

# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MORMONISM

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*The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure  
of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

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The gold-hilted dagger (left) with a blade of rare non-meteoric iron, from the tomb of Tutankhamun (d. 1325 B.C.), is reminiscent of another treasure, the sword of Laban (c. 600 B.C.), described in the Book of Mormon: “the hilt thereof was of pure gold, and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine, and I saw that the blade thereof was of the most precious steel” (1 Ne. 4:9). Courtesy the Egyptian Government.

never be sheathed again until The Kingdoms of this world become the Kingdom of our God and his Christ” (JD 19:38).

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Alan R. Millard. “King Og’s Bed.” *Bible Review*, VI, no. 2 (Apr. 1990):19. Contains a description of a sword or dagger discovered in Pharaoh Tutankhamen’s tomb in 1922 that is remarkably similar to the sword of Laban.

REED A. BENSON

## SYMBOLISM

The word “symbol” derives from the Greek word *súmbolon*, which means literally “something thrown together”; this word can be translated “token.” Contracting parties would break a *súmbolon*, a bone or tally stick, into two pieces, then fit them together again later. Each piece would represent its owner; the halves “thrown together” represent two separated identities merging into one. Thus this concept of “symbol” (unity; separation; restoration) provides a model for love, the Atonement, separation and reunification, our original unity with God, our earthly separation, our eventual return to the divine presence and renewed perfect unity with God (see DEIFICATION). Furthermore, this meaning of symbol shows that understanding any symbol requires the “throwing together” of an earthly, concrete dimension and a transcendent, spiritual dimension. Plato’s idea that knowledge is remembrance (of a premortal existence) (*Meno* 81c–d) has relevance here.

Symbolism plays a significant role in LDS life. The overriding theme is that all things bear record of Christ, “both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath: all things bear record of me” (Moses 6:63). The use of symbols among the Latter-day Saints expresses religious roots, cultural connections, and modes of life. More connected to Hebrew traditions than most Christian churches and at the same time eschewing many traditional Christian symbols, LDS symbolism is unique among modern religions.

Since LDS worship services are nonliturgical and, except for Christmas, Easter, and the Sunday Sabbath, do not adhere to the usual Christian calendar, many Christian symbols are absent from LDS religious practices. Thus, although the atonement and crucifixion of Jesus Christ are at the heart of their scriptures and theology, traditional symbols such as the cross and the chalice are not prominent. Nor are the rich iconographic materials associated with the traditional churches, especially the emblems, signs, colors, patterns, and symbols that developed during the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance.

The Church embraces biblical symbolic rituals such as BAPTISM (with its attendant associations



*The Book of Life*, by Alfred Raymond Wright (1949, carved pine, 40" high). Among the symbols included in this wood carving are twelve oxen, representing the Twelve Tribes of Israel, with a temple baptismal font resting on their backs; the four standard works of LDS scripture; a beehive, symbol of industry; spheres representing the telestial (stars), terrestrial (moon) and celestial (sun) kingdoms of glory; and a replica of the Salt Lake Temple, representing the attainment of the highest degree in the celestial kingdom. Church Museum of History and Art.

with death, burial, and rebirth), the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (with its connection to the blood and body of Christ), and marriage (which signifies both human and divine unity).

Some LDS symbols derive from the Book of Mormon. For example, the iron rod (1 Ne. 8:19) symbolizes the word of God as man approaches the tree of life (1 Ne. 11:25); the Liahona, the compass or pointer used by the Nephites in their travels (1 Ne. 16:10; Alma 37:38–39), symbolizes guidance

through sensitivity to the Spirit; the large and spacious building stands for the corruption of worldly values (1 Ne. 8:31); though the cosmic tree is a universal symbol, the Book of Mormon describes it uniquely as the love of God (1 Ne. 11:21–23).

The Church's history, especially the period of the exodus from the Midwest and the settlement of the Intermountain West, has been a fountainhead of symbols. The covered wagon and the handcart symbolize the faith, courage, and sacrifice of the pioneers; the seagull, the miraculous delivery from a natural disaster; the tabernacle, the quest for sanctuary; and the beehive, the industry and ingenuity required of true disciples.

The architecture of most LDS MEETING-HOUSES is plain and uniform. There are spires, but no crosses; few buildings have cruciform design; and very few have stained-glass windows. Again, reflecting plain, New England-style origins, the interiors of LDS churches contain no crosses or other religious symbols. The sacrament or communion table is plain and adorned only with white tablecloths. It usually rests at the same level with, and is generally adjacent to, the pews, reflecting emphasis on a lay ministry and congregational principles.

LDS temples, both in their structure and ordinances, reflect the glory of God. Their entrances are inscribed, "The House of the Lord/Holiness to the Lord," symbolizing both a sanctuary from the world and heaven itself. The Nauvoo Temple had a frieze consisting of sun stones, moon stones, and star stones, symbolizing DEGREES OF GLORY. Temples built in pioneer Utah had elaborate spires and pinnacles, bas relief, and stained-glass windows, most of which contained symbolic materials. Often temples are built on a hill and near water to suggest not only their elevation from the world, but also their separateness from it and the beauty of the living water of Christ's redemption and exaltation.

The interiors of the temples, too, are highly symbolic, suggestive of the progressive stages of the plan of salvation. By the use of films and murals, symbolic presentations are given of the creation of the world, the Garden of Eden, the telestial or present world, the postmortal terrestrial world, and the celestial kingdom where God dwells. Also associated with the temples are the symbols of the all-seeing eye and the handclasp. Like many Mormon symbols, these have Masonic parallels,

though they are by no means original to Masonry, and have different meanings in an LDS context.

Temples contain baptismal fonts that rest on the backs of twelve oxen symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel. The rooms where marriages and family sealings are solemnized contain altars and mirrored walls in which participants can see their reflections multiplied to infinity, symbolizing the eternal nature of marital love and the family unit. At the conclusion of the temple service, those participating in the endowment ceremony pass from the terrestrial room to the celestial room through a veil, which symbolizes the transition from time into eternity.

The temple ceremony is richly symbolic, with sacred symbolism in the signs, tokens, clothing, covenants, dramatic enactment, and prayer circle. The unifying connection of this symbolic material is the idea of centering. Everything in the temple is suggestive of centering oneself on Christ. The enactment of this privilege precedes the symbolic entrance into the celestial world and the presence of God.

Because it has some unique scriptures and theology and because it has both correspondence with, and independence from, its Judeo-Christian roots, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will continue to have its own unique symbolic system.

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TODD COMPTON

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## SYMBOLS, CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC

LDS cultural and artistic symbols express a distinctive view of the universe and the purpose of life, and tie the present to the historical past. These symbols derive principally from four basic sources: religious ordinances, scriptures, historical experience, and adaptations of other traditions. In the Church today, symbols can be seen in a variety of contexts, including in the continuation of ordinances; in presentations of music, poetry, literature, and drama; in visual arts, sermons, and architecture; and even in settlement patterns of pioneer towns.

The scriptures revealed through the Prophet Joseph SMITH give perspective to the symbolism of the ordinances of the gospel (*see* BAPTISM) and to the creation of the earth. A key passage contains the word of God to Adam, which revealed that everything in the universe has an important and unique role in the PLAN OF SALVATION:

And behold, all things have their likeness, and all things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath: all things bear record of me [Moses 6:63].

The focal point of “all things” and of symbolism relating thereto is Jesus Christ (*see* JESUS CHRIST, TYPES AND SHADOWS OF). Baptism by immersion is symbolic of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:3–5; D&C 76:51–52). Adam was given instruction regarding the symbolism of baptism: “Inasmuch as ye were born into the world by water, and blood, and the spirit, which I have made, . . . even so ye must be born again into the kingdom of heaven, of water, and of the Spirit, and be cleansed by blood, even the blood of mine Only Begotten” (Moses 6:59). This ordinance also symbolizes the atonement of Christ, which makes the cleansing of mankind possible and makes of the repentant new creatures.

Symbols are associated extensively with sacred gospel ordinances performed in the TEMPLE. The temple is a house of order. The orderliness is symbolized in the ENDOWMENT ceremony, which portrays the journey of individuals from the pre-mortal existence through mortal life and death to