



---

NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE  
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

---

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

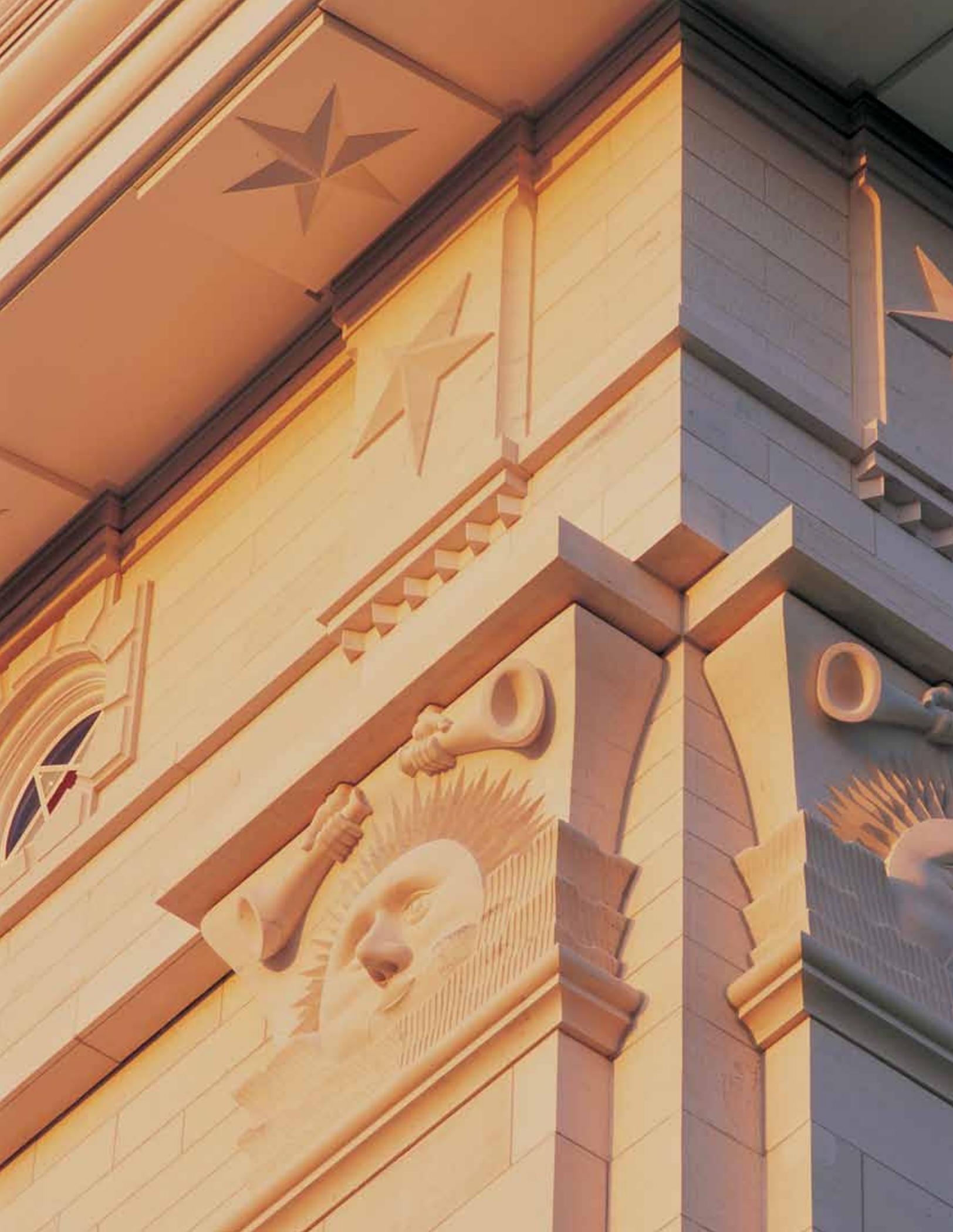
**Title** Latter-day Saint Temples as Symbols

**Author(s)** Richard O. Cowan

**Reference** *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21/1 (2012): 2-11.

**ISSN** 1948-7487 (print), 2167-7565 (online)

**Abstract** Much of what is done in Latter-day Saint temples is symbolic. Temple symbolism, however, extends well beyond the ordinances performed within the temples. From the Kirtland Temple's pulpits representing the different orders of the priesthood to the stones on the Salt Lake Temple representing the universe and one's relationship to God, exterior temple symbolism complements the principles learned within. The architecture within temples also provides insights into the ordinances. In many temples, murals depicting the different kingdoms of glory and stairs leading to higher areas remind participants of their ascent to God. This article chronicles, in detail, the meanings and development of these and other symbols incorporated into the architecture of modern-day temples.





# LATTER-DAY SAINT TEMPLES AS SYMBOLS

---

**RICHARD O. COWAN**

---

Symbols are powerful teaching tools. Like the Master’s parables, they allow individuals to learn on their own level—superficially or profoundly—according to their degree of preparation and sensitivity. This is particularly true of teachings Latter-day Saints receive in the temple. This paper, however, will not focus on temple ordinances, but rather on temple buildings themselves.

## **Early Temples**

The Latter-day Saints built their first temple at Kirtland, in northeastern Ohio. Dedicated in 1836, its exterior looked like a typical New England meetinghouse, but its interior was unique. The Lord instructed that it was not to be built “after the manner of the world” but according to a plan he would reveal (D&C 95:13-17). Rather than the customary single large room with a high ceiling, the temple was to have two meeting halls, one above the other. Both rooms featured an unusual teaching tool. At each end, there

*Sunstones and starstones on the rebuilt Nauvoo Temple. © 2002 IRI.*

## **FROM THE EDITOR:**

Most Latter-day Saints are familiar with the use of symbols and metaphors in the scriptures and in most priesthood ordinances to teach gospel lessons. We are less familiar with other uses of symbols and metaphors. In this article Richard O. Cowan cautiously suggests that a few of the less familiar architectural features of Latter-day Saint temples also were conscious attempts to present symbols and metaphors for the edification of those willing to knock and to ask. As the editor, I appreciate Dr. Cowan’s circumspect and restrained approach to this topic.



Kirtland Temple interior, showing pulpits and retractable veil. Courtesy Perry Special Collections, Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

was a stair-stepped stand with three pulpits on each of its four levels. Those on the west were for the use of the Melchizedek Priesthood, while those on the east were for the Aaronic Priesthood. Seating in the body of the halls was reversible; hence the congregation could sit facing either set of pulpits, according to which order of priesthood was conducting a particular meeting. Initials on each pulpit represented the specific priesthood office held by the individual occupying it. These arrangements therefore helped church members to understand the relative authority of various priesthood leaders.<sup>1</sup> The great revelation on priesthood, Doctrine and Covenants 107, had been revealed just the year before, so perhaps the relationships among various priesthood groups were still somewhat unfamiliar. Elder Erastus Snow later declared that the Kirtland Temple was built “to show forth the order of the Priesthood, Aaronic and Melchizedek.”<sup>2</sup>

The second Latter-day Saint temple was dedicated at Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1846. By this time, sacred temple ordinances—including baptisms for the dead, the endowment, and sealings or marriages for eternity—had been instituted. As a result, the temple’s interior added facilities for presenting these sacred rites.

#### Abbreviations on the Pulpits in the Kirtland Temple

<b>M.P.C.</b>	Melchizedek Presiding Council (First Presidency)
<b>P.M.H.</b>	Presiding Melchizedek High Priesthood (the Twelve)
<b>M.H.P.</b>	Melchizedek High Priesthood
<b>P.E.M.</b>	Presidency of Elders, Melchizedek
<b>B.P.A.</b>	Bishopric Presiding, Aaronic
<b>P.A.P.</b>	Presidency of Aaronic Priests
<b>P.T.A.</b>	Presidency of Teachers, Aaronic
<b>P.D.A.</b>	Presidency of Deacons, Aaronic

Like the Kirtland Temple’s pulpits, the Nauvoo Temple’s font was an important teaching symbol. The ordinance of baptism has rich symbolic meaning. Immersion in water represents a complete cleansing from sin (Acts 22:16) as well as burying the old life of sin and coming forth or being reborn into a new life of righteousness (Romans 6:3–6). Joseph Smith specifically instructed that temple baptismal fonts are “a similitude of the grave” and hence should be located “underneath where the living are wont to assemble” (D&C 128:13). The Nauvoo Temple’s font



Nauvoo Temple baptismal font. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

as well as most other temple fonts have followed the description of the “sea” at Solomon’s Temple, being supported on the backs of twelve oxen (see 1 Kings 7:25), perhaps representing the twelve tribes of Israel and symbolizing how the house of Israel bears the burden of providing salvation to the four corners of the earth.

Other temple ordinances were conducted on the attic level of the Nauvoo Temple. A large room was divided by canvas partitions into areas that were furnished to represent distinct stages in our quest to return to God’s presence; as the instructions of the endowment unfolded, worshippers moved from one area to the next, symbolizing our forward progression. Other smaller rooms were offices, some having altars where sacred sealings were performed.<sup>3</sup>

The first temple in Utah, dedicated at St. George in 1877, was similar to the Nauvoo Temple; in this case, however, the lower of the two main assembly halls was divided by temporary partitions to accommodate the endowment. Later in the nineteenth century, the Logan, Manti, and Salt Lake Temples employed a series of rooms to present this ordinance. Their walls were adorned with murals depicting distinctive stages in mankind’s progress back into God’s presence—the creation, the Garden of Eden, our present telestial world, the terrestrial state, and finally the celestial room, generally the most beautifully furnished space in the temple, representing the feelings of peace and joy in that glory. Typically one

climbs a few stairs when going from one room to the next, representing progress forward and upward. As meaningful as the earlier interior architectural features were, it would be on the exterior of the Salt Lake Temple where symbols were employed most extensively.

### The Best-Known Temple

The great Salt Lake Temple is probably the most widely known of all Latter-day Saint temples. Architectural historian C. Mark Hamilton noted that Brigham Young had “made provisions in the original plans for the Temple to incorporate numerous symbols . . . to speak of the order of God, Christ, the Restoration of His gospel, man’s relationship to Him and the proclamation to the world of His reality.”<sup>4</sup> Hamilton continued, “The intended program of the building is to aid man in his quest to gain entrance back into the presence of God from whence he came.”<sup>5</sup>

While the Kirtland Temple had a simple belfry, the Nauvoo and St. George Temples had taller single towers. Located on the east side of their respective valleys, the Logan and Manti Temples each had two towers; one slightly taller tower adorned each temple’s formal front, while the other tower architecturally completed the end of the building facing the town. The Salt Lake Temple’s six towers were a distinctive feature of its design. Brigham Young testified that he learned of the temple’s location and basic



World Room mural by Minerva Teichert in the Manti Temple. Courtesy Church History Museum.



Cyrus Dallin's Angel Moroni atop the Salt Lake Temple.

design by revelation. Just a few days after the pioneers' arrival in the Salt Lake Valley, he and a few others were walking across the area that would become Temple Square. He struck the ground with his cane and declared: "Here will be the Temple of our God."<sup>6</sup> President Young later spoke of this occasion:

I scarcely ever say much about revelations, or visions, but suffice it to say, five years ago last July [1847] I was here, and saw in the Spirit the Temple not ten feet from where we have laid the Chief Corner Stone. I have not inquired what kind of a Temple we should build. Why? Because it was represented before me. I have never looked upon that ground, but the vision of it was there. I see it as plainly as if it was in reality before me. Wait until it is done. I will say, however, that it will have six towers, to begin with, instead of one. Now do not any of you apostatize because it will have six towers, and Joseph only built one. It is easier for us to build sixteen, than it was for him to build one.<sup>7</sup>

An early account by William Ward described how the temple's major features were designed: "Brigham Young drew upon a slate in the architect's office a sketch, and said to Truman O. Angell [the temple's architect]: 'There will be three towers on the east, representing the President and his two Counselors; also three similar towers on the west representing the Presiding Bishop and his two Counselors; the towers on the east, the Melchisedek priesthood, those on the west the Aaronic priesthood. The center towers will be higher than those

on the sides, and the west towers a little lower than those on the east end.'"<sup>8</sup> Angell pointed out that each tower would have twelve pinnacles, symbolizing the Twelve Apostles.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most visible symbol of the Salt Lake Temple is the figure of Moroni atop the east center spire. The twelve-foot hammered copper figure had been prepared in Salem, Ohio, from a model by Utah sculptor Cyrus E. Dallin. Even though Dallin was not a Latter-day Saint, he later professed that "my 'Angel Moroni' brought me nearer to God than anything I ever did. It seemed to me that I came to know what it means to commune with angels from heaven."<sup>10</sup> The gleaming gold-leafed statue was of a heavenly herald sounding his trumpet, representing the latter-day fulfillment of John the Revelator's prophecy of an angel bringing "the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people" (Revelation 14:6).

Emil Fetzer, who would serve many years as church architect, explained that the figure of Moroni symbolizes "the Savior's charge to take the gospel throughout the world."<sup>11</sup> Elder Thomas S. Monson concurred, "The Moroni statue which appears on the top of several of our temples is a reminder to us all that God is concerned for all of His people throughout the world, and communicates with them wherever they may be."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, because Moroni is specifically associated with the Book of Mormon (whose announced mission is to convince all that Jesus is the Christ), these herald statues remind us of the Savior and the need to prepare for his second coming.

### Eastward Orientation

In ancient times, Israelite temples typically were built so that their main doorways opened toward the east. The rising of the sun announced the new day, symbolizing new beginnings and opportunities. Without artificial illumination, ancient peoples paid much more attention to astronomical features and often attributed special meaning to events in the heavens. The tabernacle of Moses as well as the temple of Solomon in Jerusalem were oriented so that their doors faced toward the east. Donald Parry, an Old Testament scholar, believed that this reflected the Garden of Eden, whose entrance was also toward the east.<sup>13</sup>

In the present dispensation, five of the first six temples built faced the east (only the Nauvoo Temple faced west).<sup>14</sup> This eastward orientation symbolizes watching for the second coming of Christ, which has been likened to the dawning of a new day (see Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:26).

### Sunstones, Moonstones, and Starstones

Emblematic stones had first been employed to adorn the exterior of the Nauvoo Temple. Each of its thirty pilasters featured a representation of the moon's face at its base, with a stone depicting the sun as part of the capital. A starstone then appeared on the wall directly above, just below the temple's cornice (see pp. 2-3). They undoubtedly reminded Latter-day Saints of the three degrees of glory spoken of by Paul and elaborated in latter-day revelation (see 1 Corinti-

ans 15:40-42 and D&C 76). One might question why stars, the symbol for the least of the degrees of glory, were placed at the highest point on the wall. These stones may not symbolize the kingdoms in ascending order, but they do represent the order in nature,

The five-pointed star with a single point downward . . . was often associated with the coming of Jesus Christ.

the moon being closest to the earth and the stars being the most distant. Questions have been asked about the five-pointed stars with a single point downward. In earlier centuries, this was a common symbol for the Morning Star, which was often associated

Salt Lake Temple model, showing progression from baptismal font to the celestial room. Photograph courtesy Shirley Smith Ricks.



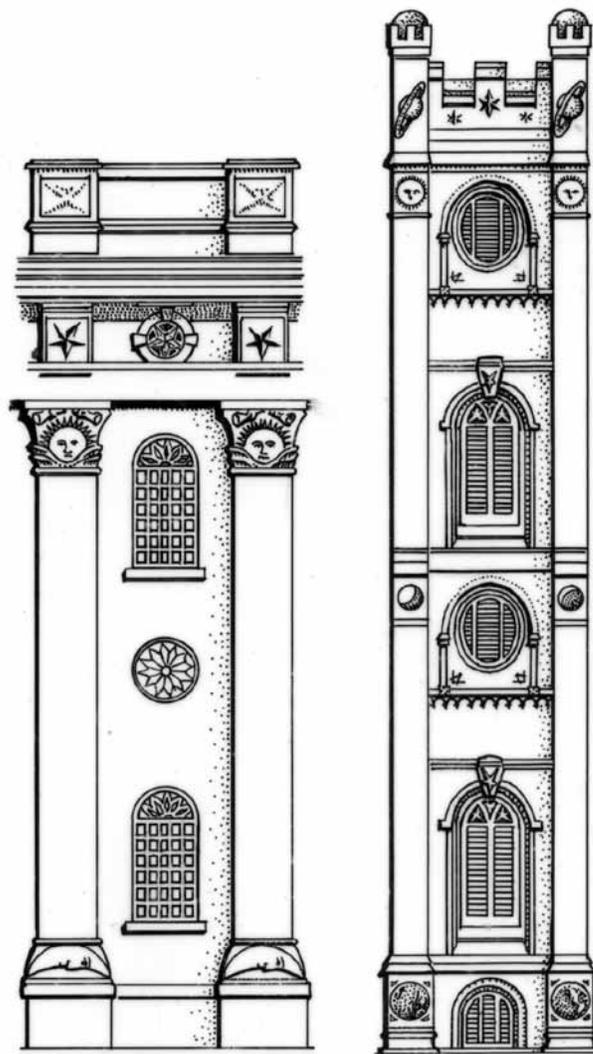
with the coming of Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup> They may also depict revelation coming down from above.

Similar symbols were next employed on the Salt Lake Temple, built between 1853 and 1893. Earthstones are at the base of each of the temple's fifty buttresses. Truman O. Angell explained that these stones represent the need for the gospel to go to all the earth.<sup>16</sup> Moonstones were about halfway up each buttress, and sunstones were near the top. Starstones are found higher up on the temple's towers. As at Nauvoo, these ornamental stones reminded Latter-day Saints of the three degrees of glory. There is another possible way to look at the meaning of these stones. Referring to Abraham 3:5, Richard Oman, another student of architectural history, pointed out that "as we move upward into the heavens, the

The earth and the moon together revolve around the sun . . . once each year. The entire solar system revolves around the center of our galaxy . . . in a much longer period of time—approaching eternity.

time sequences become longer" and that the stones on the Salt Lake Temple do the same.<sup>17</sup> The earth, represented by stones at the temple's base, rotates once every day. The moon revolves around the earth once each month. The earth and the moon together revolve around the sun, depicted higher on the temple, once each year. The entire solar system revolves around the center of our galaxy, represented by stars on the temple's towers, in a much longer period of time—approaching eternity.

Proceeding from right to left, the moonstones represent the new, first-quarter, full, and third-quarter phases. The temple's fifty buttresses approximate the number of these phases during a year. Since this number cannot be divided evenly by the four phases, at some point the cycle around the temple must be interrupted. Architectural historian Mark Hamilton was convinced that this was deliberate. "The specific reason for fifty moonstones was to create a sequential break to establish the beginning point of the lunar cycle."<sup>18</sup> This break is found on the temple's north side. If the date of 1 January is assigned to the new moon immediately after this break,



Details from Nauvoo Temple (left) and Salt Lake Temple (right). Drawing by Michael Lyon.

dates can also be assigned to each of the succeeding phases. The first quarter moon on the right buttress of the temple's main east center tower would thus represent 6 April, commonly regarded by Latter-day Saints as the date of the Savior's birth. Gold letters higher on the tower identify 6 April as the date the cornerstones were laid in 1853 as well as the date the temple was dedicated in 1893. A full moon is represented on the left buttress of this same tower. Because Easter is celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon after the beginning of spring, this moonstone may remind us of the Savior's atoning sacrifice, which was completed with his resurrection.

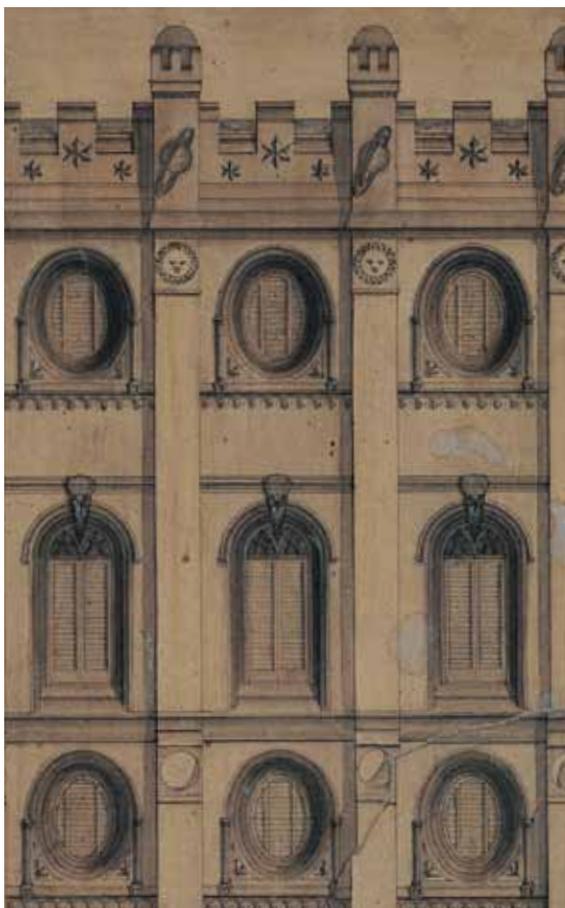
The constellation of the Big Dipper is depicted on the west center tower in such a way that the two "pointer stars" are aligned with the North Star in the sky. This star appears to be a fixed point in the heavens around which other stars revolve; hence, it

represents the absence of time—that is, it represents eternity.<sup>19</sup> Architect Truman O. Angell suggested another meaning of this constellation on the temple—“that through the priesthood of God, the lost might find their way.” Elder Harold B. Lee cited this statement and likened it to the increasingly important role being given to the priesthood in church organization and activities.<sup>20</sup>

### Lesser-Known Features of the Salt Lake Temple’s Exterior

The buttresses of the east center tower include cloudstones. These may represent the light of the gospel penetrating the dark clouds of superstition and error (see Isaiah 60:2-3). On the other hand, they may also recall how a brilliant cloud of glory filled the ancient temple (1 Kings 8:10) and will rest upon the latter-day temple in the New Jerusalem (D&C 84:5). Early drawings depicted a hand holding a trumpet penetrating from the cloud, suggesting a representation of the judgment at the time of Christ’s second coming when he will appear in the clouds of heaven (see Acts 1:9-11 and D&C 34:7).

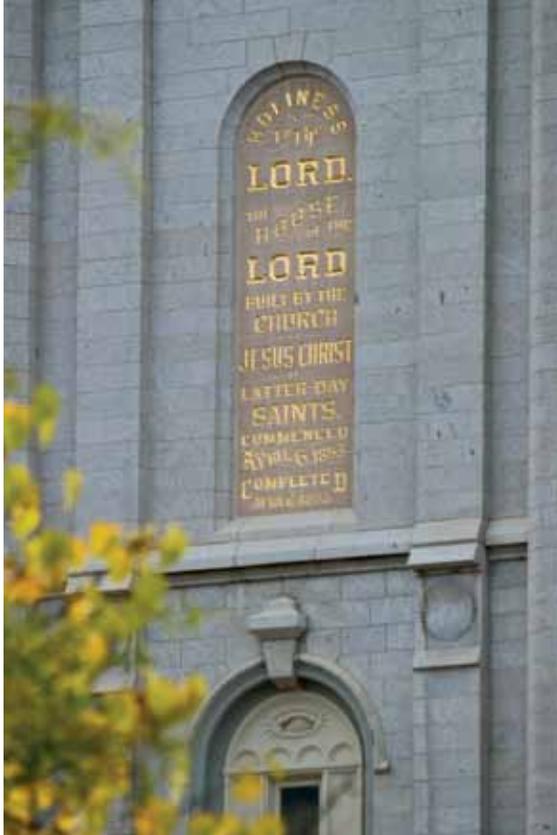
Truman O. Angell’s architectural drawing including various temple stones. Courtesy LDS Church Archives.



Moonstone cycle on the Salt Lake Temple. Drawing by Michael Lyon.

The arch at the top of the lower large window of this tower depicts clasped hands. They symbolize brotherly love and fellowship, as well as the unity that must exist among those who would build Zion (see Galatians 2:9; Moses 7:18; D&C 38:24-27; and D&C 88:133). The hands may also represent the importance of honoring sacred commitments. President Gordon B. Hinckley declared that the temple is “a house of covenants. Here we promise, solemnly and sacredly, to live the gospel of Jesus Christ in its finest expression. We covenant with God our Eternal Father to live those principles which are the bedrock of all true religion.”<sup>21</sup> Just above the clasped hands, the gilded phrase “I am Alpha and Omega” refers to Christ; these letters from the Greek alphabet are reminders of his being known as the first and the last or the beginning and the end. The arch above the upper large window depicts God’s “All-seeing Eye,” which watches over both the righteous and the wicked (see 1 Kings 9:3; Psalm 33:13-14, 18-19; Proverbs 15:3).<sup>22</sup>

The stones just below the temple’s battlements feature a circle inside a square. Some have erroneously identified them as “Saturnstones.” Angell’s early plans, however, showed these stones as distinctly different from the stones depicting Saturn. The Saturnstones would appear on the buttresses while the stones with the circles would be on the wall between the buttresses. Hugh Nibley noted that the “squared circle” is a common symbol, the



Salt Lake Temple inscriptional plaque with the all-seeing eye in the window arch below. Paul Killpack. © IRI.

circle representing the expanse of the heavens, and the square symbolizing the four corners of the earth. Hence these stones appropriately adorn the temple in which ordinances link heaven and earth.<sup>23</sup> The

Beginning with the Bern Switzerland Temple, the endowment was presented in a single room. Rather than painted murals, motion pictures provided the visual context for the teachings of this ordinance. In recent years, many temples have been built with a two-room sequence.

temple's granite exterior likewise suggests permanence and hence is a meaningful symbol for the eternal nature of sacred temple covenants.

### Subsequent Temples

Other temples built during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries frequently reflect patterns seen in the great Salt Lake Temple. While the Laie Hawaii, Cardston Alberta, and Mesa Arizona Temples were built without towers, temples with a single spire, directing attention upward and symbolizing man's

yearning for heaven, have become more common. However, because the Salt Lake Temple's pattern of six towers had become so widely recognized, it was employed in the design of the large Washington DC Temple (1974) in order for it to be readily identified as a Latter-day Saint temple. During the following decade, about a dozen smaller temples also featured two sets of three towers.

After the Salt Lake Temple, the next temple to receive a statue of the Angel Moroni was the Los Angeles Temple. The fifteen-foot figure depicting the angel with the gold plates in one hand was placed atop the temple's tower in October 1954. Two decades later, the third statue of Moroni was hoisted to the top of the Washington DC Temple's 280-foot east center spire, the tallest on any Latter-day Saint temple. Avarad Fairbanks, who sculpted this eighteen-foot figure, imagined how, especially on this particular temple, it represented "the Angel Moroni coming to the world to herald the advent of the latter days."<sup>24</sup> Hence, the church's largest three temples were all adorned by the angelic figure.

Beginning in the early 1980s, these statues have adorned virtually all new temples, even the smallest. In subsequent years, several other temples that had been built without the statue of Moroni had the angelic figure added to their towers. Thus this statue of the herald angel, first seen on the Salt Lake Temple, has become the recognized symbol of Latter-day Saint temples worldwide.

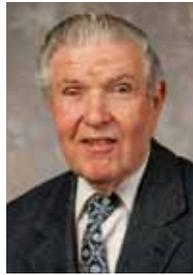
Early twentieth-century temples continued the Salt Lake Temple's pattern of a series of instruction rooms adorned with symbolic murals. The Cardston Alberta Temple, noted for its beautiful inlaid woodwork, used increasingly elegant woods in successive rooms to strengthen the symbolism of advancement toward celestial exaltation.

Beginning with the Bern Switzerland Temple, the endowment was presented in a single room. Rather than painted murals, motion pictures provided the visual context for the teachings of this ordinance. In recent years, many temples have been built with a two-room sequence. The first of these rooms is generally adorned with murals depicting scenery typical of the temple's locale, symbolizing our present telestial world. The second room customarily features off-white walls, brighter illumination, and some gold highlighting—all suggesting progress toward our heavenly reward.

Other symbols have been employed. A central staircase in the Mesa Arizona Temple, with the celestial room at its top, symbolizes the path leading back to God's presence. The San Diego California Temple has an unusual number of windows; as one ascends to the sealing rooms where the highest temple blessings are received, the amount of light increases. This symbolizes approaching a fulness of God's glory, which is characterized by light (D&C 93:36).

Thus the symbolic features of temple buildings can open our understandings to meaningful insights. What Elder John A. Widtsoe said about temple ordinances can profitably be applied to the buildings in which those ordinances are presented: "To the man or woman who goes through the temple, with open eyes, heeding the symbols and the covenants, and

making a steady, continuous effort to understand the full meaning, God speaks his word, and revelations come. . . . At the most unexpected moments, in or out of the temple will come to him, as a revelation, the solution of the problems that vex his life."<sup>25</sup> ■



**Richard O. Cowan** received his PhD in history at Stanford University and joined the Religious Education faculty at Brigham Young University in 1961. He teaches a class on Latter-day Saint temples and is the author of *Temples to Dot the Earth*. A new edition was published by Cedar Fort last year.

## NOTES

- Lauritz G. Petersen, "The Kirtland Temple," *BYU Studies* 12/4 (1972): 404-9; see Clarence L. Fields, "History of the Kirtland Temple" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1963), 28.
- St. George Stake Historical Record, quoted in Petersen, "Kirtland Temple," 405.
- Lisle G. Brown, "The Sacred Departments for Temple Work in Nauvoo: The Assembly Room and the Council Chamber," *BYU Studies* 19/3 (1979): 360-74.
- C. Mark Hamilton, *The Salt Lake Temple: A Monument to a People* (Salt Lake City: University Services Corporation, 1983), 142.
- Hamilton, *Salt Lake Temple*, 147.
- Wilford Woodruff: *History of His Life and Labors as Recorded in His Daily Journals*, ed. Matthias F. Cowley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 620; early published accounts of this event place it on 28 July, but a study of diaries suggests that it actually happened two days earlier.
- Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:133.
- William Ward, "Who Designed the Temple?" *Deseret Evening News*, 16 April 1892, p. 4, at <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045555/1892-04-16/ed-1/seq-4/> (accessed 9 August 2011).
- Quoted in Wallace A. Raynor, *The Everlasting Spires: A Story of the Salt Lake Temple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 175.
- Levi Edgar Young, "The Angel Moroni and Cyrus Dallin," *Improvement Era*, April 1953, 234; see also J. Michael Hunter, "I Saw Another Angel Fly," *Ensign*, January 2000, 30.
- Church News*, 24 July 1983, 12.
- Elmer W. Lammi, "Moroni Statue Tops D.C. Spire," *Church News*, 19 May 1973, 3.
- Donald W. Parry, "Garden of Eden: Prototype Sanctuary," in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 131-33.
- President Gordon B. Hinckley, in "Great Opportunities Really Are Ahead of Us," *Church News*, 29 June 2002, remarked on the fact that the Salt Lake and Nauvoo Temples face each other: "I see these two great structures facing each other across a major part of the continent and bonded together in a common purpose for the good and blessing of the work of the Lord."
- Matthew B. Brown and Paul T. Smith, *Symbols in Stone: Symbolism on the Early Temples of the Restoration* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 1997), 102-4.
- Truman O. Angell, "The Salt Lake City Temple," *Millennial Star* 36 (5 May 1874): 275.
- Richard G. Oman, "Exterior Symbolism of the Salt Lake Temple: Reflecting the Faith That Called the Place into Being," *BYU Studies* 36/4 (1996-97): 32; see figs. 17, 18, 24.
- Hamilton, *Salt Lake Temple*, 143.
- Oman, "Exterior Symbolism of the Salt Lake Temple," 32-34.
- Cited by Harold B. Lee, in Conference Report, October 1964, 86.
- Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Salt Lake Temple," *Ensign*, March 1993, 6.
- Duncan M. McAllister, *Description of the Great Temple: Salt Lake City* (Salt Lake City: Bureau of Information, 1912), 9; James H. Anderson, "The Salt Lake Temple," *Contributor* 14 (April 1893): 276.
- Brown and Smith, *Symbols in Stone*, 153-54; see Hugh Nibley, "The Circle and the Square," in *Temple and Cosmos* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 139-73.
- "Angel Moroni Statue Chosen for Temple," *Church News*, 10 July 1971, 5.
- John A. Widtsoe, "Temple Worship," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 12 (April 1921): 63-64, quoted in Richard O. Cowan, *Temples to Dot the Earth* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1997), 228.