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Mormon Temples - What are They and What Exactly is Going in There?
Part 1 - Introduction and The History of Mormon Temples

By Tal Davis

Introduction

If you live in or near Tallahassee, Florida, and have recently driven on Thomasville Road about a mile north of the Killlearn Estates entrance, you may have noticed a large building project taking place. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (formerly known as Mormons or LDS) is in the process of building a new temple on that spot. "Oh," you may say. "I have noticed something going up along there. But so what, there are many church buildings all along Thomasville Road: Baptist; United Methodist; Presbyterian; Assembly of God; Catholic; and others. In fact, isn't there already a Mormon church on Thomasville Road?"

True, there are many church buildings along that stretch of Highway 319, and yes, one of them is a Latter-day Saints chapel. But it is important to know that an LDS temple is not like a common worship center of most denominations. They are not even like most church buildings where Mormon congregations (called "wards") go to attend services on Sundays. Those are like the one already on Thomasville Road, and more than 31,000 of those have been built. Comparatively, there are only about 172 operating LDS temples around the world. Florida at present has only two – one near Orlando and another close to Fort Lauderdale. Along with the one in Tallahassee, another is planned to go up near Tampa in the next couple of years.

So what is so special about LDS temples? According to a statement by Russell M. Nelson, current President of the Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-Day Saints, "Each temple is a beacon of light and hope. The temple, the House of the Lord, stands as a symbol of our faith in life after death and as a stepping stone to eternal life for us and our families. The temple is a sacred and essential part of God's plan for our happiness, now and forever." (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/temples/inside-temples?lang=eng>)

Okay, but what exactly does that mean? In this three part article, we will take a look at the purposes for LDS temples, what rituals are conducted there, and answer some common questions Christians ask about them. For instance, many evangelicals are curious as to whether or not the temples (and the LDS itself) are biblical and authentically Christian. People also want to know why non-Mormons (and even a large number of LDS church members) are excluded from entering a temple once it has been dedicated and sealed.

In the weeks leading up the dedication of the temple in Tallahassee, which is scheduled for sometime in 2023, and if the church follows the usual pattern, the general public will be invited to visit and tour the newly built edifice. So, if you decide to attend the open-house, this two part series we will answer those above questions, and others you may have about the temple, and what you can expect to see when you go.

The LDS guides will not explain much themselves about what is in it or what they do there. It is all regarded as "sacred" (i.e.: secret) and only good Mormons are allowed to know what will be happening. But even they are not allowed to discuss what happens, even among themselves, outside of the temple walls.

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In this series we will begin with the modern history of Mormon temples. Part two will look at the first of the three main ceremonies conducted in the temples, called "the Endowments." Part three will address the other two rituals: Baptism for the Dead and Celestial Sealings (Eternal Marriages). You might keep in mind, that all of these ceremonies are performed by Mormons initially for themselves, but then can be done by proxy for those who have died.

History of LDS Temples

According to the official history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in the Fall of 1820, fourteen year old Joseph Smith, Jr., was visited visibly by God the Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. The two divine beings allegedly told young Joseph that they were going to use him to restore authentic Christianity to the world. They said that the "true church" and the "true faith" had been totally lost by apostasy sometime after the deaths of the early apostles.

Part of what was lost, according to later revelations given to Smith, was the building of sacred buildings like the temple that once stood in Jerusalem. Therefore, Joseph was, among other things, commanded to restore those edifices to the earth for the purpose of doing certain sacred rituals necessary for the fullness of people's eternal life. Understand, however, that the practices Joseph "restored" in the LDS temples he built, and the ones now still operating, have nothing in common with the biblically mandated activities done in the Jerusalem temple. That unique temple was built by King Solomon around 1000 B.C. and refurbished by King Herod in the first century B.C. It was, however, destroyed in A.D. 70 by the Romans and has never been rebuilt.

The Mormons' first modern temple was built in Kirtland, Ohio, in March, 1836. That particular building, however, was not designed like the later temples, but was more like a 19th century Protestant church. Smith did claim that several divine beings appeared to him in the sanctuary including Jesus Christ, Moses, and Elias (i.e.: Elijah). In 1838, because of serious legal issues, Smith and his followers were forced to leave Ohio and abandon the temple. That building still stands, but is not owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Since 1901, it has been owned by the Community of Christ, formerly called the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (RLDS). That Missouri based church is a Mormon splinter group founded by Smith's wife and son in 1860.

The next temple was built in 1846 in the Mormon settlement of Nauvoo, Illinois. Joseph Smith, Jr., however, had been killed in nearby Carthage, Illinois, in July of 1844. The surviving Mormons, led by Brigham Young, completed the temple, but, in 1847, were forced to abandon it and trekked west to Utah. The Nauvoo temple was damaged by a fire in 1848 and finally destroyed by a tornado in 1850. A new temple in Nauvoo, identical to the original, was built on its same location in 2002.

The oldest currently operating temple is located in St. George, Utah. It was opened in 1877. It was followed by temples in Logan (1884) and Manti (1888), Utah. The most famous LDS temple is located in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah. It opened in 1893 and is on Temple Square next to the famous Mormon Tabernacle auditorium. It is also across the street from the church's World Headquarters building and World Conference Center. Some people who have visited Temple Square incorrectly state that they attended a performance of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir at the temple. The

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Choir performs, not in the temple, but in the Mormon Tabernacle – the World Conference Center – located on the same square. No public services are conducted in the temple. Since then, temples have been built around the United States and the world in places like: Mesa, Arizona; Los Angeles, California; Atlanta, Georgia; Hamilton, New Zealand; Tokyo, Japan; London, England; and Apia, Samoa. 172 temples are now in

operation worldwide, with 95 planned for future construction.

So now that we have reviewed the history of Mormon temples. In Part two of this three part series we will examine the first main ceremony conducted in the temples called "The Endowments." In part three, we analyze the other two essential rituals: Baptisms for the Dead and Celestial Marriages.

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