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## Why Symbols?

The Lord uses symbols to teach eternal truths in the temple. Here's why.

Temple worship offers the opportunity to learn in ways we are not used to. "Each temple is a house of learning," explains Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. "There we are taught in the Master's way. His way differs from modes of others. His way is ancient and rich with symbolism. We can learn much by pondering the reality for which each symbol stands."<sup>1</sup>

A gospel symbol can be an object, event, action, or teaching that represents a spiritual truth. The bread and water of the sacrament, for example, represent the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Symbolism as a mode of teaching is as ancient as Adam, who was taught by an angel that the firstlings of his flocks, which he was commanded to sacrifice, were "a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father" (Moses 5:7). Just as Adam needed help in understanding the symbolism of sacrifice, we may need some guidance in understanding the "ancient and rich" method the Lord uses to teach us the highest priesthood ordinances of the gospel.

The following information from the scriptures, Church leaders, and Latter-day Saint scholars can help us better understand the rich symbolism found in the temple.

### Why Does the Lord Use Symbolism?

"Behold, all things have their likeness, and all things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth" (Moses 6:63).

"Symbols are the universal tongue. ... Symbols bring color and strength to language, while deepening and enriching our understandings. Symbols enable us to give conceptual form to ideas and emotions that may otherwise defy the power of words. They take us beyond words and grant us eloquence in the expression of feelings. Symbolic language conceals certain doctrinal truths from the wicked and thereby protects sacred things from possible ridicule. At the same time, symbols reveal truth to the spiritually alert.

"... 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 with the companion of our choice in the ordinance of eternal marriage, every covenant we make will be written

in the language of symbolism.”<sup>2</sup>

“Essential ordinances of the gospel symbolize the Atonement. Baptism by immersion is symbolic of the death, burial, and Resurrection of the Redeemer. Partaking of the sacrament renews baptismal covenants and also renews our memory of the Savior’s broken flesh and of the blood He shed for us. Ordinances of the temple symbolize our reconciliation with the Lord and seal families together forever.”<sup>3</sup>

## What Are Some Symbols Used in the Temple?

“In the temple all are dressed alike in white. White is the symbol of purity. No unclean person has the right to enter God’s house. Besides, the uniform dress symbolizes that before God our Father in heaven all men are equal. The beggar and the banker, the learned and the unlearned, the prince and the pauper sit side by side in the temple and are of equal importance if they live righteously before the Lord God.”<sup>4</sup>

“There is [a] ... special underclothing known as the temple garment, or garment of the holy priesthood, worn by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who have received their temple endowment. This garment, worn day and night, serves three important purposes: it is a reminder of the sacred covenants made with the Lord in His holy house, a protective covering for the body, and a symbol of the modesty of dress and living that should characterize the lives of all the humble followers of Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

## Why Is Some of the Symbolism Connected with the Temple Found Elsewhere in the World?

“Let me suggest that the reason why temple building and temple worship have been found in every age, on every hand, and among every people, is because the gospel in its fullness was revealed to Adam, and that all religions and religious practices are therefore derived from the remnants of the truth given to Adam and transmitted by him to the patriarchs. The ordinances of the temple in so far as then necessary, were given, no doubt, in those early days, and, very naturally, corruptions of them have been handed down the ages. Those who understand the eternal nature of the gospel—planned before the foundations of the earth—understand clearly why all history seems to revolve about the building and use of temples.”<sup>6</sup>

“The same comparative studies that discovered the common pattern in all ancient religions—a phenomenon now designated as ‘patternism’—have also demonstrated the processes of *diffusion* by which that pattern was spread throughout the world—and in the process torn to shreds, of which recognizable remnants may be found in

almost any land and time. ...

“Did Joseph Smith reinvent the temple by putting all the fragments—Jewish, Orthodox, Masonic, Gnostic, Hindu, Egyptian, and so forth—together again? No, that is not how it is done. Very few of the fragments were available in his day, and the job of putting them together was begun, as we have seen, only in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Even when they are available, those poor fragments do not come together of themselves to make a whole; to this day the scholars who collect them do not know what to make of them. The temple is not to be derived from them, but the other way around. ... That anything of such fulness, consistency, ingenuity, and perfection could have been brought forth at a single time and place—overnight, as it were—is quite adequate proof of a special dispensation.”<sup>7</sup>

## How Do We Learn What God Would Have Us Learn in His Holy House?

“We are to receive in temples, through temples, from temples, ‘power from on high’ (D&C 95:8). Christ is the source of that power. The temple is His. Every symbol in and out of that sacred structure points toward Him and, as a cup carries water, transmits the Holy Spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

*“No man or woman can come out of the temple endowed as he should be, unless he has seen, beyond the symbol, the mighty realities for which the symbols stand. ...*

“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. The endowment is so richly symbolic that only a fool would attempt to describe it; it is so packed full of revelations to those who exercise their strength to seek and see, that no human words can explain or make clear the possibilities that reside in temple service. The endowment which was given by revelation can best be understood by revelation; and to those who seek most vigorously, with pure hearts, will the revelation be greatest.”<sup>9</sup>

*“Balance the interpretation of symbolism with other revelation and gospel knowledge. ... Fit the interpretation of any symbol into the overall scheme of gospel knowledge. No matter how clever, or how logical, or how ingenious our interpretation of a particular symbol may be, if it contradicts what is revealed in other places, we can assume it is wrong.”<sup>10</sup>*

“If you will go to the temple and remember that the teaching is symbolic, you will never go in the proper spirit without coming away with your vision extended, feeling a little more exalted, with your knowledge increased as to things that are spiritual. The teaching plan is superb. It is inspired. The Lord Himself, the Master Teacher, taught His disciples constantly in parables—a verbal way to represent

symbolically things that might otherwise be difficult to understand.”<sup>11</sup>

“Temple attendance is not a guarantee that we will become better, but it provides a powerful and pointed invitation to become better. The ways of the world receive constant reinforcement—should not the ways of heaven?

“Temple work is not an escape from the world but a reinforcing of our need to better the world while preparing ourselves for another and far better world. Thus, being in the Lord’s house can help us to be different from the world in order to make more difference in the world. ...

“Teachings in the temples take us beyond present time and space. We learn of special things therein, sometimes ‘things too wonderful for [us]’ (Job 42:3) which require repeated attendance and prayer before meanings emerge.”<sup>12</sup>

## Why Do People Say the Temple Ceremony Is Sacred, Not Secret?

“In one of the early revelations in this dispensation, it was made known by the Lord that it was His will that a holy House should be built with the promise that His glory would rest upon it and His presence would be here and He would come into it, and all the pure in heart that should come into it should see God on one condition. That condition was that they ‘do not suffer any unclean thing to come into it, that it be not defiled.’ ([D&C] 97:15–16.) Obedient to that instruction these holy temples are carefully safeguarded, not because of the necessity of secrecy but because of the sacredness of the work performed therein, by forbidding those who by the measure of the Lord’s standards may be considered ‘unclean’ in that they do not keep His commandments.”<sup>13</sup>

“The ordinances [of the temple] are not deep, dark secrets to be kept as such from the world. ... The basic idea of the ordinances from Moses back to Adam is separation from the world. The endowment represents steps by which one disengages from a corrupt, secular, imprisoned environment. ...

“... The important thing is that *I* do not reveal these things; they must remain sacred to *me*. I must preserve a zone of sanctity which cannot be violated. ... For my covenants are all between me and my Heavenly Father.”<sup>14</sup>

“We do not discuss the temple ordinances outside the temples. But it was never intended that knowledge of these temple ceremonies would be limited to a select few who would be obliged to ensure that others never learn of them. It is quite the opposite, in fact. With great effort we urge every soul to qualify and prepare for the temple experience. ...

“The ordinances and ceremonies of the temple are simple. They are beautiful. They are sacred. They are kept confidential lest they be given to those who are

unprepared. Curiosity is not a preparation. Deep interest itself is not a preparation. Preparation for the ordinances includes preliminary steps: faith, repentance, baptism, confirmation, worthiness, a maturity and dignity worthy of one who comes invited as a guest into the house of the Lord.”<sup>15</sup>

## A Sanctuary of Service

President Gordon B. Hinckley

“Inside the temple ... the world is left behind with its clamor and rush. In the house of the Lord there is tranquility. Those who serve here know that they are dealing with matters of eternity. All are dressed in white. Speech is subdued. Thoughts are elevated.

“This is a sanctuary of service. Most of the work done in this sacred house is performed vicariously in behalf of those who have passed beyond the veil of death. I know of no other work to compare with it. It more nearly approaches the vicarious sacrifice of the Son of God in behalf of all mankind than any other work of which I am aware. Thanks is not expected from those who in the world beyond become the beneficiaries of this consecrated service. It is a service of the living in behalf of the dead. It is a service which is of the very essence of selflessness.”

**President Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Salt Lake Temple,” *Tambuli*, Nov. 1993, 5–6; *Ensign*, Mar. 1993, 5–6.**