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Viewing the Temple Through Wilford Woodruff's Eyes

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VIEWING THE TEMPLE THROUGH WILFORD WOODRUFF'S EYES

Laura Harris Hales

Review of *Jennifer Ann Mackley, Wilford Woodruff's Witness: The Development of Temple Doctrine (Seattle, WA: High Desert Publishing, 2014). 441 pp., appendices, selected bibliography, index. \$26.95.*

In *Wilford Woodruff's Witness*, Jennifer Ann Mackley takes what could easily be a dry topic and turns it into a fascinating study not only of the unfolding of Latter-day Saint temple doctrine but also of early Mormonism. Primarily using Woodruff's own words taken from his journals and published discourses, the narrative follows the line-upon-line revelation of doctrine pertaining to the purpose and ordinances of the temple and the quest for sacred space to conduct these rites.

With over three hundred illustrations, the book visually reinforces the concepts presented in the text and reminds readers that they are in a world far removed from the present. Doctrines we now take for granted were slowly being revealed, and leaders grappled with foreign concepts as they simultaneously rejoiced in promised blessings. Along the journey, readers are taught valuable principles applicable to understanding the nature of current prophetic revelation within the Latter-day Saint community, as they view the imperfect nature of the temple doctrine reception and implementation in the early Church.

When presenting Woodruff's growing understanding of the work for the dead, Mackley presents only enough biographical information to provide context and refrains from overabundant commentary or analysis, instead deferring to primary sources when possible to tell the story. This approach allows the author to accomplish at least three things in the book. First, readers are given glimpses into the unique experience of living in Nauvoo and being taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith. In a letter to Wilford, his wife Phoebe described the announcement of baptisms for the dead at an October 1840 conference as "strong Meat;" one of the 'strange doctrines' Joseph had brought forth that season ...

[but] he made it very plain and consistent with the gospel” (p. 48). Second, readers are introduced to unusual temple practices no longer utilized, such as baptisms for healing. Mackley introduces these rites, safely guiding members along an unknown path by explaining contemporary thinking behind their initiation and practice. Third, it allows for the interweaving of explanations of complex doctrine by presenting them through Woodruff’s eyes as he feels more and more compelled to delve into temple practices that leave him unsettled. In one case he vigorously embraces the practice of non-relative adoptions but in 1894 realizes its inappropriateness in light of the words of Malachi. Abandoning them as resolutely as he once sought them, he establishes the precursor to the Family History Library, allowing members to more easily identify their ancestors.

Mackley lays out an engaging, clear, and complete timeline for the development of temple doctrine within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but the glimpses into early Church history are the hidden jewels of this volume. As readers learn about the gradual unfolding of the form, function, and meaning of temple ordinances, they are also given tastes of the sometimes messy practice of polygyny, the preaching of misunderstood doctrine, the details of the sewing of the first temple clothes and garments, the gentle and patient manner in which President Woodruff taught the Saints the necessity of forsaking former practices, and the countless hours he dedicated to the work of salvation of both the living and the dead.

This book was written for mainstream Mormons, but scholars will not be disappointed. It is obvious that Mackley has carefully researched the topic because of her meticulous notations, many expanding on concepts from the cited text. In appealing to both audiences, the author elected to use endnotes rather than footnotes. This will frustrate some, but the continuous numbering makes finding endnotes a more manageable prospect, and the information makes the inconvenience well worth the additional effort. While the text mentions Woodruff’s zeal for temple work and initial fervor for the ordinance of adoption, one would need to look in the endnote section to learn that his enthusiasm also extended to proxy marriage sealings, as he had 267 women sealed to him (note 734).

The appendix contains five charts, with four pertaining to Woodruff’s life and only one pertaining to the development of temple doctrine. This seems an interesting shift, as Mackley foregoes discussion of Woodruff’s personal life in lieu of his ecclesiastical affairs within the body of the text. Much of what is contained in these four charts seems like material

for another book, eliciting more questions than answers in opposition to her excellent narrative. Context for some of the material is located in the endnotes, but tying the two together would be a laborious process.

Readers may fear that because the book was self-published, it is of lesser quality than one published by a college press or mainstream LDS publisher. While the cover art and binding are only of moderate quality, the text itself has been well-edited and the chronicle accomplishes the rare feat of turning a historical timeline into a fascinating read. One of the reasons Mackley may have self-published is that there wasn't a suitable mainstream publisher for this book. Though the topic is presented in a faith-promoting manner, it is also a comprehensive treatment that mentions by name all of the Latter-day Saint temple rites. While the author is careful to not reveal that which is sacred, she does nevertheless mention rites that Latter-day Saints have been asked not to discuss. For this reason, the niche publishers for this topic may have shied away from accepting the manuscript.

Wilford Woodruff's Witness is an important addition to the scholarship of temple rites in the LDS Church. It strips away the cloak of uncomfortableness about the changing nature and understanding of temple ceremonies by clearly acknowledging them and postulating that evolution of any complex doctrine is to be expected, especially those that are new and complex such as that introduced by Joseph Smith to the early Saints.

Laura Harris Hales is the co-author of *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015). She is also the copy editor of *Mormon Historical Studies*.

