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A Modern View of Ancient Temple Worship

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A MODERN VIEW OF ANCIENT TEMPLE WORSHIP

Julie J. Nichols

Review of Matthew S. Brown, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Stephen D. Ricks, and John S. Thompson, eds., Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of the Expound Symposium 14 May 2011 (Orem and Salt Lake City, UT: The Interpreter Foundation/Eborn Books, 2014). 293pp., \$24.95 (hardcover)

Abstract: This well-produced, noteworthy volume adds to the growing number of resources available to help make more meaningful the complex and historically rich experience of the temple.

When I was first endowed, I found that for me, official church publications about the background and meaning of the ceremonies enacted in the temple were full of reverence but limited in scope. For years I looked for — and, to be honest, actually found — clues and indicators about the covenants and symbols I encountered there. I had to put pieces of the puzzle together, go back to the temple to verify my own hypotheses about the meaning of this or that structural or symbolic element, and keep at it bit by bit.

Now, wonderfully, we're seeing more meaty publications that provide scholarly and spiritually edifying information about the meaning of the various elements of the temple. Even Deseret Book is offering more solid material, but we also have access to such publications as Martin J. Palmer's *The Temple Concept* (Eborn Books, 2015), *Temple Theology* (and other related works discussing the ancient understanding of temple worship) by Margaret Barker, and many other volumes indicating that, as the Interpreter Foundation puts it:

The ancient Hebrews did not believe that the temple concept originated in the time of Moses. Rather, they taught that temple rituals and doctrines originated with Adam and were handed down among the biblical patriarchs. This is precisely what the Prophet Joseph Smith tried to teach the world during the 1800s,

that the gospel of Jesus Christ is eternal and has been on the earth since the beginning.¹

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to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines. ... We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures — that Jesus is the Christ.²

Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of the Expound Symposium 14 May 2011, the book under review here, is “the [first] volume of the Temple on Mount Zion series published by the Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books. The purpose of the series is to increase understanding and appreciation of temple rituals and doctrines, and to encourage participation in the redeeming work of family history and temple worship.”³ That first and only Expound symposium was conceived and arranged by Matthew B. Brown, a Latter-day Saint author and historian whose emphasis was “on the history and doctrine of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young” (from the dust jacket), whose name is among the editors of this collection and who died tragically on Oct 5, 2011, at just 47 years of age, only a few months after his Symposium came to fruition.

A second book in this series is titled *Temple Insights – Proceedings of the Interpreter Matthew B. Brown Memorial Conference – The Temple on Mount Zion Series 2 – September 2012, Hardcover (2014)*,⁴ and the third volume of the series will appear in the coming months.⁵ It would seem that colleagues and friends carried Brown’s work forward. In any event, be warned: neither volume is for the first-time templegoer who simply wonders what awaits her or him. The eleven chapters contained in *Ancient Temple Worship* are scholarly, specific, and narrowly but

1. http://www.amazon.com/Temple-Insights-Proceedings-Interpreter-Conference/dp/1890718505/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1439408950&sr=1-2&keywords=ancient+temple+worship

2. <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/mission-statement/>

3. http://www.amazon.com/Temple-Insights-Proceedings-Interpreter-Conference/dp/1890718505/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1439408950&sr=1-2&keywords=ancient+temple+worship

4. <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/youtube-videos-of-the-temple-on-mount-zion-conference/>

5. See <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/events/2014-temple-on-mount-zion-conference/>

brightly illuminating regarding the deep heritage temple-goers access when they do work there for themselves or for the dead.

A survey of some of the titles and their authors will make my point: “Understanding Ritual Hand Gestures of the Ancient World,” by David Calabro, a recent PhD in ancient Near Eastern studies; “The Sacred Embrace and the Sacred Handclasp in Ancient Mediterranean Religions,” by Stephen D. Ricks, long-time professor of Hebrew and cognate learning at BYU; “Ascending Into the Hill of the Lord: What the Psalms Can Tell Us About the Rituals of the First Temple,” by David J. Larsen, whose PhD dissertation at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland was titled “The Royal Psalms in the Dead Sea Scrolls”; “Temples All the Way Down: Some Notes on the Mi’Raj of Muhammad,” by Daniel C. Peterson, professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at BYU; and “Nephite Daykeepers: Ritual Specialists in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon,” by Mark Alan Wright, assistant professor of ancient scripture at BYU.

Though the authors seem to be mostly local to Utah, the citations are plentiful, the scholarship convincing, and the themes impressive. Without speaking directly of delicate topics, every single article connects ancient practices, texts, and archaeological artifacts to aspects of the LDS ceremony recognizable to any templegoer.

As an example, the first of the essays in the collection, Brown’s own “Cube, Gate, and Measuring Tools: A Biblical Pattern” (1-26) argues that the geometry — the structure — of the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle of the Old Testament corresponds to the geometry of the vision in Revelation, that that geometry is assured in both texts by means of sacred measuring tools, and that certain standards are required of anyone intending to pass through the portal into the Holy of Holies, or into the presence of God, the Creator, who uses those same measuring tools to bring the world to order out of chaos. Passages from the Psalms, Job, Luke 13, and certain early Church writers are compared with the relevant passages from Exodus 25-26 and Revelation 21-22 to support the thesis that “the covenant people of the Old and New Testaments were interconnected” — and, without explicitly saying, so too the covenant people of this dispensation. Images from ancient art work provide further evidence. Brown provides an appendix of relevant passages and eight pages of notes. The templegoer who has wondered what it means to stand at the veil and enter into the presence of the Lord will be enlightened by this paper. This kind of focused scholarly information can be expansive and rewarding.

My one complaint about *Ancient Temple Worship* is that there is no foreword or preface providing background for the Symposium itself, guiding principles behind the editing of the collection, acknowledgment of the limitations of the Symposium or plans to address them in further conferences, or critical contexts to any of the essays. No website for the Symposium can be found — I assume, as I have said, that Brown's death collapsed the plans for further symposia into the FairMormon and Interpreter Foundation entities, so that the difficulty in finding a website is justifiable and correctable by looking at www.fairmormon.org and www.mormoninterpreter.com.

For the time being, however, add this well-produced, noteworthy volume to the growing number of resources available to help explain and clarify the sometimes-enigmatic but historically and spiritually rich experience of the temple.

Adapted for the Interpreter journal with the kind permission of the Association for Mormon Letters.

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