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Sacred Symbols: Finding Meaning in Rites, Rituals, and Ordinances

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Alonzo L. Gaskill. *Sacred Symbols:
Finding Meaning in Rites, Rituals, and Ordinances.*
Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2011.

Reviewed by Herman du Toit

The power and viability of symbolism is often lost on the American psyche and also finds mixed reception by American LDS audiences. It is as if the essential pragmatism of the American spirit militates against the very appearance of ambiguity in all its forms. Symbolism and metaphor comprise the tools-in-trade of skillful meaning making and the explication of profound truths in both word and image. Alonzo Gaskill, a professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University, makes the observation that Latter-day Saints do not always like symbolism. He references Truman Madsen, who recalled: “I had a built-in hostility to ritual and to symbolism. I was taught by people both in and out of the Church—with good intention, I have no doubt—that we don’t believe in pagan ceremony: we don’t believe in all these procedures and routines; that’s what they did in the ancient apostate church; we’ve outgrown all of that” (5). As a consequence, Gaskill claims, in the words of LDS scholar Suzanne E. Lundquist, that we Latter-day Saints “have become an asymbolic society, and, as a result, we do not understand the power of our own rites of passage” and make little effort to “understand the meanings of our own rituals or what ritual behavior implies.” Lundquist adds that we fail “to comprehend or internalize the messages contained in ritual symbols.”¹

The motivation for this book came after Gaskill had delivered a lecture on the interpretation of symbols in art and was approached by one of the attendees, who complained that “she had always seen things quite literally and thus had ever struggled to find symbolic meaning in the ceremonies and symbols of the Church and its ordinances or rituals. . . . Almost in a spirit of pleading she asked, ‘How can I get myself to see the symbols, and find meaning in

1. Page 2, quoting Suzanne E. Lundquist, “Native American Rites of Passage: Implications for Latter-day Saints,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., 2 vols. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1990), 1:441–43.

them?” (2). Gaskill says it was this singular encounter that spurred him on to write a book that would help this sister and others like her to find personal meaning in the rites and rituals of the restored gospel.

Gaskill teaches world religions and Christian history and is the author of numerous articles and books, including *The Lost Language of Symbolism—An Essential Guide for Recognizing and Interpreting Symbols of the Gospel*. His most recent offering is abundantly supported with copious endnotes and an extensive bibliography that speak to his broad knowledge of what symbolic acts, gestures, covenants, and ritualistic dress mean in both his own faith and in the faiths of others. However, his text is never dry and uninteresting; he writes from the perspective of “an enthralled layman” (x, quoting Madsen). Gaskill’s text is intended for an LDS audience and begins with an overview of how people function as patrons, actors, or officiators in the rites being enacted in sacred performances—roles that have been echoed down the ages. He provides the example of the narratives of the mystery plays of medieval times in which the audience was invited to identify with the action of the play and to ask, “What divine or sacred knowledge does this narrative seek to reveal to me?” (93). He makes the point that these stories being acted out—the Creation and the Fall—are *our* story, even the story of humankind. Gaskill is ever careful of not speaking directly to, or in too a revealing manner of, the sacred practices of the LDS temple.

In a chapter dealing with initiation rituals, Gaskill reveals how the practices of baptism, clothing, washing, anointing, and naming are widespread throughout the Christian world and how they have been practiced by various sects over the centuries. Here again a wealth of information is contained in the endnotes to this chapter for the serious reader with desires for more in-depth research. Turning to ordination rituals, Gaskill quotes from various sources, both ancient and modern, confirming that the “imposition of the hand is almost universally attested as the principal ritual gesture of ordination”² and, as we read in Doctrine and Covenants 36:2, that the laying on of hands can symbolize “transmission of power from on high” (76). Gaskill gives a fascinating account of the liturgical role of women in the early Christian church. According to numerous references, women began serving in the early Christian church as “deaconesses” from the early second century. He notes that their responsibilities included visiting other sisters in their homes to teach them the gospel, and washing and anointing the bodies of female candidates who had come forward to be baptized. These female deaconesses were not ordained to the priesthood

2. Page 76, quoting Paul F. Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of the East and West* (New York: Pueblo, 1990), 46.

but, as one early source noted, were “appointed” to serve (79, 80). These women symbolized the feminine aspects of the divine and represented “the handmaiden of the Lord” by the service they rendered. Gaskill notes from early Catholic liturgical documents: “The deaconess’s role during the rituals was to quietly sit by until someone needed her service. Her role or position of responsibility was not for personal gain or aggrandizement. She played no part but servant. Consequently she is as Christ, who patiently waits upon us as a servant, in that all that He does on our behalf is evidence of His desire to serve and to save.”³

Gaskill goes on to show how pervasive the uses of clothing rituals are in the Christian church from the earliest times. Sacred vestments were a standard feature in ancient Israel’s temple worship, including the donning of aprons, ephods, head coverings, sashes, and robes as noted in the book of Exodus and other early liturgical writings. Gaskill devotes a substantial portion of his text to explaining how these symbolic elements become part of covenant-making rituals that often include oath making, tokens, and passwords. He concludes his study with an overview of marriage rituals and makes the overarching observation that “from a Christian perspective, all rites, rituals, and ordinances of the Gospel are Christocentric. Their primary purpose is to draw participants unto Christ, and to place them in a covenant relationship with Him. Beyond their salvific purpose, Christian rituals are also designed to direct the patrons’ attention toward Christ through the symbolism they employ” (271).

In overview, Gaskill’s book is insightful, highly informative, and a much-needed text in these times of encroaching materialism and pseudo-religiosity. The text is lucid, and the endnotes to each chapter provide much additional information for the serious reader. Perhaps Gaskill could have given a little more prominence and explanation to the operation of typology within the lexis of symbolism. In the present text, the term is accurately defined in the endnotes as a branch of symbolism where a symbol (the “type”) is fulfilled in someone or something else (the “antitype”), an example being the Pascal Lamb and the crucified Christ (25 n. 35). However, the use of typologies in scriptural symbolism is so pervasive and so profound that it warrants greater attention in a study of this nature. Also, a little more consideration of metaphor as a powerful symbolic tool is also warranted. In a literally minded (and less literate) society, the power of metaphor is poorly understood and often neglected in visual and textual forms of discourse.

3. Page 85, paraphrasing Mary Lawrence McKenna, *Women of the Church: Role and Renewal* (New York: P. J. Kennedy, 1967), 180.

Gaskill's book contributes to Mormon literature in providing a much-needed guide to those who struggle to find meaning in sacred symbols that are often taken for granted by Latter-day Saints in their religious observances. It also alludes to a major deficit in our understanding and use of these tropes in our daily discourse.

Herman du Toit (who can be contacted via email at byustudies@byu.edu) is an independent artist and scholar. He retired as Head of Museum Research at Brigham Young University Museum of Art in Provo, Utah, in 2011. He has enjoyed an extensive career as an art educator, curator, administrator, critic, and author, both locally and abroad. He is a former head of the Durban Art School and founding director of the Cecil Renaud Art Gallery at the former Durban Technical Institute in South Africa. He holds postgraduate degrees in Art History and Sociology of Education from the former University of Natal. At Brigham Young University he was awarded a J. Paul Getty Fellowship for his PhD study of interpretive practices at some of America's leading art museums.