

A Conflicted Temple Experience

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My daughter is preparing to receive her endowments tomorrow, in preparation for her mission. Last night's emotional meltdown was badly precipitated by me because I had assumed she knew that I would not be attending the temple session with her...

That vivid image of her lingers with me—tearfully, angrily tearing out grass in the lawn as my wife and I tried almost in vain to get her to express her anger in words... “I know you have a different view of the Fall and I don't want to talk about it! Just don't tell me the Prophets are wrong! Don't tell me the temple is wrong! Don't ask me to choose between you and the prophets!”

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It took me years to realize why I was uncomfortable attending the temple. There was no doubt in my mind it was a sacred and holy place. It certainly served as a refuge for me, and as a place of retreat when I sought inspiration in time of need. But why did I have a tenuous lump of discomfort in my gut each time I witnessed the dramatic portrayal of Eden events, prior to the endowment covenant making?

First of all, *talking* about it was a problem. Among us Mormons, there is a very strong cultural aversion to—even taboo against—speaking about anything related to the temple experience. And yet there really are only a few things so sacred that they should not be spoken of openly: the specific covenants, promises and associated blessings given to us from God, including our participative interactions with God that produce those promises.

I recall the time, now decades ago, when I awaited my wife in the lobby of the Oakland Temple. I noticed a plate abutting an open door adjacent to the lobby: Temple President. Approaching, I knocked and was welcomed in. After brief greeting, I wondered aloud whether I should believe Lucifer in the Garden scene when he tells Eve (and me), “there is no other way.”

The kind president reflected for a moment and responded, “Well, in this one case, it seems we should.”

Later, I had occasion to be sitting next to my bishop during a session. Together we witnessed Lucifer captivate Eve with, “You must partake of this fruit to comprehend that everything has its opposite: good and evil, virtue and vice, light and darkness, health and sickness, pleasure and pain.” I then leaned over to my bishop and whispered, “I think that's a lie.” Without breaking his own attentive gaze he whispered back, “Yep, and here comes another whopper...”

“...there is no other way!”

Eventually it registered in my mind that it was not a matter of deciding whether to believe the temple president or the bishop, the Sunday school teacher or Eve or Lehi or whomever. Ultimately it came to this: I had to choose whether to believe Lucifer or not. Did I believe God or not when He gave direct commandments? Perhaps that was even the reason why I was sitting there watching that scene in the first place. Maybe in fact this choice between God and Lucifer was my very own test?

But it was many more years before the conflict and paradox motivated me to further pin down how such a test might also have a responsive *action* associated with it. I had carefully listened in the temple and tallied on my fingers how many commandments God had given our first parents in the Garden; and likewise tallied on the other hand how many commandments Lucifer had given our parents: four each, by my count. How many of those commandments were fulfilled? The scoring was a clean sweep, four to nil, for Lucifer's resounding win. And at the end of it, I looked down and saw that *I* was wearing the same fig leaf apron on top of my robes that Lucifer had commanded our parents to make, to cover their 'nakedness', before commanding them to hide from before the face of God.

I noticed in the dramatization of our first parents that they had discarded their aprons when they were given their coats of skins by God and wondered why I was still being asked to replace my apron on top of both my garment and also the robes of the Holy Priesthood. And yet I could not talk about it, by strict taboo.

Finally here was the source of my inner turmoil: that I was preparing to enter the presence of God while wearing the symbol of obeisance to Lucifer. That did not seem right, given that I had felt I had passed the test whether or not to believe Lucifer. Would my actions now match my conviction?

I thought I had found the solution to my problem (with the okay of my previous stake president) in the discreet removal of the offending apron in the ante space between veil and celestial room. At one point a temple worker observed me, and I am still not sure whether he was concerned about my action or my obviously deeply troubled demeanor when he sincerely asked, "Is anything wrong?" I told him, "Yes, thank you, but it's okay."

In my head though, I am well practiced in the response I would give if pressed: "How can I, the ransomed one, approach my rescuer—He is still bearing the dreadful marks of the ransom price—while I am wearing the mark of Lucifer's ownership, the one to whom the ransom was paid?"

And the level of conviction of that response only became more acute when I learned the deep symbolism of the veil from having read Hebrews 10.

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My stake president and I have an uneasy truce: He knows that by my own choice I cannot, with any semblance of integrity, wear the fig leaf apron through the veil. He does not agree with my interpretation of the apron as a mark of Lucifer's ownership and he may not agree with my interpretation of the veil itself. But at least in denying my request to remove the apron prior to

approaching the veil (or better still, dropping it altogether prior to the making of covenants), he has suggested that I might worship in the temple in other ways, without participating in the endowment since I feel such deep conflict. Among my stake president, my mother and now my daughter (per our experience last night), none seem to understand at present why I would refuse to participate when it is so important to others; or at least why do I not accept that “Heavenly Father understands my heart”, such that He would *obviously* allow me to participate anyway.

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I am very grateful to my bride who understands me so well that last night she was able to express the issue simply to our daughter, in a way that all of us can understand and extract therefrom some temporary peace, “Sweetie, your dad has never asked anyone to choose between him and the prophets. He is only asking for himself the opportunity to choose between the devil and Heavenly Father.”