

THE  
GARDEN  
OF EDEN  
AND THE TREE  
OF LIFE: TEMPLE  
SYMBOLS IN ANCIENT  
AND  
MODERN TIMES

SUBMITTED TO  
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And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:9)

So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (Genesis 3:24)

And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1-2)

The Bible in its present form begins and ends with the story of a tree of life in an Eden-like paradise. This can hardly be viewed as coincidence; rather, we should attempt to view it as did the writers of the bible. The tree of life is a symbol that stands at the beginning and the end of mortality.

The question and consequently the thesis of this paper naturally arise: What does the symbol mean? This paper will attempt to answer this question on two levels. First, what did the symbol of the tree of life mean anciently in near eastern religion, especially among the peoples of the bible. Second, how is the same symbol used today among the people known as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

PART I

There are some qualities in trees that make them natural symbols: First, a tree provides nourishment. By yielding fruit, the tree gives food and thereby sustains the life of man. As a symbol it can serve to remind man of his need for physical and spiritual nourishment. This symbol becomes more graphic when it is remembered that the tree of life stands at the center of the garden of eden--the navel or umphalos of sacred space. This sacred tree then connects Heaven and Earth. The fact that the tree resembles an umbilical cord only adds strength to the symbolism.

Second, the tree is a symbol of life in at least two obvious ways: 1) Trees blossom and then bring forth fruit. With the bearing of fruit on the one hand and the ease of interpreting the tree trunk as a phallic symbol, the tree becomes a symbol of the creation of new life and of fertility in general. 2) The tree also symbolizes eternal life or resurrection. Each autumn trees grow old and die, and each spring they are revived or reborn.

Third, by combining these two symbols we can arrive at a third: the tree can be used to symbolize God, who like a tree is the source of nourishment and of all life. Don Parry notes that not only is the tree of life a symbol of God but in the Garden of Eden the other trees represent righteous men and women who are created in the image of God. The tree of life standing in the center of the Garden of Eden is

analogous to God being at the center of the universe.<sup>1</sup>

While these three symbols (nourishment, life, and God) by no means exhaust the symbolism of the tree, they give sufficient background for what will be covered in this paper. The next question we face is how the symbols and the trees have been used in religious worship. We will look at three specific areas; religious rites or covenants, sources of revelation, and sources of divine power.

The Lord condemns some religious rites that used the tree as a fertility symbol. He commands Israel "Ye shall utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and under every green tree." He explains, "And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire " (Deuteronomy 12:2-3) apparently Israel did not obey this command fully for the Lord later condemns them for adopting the same practice and fertility rites;

When upon every high hill and under every green tree thou wanderest, playing the harlot. Yet I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed; how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me? (Jeremiah 2:20-21)

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1. Don Parry, The Garden of Eden: Sacred Space, Sanctuary, and Temple of God, unpublished paper:1985, pp.9-14. see also Psalms 52:8, Exodus 15:17, and Zechariah 4:8-14 for examples of trees symbolizing men and John 15:1, Isaiah 53:2, and Isaiah 11:1 for trees symbolizing God.

The Lord does not condemn the symbols involved, but He does condemn the practices that are taking place at these trees.<sup>2</sup>

A less well known but perhaps more important use of trees in religious rites is that of covenant making. G. R. H. Wright points out that among the art of the Middle East the tree is a common motif. In particular is a scene in which two human figures are facing each other on either side of a tree. The two figures either touch or clasp hands.



Fig. 1) scenes showing covenant making at a sacred tree.<sup>3</sup>

The reason for making covenants at a sacred tree becomes clear with a closer look behind covenant making itself.

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2. William Holladay, "On Every High Hill and Under Every Green Tree," Vetus Testamentum, 11 (1961):170-176.

3. G. R. H. Wright, "Shechem and League Shrines," Vetus Testamentum, 21 (1971):578-579.

Wright tells us the whole matter begins with the Semite term for making covenants which is to "cut a covenant." He tells us the term can be treated in two ways: 1) "to cut, to divide, to share a covenant or oath sanctioning an agreement."

2) "the cutting or dividing of a sacrificial victim. The parties to the agreement pass between the portions and/or share them as a sacrificial meal."<sup>4</sup> Not only does this seem to be done in covenants involving bible people (see Genesis 15:8-21; Exodus 24:6-8; and Jeremiah 34: 18-19), but two sacrificial meals take on added covenant significance--the passover meal and the sacrament of the Lord's supper.

The sacred tree is linked to this covenant process in at least two important ways: 1) often branches were cut from the tree as a token or sign of the covenant made; and 2) the sacred tree stood as a witness to the covenant made.

That the sacred tree stands as a witness of covenants seems to be the meaning behind Joshua's actions following his famous sermon to Israel to choose whom they will serve.

And the people said unto Joshua, The LORD our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey. So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was in the sanctuary of the LORD. (Joshua 24:24-26)

That the sacred tree is a source of revelation is also attested to in the scriptures. The following verses by no means exhaust the references:

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4. Ibid. pp. 580-581

And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain [oak] of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. And the LORD appeared unto Abram. (Genesis 12:6-7)

Then Abram removed his tent and came and dwelt in the plain [by the oaks] of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the LORD. (Genesis 13:18)

And the LORD appeared unto him in the plains [by the oaks] of Mamre. (Genesis 18:1)

And Abraham planted a grove in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the everlasting God. (Genesis 21:33)

So Jacob came to Luz, which is in the land of Canaan, that is Beth-el, he and all the people that were with him. And he built there an altar, and called the place El-beth-el: because there God appeared unto him, when he fled from the face of his brother. But Deborah Rebekah's nurse died, and she was buried beneath Beth-el under an oak: and the name of it was called Allon-bachuth [the oak of weeping]. (Genesis 35:6-8)

And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah. (Judges 3:4-5)

And there came an angel of the LORD, and sat under an oak which was in Ophra, . . . [and] Gideon threshed wheat . . . And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him, and said unto him, The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valour. (Judges 6:11-12)

And Gaal spake again and said, See there come people down by the middle of the land, and another company come along by the plain of Meonenim [by the oak of the diviners]. (Judges 9:37)

And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said Moses, Moses. And he said Here am I. (Exodus 3:2-4)

My people ask counsel at there stocks [wood or tree] and their staff declareth unto them.  
(Hosea 4:12)

Understanding that the tree is associated with the divine presence it seems logical that it also be associated with the divine power. We are not disappointed in our reasoning. Not only is there divine power manifested in the appearances and revelatory experiences at sacred trees, there is divine power manifest in what Carol L. Meyers calls "portable symbols of the tree."<sup>5</sup> When the angel appeared to Gideon at the oak of Ophrah, Gideon tests the angel by bringing him meat and unleavened cakes and setting them on a rock in front of the angel.

Then the angel of the LORD put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and there rose up fire out of the rock and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes. (Judges 9:21)

The rod of Moses and Aaron is also a portable symbol of the tree of life. This rod was able to show divine power in the hands of God's prophets, for the Lord tells Moses, "And thou shalt take this rod in thine hand, wherewith thou shalt do signs." (Exodus 4:17) Moses and Aaron then proceed to show miraculous power by this rod (for example Exodus 7:9-12, 15-25; 14:16; 17:5-6, 9-13). Later Moses mounts a serpent on a pole that has healing powers over those who look at the serpent (Numbers 21:8-9).

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5. The Tabernacle Menorah: A Synthetic Study of a Symbol from the Biblical Cult, (Scholars Press, Missoula, Montana: 1976) p. 147.



Not only does this healing pole remind us of the leaves of the tree of life that can be used to heal the nations (Revelation 22:2), but there is even a more striking example of how these rods of nature represent the tree of life. When the princes of Israel murmured the Lord commanded that they each take a rod and set it in the tabernacle of witness and the Lord would make known who was chosen by God to lead the people.

And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds. (Numbers 17:8)

Because of the power of the symbol of the tree of life it is not surprising that it be incorporated into the building of temples. In temples they would serve to symbolize those things that they had always symbolized. Their functional purpose was also to remain unchanged. They stood as witnesses to covenants, were places of revelation, indicated the divine presence as well as power.

In some temples stone columns or pillars with flared tops stood as symbols of the tree of life. In the wilderness tabernacle the menorah [seven branched candelstick] served as a portable symbol of the tree. The fact that the menorah was lit only serves to remind us of the burning bush and the Cherubims and flaming sword guarding the way of the tree, which in turn reminds us of the divine presence. The light symbol was enhanced by Solomon's Temple and the ten golden

lampstands and by the lighting of the temple during the feast of tabernacles.

In spite of the use of symbolic trees (rods, pillars, and candlesticks), it appears that the more common practice was to use actual trees. Some argue that "every Mesopotamian temple had its own 'holy grove' and 'its own tree of life.'" As Don Parry points out, "man made temples were replicas of the temple of Eden and as such had a grove or forest within its precinct."<sup>6</sup> George Widengren and Carol Meyers both argue that the temple at Jerusalem had trees within.<sup>7</sup>

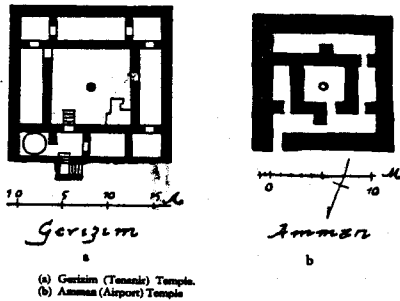


Fig. 2. two temples in Shechem showing their sacred pillars that serve as witnesses of the covenants given there.<sup>8</sup>

6. Parry, op. cit. pp. 10-12.

7. Meyers, op cit. pp. pp. 185-186. and Widengren, The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion, Uppsala: Otto Harrassowitz, 1951, pp. 5-9.

8. G. R. H. Wright, op. cit. p. 590.

PART II

Many of the Temples built by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have within their walls a room which is commonly called the "garden room," or "the room representing the garden of Eden." While this is not uncommon knowledge among Latter-day Saints, it is perhaps less well known that the garden of Eden symbol among Latter-day Saints closely matches that of ancient Near Eastern temples.

In the Saint George, Logan, Manti, Salt Lake, Hawaiian, Alberta, Arizona, Idaho Falls, and Los Angeles temples this has been done by painting murals on the walls of this room depicting the garden of Eden. All Latter-day Saint temples with the exception of the ones in Manti, Salt Lake, Alberta, and Idaho Falls now accomplish this symbolic representation by the use of motion picture media.

One method of depicting the garden of Eden has been employed only twice, possibly three times: Joseph Smith Jr.'s red-brick store in Nauvoo, and the Nauvoo and Salt Lake temples have had actual gardens of live plants and trees.

The Red Brick Store

While it is difficult to distinguish between truth and falshood in John C. Bennett's exposeé of Mormonism, and Bennett proves therein his untrustworthyness. He is the only source for the following account. Speaking of a group he calls "order lodge" Bennett remarks about what members of the church would refer to as the first temple ordinances given

by Joseph Smith Jr. to several of the Church's leaders.

The ordinances took place in the large meeting room occupying the second story of Joseph's store. Bennett states:

The lodge-room is carefully prepared and consecrated; and from twelve to twenty-four sprigs of cassia, olive branches, cedar boughs, or other evergreens, are tastefully arranged about it. These are intended to represent the eternal life and unmingled bliss, which, in the celestial kingdom, will be enjoyed by all who continue in full fellowship with "Order Lodge."



1. Joe Smith. 2. Hyrum Smith. 3. George Miller. 4. Willard Richards.

Fig. 3. Tree branches were possibly used in the Joseph Smith store when he first introduced temple ordinances.

If true, Bennett's statements about these ordinances fits into an older, symbolic pattern of trees and temples.

9. John C. Bennett, History of the Saints; an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism, Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842, pp 273,275.

The Nauvoo Temple

The garden room of the Nauvoo temple was located on the attic story. In the early part of December 1845, under the direction of Brigham Young, the attic story or council chamber was prepared for endowment work. "From 3 December to 5 December the brethren suspended canvas from the ceiling and crossbeams, dividing the Council Chamber into six rooms." One of these canvas rooms was the garden room.

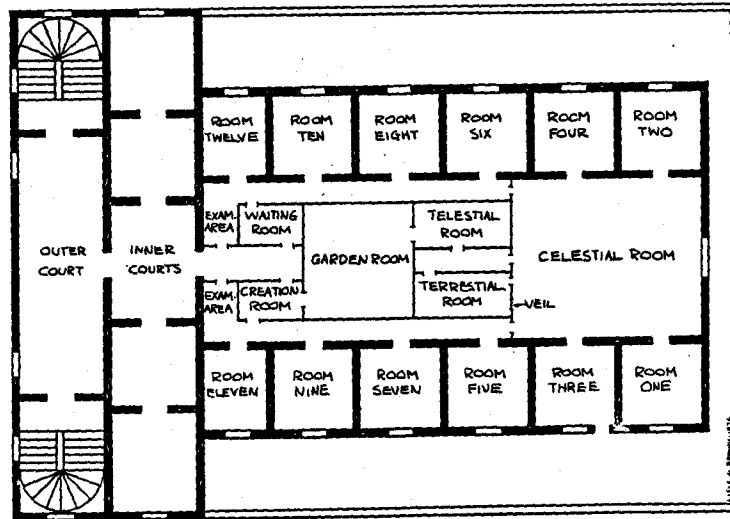


Fig. 4. Diagram of the attic story of the Nauvoo temple.<sup>10</sup>

10. Lisle G. Brown, "The Sacred Departments for Temple Work in Nauvoo: The Assembly Room and the Council Chamber," BYU Studies, 19 (Spring 1979):369-370.

On 2 December Heber C. Kimball and his son William picked up a wagon load of thirty potted plants from Hiram Kimball, who had earlier gathered the plants from houses throughout Nauvoo. The Kimballs delivered the plants to the Temple. Between 4 December and 8 December William W. Phelps carried the plants to the attic and arranged them in one of the canvas rooms.<sup>11</sup>

Due to its canvas walls and no interior lighting, the garden room was illuminated only by dim light coming through the canvas. Heber C. Kimball comments that it was "nice[ly] decorated and set up with shrubs and trees in pots and boxes to represent the Garden of Eden."<sup>12</sup>

The plants consisting of evergreens, shrubs and flowers, were arranged into aisles and walkways. One of the plants represented the Tree of life, and another, which was draped with raisens and grapevines, represented the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. An altar stood in the center of the room.<sup>13</sup>

After the saints received their endowments and were ready to move west the furnishings in the attic were removed. This included the plants and trees.

#### The Salt Lake Temple

The Logan temple served as the transition link between the hall design divided by curtains as in the Nauvoo and Saint George temples, and later temples like the Manti and Salt Lake temples: which had fixed rooms through which one could pass by a series of staircases in a somewhat circular

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11. *ibid.* page 370.

12. *ibid.* page 371.

13. *ibid.* page 371-372.

progression. When the Logan plan increased the number to whom endowments could be given as well as making the administration of these ordinances more convenient, the plans for the Salt Lake temple were changed to adopt the new format.

With the adoption of permanent rooms, Brigham Young entertained the construction of a garden room annex that would allow living plants. Truman O. Angell, Sr., the temple architect consequently drew up plans for a garden room annex off the basement floor. It would have extended about 70 yards to the south of the temple.

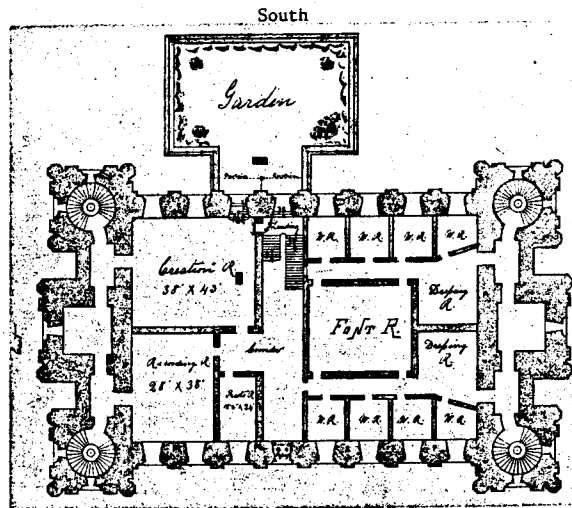


Fig. 5. proposed garden room annex to the Salt Lake temple.

Its three-wall southern exposure would have permitted the planting of an interior garden that would have given the desired atmosphere associated with the activities of the room.

However, the final plans by Joseph Don Carlos Young put the garden room in its present location inside the temple. Of course this would not allow for the planting of trees and other shrubs, but his plans did include a smaller conservatory of plants to the south of the garden room, and these plans were followed in the temple construction.

South

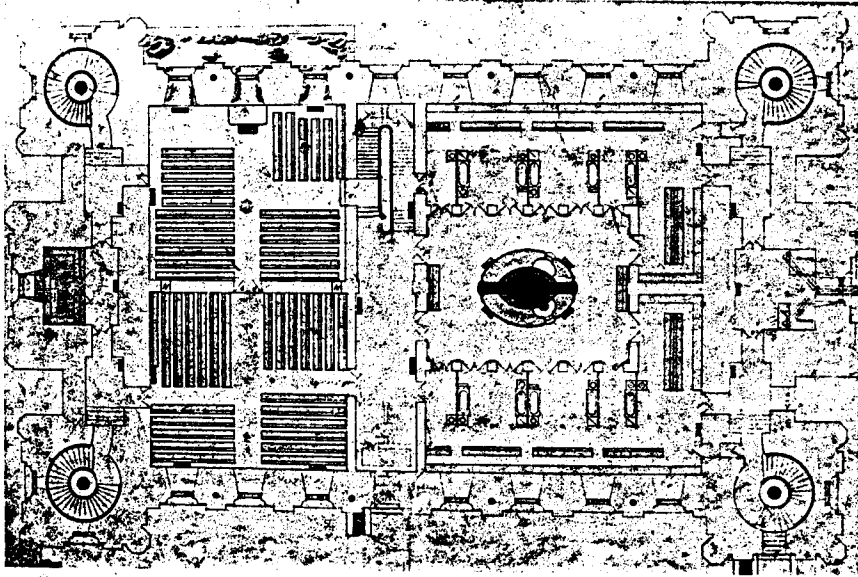


Fig. 6. Salt Lake temple garden room and conservatory.



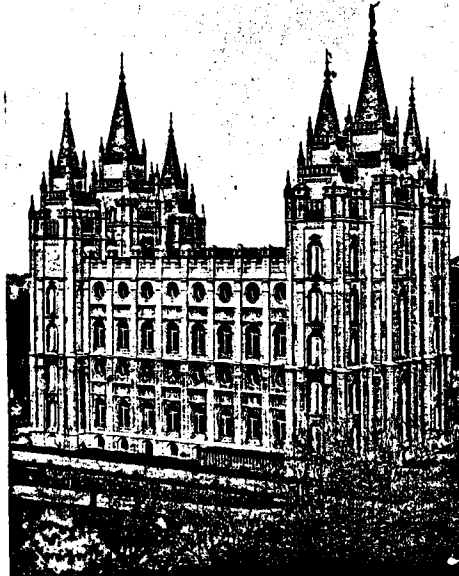


Fig. 7. The Salt Lake temple upon completion. The garden room annex can be seen in the one story structure in the south-east corner of the south wall.

James E. Talmage's description of the Salt Lake temple garden room in 1912 includes,

Ceiling and walls are embellished with oil paintings--  
—the former to represent clouds and sky, with sun and  
moon and stars; the latter showing landscape scenes of  
rare beauty. There are sylvan grottoes and mossy dells,  
lakelets and brooks, waterfalls and rivulets, trees, vines,

and flowers, insects, birds and beasts, in short, the earth beautiful, —as it was before the Fall. It may be called the Garden of Eden Room, . . . In the centre of the south wall, is a platform and an altar of prayer, reached by three steps. . . . On the sides of the altar are large doorways opening directly into a conservatory of living plants.

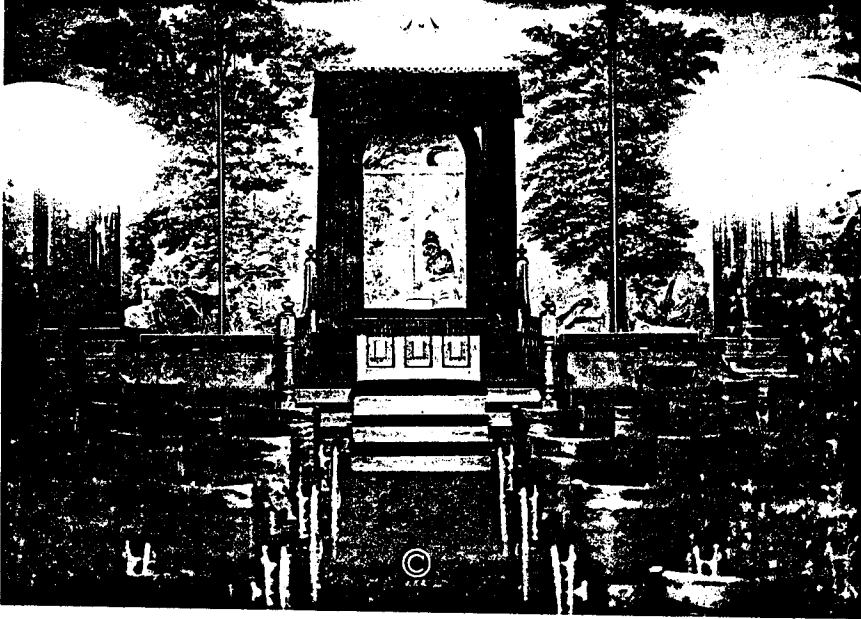


Fig. 8. A 1912 view of the interior of the garden room of the Salt Lake temple, looking toward the south wall. Note the two side doors which open on the conservatory of living plants.

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14. All citations and pictures on the Salt Lake temple come from Talmage, The House of the Lord, Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1912, pp. 186, 246. and n.a., The Salt Lake Temple: A Monument to a People, Salt Lake City: Univ. Services Inc., 1983, pp. 64, 70, 115.

Thus we see that the Latter-day Saint temple worship employs the garden of Eden and the tree of Life symbols. And as anciently, to "cut a covenant" in LDS temples is to make promises before sacred walls, and trees, and pillars, and altars, but more particularly, it is to make these covenants in the presence of God. From the Latter-day scriptures we read:

And inasmuch as my people build a house unto me in the name of the Lord, and do not suffer any unclean thing to come into it, that it be not defiled, my glory shall rest upon it; Yea, and my presence shall be there, for I will come into it, and all the pure in heart that shall come into it shall see God. But if it be defiled I will not come into it, and my glory shall not be there; for I will not come into unholy temples. (Doctrine & Covenants 97:15-17)

Just as in olden time, today's temples are places of solemn covenants. A temple is a place to pray, a place to receive revelation, a place where God's divine presence can be felt, a place where one can return to Eden and enjoy paradise:

I want to state that I was carried away with wonder and admiration and joy at what I saw in padding through the different rooms, which were elegantly painted, and when Brother Louis Garff and myself got through and outside the Temple and viewed Mother Earth again with all her sorrows and temptations, I stood and wept and said "Oh, <sup>15</sup> that I could have stayed in the temple forever."

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15. George Kirkham in Kate B. Carter, Mormon Temples, (n.c.: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, March 1971) pp. 408-409.

Canes and Rods

It is interesting that special canes and rods have also been used in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Upon the death of Joseph Smith his and his brother Hyrum's bodies were placed in oak coffins and taken to Nauvoo. The planks of these coffins were later fashioned into canes as mementos of those men. Willard Richards, Heber C. Kimball, Dimick Huntington, Wilford Woodruff and Brigham Young were among those who received such canes.

Speaking of the special properties of his cane Heber C. Kimball said the day would come "when there will be multitudes who will be healed and blessed through the instrumentality of those canes in consequence of their faith



Fig. 9. The Dimick Huntington cane held by Raymond Taylor.



Fig. 10. The Willard Richards cane.

and confidence in the virtues connected with them.<sup>16</sup>  
 John D. Lee informs us of another type of cane that also had healing properties. Lee, a son to Brigham Young by adoption, states that once when he was sick Brigham came to visit him; "About 3 . . . Father B. Y. brought and laid on my breast a cane built from one of the branches of the Tree of Life that stood in the garden in the Temple."<sup>17</sup> This cane was apparently fashioned from the plant used to represent the tree of life in the Nauvoo temple.

There is still another type of cane or rod mentioned these rods were used to receive revelation. The Joseph Smith family, Oliver Cowdery, Heber C. Kimball, Brigham Young, and Orson Hyde were possessors of such rods. Cowdery's rod was possibly used to help translate the Book of Mormon and is

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16. Stanley B. Kimball, Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer, (Chicago: Univ. of Ill. Press, 1981) page 248.

17. Charles Kelly Ed., Journals of John D. Lee, (n.c:n.p., n.d.) page 67.

alluded to in the Doctrine and Covenants 8:6-9.<sup>18</sup> Orson Hyde used his rod in a manner reminiscent of Moses when offering the dedicatory prayer on the Mount of Olives in which he dedicated Jerusalem to the return of the Jews. Orson held his rod high in the air while offering this prayer.<sup>19</sup>

#### Lighting the Temple

One last symbol that is present in Mormonism in much the same way that it was used anciently is that of Lighting the temple. Anciently this was done on the feast of Taber tabernacles and symbolized that God is light, and that light also symbolized his presence in the temple, just as the fire in the burning bush had symbolized his presence, and just as the Cherubim and flaming sword symbolized his presence at the tree of Life.

November 29, 1985, Elder James M. Paramore spoke of the lighting of Temple square at Christmas each year. He likened

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18. compare with the same revelation published in the Book of Commandments. What the Doctrine and Covenants calls the gift of Aaron the Book of Commandments calls a rod of nature.

19. see Times and Seasons, April 1, 1842, page 741. for mention of other's rods see also Stanley B. Kimball op. cit. pp248-249. ; Hyrum Andrus, Doctrinal Commentary on the Pearl of Great Price, pp. 5-6 and footnotes.

it to the Feast of Tabernacles. after indicating that that ancient ceremony was the backdrop for Christs declaration that he is the light of the world (John 8:12), Elder Paramour said

Against the backdrop of the turning on of the lights on Temple Square, I again declare Him to be the Light of the World. All who follow Him shall never walk in darkness.<sup>20</sup>

Through the centuries many of the old symbols have been preserved like putting lights on an evergreen tree at Christmas. yet it is a testimony to the power of symbols that some are still kept and preserved with all their ancient beauty and power. Such a symbol is that of the garden of Eden and the tree of life among the Latter-day Saints

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<sup>20</sup> Church News, December 8, 1985, page 12.