

Baptized, Consecrated, and Sealed: The Covenantal Foundations of Mormon Religious Identity

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One of the “elementary forms of religion” identified by Emile Durkheim is that a society’s fundamental concept of God expresses, from a cultural point of view, its highest and most ambitious ideals projected onto eternity.¹ If this is true, we should be able to reflect these spiritual realities back onto empirical cultural phenomena in order to understand the basic and most distinctive sociocultural features of a religion like Mormonism. Before outlining the conceptual benefits of this theoretical perspective, I would like to explain its assumptions and limitations so that its advantages can be more fully appreciated. The following premises define this approach:

1. Religious identity is defined by core theological concepts that are established principally by and through authoritative sources. In Mormonism these sources include, but are not limited to, the canonical standard works—the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price—and the official writings of Mormon Church leaders.
2. The core concepts that define the religious identity of a people approximate a theological system whose components are structurally interrelated and mutually coherent.
3. These basic concepts and their interdependent and mutually coherent relationships constitute the structure of the religious system.
4. This theological system constitutes a prescriptive model for meaningful religious behavior and social action. However, human behavior is rarely a complete and perfect reflection of theological ideals. Any religious society usually has a degree of dynamic tension between the structural foundations of the theological system and the behavior of those who accept those ideals.
5. Real-world experiences, including those associated with imperfect human behavior, often condition, qualify, or transform the interpretation of theological ideals, but rarely in a deterministic manner. This premise implies that religious identity is contextualized by historical, environmental, social, and other conditions as recognized and interpreted by the believers, particularly by the group’s key decision makers or the culture’s central institutions. Despite the changeable nature of religious identity, the basic theological concepts that constitute the specific expressions of religious identity tend to persist over time.

This chapter will identify the conceptual foundations of Mormon religious identity and indicate some of the major implications of this perspective for the understanding of Mormon history.

Nine years after his first visit from the angel Moroni, Joseph Smith received one of his most important revelations, section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Ostensibly its subject was priesthood—the authority, by Mormon reckoning, given to righteous men on earth to act in God’s stead. In this concise but far-reaching explication of the tradition, doctrine, and power of the priesthood, the twenty-six-year-old Mormon prophet identified those who would eventually be saved in the Father’s kingdom by virtue of this divine power. Collectively they would be known as “the church and kingdom, and the elect of God” (D&C 84:34). If these three institutions—the church, the kingdom, and the elect—define the essential social structure of Mormon heaven as suggested by this and other revelations of Joseph Smith (see, for example, D&C 76:50–70; 88:21–5; 132:6–24), then, in light of Durkheim’s sociological model, they provide an important basis for interpreting much of the historical and social experience of the Latter-day Saints.

This approach suggests that Mormon religious identity can be understood as being initially constituted and periodically refined in terms of the core sociotheological concepts of the Church of Christ (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), the kingdom of God (Zion), and the elect people of God (collectively known as the house of Israel). I will demonstrate the analytical value of viewing these concepts, which overlap considerably in ordinary Mormon discourse, as distinctive but complementary concepts in Mormon thought. Although these concepts have been conditioned, transformed, and refined over time by historical tradition and empirical and spiritual experiences, as interpreted by key church leaders, Mormon public discourse and social behavior can be seen as efforts by Latter-day Saints to express and practice in their daily lives the spiritual ideals of Christ's Church, Zion, and the house of Israel. Thus the present analysis describes the historical origins, structural foundations, and social consequences of Mormon identity in terms of three ideal-typic covenanted communities.

Historical Origins of Mormon Identity

The latter-day Church of Christ was organized by Joseph Smith in a remote farmhouse in Fayette Township, New York, on 6 April 1830. By Mormon reckoning, this event effected the restoration to earth of Christ's primitive church, with its divinely appointed officers, priesthoods, and doctrines. At least a few dozen of Smith's followers witnessed this event, but six men constituted the legal participants in the act of organization. Following a formal opening with prayer, events included the congregation's official acceptance, or sustaining, of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery as their leaders; the ordination of Smith and Cowdery to the respective callings of "first elder" and "second elder" (D&C 20:2–3); the administration of the sacrament of the Lord's supper to the congregation; the confirmation of those who had been baptized as members of the church and the ordination of several men to the priesthood; and prophetic and other inspired discourses about members' duties and the future of the Church of Christ.²

The Book of Mormon mandated this event as one of the essential preparations for the second coming of Christ and the advent of the millennium at the end of time (see 2 Nephi 9:1–2; 3 Nephi 21:22–9). As the words of the Book of Mormon fell from his lips, Joseph Smith apparently came to understand that his prophetic mission extended beyond his being an agent in restoring ancient scriptures; he was also to be the prophet of Christ's restored church. Supporting this understanding were several revelations that Smith received during this same period. These revelations specifically anticipated the "coming forth of [Christ's] church out of the wilderness—clear as the moon, fair as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners" (D&C 5:14; see 10:53–69; 11:16; 18:4–5). According to Joseph Smith, the Church of Christ began its divinely ordained march out of obscurity on 6 April 1830.

The Book of Mormon also required the establishment of the kingdom of Zion and the gathering of the house of Israel in the latter days (see, for example, 2 Nephi 25–30; 3 Nephi 20–2; Ether 13). Joseph Smith was no less intent on fulfilling these ancient prophecies than he had been on organizing the Church of Christ. At one point Smith declared that the establishment of Zion—a worldwide millennial kingdom of God—was "the most important temporal object in view" of the Latter-day Saints.³ The revelations he received from 1831 to 1834 reflect this preoccupation with Zion and reveal its gradual unfolding.⁴

In accordance with these divine directives, Smith and a number of his most trusted associates gathered in Jackson County, Missouri, in late July 1831 to dedicate Zion's "center place" (D&C 57:3). Twelve elders, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, ritually laid a log as the foundation of an appropriate habitation in the kingdom. On 2 August the Prophet laid the cornerstones of Zion's main temple, the sacred center of this urban society.⁵

The City of Zion, as defined by Joseph Smith, was to “fill up the world in the latter days” with an innumerable series of mile-square settlements, called squares, having fewer than twenty thousand residents each. Life in Zion was to be characterized by consolidated family residential patterns; concentric spheres of public, residential, and occupational activity, each legitimized and controlled by priesthood authority; and face-to-face patterns of social interaction.⁶

The gathering of the house of Israel—the ethnic identity of the people of God—was formally inaugurated at the dedication of the first Mormon temple, which was completed in Kirtland, Ohio. According to Joseph Smith’s official account of this Pentecostal-like event that followed a week of dedicatory services (27 March–3 April 1836), he and Sidney Rigdon (a counselor to Smith in the church’s ultimate governing body, the First Presidency) received a vision of Christ, who accepted the temple as the “House of the Lord,” his official dwelling place on earth (see D&C 109:1–5, 12–3, 16; 110:6–9). A series of Old Testament prophets then appeared and conferred upon Smith and Rigdon essential priesthood keys, that is, specific authority to carry out God’s will in the latter days. The first of these messengers was Moses, who bestowed upon them “the keys of the gathering of Israel from the four parts of the earth” (D&C 110:11).⁷

The house of Israel officially began to be organized among the Latter-day Saints when Joseph Smith revealed the ceremonies (called ordinances) connected with another sacred temple as it was nearing completion in the 1840s in Nauvoo, Illinois. The “new and everlasting covenant of marriage” (see D&C 131:1–4), solemnized by a ritual “sealing” of husbands and wives and parents and children,⁸ was instituted first in the upper room of Joseph Smith’s red-brick store in 1842, before the temple was completed.

Before and after the Prophet’s martyrdom in 1844, there was considerable anxiety among the Latter-day Saints to complete the Nauvoo Temple so that as many as possible could receive these sacred ordinances. They believed that once they were sealed to one another, neither earth nor hell could prevent them from receiving their promised blessings of exaltation as a covenanted kinship community. The holy order of matrimony entered into through the sealing ordinance became available for worthy Latter-day Saint couples in the Nauvoo Temple from 7 January 1846 until the Mormons were driven from their “city beautiful” and began their monumental exodus to western North America (see D&C 124:22–48).⁹

The Structure of Mormon Identity

If Mormon identity consists in membership in and acceptance of the transcendent meaning of the complementary institutions of the Church of Christ, the kingdom of Zion, and the house of Israel, how is this identity expressed by the Latter-day Saints? Each of these social institutions has a distinctive ritual of membership, code of conduct, sacerdotal order, and concept of salvation. These elements combine systematically to create a complex and profound sense of solidarity among those so identified. I will discuss each of these elements in their respective cultural contexts and then demonstrate briefly some of the major analytical advantages of this interpretive framework for understanding Mormon history.

The Church of Christ

Membership in the Church of Christ is defined by the covenant of baptism and bestowed by the complementary ordinances of “baptism by immersion for the remission of sins” and “laying on of hands [confirmation] for the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Article of Faith 4). The covenant of baptism consists in the promise that church members are “willing to take upon them the name of [Christ], and always remember him and keep his commandments which he

has given them.” In return, Christ promises that they will “always have his Spirit to be with them” (D&C 20:77). Latter-day Saints renew this covenant weekly by partaking of the emblems (bread and water) of Christ’s atoning sacrifice (see D&C 20:77, 79) in the sacrament of the Lord’s supper (commonly referred to as the sacrament), the centerpiece of Mormon Sunday worship services.

The LDS ritual of baptism is performed under priesthood authority. The baptismal candidate, dressed completely in white, is fully immersed in water in similitude of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the spiritual rebirth (symbolic washing away of the sins) of the individual candidate. Baptism is an essential ordinance of salvation, and the entire performance—from the clothing worn and the prayer uttered (see D&C 20:73) to the actions performed and sanctioned by priesthood authority—symbolically represents an ideal spiritual life characterized by complete moral purity and total fidelity to the “still small voice” (D&C 85:6), or the promptings of the Holy Ghost. Such worthiness is required of all who would be saved in the celestial kingdom. Because it is a token of a person’s assuming moral responsibility, baptism must be consented to by the prospective member, who must be of the age of accountability (at least eight years old; see D&C 20:71; 68:25–7), understand the difference between right and wrong, and commit to live a life of moral purity and good works (see D&C 20:37). These qualifications must be attested either by a designated full-time missionary (in the case of converts more than eight years old) or by the bishop (in the case of eight-year-old converts), who is the priesthood leader of the local ecclesiastical community.

Confirmation follows baptism. A formal prayer declares an individual officially a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and commands him to “receive the Holy Ghost.” The confirmation concludes with spontaneous blessings and counsel pronounced by the officiator, who is a faithful Melchizedek Priesthood holder (the higher spiritual authority in the church) and usually a family member or friend.

The code of conduct enjoined upon members of the Church of Christ can be summarized as the law of the gospel. This law is grounded specifically in the commandments, beginning with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and repentance (see Article of Faith 4), which prepare members to receive forgiveness of sins through the atonement of Jesus Christ and the daily companionship of the Holy Ghost. Related commandments include embracing the full range of Christian moral virtues—honesty, integrity, charity, temperance, humility, obedience, compassion, devotion, and so on—in public and private life.

Through the covenant of baptism, members become disciples of Christ. Thus bound to Christ, they also are bound to one another, obligated by covenant to give compassionate service, such as offering comfort in times of trial and mutual support in the gospel (see Mosiah 18:8–11). Preparing their children for baptism through example and moral instruction is one of the essential responsibilities enjoined upon parents in the Church of Christ (see D&C 20:70; 68:25).

Exhortation to maintain this code of conduct is the usual focus of LDS Sunday worship services. The crux of the congregational assembly is the sacrament (the formal weekly renewal of the covenant of baptism), which all faithful members are expected to receive.¹⁰

Those who violate the covenant of baptism by repudiating the church’s code of conduct are subject to ecclesiastical discipline, which may include disfellowshipment or excommunication. The former is a temporary suspension of membership privileges such as partaking of the sacrament, while the latter is a total revocation of formal church ties. Neither sanction is necessarily permanent, and neither prohibits a person from attending, without active participation in, Sunday worship services.¹¹

The ecclesiastical order of the church exists to help members realize and preserve gospel ideals in their lives. It consists of programs, quorums, and auxiliaries and is regulated and presided over by the Melchizedek Priesthood, which holds and governs all spiritual keys in the church (see D&C 84:19; 107:18). Priesthood officers oversee all public meetings and all religious activities of the congregation, and they control access to formal spiritual blessings of the church such as ordinations, callings, participation in the sacrament, and membership itself. Specific presiding offices in the priesthood include elder, high priest, bishop, apostle, seventy, and president of the church. Holders of the first three offices of the priesthood preside over an elaborate system of local organization: branches, wards, quorums, auxiliaries, and stakes. Councils of the First Presidency, Twelve Apostles, and Seventy preside over the church as a whole (see D&C 107:21–38).

In short, the Church of Christ embodies the following concepts central to the definition and expression of Mormon religious identity: Jesus Christ is an essential role model for all church members (see 3 Nephi 27:27); the law of the gospel is intended to purify members from all unrighteousness and to prepare them to become holy, like God; the covenant of baptism identifies those who have committed to so order their lives; the central purposes of congregational worship are for members to renew the covenant of baptism through the sacrament and to receive instruction on the proper conduct of their lives according to gospel standards; church members need one another, both during Sunday worship services and throughout the week, in order to better realize these spiritual goals; and the celestial kingdom will include those who have realized the blessings of this covenant and ecclesiastical order in their lives.

The Kingdom of Zion

The ecclesiastical order defined by the Church of Christ does not comprehend all elements of Mormon religious identity. The latter also includes a territorial order called Zion. The quest for Zion in early Mormonism reflected the core Mormon beliefs that the “earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof” (Psalm 24:1), that God gave mankind the responsibility to till the earth and take care of His other material creations in accordance with divine commandments (see Genesis 1:26, 28; 2:15; 3:23), that obedience to these commandments would result in the creation of a righteous kingdom on earth acceptable to God, and that Jesus Christ will eventually return to earth to reign personally as King of Zion (see Article of Faith 10) once the full framework has been properly established.¹²

While the biblical model for Mormonism’s ecclesiastical order is Christ and the New Testament church, the model for its territorial and socioeconomic order is Enoch and the City of Zion. Founded in ancient times, Enoch’s “City of Holiness” (Moses 7:19) was characterized by such righteousness that it was literally removed from mundane existence into heaven, where it became God’s “abode forever” (Moses 7:21). Joseph Smith came to see himself as a latter-day Enoch, called of God to establish on earth a city, society, and kingdom characterized by a degree of righteousness sufficient to cause God to restore Zion to earth, in fulfillment of his covenant with Enoch. Once united with heavenly Zion, earthly Zion would be transformed into a celestial kingdom in which those who lived worthy of its eternal glories would live literally in the presence of God (see D&C 76:62; 88:25–9; Article of Faith 10).

Membership in Zion, like that in the Church of Christ, was defined and established by covenant. Zion’s covenant was called consecration. The covenant of consecration was established not by a priesthood ordinance per se, but by a formal transaction in which a person desiring to become a citizen of Zion consecrated, or deeded, all of his material possessions to the bishop, God’s earthly agent who oversaw Zion’s material resources. In return he received from the bishop a stewardship (perpetual-use right) over an inheritance (specified property in Zion).

Formal deeds of consecration and stewardship were executed to ratify this covenant between Zion and her inhabitants (see D&C 42:30–9).¹³

Zion's code of conduct was called the law of consecration. This law required that all residents devote their energy, time, and other personal resources to establishing Zion. Work was of prime importance for all residents of Zion. By this means they "magnified" their stewardships, or increased the productivity of their inheritances. As a result, the community's resource base expanded in order to care for each family's dependents. All residents of Zion were also to donate (consecrate) the surplus of their efforts to the general needs of Zion: caring for the poor, the infirm, and the needy; preparing stewardships for Zion's future inhabitants; and establishing new settlements of Zion throughout the earth.¹⁴

In Mormon scripture some of the most exalted labor of God, angels, and mankind is called work, reflecting the theological importance of this socioeconomic imperative.¹⁵ Thus work was intended to become for the Mormons a kind of public- and community-based devotion during the first six days of the week, while worship was the ideal focus of Sabbath day activity. Just as Mormons sought to glorify God through their Sabbath day worship, they sought to imitate him through their work during the rest of the week.¹⁶

Complementary values of Zion's territorial order included cooperation, thrift, generosity, responsibility, and sacrifice. These values helped the people overcome the materialistic, individualizing, and competitive tendencies of market economies and secular governments. The ultimate aim was to unify Zion as a heavenly society and make her inhabitants equal in material things so that they could equally qualify for the highest spiritual blessings (see D&C 78:5–6). Joseph Smith's revelations declared unequivocally that if the Saints were not thus united, they could not claim to be God's chosen people (see D&C 38:27).

Bishops held the priesthood authority over Zion's material resources. They were given the keys of judgment to help them determine the righteous use of Zion's wealth and the appropriate consecrations of her residents. If Zion's inhabitants ever violated their covenant of consecration through unrighteous behavior or neglect of their stewardships, they would forfeit their inheritances and be exiled from the kingdom. Their stewardships would then be given to another (see D&C 42:37).

In short, as the Church of Christ established a sacred ecclesiastical order for the Latter-day Saints, so the kingdom of Zion defined their socioeconomic and territorial orders. Zion represented an essential concept of salvation: living in the presence of God. The associated blessings and glories—unity, safety, peace, abundance—were conditional upon residents' making and keeping sacred covenants (consecration) and living according to a prescribed code of conduct within the ubiquitous context of hard work. These efforts were designed to prepare the earth to become a celestial kingdom over which God and Christ will personally reign and which will be inhabited by those people who, along with God's other creations, fill the divine measure of their creation (see D&C 88:17–20, 25–9).

The House of Israel

The third principal dimension of Mormon religious identity is defined in kinship terms: the house of Israel. This ethnic identity binds Mormons together as adopted heirs of God's covenant with Abraham, the third major biblical figure honored by the early Mormons (see Abraham 2:9–11).¹⁷

Latter-day Saint identity with the house of Israel is established by means of two distinct rituals: patriarchal blessings and temple sealings. Mormon patriarchs possess nonadministrative keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood and a spiritual gift that allow them to bestow blessings upon Latter-day Saints. These blessings identify church members with one or another of the twelve tribes of Israel and grant them insight or counsel regarding the conduct of their lives. Almost always included in a patriarchal blessing is the promise of exaltation in the celestial kingdom, conditional upon one's living according to the covenants entered into and the commandments that person has received.¹⁸

Formal membership in the house of Israel is officially conferred via the covenant and ritual of sealing. Sealings are performed only in a temple and grant Latter-day Saints adopted kinship status in the house of Israel as full heirs of the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. The realization of these blessings ultimately depends not on a person's genetic inheritance but on faithfulness to the sealing covenant and its associated commandments. As the Mormon concept of Zion uses territorial imagery to define an earthly religious community and heavenly ideal, so the concept of Israel uses a kinship idiom to express ultimate spiritual realities and relate them to an earthly context.

From the perspective of the house of Israel, the basic social unit in mortality and eternity is the family.¹⁹ Temple sealings bind Latter-day Saints together in conjugal and parental relationships that are intended to have eternal duration. The eternal promise of sealings is conditional upon the sealed persons' faithfulness to one another and their obedience to God's commandments. In fact, only those who have entered into this "new and everlasting covenant of marriage" can become qualified for the highest degree of the celestial kingdom (see D&C 131:1–4). According to a revelation given through Joseph Smith, those who through their faithfulness have this covenant "sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise . . . shall . . . be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them" (D&C 132:19–20).

One power reserved exclusively for sealed couples in the next life is eternal increase, or the continuation of procreation (see D&C 132:19, 22, 30–1). Thus the covenant community created by the Mormon identity with the house of Israel consists of patriarchal lineages that extend from mankind's first parents, Adam and Eve, to the earth's last generation and then throughout eternity, as sealed couples beget spirit children who will in turn inhabit their own new mortal "worlds without number" (Moses 1:33) in the expanse of never-ending space. Hence gender status and conjugal relations are recognized by Latter-day Saints as eternal, essential characteristics of humankind and as natural and essential for the propagation of the human race and the complete fulfillment of human potential in heaven as on earth.

The code of conduct enjoined upon those who aspire to the blessings and powers encompassed by the house of Israel is comprehended in the law of chastity. Specifically, the law of chastity requires that sexual relations be reserved only for husbands and wives who have been legally bound together in marriage. Implicitly, this law is also a basis for purity and virtue of thought and action in all aspects of social relationships defined by "diffuse, enduring solidarity,"²⁰ including love, service, caring, righteous parenting, patience, fidelity, harmony, and all other elements of a happy home life.²¹

By Mormon reckoning, sexual intercourse is not only the most distinctive expression of lawful conjugal relations in mortality but also one of a few specific acts by which humans most closely approximate the creative role and

power of God. Thus sanctified, procreation is at the center of one of Mormonism's key dimensions of religious identity and at the height of its concept of spiritual progression.²²

Although Mormons do not ritually sever the genetic links of those who violate their covenants of sealing, sealings can be canceled (made void as regards eternal blessings) for those who repudiate these sacred relationships through unrighteous behavior. Just as excommunicants can be rebaptized into the church on condition of sincere repentance, those whose sealings have been canceled can receive a restoration of temple blessings upon appropriate rehabilitation. However, the process and authority by which persons are rebaptized into the church are neither identical to nor simultaneous with the process and authority of having one's temple blessings restored.²³ Thus the need for at least a structural distinction between the Church of Christ and the house of Israel in Mormon thought.

In summary, eternal family relations extend throughout Mormondom the blessings of Abraham and an identity with the chosen house of Israel, regardless of one's actual genetic inheritance. Membership in the house of Israel and access to its promised blessings are defined by covenant, bestowed by priesthood ordinance, and realized by faithful adherence to a strict moral code. The rituals and relations of Mormonism's kinship order are just as crucial to the expression of a complete spiritual identity as are those of the ecclesiastical and territorial orders of the Latter-day Saints.

Historical Implications of Mormon Identity

The final section of this chapter suggests some of the ways in which Mormon identity, thus conceived, can inform the study of Mormon history.

The Church of Christ

In the latter half of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, ecclesiastical practices and programs expanded from those introduced during Mormonism's pre-Utah period or evolved in response to later social, cultural, and environmental conditions. This was especially true of local congregations, where auxiliaries for women, youth, and children were organized and expanded into formal churchwide programs. In addition, priesthood quorums became age-graded, with male youth receiving the Aaronic, or preparatory, Priesthood and the Melchizedek Priesthood being reserved for worthy adult males. Instructional and social programs of the church became increasingly influenced by standardized, professional principles and practices.

The church also began constructing meetinghouses that were the spiritual and social center of the local congregation, or ward. As the Mormon practice of patterned settlement was discontinued in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, wards increasingly assumed the social functions and symbolic identity of the geographic communities of Zion. In fact, standard-plan and multifunctional meetinghouses have become the most widespread and dominant physical symbol of a permanent Mormon presence in secular urban and rural environments throughout North America and around the world. The church's meetinghouse construction and maintenance programs have become some of the most extensive in the world and figure prominently in the church's massive annual operational budget.

Missionaries have been sent to virtually every Christian nation and to many other parts of the world to spread the gospel and seek converts. The organization of wards and stakes has spread throughout North America and increasingly on other continents because converts no longer have been encouraged to gather to Zion, but to

strengthen the church in their native lands. Church membership, currently nearly ten million, is greater outside than inside the United States. In response, the General Authorities of the church have established extensive transportation, communication, and organizational networks with local congregations in order to further integrate church membership and increase the church's overall operational effectiveness.

The Kingdom of Zion

Although Zion was not established as Joseph Smith had initially envisioned it, and although the covenant of consecration was formally discontinued as a prescribed social practice in Nauvoo,²⁴ it is instructive to view Mormon history in light of Zion's core ideals and values. Through continued perseverance and hard work, Mormons did eventually establish one of the most extensive and intensive culture regions in North America, whose several hundred settlements largely resembled, though did not precisely imitate, Joseph Smith's plan for Zion.²⁵

Within Zion's territorial and socioeconomic order, the Mormons founded effective and extensive social institutions designed to recruit new inhabitants to Zion (proselytizing missions), to develop the earth's natural resources for the benefit of Zion and its citizens (economic missions, cooperative commercial and industrial corporations, welfare projects, and commercial business ventures), to improve the worldly skills and intellect of Latter-day Saints (primary and secondary schools and institutions of higher education, including Brigham Young University), to distribute the material resources of Zion equitably throughout the society (bishops' storehouses, humanitarian services, employment services, and tithing and fast offerings), and to address the psychological, emotional, and social challenges facing Latter-day Saints (LDS Social Services).²⁶ Mormonism's social programs that were established in the nineteenth century and continue in the present cannot be properly and fully understood outside the religious context of Zion and its covenant and ideal of consecration.

The House of Israel

The institutionalization of plural marriage (or more technically, polygyny) among Mormons in the nineteenth century heightened their distinctive ethnic identity. Although only a minority of rank-and-file Mormons ever entered into the practice, polygyny was certainly portrayed by Mormon leaders as a conjugal ideal and lived as a spiritual imperative.

At the same time, temples were being erected in which couples, either monogamous or polygynous, could be "sealed for time and all eternity." The Endowment House (1855–77) on Temple Square in Salt Lake City performed this function until temples could be completed in strategically located Mormon population centers. At present some fifty temples are in operation throughout the world for the purpose of extending the blessings of Abraham to the entire family of Adam, both living and dead, through the performance of living and proxy temple ordinances.

Although the unique significance and full benefit of temple sealings are wholly realized only in the next life, the church has increasingly tried to sanctify the daily life of nuclear and extended families. With strong encouragement from general church officials, many LDS families hold daily and weekly devotional activities such as family home evening, family prayer, and family scripture study. Extended families organize themselves into family associations for purposes of family history research, proxy performance of temple rituals for deceased ancestors, family reunions, and mutual support in times of need.²⁷

Because of their interest in creating eternal family relationships among all God's children—past, present, and future—Mormons have created the most extensive family history library and research network in the world. Many millions of names are currently recorded in vast electronic and microfilm databases. The Family History Library in Salt Lake City contains printed genealogical research materials that are made available to hundreds of thousands of persons interested in tracing their ancestries. In addition, branch family history libraries in numerous locations throughout North America and elsewhere serve countless others by facilitating access to these genealogical resources.²⁸

Conclusion

During its first two decades, Mormonism began to develop a simple yet multifaceted and profound religious identity based on fundamental concepts of salvation: that heaven consisted of those who had been purified through Christ's atonement and who enjoyed intimate and enduring familial relationships with others who had been perfected, and that together they lived eternally on a sanctified earth and in the literal presence of God. From this perspective, heaven fulfilled the essential purpose of God's primordial creation: to order the existence of mankind in terms of duties and opportunities in relation to God, other human beings, and the earth so that God might bless the faithful with eternal life and exaltation.

For Mormons the urgency and immediacy of realizing this complex religious order are reflected in the belief that this earth is to be the heaven that God will inhabit with his redeemed Saints and that actual lineal and collateral relatives will constitute its population: "When the Savior shall appear we shall see him as he is. We shall see that he is a man like ourselves. And that same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy" (D&C 130:1-2; see D&C 88:14-47).

The complementary institutions of the Church of Christ, the kingdom of Zion, and the house of Israel enable Latter-day Saints to conform their individual and corporate lives to the heavenly order. Associated with particular membership rituals, codes of conduct, modes of being, and ideal relationships, these institutional orders were established, maintained, and celebrated through the sacred covenants of baptism, consecration, and sealing, respectively. The complementary dimensions of this religious identity are preserved at the corporate level by priesthood authority. The various orders and keys of the priesthood define the criteria and regulate the procedures by which individuals gain access to these covenants and their blessings. Duly ordained priesthood officials also oversee the operation of the various religious institutions composed of those who have kept the covenants.

At the individual level, personal righteousness helps preserve the order and unity of this religious identity. Mormon commandments, ranging from those given initially to Adam and Eve to those given through the current prophet, emphasize in general terms how Latter-day Saints are to act toward God, other human beings (including oneself), and material resources (including personal possessions). Obedience to these commandments in the context of sacred covenants defines personal righteousness and qualifies individuals, whether in mortality or eternity, for the blessings associated with these covenants.

Taken together, the three dimensions of Mormon religious identity—the Church of Christ, the kingdom of Zion, and the house of Israel—are intended to sanctify essential aspects of Mormon society and give ultimate significance to the daily life of the Latter-day Saints, which is the earthly reflection and temporal approximation of eternal realities that carry with them the promise of salvation. Consequently, time and eternity, man and God, and earth and heaven have come to be related in a complex system of spiritual realities. Although Mormons at best

only approximate these spiritual ideals in their daily lives, and although temporal circumstances have altered the specific details of these covenanted communities throughout Mormon history, Mormonism's three-fold foundations are as relevant to Latter-day Saints today as they were in any historical period of the Mormon past.

Notes

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1. See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Free Press, 1965), 332–3.
2. See Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 143–4.
3. *History of the Church*, 1:207; see my article “Joseph Smith’s Concept of the City of Zion,” in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, the Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1993), 203–11.
4. See my dissertation, “The Mormon Ideology of Place: Cosmic Symbolism of the City of Zion, 1830–46” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1985), 66–79.
5. See *History of the Church*, 1:196–9.
6. See *History of the Church*, 1:357–62. Also see my “Mormon Ideology,” 94–8; and my “Joseph Smith’s Concept,” 209–10.
7. See *History of the Church*, 2:410–36; Milton V. Backman Jr., *The Heavens Resound: A History of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio, 1830–38* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 284–309.
8. See Rex Eugene Cooper, *Promises Made to the Fathers: Mormon Covenant Organization* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 137–48.
9. See *ibid.*, 153–63.
0. See Gary Witherspoon, “A Structural Analysis of the Symbolic Elements in the Mormon Sacrament” (master’s thesis, University of Chicago, n.d.).
1. See *General Handbook of Instructions* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), sec. 10, p. 5.
2. See Parley P. Pratt, *Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes Publishing, 1847), 29–63, 89–115. Also see my “Mormon Ideology,” 258–76.
3. See Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation among the Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 15–21.
4. See *ibid.* and my “Mormon Ideology,” 94–8.
5. See, for example, Moses 1:39; 3 Nephi 21:5, 7, 9, 26–8; D&C 4:1–5; 20:11–4; 77:12; 101:20, 64–5, 95, 100–1; 109:5, 23, 59, 78; 124:49–50, 53, 78–9.
6. On the spiritual significance of work in Mormon society, see Mark P. Leone, *Roots of Modern Mormonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 43–110; Arrington et al., *Building the City of God*, 337–58.
7. See Cooper, *Promises Made to the Fathers*, 100–31; Gordon Irving, “The Law of Adoption: One Phase of the Development of the Mormon Concept of Salvation, 1830–1980,” *BYU Studies* 14 (spring 1974): 291–314.

8. See *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, s.v. “patriarchal blessings”; Cooper, *Promises Made to the Fathers*, 74–5.
9. See *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, s.v. “family.”
0. This concept of kinship is developed by Meyer Fortes in his *Kinship and the Social Order: The Legacy of Lewis Henry Morgan* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).
1. See *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, s.v. “law of chastity.”
2. See *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, s.v. “sexuality”; Lester E. Bush Jr., *Health and Medicine among the Latter-day Saints: Science, Sense, and Scripture* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 139–78.
3. See *General Handbook of Instructions*, sec. 10, pp. 12–3.
4. See *History of the Church*, 3:301; 4:93.
5. See Raymond D. Gastil, *Cultural Regions in the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 237–42; Milton R. Hunter, *Brigham Young, the Colonizer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1940); Richard V. Francaviglia, *The Mormon Landscape: Existence, Creation, and Perception of a Unique Image in the American West* (New York: AMS Press, 1978); Richard H. Jackson, *The Mormon Role in the Settlement of the West* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978).
6. See James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976); Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900*; Arrington et al., *Building the City of God*; Glen L. Rudd, *Pure Religion: The Story of Church Welfare since 1930* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995).
7. See *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, s.v. “family life”; “family history, genealogy”; “family home evening”; “family organizations”; and “family prayer.” Also see John L. Sorenson, “Ritual as Theology,” *Sunstone* (May–June 1981): 11–4.
8. See James B. Allen, Jessie L. Embry, and Kahlile B. Mehr, *Hearts Turned to the Fathers: A History of the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1894–1994* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1995).