

**Latter-day Saint Temples in Context:  
Restoration, Romanticism, Anthropology and Passibility<sup>i</sup>**

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Today I want to consider the Latter-day Saint temple tradition in four contexts. First, as the temple figures in Joseph Smith's conception of apostasy and restoration. Second, insofar as temples concretize a human anthropology, or paradigm of the human soul, with antecedents going back into ancient history. Third, as an alternative strategy to the natural supernaturalism of Romanticism, and fourth, in light of the motif of the weeping God.

#### I. Apostasy and Restoration

It is not clear when Joseph Smith first conceived his mission as entailing the formal organization of an actual church. The first intimation may have come with section iv of the Book of Commandments. There, a revelation dated March 1829 referred to the Lord's plan to "establish my church, like unto the church which was taught by my disciples in the days of old." (BC 4:5). Joseph recast this passage for republication in the Doctrine and Covenants section 5. The changes strike me as highly significant. He referred to the "beginning of the rising up and coming forth of my church out of the wilderness" (5:14). Subsequently, another revelation similarly refers to the restoration as "this church I . . . called forth out of the wilderness" (33:5). The language, of course, evokes the description given by the Revelator, of the church's flight into the wilderness, where it is nurtured for a long time.

This language is the first important key in reconstructing Joseph Smith's notion of apostasy. He obviously saw the church as in retreat, not in oblivion. Joseph considered that fragments of the original gospel known to Adam were scattered throughout the earth, in all ages and dispensations. What he considered *was* lost

is clear in the term he most frequently associated with the apostasy: and this was ordinances. “They have strayed from mine ordinances,” reads section 1, the manifesto of the Restoration. In the ordinances, Joseph would write in section 84, is the power of godliness manifest. With the ordinances and the authority of the priesthood, he continued, we access the power of godliness (84:20-21). The central purpose of the gathering was temple building, he clearly stated in section 124, “that I [the Lord] may [again] reveal mine ordinances therein unto my people” (124:40). Subsequently, Joseph F. Smith, in his vision of the Spirit World, specifically characterized Joseph Smith’s mission as “laying the foundations of the great latter-day work,” through “the building of the temples and the performance of ordinances therein” (138:54). So Joseph seems to have conceived of apostasy as primarily the loss of priesthood authority to perform saving ordinances. And the work of restoration he understood to be tied primarily to restoring keys and covenants.

He was himself quite explicit in this regard:

What was the object of gathering the Jews, or the people of God in any age of the world?.. The main object was to build unto the Lord a house whereby He could reveal unto His people the ordinances of His house and the glories of His kingdom, and teach the people the way of salvation; for there are certain ordinances and principles that, when they are taught and practiced, must be done in a place or house built for that purpose.

. . . . Ordinances instituted in the heavens before the foundation of the world, in the priesthood, for the salvation of men, are not to be altered or changed. All must be saved on the same principles.

It is for the same purpose that God gathers together His people in the last days, to build unto the Lord a house to prepare them for the ordinances. . . . “ Ordinances,” he said, which were “instituted in the heavens before the foundation of the world.”<sup>ii</sup>

## II. A Divine Anthropology

The reference to a time before the foundation of the world takes us to another context for constructing an LDS temple theology. LDS temples represent the concretization of a radical human anthropology with ancient antecedents. Its radicalism lies in its explicit embrace of two controversial tenets. Affirmation of human existence in a pre-mortal sphere, and eventual human ascent into a realm of not just godliness but godlikeness. Greek mythology made aspirations toward divinity a crime with fearsome repercussions, but the leitmotif of feckless transgression against sacred boundaries suggests an irrepressible fascination with human potential. Similarly, in the earliest Mesopotamian creation narratives, we find glimmers of a human pre-existence. In one of these, in a pattern to be repeated almost endlessly, we find both ideas indissolubly connected, anticipating millennia of theological history. In Atrahasis—the gods convene a council to plan the creation of a new being, one who will have the capacity to do the work previously done by the gods. They do so, by slaying one of their own number, and pouring his spirit into the vessel of clay. A problem emerges, with the recognition that if the human realizes his origin among the gods, he will seek to return to his place among the gods. So the human is given a form that will obscure from him his own roots.

In these early Christian centuries, the pre-mortal soul provided the most compelling solution to numerous dilemmas associated with incarnation, but the idea was exiled from Christian thought by the sixth century, largely because in pre-existence lurked the cardinal danger foreseen by the Mesopotamian gods. Church Father Tertullian was as alarmed as they had been, and protested accordingly. Doctrines of pre-existence, he wrote, give to the human soul

so large an amount of divine quality as to put it on a par with God. [They] make it *unborn*, [suggesting its] perfect divinity; [The belief makes the soul] immortal, incorruptible, incorporeal—...invisible.. supreme, rational, and intellectual. What more could [one] attribute to the soul, [he asked in outrage,] if he wanted to call it God? We, however, who allow no

appendage to God (in the sense of equality), by this very fact reckon the soul as very far below God: for we suppose it to be born.<sup>iii</sup>

Time and again, in the history of western thought, the possibility of human pre-existence and of human theosis—or human deification—emerge and usually, for the reasons illustrated in Atrahasis, the two are interconnected. And they bring trailing in their wake both heady euphoria and tremulous angst, the possibilities of human triumphalism and the fear of blasphemous trespass. We see this in the Greek patristic tradition. We see it in the Renaissance, with the humanism and esotericism of Pico. We see it in the 17<sup>th</sup> c Cambridge Platonists, who vigorously maintained through extensive sermons and publications both the certainty of human pre-existence, and the possibility of theosis, or what they termed, “deification.” Joseph Smith hinted at human pre-existence as early as 1830, added a revelation in 1833, and the Book of Abraham, with its account of heavenly councils, in 1835. A few years later, Parley Pratt was teaching the doctrine of theosis, which Smith ratified and elaborated in his King Follett sermon. The two doctrines are connected, and given concrete form, in the thought of Joseph Smith, in a form neatly summarized by a surprised politician listening to him in 1840. “I could not perfectly comprehend him,” Matthew Davis admitted, “but the ideas seemed to be that the soul of man, the spirit, had existed from eternity in the bosom of Divinity; and so far as he was intelligible to me, must ultimately return from whence it came.”<sup>iv</sup> It is not surprising that the novelty of the idea, *apokatastasis*, as it was known anciently, should have confused the listener. It was not extent anywhere else in Christianity at that time.

But the idea finds its fullest, ritualistic expression in the LDS temple. There is found a symmetrical narrative representing the human anthropology seen in Mesopotamia and the subsequent venues mentioned earlier. Patrons of the LDS temple see enacted, in ritual form, their ascent from pre-mortal existence, to an eventual return to God’s presence, but now as exalted beings rather than unembodied spirit children. It is ironic, and unfortunate, that public perceptions of Mormonism are largely shaped by attitudes toward the Book of Mormon, which contains virtually no new doctrinal novelty, or by the institutional practice of polygyny, which

lost its core theological status before the practice even stopped. The real distinctives of Mormon theology, its views on human origins and destiny, are given their fullest exposition in a place secluded from public eyes.

### III. Nineteenth-Century Contexts

LDS Temple building was initiated at that very moment when its erasure had been most confidently celebrated in Europe. This erasure took place along two very different avenues. The transmutation of the sacred deity into holy mystery had been fully realized by Edmund Burke's treatise glorifying the sublime in 1747. His book did more than any other to lay the groundwork for the naturalization of God that took place in Romanticism. His treatise, written partly as a reaction against the rationalism of Descartes and the intellectual rigor of Locke, explicitly gloried in obfuscation, darkness, and stupefying wonder. He wrote, "Hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea." "It is our ignorance of things," he went on, "that causes all our admiration and chiefly excites our passions." As an example of writing deserving of special praise, he found passages in Milton "dark, uncertain, confused, ... and sublime to the last degree."<sup>v</sup>

His glorification of the sublime made it possible to take the last step in assimilating God entirely into the natural world, a step fully achieved in Romanticism. This apotheosis of the sublime is especially pronounced in the work of the Frenchman Rene Chateaubriand, whose works were best-sellers at the time of Joseph Smith's birth. Chateaubriand proposes a radical reconceptualization of Christianity along Romantic lines. "God is the great secret of Nature," he declares (53). "Mystery is of a nature so divine," he writes dreamily (52). He glorifies what he calls "holy ignorance," (52) and waxes rhapsodic about the utter defeat of reason by the wonder and magnitude of nature. But let me focus on one passage in particular as illustration of a sensibility to

which we can set LDS temples in contrast.

Chateaubriand describes an outing behind the Luxembourg Palace in Paris. “We were one day walking behind the palace,” he writes, “and were accidentally led to the very same Carthusian convent which Fontanes has celebrated. We beheld a church and roof of which had fallen in; . . . Long did we stroll among the sepulchral stones of black marble scattered here and there upon the ground; some were completely dashed in pieces, others still exhibited some vestiges of inscriptions. We advanced to the inner cloister; there grew two wild plum trees amid high grass and rubbish.” Reflecting on what he has seen, he admits to leaving “with a wounded heart . . . at beholding the desolation of [God’s] temple.” But the more he considers, the more he determines that “Ruins, considered under the aspect of scenery, produce a more magical effect . . . than the uninjured and entire monument.” (448-9). There follow two entire chapters on the beauty of what he calls “temples in ruins.”

I cite these passages because as a scholar of Romanticism, I find them to epitomize perfectly the strategy by which an entire generation of poets and intellectuals made their peace with the departure of the sacred from their world. Believers like Chateaubriand even saw themselves reflected there. “Man himself,” Chateaubriand wrote, “is but a decayed edifice, a wreck of sin and death.” By transferring the characteristics associated with the God of the Creeds to the natural world, they salvaged the sense of mystery, ineffability, and wonder long at the heart of the experience of God.

Meanwhile, Joseph Smith embodies a reconstitution of the sacred in an altogether different direction. While the Romantics are sacralizing nature, Smith is naturalizing the sacred. Joseph Smith did this by effecting a thoroughgoing collapse of sacred distance, and the temple is the most conspicuous and tangible emblem of this collapse. This is because the temple ritually recuperates the journey of the human soul from its pre-mortal existence in God’s presence, to its passage back through the veil into his presence, thereby inserting mankind back into a divine genealogy. But the temple in Joseph Smith’s conception does more than symbolically reenact this reintegration, this at-one-ment. The temple, with its restored priesthood ordinances, in Smith’s

understanding literally effects, or at least advances, this reintegration. Differentiating the LDS temple in this regard, I believe, from other temple traditions, is the belief that the temple is not to be construed in terms of consolation or mitigation of humankind's sinfulness, or of God's absence. It does not exist in order to recuperate a lost presence, or to make a gesture in the direction of an unbreachable Creator/Creature divide.

Rather, for reasons Joseph never articulated, the LDS temple bestows powers and forges eternal relationships in a way that could not be done in any other pre- or post-mortal setting. These powers and relationships can only be vested in individuals possessed of physical bodies. Temples and what transpires therein are therefore a principal purpose of the very passage into mortality.

Mormon temple theology is in this regard evocative of the allusion in Hebrews to the physical body of Christ as the veil of the Temple, passage through which—and only passage through which—brings about the consummation of the salvific process.<sup>vi</sup> (“we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the [veil] (that is, through his flesh).” (This typology—of a saving passage through torn flesh—echoes a Christological reading of Genesis 15, where the flaming torch of the Lord passes through the torn flesh of the sacrifices, in affirmation of his covenant with Abraham). In the triple symbolism of Mormon temples, then, passage through the veil represents the essential transit from spiritual realms into the mortal sphere, the necessary acquisition and purification of, a fleshly tabernacle, and Christ's own embodiment and torn flesh, personal to him and a universal portal back to God's presence for the human family.

#### IV. The Weeping God

The first time the word sanctuary is mentioned in the Old Testament, is in the song of Moses. The reference occurs before the existence of the temple, before even the Ark of the Covenant. The reference is to a mountain belonging to the Lord, which he has made his own abode, his own sanctuary (miqdash) [meek dawsh] (Ex

15:17). The next time the word is mentioned, it is in reference to the tabernacle the children of Israel are commanded to build. The pattern of usage in these references is the same, as the Lord commands his people to “build *me* a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.” (Ex 25:8)

But why should God need a sanctuary? There is a tradition, that finds assent in Solomon’s own words, [though some have doubted they are part of the original text] that since “heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain” God, the notion of building him a house to dwell in has no literal counterpart. The sanctuary, therefore, is really for the benefit of the people. A place of communal worship, a symbol of God’s covenant with man, a pledge, according to the Zohar, “of the Holy One to dwell with us and not to abhor or forsake us.”<sup>vii</sup>

I want to suggest that given their theology, the meaning of the temple as sanctuary may be quite different for Latter-day Saints. Friedrich Nietzsche once noted that “even God hath his hell; it is his love for man.”<sup>viii</sup> Mormons, I think, would state the case rather more gently, but understand his point.

Latter-day Saints have historically rejected the God of the ancient and modern creeds, turning away from a Being who is without body, parts, or passions, to a God who is both embodied and passible. Passibility [God’s capacity for emotion] seems to come and go in the history of theology. Origen was one of its staunchest defenders, writing, “Does not the Father . . . experience emotion, seeing he is long-suffering and of great mercy? Or do you not know that when he distributes human gifts, he experiences human emotion?... The Father himself is not impassible, if he is asked, he takes pity and experiences grief, he suffers something of love and . . . for our sake he experiences human emotion.”<sup>ix</sup> So it is with Mormons. Though the physical anthropomorphism of their God is an especially conspicuous tenet, God’s physical form is not the point. That God has a heart that beats in sympathy with ours is. That he feels real sorrow, rejoices with real gladness, and weeps real tears. This, as Enoch learned in the text produced by Joseph Smith, is an awful, terrible, yet infinitely comforting truth. In similar fashion, Mormons have shifted the worshipful gaze from the dying God of Calvary to the suffering

Redeemer of Gethsemane. The implicit possibility of this shift is an atonement that may be more a function of infinite, and infinitely painful, empathy, than some calculus of punishment,

Given these contexts of Enoch's weeping God and the Christ of Gethsemane, Latter-day Saints might consider that the divine nature is more about infinite vulnerability than infinite power. And it is in this context, that the possibility is suggested that a temple might be viewed by Latter-day Saints—not just a place where they come to find refuge from, and transcendence of, the blood and sins of their generation, but where Jehovah himself comes to find refuge from his pain, and from the sorrow inflicted by the evils of his creation. Smith suggested this meaning in his remarks upon laying the cornerstone of the Kirtland Temple. Christ was recorded in the New Testament as saying he had “not where to lay his head” (Luke 9:58; Matt. 8:20). Relating this to an absence of sanctuary, Joseph said at Kirtland, now “the Son of Man [has] where to lay his head.”<sup>x</sup>

In the Enoch text produced by Joseph Smith, we find ample context for this literal reading of God's suffering the temple as sanctuary.

And Enoch said unto the Lord: How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity? The Lord said unto Enoch: Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency; And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood;... and among all the workmanship of mine hands there has not been so great wickedness as among thy brethren...misery shall be their doom; and the whole heavens shall weep over them, even all the workmanship of mine hands; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?...

and until that day [that my Chosen shall return unto me] they shall be in torment; Wherefore, for this shall the heavens weep. (Moses 7:33-40)

This motif of the weeping God is of course frequent in extra-biblical texts. In one Talmudic text, from the *Pesiqta Rabbati*, Isaiah's words (40:1) are slightly recast to suggest it is the Lord appealing for consolation to his people, not the other way around. "Comfort *me*, comfort *me*, my people," the text reads.<sup>xi</sup>

If this conversation depicted with Enoch or the plea from Isaiah does indeed reflect the God that Latter-day Saints worship, then it can't help but have bearing on the concept of the Temple where they go in hopes of finding him. Temples may be associated with mountaintops not because that symbolizes the closest approach to heaven, but because that situation represents the greatest distance from the fallen world.

In this connection, I conclude with one final thought. And that has to do with the temple as a place of revelation. To return to the passage I opened this section with, the Lord said to Moses, "make me a sanctuary, that I may  *dwell* in their midst." (Ex 25:8). Yet as scholars have elsewhere pointed out, in the Septuagint, that becomes, "Ye shall make me a holy place, and I shall be seen among you."<sup>xii</sup> This is of course close to the language Joseph Smith used. "That the son of Man might have a place to manifest himself to his people," he said in the Kirtland Temple dedicatory (109:5).

I won't here address the controversy over what transpired between the first and second temple periods, as regards the perhaps changing meaning and status of revelation. I simply want to make this point. There are many theologies of revelation. Commentators often speak of the New Testament concept as a "drawing away by Christ of the veil of darkness," or a communicating of divine truth, even the narration of heavenly secrets. But the Greek word, of course, *apokalupsis*, means to uncover, to disclose, to make bare. And this kind of uncovering, or *self-exposure*, is integral to the most intimate forms of communication. "Communication," a leading scholar in the field writes, "is a risky adventure without guarantees."<sup>xiii</sup> What transpires in a temple, in

other words, whatever sacred communion takes place, as in any act of communication, will be conditioned by and proportional to the degree of vulnerability and risk-taking engaged in by the entities involved. In the temple, Latter-day Saints believe God reveals himself. The God of Enoch and Gethsemane, the one who weeps and suffers our pain, comes to the temple where he is prepared to commune with us--if we likewise render ourselves naked, bereft of all pride and all self-deception, in surroundings that are redolent of nakedness, pain, and vulnerability: the initiatory, the altars, the gauzy veil. We ascend to the highest in us, and he comes home to his sanctuary, and there we meet.

This mutuality is what makes any intimate communion undertaken in good faith a sacred occasion.<sup>xiv</sup>

The temple is in this regard an exemplum with universal significance.

Terryl Givens  
University of Richmond

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<sup>i</sup> I am indebted to Fiona Givens for two keen insights I develop in this paper. First, her recognition of the woman in the wilderness as the symbol of a church gone underground rather than into oblivion. Second, her perceptive reading of the Lord's sanctuary as a refuge for God, not mankind, consistent with the vulnerable God motif of Enoch.

<sup>ii</sup> Joseph Smith, Jr., History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 7 vols., eds. James Mulholland, et al. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951), 5:423-24.

<sup>iii</sup> Tertullian, Treatise on the Soul XXIV (ANF 3:203).

<sup>iv</sup> Smith, 4:79.

<sup>v</sup> Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), 55.etc.

<sup>vi</sup> By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh (Hebrews 10:20). Christians could see in Genesis 15 a typology of this connection:

<sup>vii</sup> Zohar iii. 114a, referring to Lev. xxvi.11.

<sup>viii</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra chapter xxv.

<sup>ix</sup> Cited in Michael Lieb, Theological Milton: Deity, Discourse and Heresy in the Miltonic Canon (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 2006), 132.

<sup>x</sup> Andrew Jenson, The Historical Record (Salt Lake City: 1888), 7:859.

<sup>xi</sup> Pisqa 29, cited by Michael Fishbane, The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 78.

<sup>xii</sup> Seeking the Face of the Lord: Joseph Smith and the First Temple Tradition," in Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens, eds., Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries (New York: Oxford, 2009). 143.

<sup>xiii</sup> John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1999), 267.

<sup>xiv</sup> In the Paradise of God, Adam and Eve "know" one another. The fullest kind of knowledge incorporates body and soul, and takes place under conditions of literal and figurative nakedness. True communication may be said to be proportional to the degree of self-revealedness we risk.