

Temple Themes in the Book of Moses

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Importance of the Doctrines of the Creation, the Fall, and the Plan of Redemption

1. Elder Bruce R. McConkie called them the “three pillars of eternity.”¹
2. Four accounts of these events: Genesis, book of Moses, book of Abraham, temple
3. They were the highest priority in the “Joseph Smith Translation” of the Bible (see below)

Background of the Book of Moses

The placement of the book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price obscures the fact that it was actually produced as part of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible (JST). Moses 1 was received in June 1830, a time of great exuberance in the Church, but also a period of intense persecution for Joseph Smith.

The first page of the manuscript of Moses 1, like many of the Prophet’s revelations, appears to have been flowingly dictated in a single setting. That the Prophet could find the time, strength, and inspiration necessary to receive and record this beautiful and complex account of the visions of Moses during such a busy and difficult period is a great wonder.

The Bible Translation Tutors Joseph Smith in Temple Doctrines

JST changes in Genesis occur four times more frequently than in the New Testament, and twenty-one times more frequently than in the rest of the Old Testament. The first 24 chapters of Genesis—1% of the Bible—occupied 24% of the total translation time.²

Why should these chapters receive so much attention? Perhaps one of the most important reasons is that they contain the stories of the patriarchs: Adam and Eve, Enoch, Noah, Mechizedek, and Abraham. All these figures are important to understanding the temple and the priesthood.

Many temple-related revelations were received during or shortly after the main period of Bible translation (e.g., Moses 1, book of Abraham, D&C 84, D&C 132). Some of these were not published until more than a decade later in Nauvoo, just before the Saints received their temple blessings.³

The key to understanding the book of Moses is to see it as a “temple text.” To make such a claim is to say that the book contains material that was used anciently as part of temple worship.⁴

Harold Bloom, Yale Professor and Jewish Literary Scholar

Professor Bloom called the book of Moses and the book of Abraham two of the “more surprising” and “neglected” works of LDS scripture.⁵ What did Professor Bloom find so “surprising” in the book of Moses? He said he was intrigued by the fact that many of its themes are “strikingly akin to ancient suggestions.” While expressing “no judgment, one way or the other, upon the authenticity” of LDS scripture, he found “enormous validity” in the way these writings “recapture... crucial elements in the archaic Jewish religion... that had ceased to be available either to normative Judaism or to Christianity, and that survived only in esoteric traditions unlikely to have touched [Joseph] Smith directly.”⁶ In other words, Professor Bloom wondered how Joseph Smith could have come up with, on his own, a modern book that resembles so closely ancient Jewish and Christian teachings.

Moses’ Heavenly Ascent (Moses 1)

Ancient temple rituals dramatically depict a *figurative* journey into the presence of God. However, the ascent literature tells the stories of prophets who experience *actual encounters with Deity* within the *heavenly* temple—the “completion or fulfillment” of the “types and images” in earthly priesthood ordinances.⁷

Moses 1 is a perfect example of the pattern of heavenly ascent. The events of this chapter follow the teaching pattern always used in temples: Creation, Fall, and Atonement.

Moses 1 contains striking parallels with ancient documents such as the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.⁸

It was during the heavenly ascent of Moses that he received the vision of the Creation, the Fall, and the Plan of Redemption that are recorded in the rest of the book of Moses.

The Days of Creation and the Temple (Moses 2)

Both modern Bible scholarship⁹ and contemporary science¹⁰ agree with the Prophet Joseph Smith¹¹ that the universe was “organized” from pre-existing matter rather than created from nothing.

Ancient depictions show the use of the compass and the square as tools by which God laid out the universe, giving it the form and function of a heavenly temple.¹²

The Israelite Tabernacle was built as a “a scale-model of the universe,”¹³ with the results of each day of creation being symbolically reflected in tabernacle furnishings.¹⁴ The Hebrew text of Exodus 40:33 exactly parallels the account of how God finished creation.¹⁵ Speaking for God, an ancient Jewish commentary comments: “It is as if, on that day [i.e., the day the tabernacle was raised in the wilderness], I actually created the world.”¹⁶

In the Garden of Eden, Adam was vested as a king and priest.¹⁷ The Hebrew words commanding Adam and Eve to “dress” and “keep” the Garden were the same ones used later to describe the temple service of the Levites.¹⁸ Thus, Adam and Eve in the Garden were essentially “temple workers.”

Ancient readers knew when they read that God “rested” on the seventh day that the only place He could do that is within His heavenly temple. To “rest” in this sense means to take charge of the normal operations of the universe, after having finished the work of creation.¹⁹ Modern scholarship sees the seventh day of creation as the enthronement of God in His heavenly temple and the culmination of all prior creation events.²⁰

The Temple Layout of the Garden of Eden (Moses 3)

The Tree of Life is said to be “in the midst” (i.e., in the center) of the Garden of Eden.²¹ The center was the most sacred place in ancient worship.²² Mountains are another symbol of the “sacred center.”²³ The temple, described by Isaiah as “the mountain of the Lord’s house,”²⁴ is likewise a symbol of the center. In ancient Israel, the holiest spot on earth was believed to be the Foundation Stone in front of the Ark within the Holy of Holies of the temple at Jerusalem. To the Jews, “it was the first solid material to emerge from the waters of creation,²⁵ and it was upon this stone that the Deity effected creation.”²⁶ As a famous passage in the *Midrash Tanhuma* states:²⁷

The land of Israel sits at the center of the world; Jerusalem is in the center of the land of Israel; the sanctuary is in the center of Jerusalem; the Temple building is in the center of the sanctuary; the ark is in the center of the Temple building; and the foundation stone, out of which the world was founded, is before the Temple building.

In the symbolism of the sacred center, the circle is generally used to represent heaven, while the square typically signifies earth.²⁸ Among other things, the intersection of the circle and square can be seen as depicting the coming together of heaven and earth in both the sacred geometry of the temple and the soul of the disciple.²⁹ For example, as part of the ritual of *tawaf*, Islamic *haji* pilgrims enact the symbolism of the circle and the square as they form concentric rings around the rectangular *Ka’bah*.³⁰ Likewise each year at Easter, Catholic clergy with lighted candles move in a circle around the rectangular edicule within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.³¹ On the night of Jesus’ passion, the Gnostic *Acts of John* records that a prayer circle was formed by His apostles, with the Savior at the center: “So he told us to form a circle, holding one another’s hands, and himself stood in the middle.”³²

The center is the *most* holy place, and the degree of holiness decreases in proportion to the distance from that center.³³ Thus when Jesus visited the Nephites, His placement of the children so that they immediately surrounded Him—their proximity exceeding even that of the encircling angels and accompanying fire—conveyed a powerful visual message about their holiness: namely, that “whosoever... shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”³⁴ Hence, Jesus’ instructions to them: “Behold your little ones.”³⁵

Partaking the fruit of the Tree of Life does not symbolize immortality, but rather receiving eternal life or exaltation.³⁶ The tree itself is a symbol of embodied and enthroned Deity.³⁷ It also can represent the righteous, who will eventually sit with Christ on His throne, even as He sits with His Father.³⁸

The Tree of Knowledge was later said by Eve to have also been in the midst of the Garden.³⁹ How could both share the center? An interesting Jewish tradition is that the foliage of the Tree of Knowledge hid the Tree of Life from direct view. One could not take of the Tree of Life—or even see it—until he had first taken of the Tree of Knowledge.⁴⁰

Ephrem the Syrian called the Tree of Knowledge “the veil for the [heavenly] sanctuary.”⁴¹ He pictured Paradise as a great mountain, with the Tree of Knowledge providing a boundary partway up the slopes. The Tree of Knowledge, Ephrem concludes, “acts as a sanctuary curtain [i.e., veil] hiding the Holy of Holies [of the heavenly temple,] which is the Tree of Life higher up.”⁴²

The Tree of Knowledge and the veil are both symbols of death and rebirth or resurrection.⁴³

The message about the results of eating of one or the other tree is clear. In both cases, those who eat become “partakers of the divine nature”⁴⁴—the Tree of Life symbolizing the means by which a fitting measure of eternal life is granted to the faithful, while the Tree of Knowledge enabling those who ingest its fruit to become “as gods, knowing good and evil.”⁴⁵ The subsequent story of the Fall seems to teach, however, that eating of either tree in an unprepared state may bring dire consequences.

Elder Bruce C. Hafen explained: “[God] cannot fully receive us and give us the gift of celestial life... until we have learned by our own experience to distinguish good and evil.”⁴⁶

Temple Symbolism in the Story of the Fall (Moses 4)

At the moment of temptation, Satan deliberately tried to confuse Eve. The Devil—and the scripture reader—know that there are two trees in the midst of the Garden, but only one of them is visible to Eve.⁴⁷ He described the Tree of Knowledge as if it were identical to the Tree of Life.⁴⁸

Satan also tried to mask his own identity by appearing as a serpent, a symbol of Christ.⁴⁹ In his temptation of Eve, Satan “has effectively come as the Messiah, offering a promise that only the Messiah can offer, for it is the Messiah who will control the powers of life and death and can promise life, not Satan.”⁵⁰ Not only has the Devil come in guise of the Holy One, he seems to have deliberately appeared, without authorization, at a most sacred place in the Garden of Eden.⁵¹ If it is true, as Ephrem the Syrian believed, that the Tree of Knowledge was a figure for “the veil for the sanctuary,”⁵² then Satan has positioned himself as the very “keeper of the gate.”⁵³ Thus, Eve was induced to take the fruit “from the wrong hand, having listened to the wrong voice.”⁵⁴

BYU scholar Hugh Nibley succinctly sums up the situation: “Satan disobeyed orders when he revealed certain secrets to Adam and Eve, not because they were not known and done in other worlds, but because he was not authorized in that time and place to convey them.”⁵⁵ Although Satan had “given the fruit to Adam and Eve, it was not his prerogative to do so—regardless of what had been done in other worlds. (When the time comes for such fruit, it will be given us legitimately.)”⁵⁶

The Fall of Adam and Eve was essential, providing a way for us to be born into an imperfect, mortal world, and to learn from experience to distinguish good from evil. Elder Bruce C. Hafen explained: “God placed cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the way of the Tree of Life until Adam and Eve completed, and we, their posterity, complete [the] preparatory schooling [of mortality].”⁵⁷ Similarly, in modern temples we learn that we cannot be admitted into the presence of God until we have demonstrated our knowledge and our faithfulness.

In the Fall of Adam and Eve, what may seem solely as punishments should be regarded instead as “measures taken for the good of the human species in its new situation.”⁵⁸ Exposed in nakedness, God will clothe them;⁵⁹ subject to temporal and spiritual death, God will bless them with posterity and the eventual possibility of eternal life;⁶⁰ and bereft of the fruit of the Garden, God will provide Adam and Eve with the seeds of life-sustaining grains.⁶¹

The imagery of clothing is beautifully conveys the correspondence between the stages of personal progression and the accrual of glory in increasing likeness to God.⁶² The temple teaches us that being clothed with glory is not an event that transpires in an instant, but rather occurs through a process of gradual growth, “grace for grace.”⁶³

The Five Celestial Laws (Moses 5-8)

The story of Adam and Eve and their family after the Fall “is not an account of sin alone but [also] the beginning of a drama about becoming a being who fully reflects both God’s image and His *likeness*.”

Genesis is not about the origins of sin; it is also about the foundations of human perfection. The work that God has begun in creation he will bring to completion.”⁶⁴

In modern temples, we learn how, through our faithfulness, we can draw on the power of Christ’s Atonement to bring us back into the presence of God. Moses 3-4 tells the story of the “down-road” away from Eden, while chapters 5-8 follow the journey of Adam and Eve and the righteous branches of their posterity along the “up-road.”⁶⁵

A major theme of the many ancient stories from outside the Bible about life after the Fall concerns the unsuccessful attempts of Satan to deceive Adam and Eve. They become increasingly immune to his wiles through the knowledge and protective power provided by angelic visitations, and the knowledge and covenants received through ordinances.⁶⁶

Anciently, this upward journey was sometimes represented by a ladder. Speaking of Jacob’s dream of the heavenly ladder in Genesis 28, Elder Marion G. Romney of the Twelve said: “Jacob realized that the covenants he made with the Lord were the rungs on the ladder that he himself would have to climb in order to obtain the promised blessings—blessings that would entitle him to enter heaven and associate with the Lord.”⁶⁷ Similarly, the Prophet Joseph Smith correlated the “three principal [rungs] of Jacob’s ladder” with “the telestial, the terrestrial, and the celestial glories or kingdoms.”⁶⁸ Having completed his climb up the ladder of divine covenants, we are told that Jacob wrestled with a heavenly messenger. At daybreak, having passed the test, Jacob received the new name of Israel.⁶⁹

Specific teachings about covenants relating to five celestial laws are to be had in the temple. Elder Ezra Taft Benson elaborates: “Celestial laws, embodied in certain ordinances belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ, are complied with by voluntary covenants. The laws are spiritual. Thus, our Father in Heaven has ordained certain holy sanctuaries, called temples, in which these laws may be fully explained, the laws include the law of obedience and sacrifice, the law of the gospel, the law of chastity, and the law of consecration.”⁷⁰

The consequences of keeping and breaking each of the covenants are illustrated through a series of stories in Moses 5-8. In the final two chapters of the book of Moses, Enoch and his people, who have kept the law of consecration, are taken up to walk in the presence of God⁷¹ while the wicked, who have practiced violence and corruption, are destroyed in the great Flood.⁷²

Fittingly, just as the first book of the Bible, Genesis, recounts the story of Adam and Eve being cast out from the Garden, its last book, Revelation, prophesies a permanent return to Eden for the sanctified.⁷³ In that day, the veil that separates man and the rest of fallen creation from God will be swept away, and all shall be “done in earth, as it is in heaven.”⁷⁴ In the original Garden of Eden, “there was no need for a temple—because Adam and Eve enjoyed the continual presence of God”—likewise, in John’s vision “there was no temple in the Holy City, ‘for its temple is the Lord God.’”⁷⁵ The premortal glory of the righteous shall then be “added upon”⁷⁶ as they receive a fulness of the blessings of sanctification, “coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy.”⁷⁷

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Endnotes

1 B. R. McConkie, Christ and the Creation. Examples of scriptural use of these "three pillars" in explaining the plan of salvation include 2 Nephi 2:22-26; Alma 18:36, 39; 22:13; Mormon 9:12; D&C 20:17-18, 20-25; Moses 6:54-59; and Articles of Faith 1:1-3.

2 J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image, pp. 3-4; J. M. Bradshaw, Moses Temple Themes, pp. 13-14.

3 J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image, pp. 4-6; J. M. Bradshaw, Moses Temple Themes, pp. 15-16.

4 BYU scholar Jack Welch defines a temple text as "one that contains the most sacred teachings of the plan of salvation that are not to be shared indiscriminately, and that ordains or otherwise conveys divine powers

through ceremonial or symbolic means, together with commandments received by sacred oaths that allow the recipient to stand ritually in the presence of God. Several such texts are found in the Book of Mormon. In addition to the text of Ether 1-4 regarding the brother of Jared, the most notable are Jacob's speech in 2 Nephi 6-10, Benjamin's speech in Mosiah 1-6, Alma's words in Alma 12-13, and Jesus' teachings in 3 Nephi 11-18." (J. W. Welch, *Temple in the Book of Mormon*, p. 301).

5 H. Bloom, *Names Divine*, p. 25. Hugh Nibley concurs with this assessment, noting that the Pearl of Great Price "has received less attention than the other writings and has been studied only superficially" (H. W. Nibley *et al.*, *One Eternal Round*, p. 18).

6 H. Bloom, *American Religion*, pp. 98, 99, 101.

7 H. W. Nibley, *Apocryphal*, pp. 310-312.

8 R. Rubinkiewicz, *Apocalypse of Abraham*. See J. M. Bradshaw and D. J. Larsen in J. M. Bradshaw, *Moses Temple Themes*, pp. 30-49.

9 See J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image*, 2:1f, pp. 94-95.

10 See *ibid.*, p. 538.

11 J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 5 January 1841, p. 181, 7 April 1844, pp. 350-351.

12 E.g., J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image*, pp. 216-218, 571-574, 654-657; H. W. Nibley, *Circle*.

13 H. W. Nibley, *Meaning of Temple*, pp. 14-15; cf. T. D. Alexander, *From Eden*, pp. 37-42; H. W. Nibley, *Greatness*, p. 301.

14 J. M. Bradshaw, *Moses Temple Themes*, pp. 51-55.

15 Moses 3:1. See A. C. Leder, *Coherence*, p. 267; J. D. Levenson, *Temple and World*, p. 287; J. Morrow, *Creation*.

16 J. Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah* 1, 3:9, p. 35.

17 See J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image*, Endnote 4-58, p. 314.

18 J. M. Bradshaw, *Moses Temple Themes*, pp. 174-175.

19 J. H. Walton, *Lost World*, pp. 72-73, 75.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73, 75.

21 Moses 3:9.

22 J. M. Bradshaw, *Moses Temple Themes*, pp. 69-90.

23 J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image*, p. 147.

24 Isaiah 2:2.

25 Psalm 104:7-9.

26 J. M. Lundquist, *Meeting Place*, p. 7.

27 J. T. Townsend, *Tanhuma*, *Qedoshim* 7:10, *Leviticus* 19:23ff, Part 1, 2:309-310. See also J. M. Lundquist, *Meeting Place*, p. 7; J. M. Lundquist, *Temple of Jerusalem*, p. 26; Z. Vilnay, *Sacred Land*, pp. 5-6; O. S. Wintermute, *Jubilees*, 8:19, p. 73, 3:9-14, 27, pp. 59-60, 4:26, p. 63.

28 See, e.g., J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image*, pp. 571-574.

29 J. M. Lundquist, *Fundamentals*, pp. 666-671; cf. *Matthew* 6:10.

30 = Arabic "cube."

31 For more on related themes, see, e.g., F. M. Huchel, *Cosmic (Book)*; F. M. Huchel, *Cosmic*; N. Isar, *Dance of Adam*; H. W. Nibley, *Circle*; H. W. Nibley, *Prayer Circle*.

32 E. Hennecke *et al.*, *NT Apocrypha*, *Acts of John*, 94, p. 227.

33 Such symbolism illuminates the cosmology of the book of Abraham, where the planet Kolob is "set night unto the throne of God" (*Abraham* 3:9) with other planets in increasing distance from the center. The term Kolob "may derive from either of two Semitic roots with the consonants *QLB/QRB*. One has the meaning 'to be near,' as in Hebrew *qarob* (F. Brown *et al.*, *Lexicon*, p. 898)... The other meaning is 'center, midst,' as in Hebrew *qereb* (*ibid.*, p. 899)... In Arabic, *qalb* [heart, center] forms part of the names of several of the brightest stars in the sky, such as Antares... the constellation Scorpio... and Regulus... in the constellation Leo" (R. D. Draper *et al.*, *Commentary*, pp. 289-290). See also H. W. Nibley *et al.*, *One Eternal Round*, pp. 250-254, 259, 266.

34 *Matthew* 18:4.

35 *3 Nephi* 17:23.

36 B. R. McConkie, *New Witness*, p. 86; cf. A. Gileadi, *Studies*, p. 10; B. C. Hafen, *Broken*, p. 30. See also Vos, as cited in V. P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, p. 209 n. 6. Note that in the vision of Lehi there is not the same ultimacy when the fruit is eaten, since some, "after they had tasted of the fruit... were ashamed... and... fell away" (1 Nephi 8:28).

37 J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image*, 3:9g, pp. 163-164.

38 Revelation 3:21.

39 Moses 4:9.

40 "God did not specifically prohibit eating from the Tree of Life because the Tree of Knowledge formed a hedge around it; only after one had partaken of the latter and cleared a path for himself could one come close to the Tree of Life" (R. M. Zlotowitz *et al.*, *Bereishis*, p. 101, cf. p. 96. See also L. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:70, 5:91 n. 50).

41 Ephrem the Syrian, *Paradise*, 3:5, p. 92. Note that the phrase "in the midst" was also used for the heavenly veil in the Creation account (Moses 2:6).

42 Brock in *ibid.*, p. 52..

43 J. M. Bradshaw, *Moses Temple Themes*, pp. 109-119.

44 2 Peter 1:4. For recent exegesis of this phrase, see J. Starr, *Partakers*.

45 Moses 4:11; cf. Moses 4:28.

46 B. C. Hafen, *Broken*, p. 30.

47 T. N. D. Mettinger, *Eden*, pp. 34-41.

48 M. Barker, *Wisdom*, p. 2.

49 Numbers 21:5-9; John 3:14; Alma 33:18-22; Helaman 8:14-15.

50 R. D. Draper *et al.*, *Commentary*, p. 43. See John 5:25-26; 2 Nephi 9:3-26.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 42, 150-151.

52 Ephrem the Syrian, *Paradise*, 3:5, p. 92.

53 2 Nephi 9:41.

54 M. C. Thomas, *Women*, p. 53.

55 H. W. Nibley, *Return*, p. 63.

56 H. W. Nibley, *Gifts*, p. 92.

57 B. C. Hafen, *Broken*, p. 30.

58 U. Cassuto, *Adam to Noah*, p. 163.

59 Moses 4:27.

60 Moses 4:22.

61 Moses 4:25.

62 J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image*, pp. 234-240.

63 D&C 93:12.

64 G. A. Anderson, *Perfection*, p. 8.

65 See J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image*, pp. 328-351.

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 329-338.

67 M. G. Romney, *Temples*, pp. 239-240. See H. W. Nibley, *Sacred*, pp. 579-581.

68 J. L. Carroll, *Reconciliation*, p. 95 n. 18; J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 21 May 1843, p. 305.

69 See Genesis 32:24-30.

70 E. T. Benson, *Vision*.

71 Moses 7:69.

72 Moses 8:30.

73 Revelation 22:1-5. See T. D. Alexander, *From Eden*, pp. 13-15; M. Barker, *Revelation*, pp. 327-333; R. D. Draper *et al.*, *Promises*.

74 Matthew 6:10.

75 W. J. Hamblin *et al.*, *Temple*, pp. 14-15. See Revelation 21:22.

76 Abraham 3:26.

77 D&C 130:2.