointed star) is *not* an ancient symbol for the Melchizedek Priesthood and that the proper ancient name for this design is *not* the seal of Melchizedek, we are left with the question, is it appropriate for modern Latter-day Saints to take an unaffiliated design, such as dual overlapping squares, and turn such a design into an official symbol for the Melchizedek Priesthood or for the act of making one's calling and election sure? Because this article is unlikely to end the popular practice among Mormons of claiming the aforementioned design as the ancient seal of Melchizedek and a symbol for the higher priesthood, I leave it to readers to decide whether to embrace or reject the symbol.⁸⁹ For this author it matters little—though frankly, if we as a people are to adopt this symbol, it would be more appropriate to interpret it as a representation of Christ rather than as a symbol of one whose life typified him.⁹⁰ **RE**

Notes

1. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Donald W. Parry, *A Guide to Scriptural Symbols* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 1; see also Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt

Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 773; Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Gospel Symbolism* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 249.

2. Examples of symbols found in non-LDS traditions but also utilized by Latter-day Saints include white as a symbol of purity, victory, and happiness; the elements of the sacrament as representations of Christ's slain body and shed blood; the use of olive oil as a token of the Holy Ghost; the laying on of hands as a sign of conferral; and so forth. Examples of symbols unique to Latter-day Saints include statues of the angel Moroni, the CTR crest, sacred clothing associated with the temple and its rites, presidencies as symbolic mirrors of the Godhead, and so on.

3. See Val Brinkerhoff, *The Day Star: Reading Sacred Architecture* (New York: Digital Legend Press, 2009), 1:50, 52, 53; 2:63, 131. "An eight-sided figure is . . . the seal of Melchizedek. The . . . mosaic in St. Apollinare in Classe . . . shows the seal of Melchizedek. . . . The seal of Melchizedek should remind us that it is the Melchizedek Priesthood that administers the ordinances of exaltation." Gerald E. Hansen Jr., *Sacred Walls: Learning from Temple Symbols* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2009), 47.

4. While most Latter-day Saints who utilize this symbol associate it with the Melchizedek Priesthood, some refer to it as the symbol of having made one's calling and election sure, and also of the principle of eternal progression. See Brinkerhoff, *Day Star*, 2:132, 142, 145; Bryce Haymond, "The Seal of Melchizedek—Part 3," *Temple Study: Defending and Sustaining the LDS Temple*, <http://www.templestudy.com/2008/09/10/the-seal-of-melchizedek-part-3>.

5. This design has been reported to appear in various places in the San Diego, Newport Beach, Redlands, Bountiful, Nauvoo, Salt Lake, Draper, and Albuquerque temples. See Bryce Haymond, "The Seal of Melchizedek—Part 3."

6. See Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 91–138.

7. See Brinkerhoff, *Day Star*, 2:155–56.

8. See Brinkerhoff, *Day Star*, 2:156.

9. See Haymond, "The Seal of Melchizedek—Part 1," *Temple Study: Defending and Sustaining the LDS Temple*, <http://www.templestudy.com/2008/09/08/the-seal-of-melchizedek-part-1>.

10. See Haymond, "Seal of Melchizedek—Part 3."

11. See Haymond, "The Seal of Melchizedek—Part 4," *Temple Study: Defending and Sustaining the LDS Temple*, <http://www.templestudy.com/2008/09/11/the-seal-of-melchizedek-part-4>. See also Brinkerhoff, *Day Star*, 1:61. Val Brinkerhoff recounts a conversation he had with Bill Lewis on this matter (see *Day Star*, 2:61). Elsewhere he quotes Lewis as saying, "And so I wrote President Hinckley . . . and said now you're too busy to respond, but just for your interest, for your information. And sure enough, a week later he responded very nicely. And [I] found out later, he called Brother Nibley and checked on it, talked with him about it." Val Brinkerhoff, "LDS Symbolism Series: Interview of Bill Lewis, Private Architect of the San Diego, California LDS Temple" (unpublished manuscript in author's possession, 2006), 28; emphasis in original; transcribed by Jennifer Olson. Lewis indicated that President Hinckley did not tell him personally that he had spoken to Nibley about this, but Lewis heard through the grapevine that President Hinckley talked with Nibley at some point about the symbol. From his oral interview it is unclear what exactly President Hinckley explicitly conveyed to Lewis and how much Lewis learned through some secondary source or drew as a conclusion from nonexplicit statements. Lewis never states in his interview that President Hinckley personally told him he had called Nibley or that President Hinckley informed him of what Nibley said about the symbol.

12. See Haymond, "Seal of Melchizedek—Part 4." Another source reports that a member of the Temple Construction Department "became curious about the motif and asked Hugh Nibley (a professor at BYU at the time) if any ancient meaning was attached to the symbol. Nibley is said to have explained that in antiquity the 2 interlaced squares . . . is typically referred to as the Seal of King Melchizedek." Bill Lewis, in Brinkerhoff, *Day Star*, 2:156; see also 2:160 n.1; 1:60–61. While Nibley may have said this, there is no support for such a claim in antiquity.

13. Conversation with Robert J. Matthews, March 18, 2009; see also Paul E. Damron, "Melchizedek: A Personal Study" (unpublished paper presented to the Church Educational System Graduate Scripture Study of the New Testament class, Sacramento, 2000), 3–4. I express appreciation to Paul Damron for freely sharing with me his detailed research notes on this subject.

14. Michael Lyon, telephone conversation with the author, January 16, 2009.

15. Hugh W. Nibley, "A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price—Part 3: Empanelling the Panel," *Improvement Era*, July 1968, 54.

16. Hugh W. Nibley, "The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham: A Response by H. W. Nibley to E. H. Ashment," *Sunstone*, December 1979, 49.

17. Brinkerhoff reported that Bill Lewis, the architect of the San Diego temple, told him, "Some in the academic world refute the meaning and its title. What is clear is that Hugh Nibley believed that it had connection to the ancient high priest and apparently Pres. Hinckley believed him." Brinkerhoff, *Day Star*, 1:61. As we have shown, it isn't clear at all what Nibley believed on this matter. It appears that he contradicted himself when he spoke to various people who inquired of him regarding the symbol. Unfortunately, because he is no longer living and thus cannot explain what he really said or believed, it seems wise to (1) trust the witness of those who knew Nibley and (2) more importantly, look at what scholarly sources tell us. In the end, Nibley may or may not have believed that this symbol was associated with Melchizedek. If he did, he may have been wrong. When one surveys ancient and scholarly sources on the matter, all evidence points to the fact that this design has absolutely nothing to do with Melchizedek or his priesthood. Every claim of its ancient connections to Melchizedek can be traced back to a one-on-one conversation with Nibley or to Michael Lyon's caption in Nibley's book. There is nothing else to support the bold declaration that this is some ancient symbol of King Melchizedek and his priesthood. Thus, even if Nibley did believe the design was associated with Melchizedek, there is not a scrap of evidence to support such a belief. By this I mean no offense. I am simply trying to let the sources, ancient and modern, speak for themselves.

18. See Haymond, "Seal of Melchizedek—Part 4."

19. Bill Lewis, oral interview with Val Brinkerhoff, August 2006. Brinkerhoff confirmed the accuracy of Lewis's words to me in personal correspondence on November 2, 2009.

20. See Haymond, "Seal of Melchizedek—Part 4."

21. See Haymond, "Seal of Melchizedek—Part 4." Bill Lewis reported this same experience as follows: "Elder Haight was down, to usher the media through and answer questions, and so when they came back and they were asking questions, that was the first question that one of the reporters asked, 'What's that symbol mean? What part of the Church?' And it caught Brother Haight off guard I think. And he said the right answer in my opinion, he just said, 'Well, that's the architectural symbols they use.'" Bill Lewis, in "LDS Symbolism Series," 27; emphasis in original.

22. Brinkerhoff has pointed out to me that some who have reported Nibley's comments about the symbol being somehow associated with Melchizedek say they spoke with Nibley

prior to the actual publication of his book *Temple and Cosmos*. However, it should be noted that Nibley's book was being written, illustrated, and edited for a significant time prior to its publication in 1992. Consequently, Nibley had already likely been introduced to the so-called seal of Melchizedek by Michael Lyon well before his book reached the bookstore shelf and long before the April 1993 dedication of the San Diego Temple. Brinkerhoff's oral interview with Bill Lewis actually implies that the conversations with Nibley about this symbol came shortly after the temple open house and therefore well after Nibley's book was in print. See "LDS Symbolism Series," 27–28. Time and again, those who suggest a Melchizedek connection to the symbol attribute it to Nibley and cite his book as evidence of the interpretation. While I am willing to concede that Lewis and a handful of others may trace their understanding to Nibley, since he never used that phrase in any of his writings, it is likely that he was influenced by Lyon's comment. And certainly the vast majority of those I have encountered who believe the symbol is associated with Melchizedek cite Lyon's caption as their source (though they attribute the caption to Nibley).

23. Conversation with Michael Lyon, January 16, 2009; see also Haymond, "The Seal of Melchizedek—Part 2," *Temple Study: Defending and Sustaining the LDS Temple*, <http://www.templestudy.com/2008/09/09/the-seal-of-melchizedek-part-2>. Lyon told me that though he has tried on numerous occasions to find the book in which he thought he had seen the symbol, he has been unsuccessful in locating it or any other text that connects the eight-pointed star with Melchizedek or that calls that design the seal of Melchizedek. In a conversation with Lyon in the year 2000, he indicated that he did not know whether the interlocking squares on the altar cloth were a deliberate construction of the artist of the mural or just an interesting shape that enhances the design. Lyon suggested that often the symbol of two interlocked squares was utilized as a representation of a flower because it would have been "easier to put onto a wall or stone frieze" than to carve a flower. Damron, "Melchizedek: A Personal Study," 8. More recently, Lyon told me that "the eight-pointed star in the Ravenna mural may be nothing more than a pleasing design [with no particular meaning], developed by the mural's creator." Michael Lyon, conversation with the author, January 16, 2009; see also Allen H. Barber, *Celestial Symbols: Symbolism in Doctrine, Religious Traditions and Temple Architecture* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1989), 154, 168–69.

24. Michael Lyon, e-mail to the author, March 4, 2009.

25. Again, Nibley may well have shared Lyon's idea with a select few—perhaps even President Hinckley. But the general popularity of the symbol has come (in the opinion of this author) not from comments by Nibley to a couple of individuals, but rather from the widely seen and cited caption written by Lyon in *Temple and Cosmos*.

26. Michael Lyon stated, "The design is found in many Byzantine contexts where it does not seem to have any special meaning." Personal correspondence with author, November 19, 2009.

27. See Haymond, "Seal of Melchizedek—Part 2."

28. There are two historic basilicas in the northeastern portion of Italy: San Vitale (in Ravenna) and Sant'Apollinare (in Classe). Construction on the San Vitale edifice began in AD 526. Upon completion, the building was dedicated to the martyrs of the city of Ravenna. Construction on San Vitale's sister basilica, Sant'Apollinare, began in AD 532. This second basilica was dedicated to Classe's first bishop. Sant'Apollinare is a more modest undertaking than its counterpart and predecessor. And the second of these two basilicas borrowed heavily from the motifs of its forerunner in San Vitale, including imitating and adapting its art work. Indeed, one scholar noted that the mural in Sant'Apollinare which is so heavily connected with the "seal of Melchizedek" myth is "unquestionably an adaptation of the two mosaics in

San Vitale. . . . The three antitypes of Christian priesthood [Abel, Isaac, and Melchizedek] have been brought together in one scene." Otto G. Von Simson, *Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 59. Upon their completion, both basilicas were dedicated by Bishop Maximian of Ravenna—San Vitale in AD 548 and Sant'Apollinare in AD 549.

29. Note that both of these individuals are political rather than religious figures.

30. See Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, 109, fig. 25.

31. As to the meaning of the gamma, square, or right angle, one authoritative text on Jewish symbols notes that in antiquity the square symbolized the hope "for immortality" by the wearer. Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964), 9:163. In LDS writings we find interpretations such as the following: "An angle of a square . . . forms the sign of the square 'L' . . . which signifies moral rectitude." M. Garfield Cook, *Restoration In Geometric Symbolism*, 2nd. rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: M. Garfield Cook, 2004), 38. A square or right angle "is a symbol of justice and uprightness, to act uprightly, justly and truthfully; . . . and [it is] an emblem of morality, which taught the initiated to square their lives and actions according to the laws of God." Barber, *Celestial Symbols*, 36. One non-LDS text suggests that the square symbolizes staying "within . . . proper limits." Robert Macoy, *A Dictionary of Freemasonry* (New York: Gramercy Books, 2000), 674. Elsewhere we read, "The square was an emblem of morality, which taught them to square their lives and actions by the unerring laws of God's word, and to regulate their conduct according to the doctrine laid down by their divine Creator, to preserve a lively faith in his holy gospel, and taught them to live in charity with all mankind." George Oliver, *The Ancient Landmarks of Freemasonry* (Silver Springs, MD: The Masonic Service Association, 1932), 249, cited in E. Cecil McGavin, *Mormonism and Masonry* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 60. The square is "the implement of proof. 'Prove all things, hold fast that which is good' [1 Thessalonians 5:21]." Robert Morris, *The Poetry of Freemasonry* (n.p.: The Wrener Company, 1895), 119.

32. Michael Lyon, conversation with the author, January 16, 2009; see also Damron, "Melchizedek: A Personal Study," 8; Barber, *Celestial Symbols*, 9:164.

33. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:164.

34. C. Wilfred Griggs and others, "Evidences of a Christian Population in the Egyptian Fayum and Genetic and Textile Studies of the Akhmim Noble Mummies," *BYU Studies* 33, no. 2 (1993): 226; see also 227; John W. Welch and Claire Foley, "Gammadion on Early Jewish and Christian Garments," in *Masada and the World of the New Testament* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1997), 254–55.

35. One source notes that "in mediaeval times it was the gammadion [that was] used to symbolize Christ." J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 166. One expert on the evolution of symbols likewise suggested that "the gammadion . . . sometimes [takes] the place of the Cross of Christ" and that in certain cultures "the gammadion . . . [is a] representation of . . . god." Count Goblet d'Alviella, *The Migration of Symbols* (New York: University Books, 1956), 45, 50; see also 50–51, 71. He also says that for the Aryans, for example, the gammadion was a symbol of "the omnipotent God of the universe" or the "Heavenly Father" of subsequent mythologies (74, 75). One LDS source suggests that gammadion may be a "figure of victory" or "hoped for immortality." Welch and Foley, "Gammadion on Early Jewish and Christian Garments," 255. Indeed, "victory . . . commonly appears as a symbol of immortality." Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 9:163, as cited in Welch and Foley, "Gammadion on Early Jewish and Christian Garments," 255. There is evidence that gammadion were "used . . . to ornament the garments of certain priestly personages" in the

fourth century and that, in fact, they are constantly found on altars and priestly vestments in various cultures and religions. D'Alviella, *Migration of Symbols*, 35, 44.

36. See Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, 157; Jack Tresidder, *Symbols and Their Meanings* (London: Duncan Baird, 2000), 154.

37. Nadia Julien, *The Mammoth Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Elfreda Powell (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1996), 398; see also J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd ed., trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971), 307; Cook, *Restoration in Geometric Symbolism*, 26; David Fontana, *The Secret Language of Symbolism* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), 54.

38. See Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, 157; Fontana, *Secret Language of Symbolism*, 54.

39. Barber, *Celestial Symbols*, 165.

40. Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, 157.

41. For examples of the number eight as a symbol of resurrection, see James F. White, "The Spatial Setting," in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 798, 799; Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, 118; Robert D. Johnston, *Numbers in the Bible: God's Design in Biblical Numerology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1990), 75; Julien, *Mammoth Dictionary of Symbols*, 135; E. W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1967), 200; John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 122. For examples of eight as a symbol of new beginnings, see Johnston, *Numbers in the Bible*, 75; J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd ed. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971), 233; Julien, *Mammoth Dictionary of Symbols*, 135; Bullinger, *Number in Scripture*, 196, 200; Tresidder, *Symbols and Their Meanings*, 168. For examples of eight as a symbol of rebirth, see Julien, *Mammoth Dictionary of Symbols*, 135; Cook, *Restoration in Geometric Symbolism*, 40; Hansen and Brinkerhoff, *Sacred Walls*, 47. For an example of eight as a symbol of renewal, see Tresidder, *Symbols and Their Meanings*, 154, 168. For examples of eight as a symbol of baptism, see Cirlot, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 233; McConkie and Parry, *Guide to Scriptural Symbols*, 46; White, "The Spatial Setting," 798, 799; Cook, *Restoration in Geometric Symbolism*, 41. "According to Clement of Alexandria, Christ placed those whom he gave a second life under the sign of eight." Julien, *Mammoth Dictionary of Symbols*, 135.

42. Cook, *Restoration in Geometric Symbolism*, 40; Hansen and Brinkerhoff, *Sacred Walls*, 47. "The Sibline Oracles 1:342–344 give the number of the name of the Savior in Greek as 888 (I=10, A=8, S=200, O=70, Y=400, S=200)." Richard D. Draper, *Opening the Seven Seals* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 273, n. 29. "In the Hebrew alphabet this is the sacred number of Jesus." Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, 120.

43. Bullinger points out that, if spelled out in Greek gematria, "Christ" totals 1,480 (8 × 185); "Lord" totals 800 (8 × 100); "Our Lord" totals 1,768 (8 × 82); "Son" totals 880 (8 × 110). Additionally, in gematria "the names of the Lord's people are multiples of eight" in most cases. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture*, 203, 204, 205–7.

44. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture*, 200; see also Cook, *Restoration in Geometric Symbolism*, 41.

45. Tresidder, *Symbols and Their Meanings*, 154.

46. One expert on the church at San Vitale noted that the building's eight-sided design is Christocentric in its meaning. He wrote, "In Christian architecture the octagonal plan is an image of the Easter sepulcher. Liturgically and mystically, a martyr's sanctuary is both his tomb and Christ's sepulcher; and early Christian theology conceived the dignity of martyrdom as the martyr's mystical transfiguration into Christ. The architecture of San Vitale, evoking

this relation of the death and resurrection of the titular saint to the death and resurrection of Christ, is a significant tribute to the Christlike dignity of St. Vitalis." Von Simson, *Sacred Fortress*, 4; see also Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, 111. Thus the structure of the very building in which the mural is found is Christocentric, sending a message to the mural's viewers as to what the architect and artists involved in constructing the building had in mind as the ultimate symbolism of the building and its art, including the so-called seal of Melchizedek.

47. Some might question our drawing a connection between eight-pointed stars and dual overlapping squares. Encyclopedias of symbolism do not always distinguish between these two symbols and their potential symbolic meanings. We have no way to tell what was intended at Ravenna, so we will treat here the eight-pointed star in case the artist intended his design to be perceived as such.

48. My interpretation of a star as a symbol for an angel is based on several early Christian infancy narratives that suggest that the "star" that the "wise men" followed was actually an angel. "There appeared to them an angel in the form of that star which had before been their guide in their journey; the light of which they followed till they returned into their own country." "The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ," 3:3, in William Hone, comp., *The Lost Books of the Bible*, trans. Jeremiah Jones and William Wake (New York: Bell Publishing, 2004), 40; see also "The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Saviour," 8:406, verse 7, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Anti-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), which reads basically the same: "There appeared to them an angel in the form of that star which had before guided them on their journey; and they went away, following the guidance of its light, until they arrived in their own country."

49. See Harold Bayley, *The Lost Language of Symbolism: An Inquiry into the Origin of Certain Letters, Words, Names, Fairy-Tales, Folklore, and Mythologies* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1993), 1:109–11 and fig. 299. Like Bayley, Nadia Julien suggests that stars "express the words 'god' and 'heaven.'" Julien, *Mammoth Dictionary of Symbols*, 401.

50. See Bayley, *Lost Language of Symbolism*, 2:96.

51. James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), "star," 289.

52. See Brinkerhoff, *The Day Star*, 2:132, 138, 145, 160.

53. One text states that "the ancient seal of King Melchizedek [is] found in antiquity in many Christian contexts." Brinkerhoff, *Day Star*, 1:52. The reader should be aware that, while Christian churches occasionally display eight-pointed stars (✴) in their art and architecture, the overlain or interlocked squares (⬛) that appear to form a type of eight-pointed star (being called by some Latter-day Saints the "seal of Melchizedek") are quite rare in Christianity—and are never referred to as the "seal of King Melchizedek," nor are they ever associated with Melchizedek. Thus, connections often made between stars in various churches and the design this article is examining are forced, as they are very different in appearance and meaning. See Brinkerhoff, *Day Star*, 2:131–81, particularly 157–58.

54. Julien, *Mammoth Dictionary of Symbols*, 404.

55. Friedrich Rest, *Our Christian Symbols* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1987), 60.

56. Barber, *Celestial Symbols*, 30. Another penned this: "An eight-pointed star is symbolic of the way to heaven"—Jesus Christ being "the Way." Cook, *Restoration in Geometric Symbolism*, 40.

57. See Brinkerhoff, *Day Star*, 2:132, 138, 145, 160.

58. Little is known about Melchizedek's early life, just as little is known about Jesus' early life. Melchizedek manifested gifts of the Spirit in his youth (see JST, Genesis 14:26), as did

Jesus (see JST, Luke 2:41–52). Melchizedek bore the title “King of Righteousness,” which Jews associate with their Messiah, and Jesus *was* the “King of Righteousness” and the Jewish Messiah. Melchizedek is one of very few figures depicted in scripture as having offered the Lord’s Supper (see Genesis 14:18–20; JST, Genesis 14:17–20). Jesus offered the Lord’s Supper as the fulfillment of the Pascal feast (see Matthew 26:26–28). Scripture draws parallels between Christ and Melchizedek (see Hebrews 7:14–16; Psalm 110:4). Both were famous for preaching repentance to their hearers (see Alma 13:18; Matthew 4:17; D&C 18:22; 19:15–20), and for administering salvific ordinances for the remission of sins (see Alma 13:16; JST, Genesis 14:17; JST, John 4:1–3). The priesthood is called after Melchizedek’s name (see D&C 107:3–4), whereas it used to be called after Christ’s name, even the “Priesthood after the order of the Son of God” (D&C 107:3–4). Melchizedek is said to have reigned “under his father” (Alma 13:18), just as Christ reigns “under His Father” (see John 5:19). Melchizedek was king of Jerusalem (see Genesis 14:18; Psalm 76:2), and Jesus, by right, should have been king of the Jews and Jerusalem (see Matthew 1; 2; 5:35). Both were known for their miraculous powers (see JST, Genesis 14:26). Just as Melchizedek was called the “king of heaven” by his people (JST, Genesis 14:34–36), Jesus is the King of Heaven and is acknowledged as such by those who are his true followers (see 2 Nephi 10:14; Alma 5:50). Both were known as the “Prince of Peace” (JST, Genesis 14:33; Hebrews 7:1–2; Alma 13:18; Isaiah 9:6; 2 Nephi 19:6; see also John 14:27). Of Melchizedek it was said that no high priest was greater (see Alma 13:19), and Christ is *the* Great High Priest (see Hebrews 3:1; 9:11). Melchizedek is said to have overcome the world (see JST, Genesis 14:33–34), typifying that Jesus would overcome the world (see John 16:33).

59. Of the San Vitale mural, one expert wrote, “The scene on the right depicts Abel, Melchizedek, and Abraham on the three sides of an altar upon which they are offering their sacrificial gifts: Abel the lamb, Melchizedek the bread, and Abraham his son Isaac. The composition is unquestionably an adaptation of the two mosaics in San Vitale. . . . the three antitypes of Christian priesthood have been brought together in one scene.” Von Simson, *Sacred Fortress*, 59.

60. See Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, 111.

61. Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, 111.

62. In San Vitale, next to the mural of Abel and Melchizedek is a mural of Abraham and Isaac. Thus, it appears that the artist of the Sant’Apollinare mural simply combined the two separate murals of San Vitale into one singular motif.

63. Because the Latin caption is incorrectly written, the best we can offer is a rough translation. But it appears to say, “Melchizedek illustrates, as Scripture demonstrates, of Christ, [unintelligible], similar to/more so than Abel.” In other words, “As Scripture attests, Melchizedek is a type or symbol of Christ, as was Abel” or “even more so than was Abel.” I express appreciation to Drs. Eric D. Huntsman and Jeffrey R. Chadwick for looking at this inscription and offering their interpretation of its meaning.

64. For example, Abel was a shepherd (see Moses 5:17) like Christ, the “Good Shepherd” (John 10:11). Abel offered an acceptable offering, which consisted of a male lamb, without blemish, of the first year (see Moses 5:20), just as Christ’s offering was accepted by God and was typified by the slaying of a male lamb, without blemish, of the first year. Abel’s offering involved the shedding of blood (see Moses 5:20), and Christ’s offering involved the shedding of his own blood (see Moroni 5:2). In making his offering Abel was opposed by his brother (see Moses 5:21). So also, in making his offering and atonement Jesus was opposed by his brother Lucifer (see Abraham 3:27–28). Scripture informs us that Abel walked in holiness before God (see Moses 5:26), as did Jesus (see 2 Nephi 31:7; 3 Nephi 11:7).

65. As an example, Isaac was the birthright son of a righteous father (see Genesis 21), as was Jesus (see D&C 93:21). Isaac’s birth required a miracle (see Genesis 11:30; 17:15–22), as did Jesus’ (see Luke 1:26–38). In his mid-thirties Isaac was offered as a sacrifice by his father. Jesus was offered up by the Father apparently sometime during his thirty-fourth year of life. *Genesis Rabbah* 56:8 suggests that Isaac was somewhere between thirty-five and thirty-seven years of age; see also Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), 108; Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979–81), 1:364. The attempted sacrifice of Isaac took place on Mount Moriah (see Genesis 22:2), the same location at which Jesus was crucified (see Mark 15:22). Isaac carried the wood to which he would be bound up to the top of Mount Moriah (see Genesis 22:6) just as Jesus carried the wooden cross on which he would be bound to the top of Golgotha’s hill (see John 19:17). An angel ministered to both Isaac and Jesus during their hour of sacrifice (see Genesis 22:11; Luke 22:43). It is traditionally understood that Isaac willingly went to his place of sacrifice trusting his father’s judgment and decision, just as Jesus willingly went to his place of sacrifice trusting in his Father’s judgment and decision (see Abraham 3:27; Moses 4:2). A goat was provided for Isaac so that he wouldn’t have to die (see Genesis 22:13), and Christ is the scapegoat for Isaac, and all mankind, having died in our stead (see Romans 5:8; Revelation 5:6). The ram, which died in Isaac’s place, had the top of his head caught in some thorn bushes (see Genesis 22:13), and as part of his sacrifice, a crown of thorns had been placed on Christ’s head (see Matthew 27:29).

66. See note 58.

67. Von Simson, *Sacred Fortress*, 25, 26; see also William J. Hamblin and David Rolph Seely, *Solomon’s Temple: Myth and History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 53, 111.

68. See Von Simson, *Sacred Fortress*, 4, 15.

69. See Von Simson, *Sacred Fortress*, 25. Because the emperor who commissioned the building of the church was trying to associate himself with Christ (and thus, by default, with Abel, Melchizedek, Isaac, and Abraham), these standard symbols of Christ are used in the Church’s murals as symbols of the Emperor too; see Von Simson, *Sacred Fortress*, 31.

70. Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, 45.

71. See Tresidder, *Symbols and Their Meanings*, 146–47; see also Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, 45–46.

72. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:945; Gerald G. O’Collins, “Crucifixion,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1206–8.

73. See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 2:198.

74. See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 2:199; Nathan Ausubel, *The Jewish Book of Knowledge* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1964), “Magen David,” 263; Morris N. Kertzer, *What Is a Jew?* rev. Lawrence A. Hoffman (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 174–75.

75. Ausubel, *Jewish Book of Knowledge*, “Magen David,” 263.

76. Geoffrey Wigoder, ed., *Encyclopedia of Judaism* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing, 1989), “Magen David,” 44; see also Fred Skolnik, ed., *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2007), “Magen David,” 11:688, 697.

77. Skolnik, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, “Magen David,” 11:687.

78. As we noted above, the so-called seal may not actually be two overlapping squares or an eight-sided star. It may only be eight gammas arranged in a circular pattern.

79. Indeed, after looking at literally dozens of books on symbolism, including some of encyclopedic length, I could find only one text that presented this exact design and then

offered a specific definition of its meaning. Though the text did not give a name to the design, nor did it indicate whether it was intended to be viewed as an eight-pointed star, two interlocked squares, a rosette, or a series of gammas arranged in a circle, it did offer the following definition: “Material generation through the interaction of two opposing principles.” Cirlot, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 122. What does this definition mean? In less than clear language, it appears to be suggesting that the symbol represents reproduction or the generating of some temporal thing through the interaction of two opposites. But the symbol in the singular definition available to researchers is not connected to Melchizedek, to priesthood authority or power, or to anything innately religious.

80. Keith Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 29, diagrams C and F; see also 55, 151, 192; Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 239.

81. One of my colleagues pointed out that “the symbol is so frequent in Islam that it is even represented in Microsoft Word’s symbol cache for Arabic!” Jeffrey R. Chadwick, personal correspondence with author, October 21, 2009.

82. See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 2:198; see also volume 3, fig. 547.

83. M. H. Port, ed., *The Houses of Parliament* (London: Yale University Press, 1976), 126, fig. 79.

84. Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 85.

85. Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 228, 230. Other divine or angelic beings also have their glory depicted through the use of the two interlocked squares. See, for example, Yaroslav School, *John the Theologian*, ca. 1820, in S. Kent Brown, Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, and Dawn C. Pheysey, *Beholding Salvation: The Life of Christ in Word and Image* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 44, fig. 43.

86. These kinds of wealth are gifts such as prosperity, good health, knowledge, strength, posterity, and power.

87. I wish the reader to be aware that I do not accuse the temple’s architect (Bill Lewis), Professor Val Brinkerhoff, or illustrator Michael Lyon of creating the folklore of the “seal of Melchizedek” that I hear from various members of the Church at least once a month. Rather, lay (and I believe, well-intending) members have glommed onto bits of truth and popularly told sensationalized stories and combined these into a tale beyond anything Nibley could have imagined—a tale which circulates as well as any faith-promoting rumor since the dawning of the Restoration.

88. While I once again acknowledge that Nibley’s inconsistent comments on this issue have added to this, I remind the reader that the vast majority of Latter-day Saints remain unaware of his handful of personal comments to various people. Lyon’s caption in Nibley’s book has been a major catalyst in the advancement of this tradition. On a related note, President Boyd K. Packer said, “Instruction vital to our salvation is not hidden in an obscure verse or phrase in the scriptures. To the contrary, essential truths are repeated over and over again.” *Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 286. Obviously, the seal of Melchizedek is not essential to our salvation. Nor is it a symbol discussed or taught publicly by the presiding Brethren, employed in the salvific ordinances of the temple, or found in the holy scriptures.

89. As one who feels it is appropriate to create our own modern symbols, Val Brinkerhoff wrote: “We as Latter-day Saints *can* take a motif and apply our own meaning to it. . . . If we want this historic motif to represent the Melchizedek Priesthood in the late 1980s or now

(no matter what it may have represented for others), then so be it.” Personal correspondence, July 13, 2010; emphasis in original.

90. It is worth noting that while Brinkerhoff is an advocate of calling the design in question the “seal of Melchizedek,” he does rightfully see this symbol as strongly connected to, and representative of, Christ and his saving acts and ordinances. He is less dogmatic than some and offers several interpretations of the design, though the most common interpretation found in his writings being the “seal” explanation. Consequently, while he and I disagree on the symbol’s connection to Melchizedek, we are in agreement on the Christocentric nature of the symbol. See Brinkerhoff, *Day Star*, 2:131–81, specifically 2:132, 138, 145, 160.