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Christopher M. Moreman

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Daniel Belnap

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Mormon afterlife beliefs and funerary practices

Daniel Belnap

Like other Christian denominations, Latter-Day Saints have a rich tradition regarding the afterlife. Yet the Latter-Day Saint conception is tied directly to the unique doctrinal understanding found within the faith, particularly the role of an embodied eternal existence as a requisite of salvation. This role manifests itself physically in the Latter-Day Saint temples, in which the living church members recognize their ongoing relationships between the dead, the divine, and themselves. Thus, to understand the significance of the afterlife in Latter-Day Saint practice requires one to understand the Latter-Day Saint cosmology.

Cosmology and role of afterlife

Latter-Day Saint salvation hinges on an ontological understanding in which the nature of God is the same nature as that of humankind. In other words, Latter-Day Saints understand God to be the same type of being as man is, but in a higher, greater state (www.lds.org/topics/God-the-Father).¹ This ontology has ramifications concerning the purpose of existence, the most important for this chapter being that all states of existence prior to judgment are meant to prepare and develop man to not only return to the presence of God, but to, in fact, become like God, even attain the same state in which God now exists (www.lds.org/topics/becoming-like-god). Thus the divine intention of God is likened to that of a father seeking to provide his children with all the advantages that he himself has. The church's doctrines and practices are aimed at bringing about that fulfillment.

With this foundational doctrine, Latter-Day Saints understand that there are stages of existence, beginning in pre-mortality, including mortality, continuing into post-mortality, and culminating in a physically resurrected eternal state. Fundamental in this is the recognition that individuals retain self-identity and agency to make decisions concerning their salvation as they progress from state to state in a process referred to as "the plan of salvation" (lds.org/topics/plan-of-salvation). The traditional

Christian states of heaven and hell are present in this cosmology, but their nature and purpose differ. In the most general sense, for the Latter-Day Saint, heaven is “the place where God lives” and the ultimate “home of the faithful.”

Yet this basic answer does not fully encompass Latter-Day Saint understanding, which includes multiple localities of eternal “glory” based on the individual’s moral and ethical state. This belief is understood to have been present in New Testament Christianity with Christ himself stating that “in my Father’s house are many mansions” (John 14:2) as well as Paul’s experience of being “caught up to the third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2). This concept was expanded by Joseph Smith in his vision experienced on February 16, 1832, subsequently recorded as section 76 of *The Doctrine and Covenants*, a book of LDS scripture that contains revelations received by Joseph Smith and part of the LDS canon.

Likewise, hell is understood to be a term for both a temporary state following death but prior to resurrection to which those who have not had the opportunity to hear the fullness of the gospel (i.e., the revealed truth held by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) or who were disobedient to that fullness while in mortality, as well as the term designating the final, eternal state for Satan and his followers. In the case of the latter, Satan and those who follow him all the way to judgment are to experience the “second death,” a term denoting one who chooses not to be redeemed via Christ and his atonement and therefore cannot enter into the presence of God.

More pertinent to this volume is the Latter-Day Saint conception of the afterlife, which precedes judgment, commonly referred to as the “spirit world.” This state is further divided into two categories. The first of these is referred to as paradise, the place where the righteous go to await the resurrection and is noted by being a place of peace and happiness. The second is termed “spirit prison,” derived from 1 Peter 3:19–20, which describes Christ preaching to the spirits in prison following his death but prior to his resurrection (an event more commonly known in Christianity as the “Harrowing of Hell”). As noted above, this particular state may also be designated as hell, but because it includes individuals who have not accepted the gospel and are awaiting the opportunity to be taught, it may be best understood as a state similar to sheol or hades, the Hebrew and Greek localities wherein the dead resided. If those who reside in spirit prison accept the gospel taught to them, then they are ushered into paradise to await judgment (www.lds.org/topics/hell; see also www.lds.org/topics/paradise).

As noted above, LDS doctrine recognizes that those in the spirit world still retain moral agency to make decisions, particularly about their own salvific state. Those who are interested may be taught by others who have already accepted the gospel of Christ in mortality and who died firm in the faith, or by those who were converted while in spirit form following death. In either case, missionary outreach is a primary responsibility for the Latter-Day Saints after they have died. In fact, the faith makes the bold claim that all who have ever existed on this earth will hear the gospel message in its entirety and be able to choose or reject it with a full understanding of this choice and its outcomes.

Coinciding with this doctrine are the rituals, or ordinances, that define the Latter-Day Saint experience. Like Catholicism, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints affirms that ordinances are not just symbols of faith, but necessary for salvation. The ordinances themselves include: baptism, ordination to the priesthood for worthy males, the endowment (more on this below), and sealings, most often experienced in the form of marriage. The last type of ordinance “seals,” or binds, the individual to a family unit. In the case of marriage, the husband and wife are sealed together; in the case of children, they are sealed to parents. When these sealings are performed by one holding the proper authority, the relationships are recognized as eternal, thus providing a family structure that is understood to be necessary for exaltation, or the divine state that one may obtain.

While the church emphasizes the importance of marriage, with its attendant sealing, because of its necessity in the attaining of the highest exalted state following judgment, it also recognizes that this arrangement is not achieved by all who experience mortality. In these cases, again because of the importance placed on the agency of the individual, it is believed that those who desire to enter into a marriage relationship will be able to do so prior to judgment. The specifics as to how this happens is unclear, though it appears that such relationships may be initiated in the spirit world (Handbook 2, 1.3.2: www.lds.org/handbook/handbook-2-administering-the-church/families-and-the-church-in-gods-plan).

The same holds true for all who have not had the opportunity to participate in the salvific ordinances while alive. To resolve this problem, members of the church perform these ordinances on behalf of deceased individuals, though it is understood that these are not binding on a deceased individual unless he or she decides to recognize their validity as noted above. These are performed in buildings specifically designated to do so, termed “temples,” along with marriages for the living as well as the sealing of children to parents for families that convert to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The actual practice will be discussed below.

Historical development

Though the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints was officially organized on April 6, 1830, many of the founding principles had been established years earlier. In the early spring of 1820, Joseph Smith, the founder of the church, while praying in a grove of trees near his home in Palmyra, New York, experienced a theophany in which God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, as two separate entities, appeared in answer to Joseph’s prayers. On this event, the unique ontology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints rests, as Joseph was led to understand that the two beings were not different in type from himself, but in state, being glorified, resurrected beings as opposed to his mortal self. Though only fifteen at the time, Joseph was led to understand that he had been chosen to be a prophet similar to individuals called in the Bible. This narrative, commonly known among the membership of the church as the First

Vision, is canonized in *The Pearl of Great Price*, one of the volumes of scripture that make up the standard works, or officially recognized books of scripture, in a section known as the Joseph Smith-History.

During the next ten years until the official organization of the church, Joseph went through an intense training period, including the reception and translation of *The Book of Mormon* and other heavenly visitations. One series of visitations is of particular importance to the subject of this volume. During the night of September 21, 1823, Joseph was visited three times by Moroni, a physically resurrected individual who was the last prophet and recorder of *The Book of Mormon*. Though the primary purpose of the visits was to prepare Joseph to receive the original plates from which *The Book of Mormon* was translated, according to Joseph, Moroni placed the reception of the plates within a larger set of biblical prophecies concerning the last days. Among the prophecies was Moroni's version of Malachi 4:5–6: "Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming" (Joseph Smith-History, 28–47). The text spoken by Moroni differs from the original KJV text emphasizing the bestowal of the priesthood, God's authority to man on earth, as well as the significance of covenants, or promises, in the future church.

It is not clear as to how the church interpreted this prophecy at its organization. Though the priesthood was restored to Joseph through visitations by John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John, the last official holders of the priesthood prior to Joseph Smith, it was not until April 1836 that the promised visitation of Elijah occurred. Prior to 1836, it appears that the prophecy was understood to refer to missionary work in general. For instance, in August 1833, a revelation to the church exhorted the saints to: "renounce war and proclaim peace, and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children; and again, the hearts of the Jews unto the prophets, and the prophets unto the Jews; lest I come and smite the whole earth with a curse, and all flesh is consumed before me" (*The Doctrine and Covenants* 98:16).

The establishment of the temple and its rituals was intimated early on in the church, but it wasn't until 1836 that the church was able to build the first temple in Kirtland, Ohio. These buildings were, and still are, differentiated from regular meeting houses. Highlighting this new form of worship, the dedication of the Kirtland Temple was characterized by a pentecostal experience similar to the one recorded in Acts 2 (Harper, 2005). The dedicatory events culminated in the manifestation of Jesus Christ to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the temple itself on April 3, 1836. After officially accepting the dedication of the temple, Jesus Christ left and three other beings appeared, giving priesthood responsibilities, known as keys, to Joseph Smith. Among the three was Elijah, who said: "Behold the time has fully come, which was spoken of by the mouth of Malachi-testifying that he [Elijah] should be sent, before the great and dreadful day of the Lord come – to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and

the children to the fathers, lest the whole earth be smitten with a curse – therefore the keys of this dispensation [period of time in which the proper ecclesiastical organization is formed on the earth] are committed into your hands” (*The Doctrine and Covenants* 110:14–16).

Coinciding with the building of the temple, records show that Joseph and other early members had begun to contemplate the nature of the dead. In January of 1836, while in the yet-to-be-dedicated temple, Joseph was shown a vision of heaven, therein which were a number of individuals, including his deceased older brother, Alvin. According to the text describing the vision, Joseph was surprised to see his brother: “[I] marveled how it was that he had obtained an inheritance in that kingdom, seeing that he had departed this life before the Lord had set his hand to gather Israel the second time, and had not been baptized for the remission of sins” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 137:6). As evidenced by this statement, it appears that prior to this time, the early saints believed that those who were not baptized while living did not experience salvation, i.e., worthiness to dwell in the presence of God.

In response to his statement, Joseph recorded the Lord as saying: “All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs in the celestial kingdom of God. Also all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of it, who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom. For I the Lord will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 137:7–9). This is the first official indication that the church would recognize the continuity of agency as well as that of self beyond death. Though it does not explicitly state that one could still act in regards to one’s salvation after death, it does imply that one’s desires were recognized and taken into account. This revelation, coupled with Elijah’s declaration, led Joseph to consider the relationship of the living with the dead in ways he had not done prior.

Though no official statements were made immediately following Joseph’s vision, in 1838 in a Mormon periodical, *Elder’s Journal*, Joseph, responding to a question concerning those who had died without the gospel following the death of the New Testament apostles, stated: “All those who have not had an opportunity of hearing the gospel, and being administered to by an inspired man in the flesh, must have it hereafter before they can be finally judged” (*Elder’s Journal*, 1838: 43). His answer suggests that while in the interim period since the vision of his older brother, Joseph had been thinking about and developing further his understanding of the relationship between the living and the dead. Though the answer does not mention any specific practices, it does suggest that by 1838 Joseph had recognized the necessity of vicarious work on behalf of the dead.

It would be another two years before Joseph declared that such work could be done. At the funeral of a Seymour Brunson in August of 1840, Joseph mentioned the possibility of baptisms performed by the living on behalf of the dead. Basing part of his sermon off of 1 Corinthians 15:29, which appears to reference the performance of such baptisms by early Christians, Joseph declared that further revelation was coming

on the subject, but that it was now possible for living family members to be baptized on behalf of their own deceased (Baugh, 2015). Still, it wasn't until September 1842 that the doctrine was made official as currently recorded in the 128th section of *The Doctrine and Covenants*. The revelation begins with instruction concerning the proper keeping of records and the role of record-keeping to establish the validity of one's participation in the ordinances necessary for salvation. The importance of these records is particularly stressed in relation to the dead "for out of the books shall your dead be judged, according to their own works, whether they themselves have attended to the ordinances in their own *propria persona*, or by the means of their own agents" (v. 8).

The "ordinances" referred to was specifically baptism, which the church states must be performed for salvation, following Christ's instructions in John 3, that all men must be baptized to enter into the kingdom of God. Noting that Paul alluded to baptisms for the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29, Joseph then tied the Malachi prophecy to the new work for the dead: "I might have rendered a plainer translation to this, but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purpose as it stands. It is sufficient to know, in this case, that the earth will be smitten with a curse unless there is a welding link of some kind or other between the fathers and the children, upon some subject or other – and behold what is that subject? It is the baptism for the dead" (*The Doctrine and Covenants* 128:18). This marked the first time that the prophecy was formally recognized as referring to the ongoing relationships between the living and the dead.

Not only did the revelation provide the saints the opportunity to save their dead, but it also highlighted the importance of the work in their own salvation. In fact, Joseph made clear that "we [the living] without them [the dead] cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect," suggesting that this new work was going to be an essential part of the Latter-Day Saint worship. Intriguingly, this dyadic relationship is made triadic by Joseph in the next sentence: "Neither can they nor we be made perfect without those who have died in the gospel also" (*The Doctrine and Covenants* 128:18). How exactly this group interacts with the two other groups is not clear from the text. It appears that it refers to righteous individuals who had died in earlier dispensations, but there is no elaboration on the specifics as to how they are significant. Yet reference to this group continued the ongoing and developing understanding that individuals following mortality retained not only their sense of self, but also the ability to act as independent agents.

This pivotal revelation ends with Joseph's invitation to the membership of the church: "Let us, therefore, as a church and a people, and as Latter-Day Saints, offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness; and let us present in his holy temple, when it is finished, a book containing the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptance" (*The Doctrine and Covenants* 128:18, v. 24). The saints took up the challenge, and baptisms for the dead commenced in Nauvoo even before the completion of the temple.

Seventy-five years later, during the ministry of the sixth prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, further revelation was received concerning the state of the dead and the continuity of agency. According to church history, while

contemplating 1 Peter 3:18–20 and 4:6, and the state of those to whom Christ preached during his interment, the prophet Joseph F. Smith was shown Christ instructing the righteous dead, the same individuals as Joseph Smith's third group, concerning their ministry to the remainder of the dead:

- 30 But behold, from among the righteous, he organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed in power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness, even to all the spirits of men and thus was the gospel preached to the dead.
- 31 And the chosen messengers went forth to declare the acceptable day of the Lord and proclaim liberty to the captives who were bound, even unto all who would repent of their sins and receive the gospel.
- 32 Thus was the gospel preached to those who had died in their sins, without a knowledge of the truth, or in transgression, having rejected the prophets.
- 33 These were taught faith in God, repentance from sin, vicarious baptism for the remission of sin, the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying of hands,
- 34 and all other principles of the gospel that were necessary for them to know in order to qualify themselves that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.
- 35 And so it was made known among the dead, both small and great, the unrighteous as well as the faithful, that redemption had been wrought through the sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross.

(The Doctrine and Covenants 138:30–35)

With this revelation, the continuity of agency was established as official doctrine and has remained as such since. Joseph F. Smith's revelation also harmonized the work for the dead with the missionary work performed by members while living.

- 57 I beheld that the faithful elders of this dispensation, when they depart from mortal life, continue their labors in the preaching of the gospel of repentance and redemption, through the sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son of God, among those who are in darkness and under the bondage of sin in the great world of the spirits of the dead.
- 58 The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God [the temple],
- 59 and after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions, and are washed clean, shall receive a reward according to their works, for they are heirs of salvation.

(The Doctrine and Covenants 138:57–59)

Thus, the righteous dead now included not only those who were deceased from earlier dispensations, but also those who died within this dispensation. Moreover, it highlighted the continuity between the growing emphasis of missionary work among the living and the increased role of work of the dead in church practice.

Finally, the revelation also confirmed the current interpretation of the Malachi prophecy. In a section mentioning notable members of the righteous dead chosen to perform the missionary work in the spirit world, both Malachi and Elijah were included: “And Malachi, the prophet who testified of the coming of Elijah – of whom also Moroni spake to the Prophet Joseph Smith, declaring that he should come before the ushering in of the great and dreadful day of the Lord – were also there. The Prophet Elijah was to plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to their fathers, foreshadowing the great work to be done in the temples of the Lord . . . for the redemption of the dead, and the sealing of the children to their parents, lest the whole earth be smitten with a curse and utterly wasted at his coming” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 138, vs. 46–48).

Since the official recognition of both revelations by the church body, Latter-Day Saints have engaged in work for the dead by emphasizing the importance of establishing one’s own family history/genealogy and performing the salvific ordinances on their behalf in temples specifically built for this purpose. As of this writing, there are 143 temples in operation with another fifteen under construction and twelve more announced although construction has not begun. Though entrance is restricted to those who are practicing members of the church, prior to the dedication all are invited in to see the temple.

Practice

As noted above, the beliefs of the church are reflected in the performance of ordinances, rituals that highlight the nature of the relationship between God and man and that prepare one to attain one’s full potential as a divine being, one of the more striking being the endowment. This ordinance includes covenants made by the participants concerning moral and ethical behavior that harmonizes with those taught by Christ as found in the scriptures as well as investiture in clothing symbolizing this spiritual transformation. The entire ceremony is considered sacred and is not shared outside of the temple building in order to retain the sacred nature, but the rites themselves reflect and enhance the intended spiritual transformation made by those agreeing to live according to the covenants. While these ordinances are performed by the living for themselves, they are also performed vicariously for the dead.

The temple work for the dead itself consists of three elements echoing the same order as that performed for the living: the rites associated with baptism, the individual’s endowment, and the sealing (if possible) of the individual to members of their immediate family (i.e., spouse and children). Regarding the first, each temple is equipped with a baptismal font situated underground to emphasize that the baptisms performed there are for the dead. The font itself rests on the back of twelve carved oxen, similar to the brazen sea in Solomon’s temple (see 1 Kings 7:23–26), which suggests that baptism for the dead, like baptism for the living, adopts one into the house of Israel.

Having been baptized, if the deceased individual is male, then the representative is ordained to the priesthood on his behalf. The deceased individual now has their endowment performed on their behalf. Like an endowment for a living individual, the

deceased is given the opportunity via vicarious participants to accept and enter into a covenant relationship with God emphasizing the high moral and ethical standards the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints espouses. This is understood to coincide with the missionary work performed in the spiritual world.

The final element is that of sealing. In this rite, individuals representing the deceased are “sealed” to each other, meaning that the relationships between the represented persons, either as married or as sons or daughters to a married couple, are recognized by the priesthood and thus made eternally binding and to be recognized by God, thus highlighting again the role of the family in LDS salvation, as noted above. Again, it should be stressed, that while these ordinances are performed for the deceased, the ordinances are not considered efficacious unless the individual for whom they are performed accepts them.

Though not a part of the work for the dead, the church also has formal funerary practices. Unlike the deceased who are not members of the church, deceased members have already performed these necessary salvific ordinances, thus the temple performances described above are not necessary. A typical Latter-Day Saint funeral consists of the services, usually held at the local church building, and the dedication of the gravesite itself. Because the funeral is held at the church building, the event is considered to be a church meeting. It is presided over by the highest-ranking church authority present and is conducted by the local church leader (the bishop). Talks are delivered by members of the immediate family, church leaders, or others specifically requested by the family. Participants are encouraged to keep the proceedings within a manageable time frame (an hour to an hour and a half), to avoid lengthy sermons, and to emphasize the doctrines of Christ’s atonement and the resurrection. In fact, the church’s official instruction is that discussion of these principles are the “essential purpose” of these services. Family is encouraged to avoid excessiveness in all aspects: food, clothing, and music, but instead to recognize the sacred nature of the meeting.

As for the burial itself, while cremation is not encouraged, it is not mandatory to be buried. What is expected is that if the deceased is a member in full standing who had attended the temple he or she is to be buried in their temple clothing. If they cannot be buried in the clothing for whatever reason, the clothing should be folded neatly and placed near the body in the coffin. In the case of cremation, they are still to be dressed in the temple clothing. The reason for this is not provided, but it is possibly to signify that the blessings of the temple continued beyond mortality, as well as signifying the true divine nature of all mankind.

An important rite associated with the burial is the dedicating of the grave. It is performed by one holding the priesthood who consecrates the plot as a “resting place for the body of the deceased, prays that the place will be hallowed and protected until the Resurrection,” and “asks the Lord to comfort the family” (Handbook 2.20.9: www.lds.org/handbook/handbook-2-administering-the-church/priesthood-ordinances-and-blessings). While this rite is not necessary for salvation, it is one of many other ordinances (such as the naming of a child, the blessing of the sick, and the dedication of church buildings and homes) whose primary function is to comfort the living by

revealing God's will or creating an environment that may become, if an individual is worthy, conducive to the feeling of God's love.

Both ritual practices, those associated with the actual burial and those performed in the temple for the deceased, emphasize the ontological understanding of the LDS faith. Indeed, while these ritual processes are performed on behalf of the dead, they provide meaning and a sense of purpose for those performing them as well. Thus the rites and doctrines serve to link both living and dead to an eternal family headed by God the Father, and in so doing, provide the means for all humankind to achieve the true divine potential that defines us all.

Note

- 1 Though there is a rich bibliography both within and without Latter-Day Saint scholarship concerning LDS cosmology and the afterlife, there is no catechism or encyclopedia of belief that represents the official doctrine. With that said there are three sources that are understood to represent the official status of any given doctrine: 1) the canon of scripture, which includes the Doctrine and Covenants, a set of texts providing revelation given to the early prophets of the church; 2) the General Handbook of Instructions, which is an online resource to church laymembers and church leadership concerning administrative responsibilities (www.lds.org/handbook/handbook-2-administering-the-church); and 3) www.mormonnewsroom.org and www.lds.org/topics. In the case of the latter, these two online resources are reviewed and approved by the current church leadership and represent the general Latter-Day Saint belief in continuing divine revelation.

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