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The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology

By Jonathan A. Stapley

New York: Oxford University Press, 2018

Reviewed by Dan Belnap

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the ritual behavior of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹ The latest volume to address that subject is Jonathan Stapley's *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology*, published by Oxford University Press. Grounded in his extensive studies concerning individual healing rites and Latter-day Saint sealings, Stapley explores the concept of priesthood and authority. He does so through five chapters, each one focusing on a specific practice: chapter 1 concerns priesthood ordination; chapter 2, sealing; chapter 3, infant blessings; chapter 4, a number of ritual behaviors outside of temple settings; and chapter 5, the presence of the "cunning-folk" tradition within nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint culture.

Though a relatively slim volume (the text is only 128 pages), Stapley does an excellent job of noting some of the theological and historical challenges that arise from Latter-day Saint ritual praxis, including the participation of women and blacks, a subject that remains a historical concern for many Church members. Moreover, Stapley adds to the ongoing dialogue on Latter-day Saint praxis by discussing ritual behavior that is often unaddressed, such as those rituals often considered to

1. Two recent examples would be Terryl L. Givens, *Feeding the Flock: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Church and Praxis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Alonzo L. Gaskill, *Sacred Symbols: Finding Meaning in Rites, Rituals, and Ordinances* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort Press, 2011). The latter is particularly addressed to the membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One could also include Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), which also addresses Latter-day Saint ritual praxis, though that is not the overall purpose of the study.

be “nonsalvific” (that is, not necessary for salvation). Discussions on Church praxis usually focus on what may be termed “high ritual” or “high liturgy,” which refers to formal rituals engaged in during official, communal worship (for example, the sacrament, temple rites, baptism, and so forth). But with Stapley’s observations on healing ritual in particular, he places these “nonsalvific” rites within the continuum of the “salvific” rites, thus providing a more complete and comprehensive understanding of Latter-day Saint ritual praxis. Similarly, his chapter on “cunning folk” introduces the reader to ritual practices and authority of other nineteenth-century traditions in European and American communities and explains how those traditions intersect with Latter-day Saint history.² Yet perhaps the most significant contribution of Stapley’s study is his exploration of the nature and function of the priesthood.

Central to his volume is his separation of the priesthood into two conceptual categories: “cosmological priesthood” and “ecclesiastical priesthood.” Stapley defines cosmological priesthood as the “material network of heaven,” or the social network of both those on earth and those in heaven who are connected to one another through the rituals associated with the temple (he refers later to this network as “the organizational fabric of heaven” [22]). This priesthood is not an authorization of divine power but designates the relationship between the participants of the ritual themselves; thus, those who participated in the temple rituals inaugurated in Nauvoo, Illinois, could be designated as “the priesthood,” which included the female as well as the male participants. Ecclesiastical priesthood, on the other hand, is the power (the power of God) distinct from the individual that must therefore be received via those who have the authority to give the priesthood to another. This conception of priesthood includes “offices” and channels the “power of God” into the specific venue of the priesthood holder, or more importantly, the priesthood authority—that is, one who possesses priesthood “keys.” Those who have engaged with this priesthood have historically been white males. The tension between these two

2. And still do. A personal conversation with a Church friend notes the ongoing tension. While the concept of using a peep stone was difficult for this individual to accept, they readily noted the efficacy of “dowsing,” or looking for water using a Y-shaped rod that would “dip” in one’s hand when passing over an underground water source.

conceptions of priesthood, Stapley suggests, in his introduction and conclusion, may be at the root of Latter-day Saint questions regarding the role of priesthood in our ritual praxis, both historically and contemporarily:

More broadly, this book uses liturgy to elucidate the cosmologies and authorities that order and structure Mormon life and opens new possibilities for understanding the lived experiences of women and men in the Mormon past and Mormon present. . . . By tracing the development of the rituals and attempting to ascertain the work they have accomplished, the Mormon universe, with its complex priesthoods, authorities, and powers, becomes comprehensible. . . . The gender-exclusive priesthood language of the Nauvoo Temple contradicted the exclusively male ecclesiastical priesthood language that developed in the church; ultimately the latter held sway. After the decline of the cosmological priesthood as an active internal framework, Mormons spent the last one hundred years working to understand how women fit into an increasingly vast priesthood authority structure. . . . Any analysis of authority throughout Mormon history is consequently challenged by the changing lexical terrain. Over time, church leaders and members have used the term “priesthood” in reference to various aspects of liturgical, ecclesiastical, and priestly (temple) authorities. This framework is key to understanding how Mormons have tamed the chaotic heaven opened by an angel and a golden book. (2, 125–26)

While the two conceptual approaches may be a productive model to explore the nature of authority within the Latter-day Saint faith, suggesting that the “cosmological” priesthood has been overshadowed by an increasing emphasis on “ecclesiastical” interpretations of priesthood ignores the role that ecclesiastical priesthood played in the establishment of the Nauvoo temple rites, including sealing, or even the role of ecclesiastical priesthood within the rites themselves. This may be because the individuals involved in the introduction of these rites—namely, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and other early Church leaders—do not appear to have conceived of the priesthood through these lenses of “cosmological” and “ecclesiastical” priesthood. Thus, even as Stapley notes that those who participated in the temple rites were “the priesthood” (that is, the cosmological priesthood), he includes Brigham Young’s statement that they received “the keys of the Priesthood” (17); the cosmological was also ecclesiastical. This may be best understood through the early Church’s practice of adoption sealings. Though Stapley states that ritual adoption sealings made the “material heaven on earth,” since all living

Saints could now theoretically be bound to one another, those to whom Latter-day Saints were sealed were always male members of Church leadership—the ecclesiastical priesthood authority. Being sealed to Church leaders was efficacious because of their priesthood authority. The material heaven was not just for eternal families but also for families led by kings and priests, two positions with ecclesiastical meaning. This holds true even for the female performance of healing rituals, understood by Stapley as operating under the cosmological priesthood. Even though these rites were associated with female participation and authority experienced within the temple liturgy, the authority that women received via the temple liturgy still came through the ecclesiastical priesthood authority of the temple president and ultimately through the ecclesiastical office of Apostle. In all of these cases, the “cosmology” of the priesthood was created or engaged through the ecclesiastical authority of the priesthood.

The focus on these conceptual distinctions can, at times, lead to lacuna in the analysis. For instance, on pages 92–93, the reader is told that the term *ordinance*, as used by Joseph, reflected the greater Protestant meaning: “Moreover, Smith’s revelations, sermons, and letters employed the term ‘ordinance’ in the broader sense used by the early reforms—that is, in the context of commandments and laws. . . . Smith’s successors grew to employ the term ‘ordinance’ in a manner similar to the way some Roman Catholics employ the term ‘sacraments.’ Mormons grew to see ordinances as a category of venerable rituals to be performed by priesthood officers.” While it is true that the term may have been used that way at times by Joseph, even a cursory review of the term in the Doctrine and Covenants reveals that Joseph was also using the term to refer to ritual practices early on (see D&C 88:139–40; 107:20; and 124:30, 33). This oversight may seem trivial, but it reflects the challenge of allowing a conceptual approach to determine the historical analysis, rather than using history to determine a conceptual approach. A more serious absence is the lack of analysis of the other temple rites introduced at the same time as the sealing rites. While Stapley explores the ramifications of the sealing rite, the other temple rites, such as the washing and anointing and the endowment, which were often experienced at the same time as the sealing of the husband and wife, are not discussed at all. Why is not clear, though perhaps it is because the role of ecclesiastical authority in the performance of these other rites may run counter to the thesis of his study. In any case, by isolating the sealing rite from the rest of the temple praxis and ignoring the other rites

associated directly with the sealing, Stapley limits what he means by liturgy, a limitation that makes it possible to engage with his conceptual divisions concerning the priesthood.³

In a similar manner, by starting the discussion of Latter-day Saint cosmology as if it emerged from selective rites of the late Nauvoo period, Stapley makes a very specific, and limiting, definition of cosmology. While the social network that defines his cosmological priesthood is certainly a part of Latter-day Saint cosmology, earlier revelations, such as Doctrine and Covenants 76, 83, 88, 93, and 107, had introduced the Saints to “kingdoms” and “glories,” to the beginning of all things and to the time when all things ended. Time and space, which are not aspects explored in Stapley’s cosmology, were as important to the early Saints’ understanding of the cosmos as was the awareness of the eternal, social relationships that could be created. Moreover, the priesthood defined how time and space were experienced and engaged with as much as it defined the social structure of the cosmos, including in the ritual praxis of the Latter-day Saint.

Significantly, these cosmological elements emerge in earlier revelatory material, yet the Doctrine and Covenants is rarely cited in Stapley’s volume.⁴ Joseph’s theology of ritual and priesthood, as outlined in section 84:19–25 does not appear in Stapley’s historical analysis, even though it is alluded to in the title.⁵ Yet these earlier revelations were foundational to the form and structure of the later temple rites and the subsequent cosmology described within those rites. As with the

3. Though Stapley never discusses how he conceived of his conceptual distinctions in this volume, his earlier phenomenal work on early Mormon healing rites suggests that this particular rite is the kernel from which he developed the model. Similarly, his belief that the ecclesiastical priesthood has “overshadowed” the cosmological priesthood appears to stem from the gradual cessation of female healing in the early twentieth century. Yet the end of adoption sealings and the normalization of sealings to family members instead of ecclesiastical leadership suggests that his assertion that the cosmological approach to the priesthood has been overshadowed over the past century may not reflect actual experience, since both of these examples suggest an expansion of the “cosmological” priesthood during the same period Stapley suggests it was being overshadowed.

4. Both sections 76 and 107 are alluded to briefly, though the content of both is not engaged in the text.

5. Doctrine and Covenants 84:19–21 is cited once in the conclusion but is not referenced elsewhere in the body of the volume.

limitation on the liturgy noted above, basing the cosmology on selective ritual and late theology means that an understanding of both praxis and theology is limited at best. As to why earlier Latter-day Saint theology is ignored is not clear, though again, perhaps it is because the earlier cosmological revelations did not distinguish, in terms of function or understanding, between "cosmological" and "ecclesiastical" priesthood.

These challenges aside, Stapley's work is a welcome addition to the growing library on Latter-day Saint ritual praxis. His conceptual division of the priesthood, while perhaps not reflecting an actual division in the priesthood, is nevertheless a useful model for exploring some of the complexities of the priesthood and, in light of recent teachings concerning the priesthood from Latter-day Saint Church leadership, a tool that can be used to further expand our understanding of how priesthood may be engaged. Though the study is limited in what it defines as cosmology, it does reflect the important role that social relationships have within Latter-day Saint cosmology and the role that ritual, both salvific and nonsalvific, plays in the understanding and creation of that cosmos. Stapley ought to be congratulated on producing a study that provokes even as it leaves space for further discussion.

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