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*The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple
Worship* by David John Buerger

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DAVID JOHN BUERGER. *The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship*. San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994. 234 pp. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Danel W. Bachman, Instructor, Logan Institute of Religion, Logan, Utah, and Kenneth W. Godfrey, historian and writer.

Joseph Smith believed that at the core of restoration theology was temple worship.¹ However, he left behind few documents detailing how and when the endowment was revealed to him. That many Latter-day Saints have an interest in temples and temple ceremonies is evidenced by the fact that large collections of unpublished temple-related documents circulate among historians, theologians, and interested members. Even scholarly books such as Donald W. Parry's *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism* and Hugh Nibley's *Temple and Cosmos* enjoy surprisingly brisk sales. Still most Latter-day Saints remain unfamiliar with the antecedents and historical development of modern temple ceremonies. Even revealed sacred rites, we believe, have a history that can be both interesting and instructive.

The Mysteries of Godliness attempts the first historical treatment of the development of the endowment and other temple rites. The preface acknowledges the sensitivity of this theme and promises “to treat the ceremony with respect” in order to “enhance understanding of the temple for both Latter-day Saints and others by providing a history of the endowment” (vii, ix). Yet, “given exaggerated claims about the temple and its origin by some enthusiastic apologists” [just who these persons are and what constitutes their exaggerated claims the author does not tell us], he argues that “a degree of specificity in detail is unavoidable” (viii). Using many unpublished primary sources and published exposés written by anti-Mormons, Buerger traces endowment history from its beginnings in 1831 to the present day. His narrative is specific enough to offend the sensitivities of most devout Mormons, despite his disclaimers.

All sacred texts and sacred ceremonies, when they become the object of historical analysis, should be treated with delicacy and care—somewhat like cultivating a rare flower. This care is

necessary if understanding is to blossom in the hearts of readers who cherish their faith or in the minds of others in terms that are true to the nature of the subject matter. Buerger, attempting to speak through his sources, some of which are openly antagonistic to Joseph Smith and the ceremonies revealed through him, fails to pass the sensitivity test. Nevertheless, basing his history on a plethora of documents (many of which are restricted by the Church because of their sacred content and thus cannot be studied by general researchers to determine their meaning, veracity, or historical setting), he does create an interesting narrative.

Buerger probes the “Kirtland Ceremony” as a precursor for the more complete Nauvoo temple ritual, and he examines the influences of the Book of Abraham and the Book of Moses on the endowment. A large section in one chapter of his book is devoted to Masonic rites and the role they might have played in endowment history. Moreover, he particularizes the contributions of Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, David O. McKay, George F. Richards, and Gordon B. Hinckley to that which transpires in Mormon temples.

Latter-day Saints and scholars alike will learn something new by studying this relatively small volume. Using prose devoid of rancor and sensationalism, Buerger utilizes minutes of Schools of the Prophets, First Presidency letters, and other primary sources to provide some detail in the history of the development of temple ceremonies, including the seldom-mentioned second anointings ritual. Buerger discusses the meaning of many sacred symbols and practices associated with temple worship. David O. McKay, we learn, first explained the symbolism associated with the temple clothing worn by faithful Latter-day Saints. Buerger documents and explains the origin of style changes in temple clothing; however, the historical and religious setting and origin of this clothing is glaringly absent from the pages of this book, as is an explanation of the significance such apparel has for endowed Church members. Buerger also informs us that early Mormons who were married were expected to refrain from intimate relations ten days prior to attending the temple (unmarried Mormons were to refrain altogether). He documents, too, that many deceased women were sealed to high Church officials in the St. George Temple. The historical development of the ordinance of the washing of feet is also

explained, as is the background for the introduction of sophisticated media in today's ritual.

While there is much of value in this volume, it is seriously flawed. Buerger promises a history of Mormon temple worship, but his focus is much more limited, with emphasis on washings, anointings, second anointings, and washing of feet—precisely those things Latter-day Saints believe are most private and thus should not be discussed publicly. At the same time, he neglects other very important aspects of temple worship.² This exclusivity belies the title and promise of the book. Those who study its pages will fail to find anything regarding temple dedications, solemn assemblies, or the experiences of those millions of Mormons who have participated in temple rites since 1842.

The cover, to cite the first example, lacks taste and attempts to titillate the eye. It would be more appropriate for some slick magazine or murder mystery than for a serious history of a sacred ceremony. Other weaknesses in the volume are of a more serious nature.

In chapter one, Buerger argues that “High Priesthood” originated in 1831 “in the mind of Sidney Rigdon” (2). Buerger’s source for this claim is the 1887 publication *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, authored by David Whitmer many years after the introduction of the Melchizedek Priesthood. Better studies, including the writings of Larry C. Porter, conclude that Joseph Smith, not Sidney Rigdon, introduced the Melchizedek Priesthood to Latter-day Saints.³ The description of the second anointing, as performed in temples today, uses as a source a “knowledgeable anonymous individual” (66–68). Serious readers have no way of proving the accuracy of the Buerger account. The author also contends that following 1831, Mormon theology became “predestinarian” (2), using a word that will puzzle most LDS readers. Participating in sealing ordinances in Latter-day Saint temples is not akin to being predestined, nor does the word adequately or accurately describe the Latter-day Saint theological concept of having one’s calling and election made sure. The LDS idea of sealing, Buerger argues, is not totally congruent with New Testament theology regarding sealing. There, God is always the sealing agent, whereas in Mormonism a human intermediary is introduced. Buerger fails to consider how and why this difference came about. For most Latter-day Saints, the

ceremony draws believers to Jesus Christ. Buerger fails to explain how or why sealing came to be at the center of temple worship.

While he searches for antecedents to the temple ceremony in freemasonry, focusing on the signs, tokens, keywords, and penalties (Buerger does admit there was no wholesale borrowing of the endowment from Masonry), he fails to acknowledge the unique theological meaning and the religious and doctrinal content in which they are embedded in the endowment. He also ignores the influence that biblical texts may have had on Joseph Smith's temple thought. There is, as Grant Underwood and Philip Barlow have shown, an intense biblicism that undergirds and pervades the Prophet's thinking.⁴

Furthermore, Buerger ignores the contributions of the Book of Mormon to Latter-day Saint temple worship. Several LDS scholars have shown that there is more in the Book of Mormon about temples and the endowment than a cursory reading might indicate.⁵ Their research leads the careful student to believe that Joseph Smith learned much about temples as he translated ancient texts and worked on his translation of the Bible. An exhaustive study of the endowment must include a thorough study of all Mormon scripture.

Because of the book's fragmentary nature, the author does not provide the reader with an understanding of the plan of salvation that the ceremony is intended to convey. Nor does he clarify why temple rites are the core of Mormonism. The building of temples is another significant part of temple worship which deserves greater attention, including site selection, the laying of cornerstones, the placing of capstones, and the sacrifices involved in constructing these edifices.

Readers who wish to become more knowledgeable about the historical development of the endowment ceremony itself will probably learn something from reading *The Mysteries of Godliness*. However, those who desire to understand the spiritual aspects of temple worship and the impact of temple ceremonies on individual Latter-day Saints will be disappointed with this treatment of temple worship.

NOTES

¹Larry C. Porter and Milton V. Backman Jr., "Doctrine and the Temple in Nauvoo," *BYU Studies* 32, nos. 1 and 2 (1992): 41-56.

²See Allen Claire Rozsa, "Temple Ordinances," and Immo Luschin, "Latter-day Saint Temple Worship and Activity," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4: 1444, 1447.

³Larry C. Porter, "The Restoration of the Priesthood," *Religious Studies Center Newsletter* 9, no. 3 (May 1995): 10.

⁴See Grant Underwood, "Joseph Smith's Use of the Old Testament," in *The Old Testament and the Latter-day Saints*, Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, 1986 (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1986), 381; and Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁵See John W. Welch, "The Temple in the Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful," and M. Catherine Thomas, "The Brother of Jared at the Veil," in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 297, 388. See also John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990).