NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title The Pervasiveness of the Temple in Religious Thought

Author(s) Darren T. Roulstone

Reference *FARMS Review of Books* 13/2 (2001): 79–86.

ISSN 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Abstract Review of *The Temple in Time and Eternity* (1999), edited by Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks; and *The Gates of Heaven: Insights on the Doctrines and Symbols of the Temple* (1999), by Matthew B. Brown.

The Pervasiveness of the Temple in Religious Thought

Darren T. Roulstone

Introduction

With the number of temples of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints growing rapidly worldwide (as of this writing, 103 have been dedicated, with almost half of the dedications taking place in the last three years), members of the Church of Jesus Christ are increasingly being asked the questions "What is a temple?" and "Why are they so important to your faith?" While temples are seen as a distinctive feature of the restoration, Latter-day Saints view temple worship as continuing a pattern begun "in the beginning" and continuing on through New Testament and Book of Mormon times. Indeed, although discussion of the apostasy by Latter-day Saints usually focuses on the question "Why did revelation cease after the death of the apostles?" a related and equally important question is "Why did temple worship cease as well?"

Review of Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks, eds. *The Temple in Time and Eternity.* Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999. xii + 370 pp., with citation and subject indexes. $24.95.

Review of Matthew B. Brown. *The Gate of Heaven: Insights on the Doctrines and Symbols of the Temple.* American Fork, Utah: Covenant, 1999. ix + 342 pp., with bibliographical references and index. $24.95.

In this review I will examine two books that illustrate the rich history of temple worship. *The Temple in Time and Eternity,* edited by Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks, is a companion work to *Temples of the Ancient World* and marks the second volume in the series Temples through the Ages. *The Gate of Heaven* is by Matthew B. Brown, who earlier coauthored *Symbols in Stone: Symbolism on the Early Temples of the Restoration.* Both of these books are informative and well researched and clarify the importance of the temple in religious thought and history. While mostly aimed at members of the Church of Jesus Christ, the books are also helpful to friends and associates interested in learning more about the religious and historical background of Latter-day Saint temple worship.

The Temple in Time and Eternity

The Temple in Time and Eternity contains an introduction followed by eleven essays in three sections: "Temple and Ritual," "Temples in the Israelite Tradition," and "Temples in the Non-Israelite Tradition." The introduction contains several quotations from ancient sources on the importance of the temple, among them the following: "A midrash concerning Abraham explains that God offered the entire world to Abraham, but the patriarch responded by saying, 'Unless you give to me a temple . . . , you have given me nothing' (*Exodus Rabbah* 15:8)" (p. x).

The idea that the temple is essential to create meaning in this world runs through Hugh W. Nibley's "Abraham's Temple Drama." His essay is based on a presentation made for the Book of Abraham Lecture Series and is vintage Nibley: wide-ranging, fast-moving, and full of quotations and references linking ancient beliefs with doctrines and practices of the restoration. While Nibley focuses a bit more on Abraham than the temple, he presents a vivid discussion of temple ordinances as part of a drama that teaches us about reality. The temple reminds us that this world (as real as it is) is only a preparation for another world. In temple ordinances (literally presented as a play or a movie, depending on which temple you attend), we see the preparations for this world, learn the requirements for our

roles in it, and are "walked through" the path to our ultimate destination. Nibley's contribution is followed by Stephen D. Ricks's "Oaths and Oath Taking in the Old Testament," which describes the manner of taking oaths—a subject linked to the temple's emphasis on making covenants. In a broader context, the emphasis on covenants is a distinctive feature of Latter-day Saint ordinances both within and without the temple.

Other essays in the book include two by John A. Tvedtnes: "Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity" and "Temple Prayer in Ancient Times." The first provides dozens of references to the practice of baptism for the dead among early Christians. The essay makes clear that some early Christian groups practiced baptism of living proxies on behalf of the deceased and understood this concept as part of Christ's ministry to those who died without having received the gospel in this life. To those who are not members of the Church of Jesus Christ, work for the dead is a most striking (and often baffling) aspect of Latter-day Saint temple worship. This essay makes it clear that such work is not as foreign to historical Christianity as many assume.

Tvedtnes's second article surveys the practice of prayer in ancient and modern temples. Again, the striking similarities between ancient and Latter-day Saint temple worship provide evidence supporting the view that Joseph Smith's introduction of temple worship was, truly, a restoration of forms of worship practiced in the past by followers of God. This evidence of the consistency of the gospel throughout the ages is particularly appealing to members of the Church of Jesus Christ, who see all forms of worship (from the Garden of Eden to the present dispensation) as part of our Heavenly Father's plan of salvation, a plan centered on the life and mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. Tvedtnes closes his second essay with these words, "From the preceding discussion, we can see that ancient temple prayer was a symbol of Christ. . . . Everything points to the Savior" (p. 70).

The second section begins with Richard O. Cowan's perspective on gospel consistency in "Sacred Temples Ancient and Modern." He quotes Elder John A. Widstoe: "All people of all ages have had temples in one form or another" (p. 99). Cowan, quoting Nibley, discusses the concept

of temples as "meeting places at which men at specific times attempted to make contact with the powers above" (p. 100) and gives several examples such as Mesopotamian ziggurats, Jacob's vision at Bethel, Moses' tabernacle, and Solomon's temple. While it is not always clear what ordinances were performed in ancient temples, Cowan notes the following practices associated with ancient temple worship: personal purity as a requirement for entrance to a temple, washing with water and anointing with oil, participants dressing in white clothing, instructions on how to return to God's presence, temple prayer, and eternal marriage. Cowan concludes with a look at the restoration of temple worship in this dispensation, including the endowment, sealings, and work for the dead.

Richard D. Draper and Donald W. Parry contribute a fascinating discussion of the use of temple imagery in the Bible. In "Seven Promises to Those Who Overcome: Aspects of Genesis 2–3 in the Seven Letters," they demonstrate how temple imagery in Genesis 2–3 is used by John in his addresses to the seven churches (Revelation 2–3). For example, while Adam and Eve were kept from the tree of life (Genesis 3:22–24), those who overcome the world (the elect) are promised they will partake of the fruit "of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7). The authors note, "By overcoming the world, church members could return to life, but they first had to reach the tree, which was in the midst of sacred space. For the modern Saint to get to the tree, he or she must first visit the temple and partake of its glorious ordinances" (p. 128). Other temple parallels between Genesis and Revelation include God's granting dominion to man (Genesis 1:28 and Revelation 2:26), sacred clothing (Genesis 3:21 and Revelation 3:5), and receiving names (Genesis 2:23; 3:20; 5:2; and Revelation 2:17).

The final two compositions of the second section represent the eclectic nature of this collection. In a modern setting, Alan K. Parrish discusses the importance of the temple by focusing on the devotion to the temple shown by Elder John A. Widtsoe of the Quorum of the Twelve. Examining Widtsoe's testimony of temple work and genealogy, Parrish remarks, "That modern temple work rose to such prominence amid the strains of his demanding life is compelling evidence of his

conversion to it" (p. 144). As he reviews Widtsoe's labors on behalf of temple work, Parrish emphasizes the great importance of such work and the need for Latter-day Saints to strengthen and act on their testimonies of it. Thomas R. Valletta contrasts the priesthood of God, "rooted in keeping sacred covenants centered in the temple" (p. 183), with the order of Nehor as described in the book of Alma.

The final section of the book discusses temple worship outside the Israelite tradition. I found this section to be more difficult to read because its three selections deal with ideas somewhat removed from Latter-day Saint temple worship. In particular, John Gee's "The Keeper of the Gate" is a challenging read. That said, the concept of non-Israelite temples reminds us of the importance of the temple in religious thought, an idea also discussed in Nibley's opening essay. To see temple designs, symbols, and images in these contexts reminds us that the gospel was taught to Adam and Eve in the beginning but was constantly corrupted or lost through time with only traces of the original truths surviving among the peoples of the world. In this regard, E. Jan Wilson's essay, "Inside a Sumerian Temple," provides fascinating information regarding the earliest recorded temple worship and its relation to biblical history and the Book of Abraham. Similarly, Gaye Strathearn and Brian M. Hauglid document temple aspects of the Great Mosque of Mecca. It is a striking form of "historical ecumenicalism" to see the role of the temple in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

The Gate of Heaven

According to the introduction to this book, its purpose is to answer questions regarding the use of symbolism in temples both ancient and modern. The outline of the book covers the concept of the temple from premortal planning to the latter-day temple work of this dispensation. While all eight chapters provide interesting reading, two stood out for me.

Chapter 5, "Early Christians and the House of the Lord," examines the Temple of Herod, which stood during the Savior's ministry. Brown relates the symbols of this temple to descriptions of the Savior and his ministry. Noting that most Christian faiths teach that the

Savior rejected the temple and temple worship, he answers several questions regarding this issue, including the following three:

Did Jesus Christ and his disciples reject and abandon the temple? Brown points out that the Savior referred to the temple as "my Father's house" (John 2:16; 14:2) and taught "daily" there (Luke 19:47). After his ascension, his disciples were found "continually in the temple, praising and blessing God" (Luke 24:53). As Brown declares, "The earliest Christians . . . only stopped worshipping and teaching [in the temple] when they were literally thrown out of its hallowed halls by their enemies" (p. 170).

Did Jesus Christ signal the end of temple worship when he drove the sacrificial animals from the temple courts during his ministry? Brown points out that the Savior's actions were designed to purify the temple, not to destroy it. Further, "there is no statement in the Bible confirming that [the end of temple worship] was the Lord's intention" (p. 171).

Did Christ's atonement nullify the need for all temple ordinances? While the Savior's atonement fulfilled the law of Moses, Brown reminds us that temple and priesthood ordinances predate this law. Thus the end of the law was not the end of temple worship.

The rest of this chapter discusses events and topics in the New Testament that relate to temple worship. Brown reviews evidence linking temple imagery, symbolism, and teachings to the Mount of Transfiguration, the Sermon on the Mount, the Mount of Olives, the day of Pentecost, the gathering, and the Savior's Forty-Day ministry. This chapter reviews many items indicating that temple worship was woven into the pattern of early Christian worship. Thus, as noted earlier, Latter-day Saints appropriately view temple worship as part of a restoration of primitive Christianity.[1]

Another impressive chapter is the seventh, "The Gate of Heaven," which deals with many of the implications of modern-day temple work. In particular, the chapter recounts instances of church members

1. Ironically, the inevitable protesters who haunted the Detroit Temple open house in October 1999 were handing out a pamphlet entitled "Are Mormon Temples Christian?" I didn't take the pamphlet but have no doubt its author(s) was unfamiliar with the material under discussion here.

who have received manifestations from the spirit world regarding the need for temple work to be done. While the visitation of the founding fathers to Wilford Woodruff is well known, Brown provides several examples of comparable events. An incident in the Cardston Alberta Temple will convey the message contained in these experiences:

> [The witness] stated that he saw the main corridor to the sealing room filled with people looking into the sealing room and taking note as sealing ordinances were administered for one person after another, in the relationship of wives to husbands or children to parents.
>
> He said that he saw plainly as each person's work was done he or she would shake hands with the people still waiting in the corridor and would apparently go away. When the work in the sealing room was finished, he still saw very many waiting in the corridor. They were apparently very much disappointed in knowing that the work was finished for the day and no work was done for them.
>
> This leads us to believe that a good many people in the spirit world know just what is being done in the temple and that when the work is not done for them, they are greatly disappointed. (p. 268)

If we as members of the Church of Jesus Christ learn nothing else from this book than the moral of the above story, we will have learned much.

Other chapters in this book deal with temple concepts before the time of Moses, the tabernacle built by Moses, Solomon's temple, the restoration of temple worship in our day, and the need to "stand in holy places." In addition, an appendix provides information about temple ordinances and Freemasonry. Information on this topic is difficult to obtain—especially information from a Latter-day Saint perspective. While not the final word on the subject, this appendix is a good start to respond to those who have heard allegations that Joseph Smith used Masonic rituals as the template for fabricated temple ordinances. To sum up, the book is well written, beautifully illustrated, and a wonderful resource for those wanting a detailed study of the temple.

Clearly, the two books are very different. *The Temple in Time and Eternity* is a collection of essays by multiple authors on a wide range of narrow issues, including temple work outside of the "familiar" Judeo-Christian tradition. *The Gate of Heaven* is a unified book by a single author focusing on the history and symbolism of temple worship from a Latter-day Saint point of view. Perhaps it is inevitable that I should feel more "inspired" after reading the latter book than the former. In *The Gate of Heaven*, Matthew Brown is able to put a glorious context around temple ordinances. One of the powers of the temple is its ability to lift us up, to remind us of the real (celestial) world we are preparing for in this temporary (telestial) one. Connecting modern-day temple worship and temple worship in the Old and New Testaments reminds us of the heritage Latter-day Saints share with God's people of all ages. (The essays by Nibley, Tvedtnes, and Draper and Parry achieve a similar effect—hence my preference for section 1 of *The Temple in Time and Eternity*.) My final advice—read both books and get the best of both worlds.