

INTRODUCTION:  
LATTER-DAY SAINTS AND THE  
PERCEPTION OF RITUAL

THE IMPETUS FOR THIS VOLUME arose out of two different but related events I experienced a few years ago. The first occurred while reading Alma 44, in which Captain Moroni, having brokered a temporary cease-fire following a decisive victory in battle, begins to explain to Zerahemnah the reasons for the Nephite success: “And now, Zerahemnah, I command you, in the name of that all-powerful God, who has strengthened our arms that we have gained power over you, by our faith, by our religion, and *by our rites of worship*” (v. 5; emphasis added). It struck me then, and still does today, that Moroni saw the rites of his religion as an inherently powerful aspect of his life. What also struck me was the way in which the word *rite* was used in a positive manner in the modern translation.

This last observation is important because some months later, while teaching a temple preparation class, I asked the class what their general perception was concerning the words *ritual* and *ritualistic*, two terms derived directly from *rite*. Each class member expressed unease with those terms, viewing them as negative expressions that hinted at dark, profane acts, though the terms themselves mean nothing of the sort. The term *rite*, from which *ritual* and *ritualistic* stem, simply means “with correct religious procedure; in the manner required, properly, duly, correctly, rightly, fittingly”<sup>1</sup> and perhaps originally meant something even

more simple—“to number, to count.”<sup>2</sup> By these definitions, the terms describe perfectly an array of spiritual and religious experiences within our church. Yet we are uneasy with the terms ourselves, no doubt in part because of the claim found throughout anti-Mormon literature that the Church is “ritualistic” or filled with “rites.”<sup>3</sup> Instead we use the more neutral term *ordinance*, which can refer to both acts and beliefs, thereby diluting the more negative connotations of *ritual*.<sup>4</sup>

To be fair, our church is not the only one in which ritual is understood by those who are outside of it as a negative qualification. Catholics are also confronted with this perspective. In fact, during the nineteenth century, some who wrote about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its membership grouped the Church with Catholicism as non-Christian.<sup>5</sup> So why do these terms have such negative baggage? While the answer to this question could take up a book by itself, two points may enlighten.

The first point is that there is a lack of consensus among scholars as to what exactly a ritual is.<sup>6</sup> In the past, ritual has simply been understood as religious practice, but it is now recognized as a genre of action that spans both religious and secular spheres, including politics, education, and even sports. Though a general understanding of ritual as a prescribed, physical act that has been incorporated into society for social purposes seems to be accepted, this understanding is extremely vague and is open to a variety of applications.<sup>7</sup> This uncertainty as to what constitutes a ritual experience may, in turn, create hesitancy in discussions because such an ambiguous subject matter runs the risk of offense. Better to avoid it at all costs than to offend.

This tension between actual ritual practice and being labeled as ritualistic by others reflects the unease with which ritual has been understood since the Greco-Roman period, when the ritual behavior of the foreigner or the barbarian was contrasted with the proper rites within one’s own society.<sup>8</sup> This, in turn, reflects an almost intuitive understanding that ritual, particularly religious ritual, has power to define what and where one is within the cosmos. It may be viewed as creative, providing the means by which an individual, or community, can maintain or

further expand the cosmos, or as chaotic, threatening to overwhelm the established order. Though persecution against The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints commenced as early as 1830, the description of the Church as one that practiced negative “rites” or “rituals” or was “ritualistic” did not start until it began to perform the temple rituals revealed by Joseph Smith. Both of these solidified the Church as Other and therefore a threat that hovered on the edge of civilization; that the rites themselves were somewhat similar to other rites already known (Catholicism and Masonry in particular) only made the fear worse. Mormonism became the subject of congressional inquiry and fictional sensationalism, thus entering into the public imagination as a distant group that threatened the moral structure of “true” society.<sup>9</sup>

The second point affecting our understanding of ritual was the Protestant Reformation.<sup>10</sup> The Protestant Reformation arose out of concerns over abuses, actual and perceived, perpetuated by the Catholic Church in the availability and use of the ritualized sacred experience, or the sacraments.<sup>11</sup> Because the Catholic Church claimed that it was invested with divine authority, it also laid claim to being the sole power over the performance and participation of the sacraments, the rituals that bound the good member to both God and church. As the church grew and consolidated its immense power, it appeared that some began to use the rituals of the church for personal gain. Beginning with Martin Luther, individuals, catalogued the abuses that Catholic authority enacted in the ritual life of the laity. Following Luther’s lead, these criticisms emphasized the personal, individual relationship that one could have with God and thus discounted the outward, ritualized nature of Christianity, in some cases considering the sacred rituals as either diversions or outright frauds perpetrated by the church.<sup>12</sup> Yet the irony is that even as Protestant scholars and religious leaders spoke out against the excesses of “ritual,” they themselves were engaged in ritualized acts, the Protestant Reformation merely substituting one set of formal ritualized acts with other less formal, though no less ritualistic, acts to replace them.<sup>13</sup>

By the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, the term *ritual* was used in secular, scholastic studies to describe “primitive” or “bloody”

worship practices of native, non-European cultures by the pioneers of anthropology and modern religious studies.<sup>14</sup> Thus, by the twentieth century, the word *ritual* was associated with the negative image of religious abuse, arising out of the Protestant Reformation, and “uncivilized” behavior of the foreign “Other.”<sup>15</sup>

The restoration of the true Church of Jesus Christ not only revealed doctrines long lost or distorted but also an entire body of ritual activities, some that were familiar along with others that were completely new.<sup>16</sup> These rituals brought again to the forefront the role of authority, for ritual only has efficacy if the practitioners have the authority to make the acts valid and recognized. Among the revelations concerning Latter-day Saint ritual behavior is Doctrine and Covenants 84, which gives insight into the value of ritual performance. Sandwiched between Abraham’s priesthood lineage and a description of the various priesthood offices is the following: “[This] priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God. Therefore in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh” (vv. 19–21).

As these verses suggest, there is a relationship between the performance of priesthood ordinances (or rituals)<sup>17</sup> and the expression (or manifestation) of the power of godliness. The importance of godliness is revealed in the next verses, which state that without godliness no one can see God and live. Therefore, one of the plain and precious truths revealed in this dispensation is the importance of godliness, and thus of ritual, to receiving the fullness of God’s glory.

The term *godliness* is found twenty-two times in the scriptures, the majority of which are found in the New Testament. Perhaps the most familiar reference for Latter-day Saints is 2 Timothy 3:2–5, which describes the general condition of man in the last days: “Men shall be lovers of their own selves, . . . without natural affection . . . [and] having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.” In these references, godliness does not appear to serve as a synonym for the power of God but

is instead the correct or proper way of interacting with the divine from the mortal perspective and thus refers to the interactive nature of the mortal-divine relationship, even the embodying of that relationship.<sup>18</sup> In other words, it is a state that a mortal must achieve in order to interact with divinity. Thus, if one is to be transformed to enter into the divine social state, or receive exaltation, the power of godliness must be made manifest in him, and this manifestation, or awareness, according to Doctrine and Covenants 84:20, is found in the ordinances of the gospel under the authority of the priesthood.<sup>19</sup>

The Prophet Joseph Smith further elaborated on the relationship between the ordinances and acquisition of divine knowledge elsewhere, suggesting that ritual was tied directly to revelation:

Reading the experience of others, or the revelation given to them, can never give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God. Knowledge of these things can only be obtained by experience through the ordinances of God set forth for that purpose. Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject. . . . I assure the Saints that truth, in reference to these matters [plan of salvation], can and may be known through the revelations of God in the way of his ordinances, and in answer to prayer.<sup>20</sup>

This statement, coupled with the revelation in section 84, suggests that ritual is indispensable to both the reception of divine revelation and personal communion with God. Thus ritual is more than simply a symbolic system by which one comes to understand certain gospel principles but is an actual experience necessary for complete salvation. Why formalized physical acts known as ritual would be indispensable is not answered in the scriptures, though there is growing evidence that ritual can make the body more conducive to certain spiritual experiences.<sup>21</sup> However ritual does it, it is clear that Captain Moroni understood that there was power inherent in the rites of his worship.<sup>22</sup>

It is in this spirit that this volume was compiled, for ritual plays a fundamental role in the Latter-day Saint experience, coinciding with the unique doctrines restored in this dispensation. Indeed, these two elements of our faith cannot be separated from one another, a fact recognized by noted ritual scholar Ronald Grimes: “No one can accuse the Mormons of being ritually flat or theologically shy.”<sup>23</sup> Though the authors of each piece in this volume come from different areas of specialty, they all seek to describe some aspect of Latter-day Saint ritual experience. Most of the rituals described within will be familiar to the practicing Latter-day Saint, though the manner in which they have been approached may be new. The volume begins with two pieces that introduce the reader to general approaches of ritual study. Walter van Beek looks at the varied ways in which man has sought to find meaning in ritual and acquaints the reader with the “meaninglessness” of ritual, or the contemplative state that ritual makes possible. He is followed by John Hoffman’s study, which provides a sociological perspective while at the same time examining the intersection between the ordinances associated with work for the dead and the veneration of one’s deceased in Japanese Shintoism.

The chapters then follow a general chronological trajectory beginning with the ancient Near East and working towards our modern era. Ronan Head begins this trajectory by reviewing the ritual nature of feasting from ancient Mesopotamia to the modern practice of the “ward party.” Michael Rhodes then presents “sealing” practices in his discussion on the eternal nature of families in ancient Egypt. His article is followed by two that discuss rituals found in the Old Testament. RoseAnn Benson discusses the role of ritual in the marriage covenant of Adam and Eve, while Alonzo Gaskill explores the relationship between covenants and rites associated with footwear as described in the Old Testament.

From there we move to the New Testament, where our first article is from Stephen Ricks, who looks at the ordinance of baptism from a comparative approach within Judaism and early Christianity. He is followed by Gaye Strathearn, who continues a longstanding tradition of Latter-day Saint scholarship by exploring the similarities between the

temple ordinances and a series of rites described in the Gnostic text the *Gospel of Philip*.

The next section of the volume concerns itself with the history of LDS ritual in this dispensation. My paper acts as the transition between the ancient and modern worlds, examining the rite of dusting of feet, beginning from its ancient antecedents to the manner in which it is understood today in contemporary missionary work, while at the same time trying to establish a methodology by which further ritual study can be approached. Aaron Reeves looks at the significance of ordaining by the laying on of hands within a theological foundation of belonging established by Joseph Smith, while Jonathan Stapley reviews the history of Latter-day Saint healing rites in all their variations. Next Megan Jones describes the defining nature of Mormon pageantry in terms of both our relationship to our history and to the world around us. Michael Ing's paper focuses on the understanding of ritual within the traditions of Buddhism, providing insights which may be instructive to enhancing our own ritual practice. And Jennifer Brinkerhoff Platt's article explores both the challenges and wonder that our church may experience in terms of ritual as we continue to grow, especially among non-Western traditions, by examining the significance of the *buna* coffee ritual among Ethiopian women and its place among Latter-day Saint Ethiopian women. The volume concludes with a reflective essay by Robert Millet which describes the importance of salvific ordinances, ordinances of comfort, and personal sacraments in our salvation and exaltation.

In each study, the particular author has sought to demonstrate the richness of ritual practice within our faith—past, present, and future. As stated earlier, many of the studies explore rituals or ordinances that we are familiar with, such as baptism, ordination, temple rites, and so forth. Yet this volume does not purport to be an exhaustive analysis of LDS ritual behavior, and we are aware that there are other ordinances that could have been discussed. With that in mind, we hope that this volume acts at the very least as a springboard launch appreciation for our rich ritual heritage. Perhaps the volume will do more, such as spurring the

reader on to find out for themselves the power that comes from our own rites of worship.

### Notes

1. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare (1982; repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), “rite,” ritūs.”
2. Some have suggested that *ritūs* developed from an older, Proto-Indo-European (PIE) base “re(i)-”; the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* suggests that the reader compare usages of *ritūs* to the Greek ἀριθμός (meaning “to count” or “to number”).
3. These terms, with their negative connotations, were used to describe The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints early on. See for instance Nelson Winch Green, *Fifteen Years Among the Mormons: Being the Narrative of Mrs. Mary Ettie V. Smith* (Indianapolis: Dayton & Asher, 1859), which mentioned twice that “the monstrous . . . horrid rite” of human sacrifice was performed in the temple as part of the Mormon ceremony. Though mention of this particular rite has disappeared from anti-Mormon polemic, the belief that anti-Christian ritual is performed is alive and well, especially since the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the Church was deemed a cult by certain evangelical groups because of the ritual forms the Church engaged in.
4. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, “ordinance.” The term stems from an Old French term that originally meant “decision made by a superior” or “a ruling made by people or a person with appropriate authority.” Thus the term, at its core, reflects the authority by which a statement is made or an act is committed.
5. One explicit example of the association in the minds of the nation between Mormons and Catholics can be seen in the following: “The West is the arena where the contest is to be carried on between Infidelity, Romanism, Mormonism and Satanism on one side and Christianity on the other.” Quoted in Carrie Prudence Kofold, “Puritan Influence in Illinois Life before 1860,” in *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society for the Year 1905*, Sixth Annual Meeting for the Society, Springfield, IL, January 25–26, 1905 (Springfield: Illinois State Journal, 1906), 326. For more on the anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). See also David Brion Davis, “Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic and Anti-Mormon Literature,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (1960): 205–24.
6. Two recent volumes have done an exceptional job of summarizing the primary approaches to ritual as well as providing a comprehensive bibliography.



- See Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, Michael Stausberg, eds., *Theorizing Rituals*, Studies in the History of Religions (Boston: Brill, 2007). See also Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).
7. Jan Snoek, "Defining 'Rituals,'" in *Theorizing Rituals*, 3–14. I include the purpose of transformation and identity placement into this general approach, meaning that I define a ritual as a prescribed, physical act that moves an individual within a given social or religious structure to another given social structure by transforming the environment or individual themselves, or maintains the current status by allowing change to be incorporated into the existing social structure.
  8. David Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 103, 105: "Proper civic ritual should have order and custom. . . . Alien ritual was imagined as disordered and excessive, secretive and foreign, cacophonous, and inverting of proper sacrificial procedures and substances. . . . To the extent that proper ritual brings about divine beneficence and the conquest of the disorderly, Satanic powers, heretic ritual carries equivalent power in the opposite direction." In at least one example, Lucan's *Pharsalia*, book 6, the term *ritus* is used to designate these barbaric acts, thus establishing that early on, the terms *rite*, *ritual*, and *ritualistic* had negative connotations.
  9. Each of these is explored in Terry L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
  10. Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed., New Approaches to European History 33 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 299: "The modern intolerance toward 'mere ritual' originated in the ritual revolution of the sixteenth century and the deritualizations of the eighteenth."
  11. "The Protestant Reformation produced an ideological stance that was openly hostile toward ritual . . . reformation theology placed emphasis on the inner religious experience of the Christian as the constitutive moment in individual Christian experience." Frank H. Gorman, "Ritual Studies and Biblical Studies: Assessment of the Past; Prospects for the Future," in *Transformations, Passages, and Processes: Ritual Approaches to Biblical Texts*, Semeia 67 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 14–15. David Frankfurter, "Ritual as Accusation and Atrocity: Satanic Ritual Abuse, Gnostic Libertinism, and Primal Murders," in *History of Religions* 40, no. 4 (May 2001): 361: "The formalist image of ritual, in which a priesthood manipulates and exploits mesmerized devotees through empty or frightening symbols, chants, and gestures, stems from anti-Catholic polemic in the seventeenth century, in which Catholic ritual itself was perceived as a kind of sorcery." For one example, see the

words of Increase Mather, *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (1684), 127: “The Popish Priests undertook by Conjurament to obtain Water. The Magical Ceremonies by them observed were most horrid and ridiculous. For they took an Asse, and put the Sacrament of the Eucharist into his Mouth, sang Funeral Verses over him, and then buried him alive before the Church doors.”

12. John Wesley, in *Concise Ecclesiastical History* (London, 1781), 1:262, described the rites of the Catholic Church as seductive “arts” that “were practiced upon the ignorant devotion of the simple.” Muir writes, “The sixteenth-century crisis in the ‘communal, performative sign,’ which had led a learned few to see ritual observances as a diversion from true spiritual concerns or worse as a manipulative fraud, stimulated a vast debate about what a rite is and what it does.” *Ritual*, 189. He later writes, “By the eighteenth century ‘ritual’ had become a dirty word, . . . [implying] insincerity and empty formality, the very antithesis of the Enlightenment values that prized individual spontaneity and authenticity.” *Ritual*, 294.
13. Muir, *Ritual*, 203–5: “Despite their emphasis on the Bible and interpretation, Protestants still experienced the sacred through rituals, and the Reformation itself was largely achieved through a ‘ritual process.’ . . . These rituals of reform ranged from simple desecrations by individuals to complex, collective counter-rituals . . . that often displayed characteristics of a rite of passage with its three stages of disaggregation, transition, and reintegration. [The image] desacralized through the humiliating rite of passage . . . the rite of degradation described here brought about a lowering status and proved the image to be nothing more than its component materials.” The Protestant Reformation also brought about new rituals. See Muir, *Ritual*, 215: “In the struggle over appropriate rituals, the Protestants did not just strip away traditional Catholic practices but invented entirely new ceremonies, especially new rites of remembrance.”
14. Frankfurter, “Ritual as Accusation,” 363, 365–66: “The formalist model [of ritual, see above] has long influenced scholarship on comparative religions and, especially, the conceptualization of ancient religions. Predominantly Protestant historians cast any elaborate ensemble of priesthood, temple, and formal sacrifices (such as ancient Canaanite religion or even Judaism before the temple’s destruction) as decadent, spiritless, and conniving—that is proto-Catholic caricatures. . . . The Bacchantic model is also preserved in a stream of religious scholarship that first achieves respectability with the nineteenth-century Semiticist W. Robertson Smith, . . . [who] gives new authority to the ancient model of ritual atrocity, casting it as the archetype of communal ritual. . . . Durkheim researched his theories, and Turner did his fieldwork. But each of these figures found resonance in the notion of ritual as

- that point when humans launched themselves into varying degrees of amoral enthusiasm. Ritual became the space opened for dramatic moral reversal.”
15. Frankfurter, “Ritual as Accusation,” 359: “The term ‘ritual’ has come to indicate some dangerous realm of behavior, where countercultural conspiracy is mobilized, where ordinary people might dissociate and commit perversions, where the innocent might be mesmerized or brainwashed, where the social and symbolic pillars of reality might be inverted permanently. . . . Ritual’s evil seems to lie especially in two domains: on the one hand, the removal of moral and social constraints such that participants become frenzied and, as it were, bestial; and, on the other hand, the repetitive dramatic program in which certain elite participants gain control over others through staging, robes, and secrets. Ritual, in this formalist sense, is intrinsically hierarchical, elevating and empowering a priesthood while exploiting initiates and faithful for personal gain. While the first, Bacchantic type of evil ritual assumes that rituals are procedures that lead to erotic or homicidal ecstasy, the formalist type seems to deny any emotionality whatsoever, often emphasizing the cold calculation of the leaders.”
  16. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 205: “The priesthood doctrines opened a ritual world that Protestantism, with its emphasis on preaching, had closed off.”
  17. Though the term *ordinance* as used in the scriptures can, in places, be ambiguous (either as ritual or instruction), Elder Boyd K. Packer, understood this particular reference to indicate the ritual performances. *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 143–55. Elsewhere in the Doctrine and Covenants the term appears to refer primarily to rituals, specifically the rituals associated with temple work (see D&C 88:139; 107:14; 124:33; 128:8, 121; 138:54; Official Declaration 1).
  18. The Greek term translated as “godliness” in 2 Timothy 3:5 is *εὐσεβεία*, derived from *σεβό*, meaning “to be in awe, or reverence” (literally “shrink before”), is often defined as piety, or the proper manner in which one interacts with the divine. Interestingly, the term translated as “form” has a primary meaning of “embodied.”
  19. Though exaltation may not commonly be thought of as social movement, the Doctrine and Covenants suggests that this may be a productive model in which to think of the divine. In D&C 130:2, Joseph describes exaltation as the following: “The same sociality that exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy.”
  20. *The Teachings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 577.
  21. Though no studies have been done on the physiological impact of rituals in LDS practice, there is a growing subfield within ritual studies as to the

physiological effect of ritual. For more on this, see Axel Michaels, ed., *Body, Performance, Agency and Experience*, Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual 2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010).

22. It is unclear from the text if Moroni is speaking about all the rites, including those from the law of Moses, or a specific set of rites which do not include the Mosaic ritual system. This may differentiate LDS ritual experience further, for in the Joseph Smith Translation of Exodus 34:1, we find that the power of ritual to enter into the presence of God unscathed was taken from the early Israelites: “And the Lord said unto Moses, Hew thee two *other* tables of stone, like unto the first, and I will write upon *them* also, the words *of the law, according as they were written at the first on the tables which thou brakest; but it shall not be according to the first, for I will take away the priesthood out of their midst; therefore my holy order, and the ordinances therefore, shall not go before them; for my presence shall not go up in their midst, lest I destroy them*” (italics delineate JST additions).
23. Ronald Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 166.