

“Shake Off the Dust of Thy Feet”: The Rise and Fall of Mormon Ritual Cursing

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Introduction

In July 1830, just three months after the formal organization of the Mormon Church, Joseph Smith dictated a revelation that promised, “in whatsoever place ye shall enter in & they receive you not in my name ye shall leave a cursing instead of a blessing by casting off the dust of your feet against them as a testimony & cleansing your feet by the wayside.”² Subsequently, the historical record is replete with examples of ritual cursing being performed up through the 1890s. While many of Smith’s revelations and doctrinal innovations continue to be practiced by the LDS Church today, cursing has fallen into disuse. Despite this ritual’s unique status as an act of formally calling down God’s wrath upon others, it has received surprisingly little attention in scholarly studies.³

The first objective of this paper is to examine ritual cursing within Mormonism: how ritual cursing began, who performed curses, who was cursed, and how the ritual was performed. Factors that contributed to an environment conducive to ritual cursing will also be explored. Cursing arose during a period of bold innovation within Mormonism, as founding prophet Joseph Smith unveiled a seemingly endless stream of new doctrines and practices. Although ritual cursing may be appropriately described as new to the religious world in which Mormonism was born, it had ancient roots. Ritual cursing was an expression of Christian primitivism among Mormons, an attempt to recapture an ancient biblical rite that had been lost over time. The most common practitioners of

ritual cursing were Mormon missionaries who faced rejection in their efforts to proselytize. Mormonism began as a small sect with many religious and political enemies, and Mormons used ritual cursing as a means of holy retaliation against their enemies. The manner in which the ritual was performed varied, typically including the dusting or washing of feet, but at times involving the shaking of one's garment. Cursing was considered part of a missionary's duty to prepare the world for the imminent millennium. The ritual designated unbelievers as such, marking them as separate from believers for the day of judgment. The ritual was fluid and developed over time, cross-pollinating with other rituals from the School of the Prophets, the Kirtland Endowment, and the prayer circle. The combination of doctrinal innovation, Christian primitivism, and millenarianism, set against a backdrop of proselytizing efforts, disbelieving masses, and persecuting mobs, provided fertile ground for ritual cursing to flourish in the early days of the Church.

The second objective of this paper is to examine the decline and discontinuation of the cursing ritual. This discontinuation resulted from a reduction in prominence of several aforementioned influences present during the formative years of the Church. Over time, Mormonism transitioned from a small, young, persecuted minority to a stable, sizeable, economic power in the western U.S.⁴ With the transition to stability, pressures and priorities within Mormonism changed. As Mormons removed themselves geographically from their tormentors, violence and persecution lessened. Generations passed without Jesus's return, and Mormonism's millenarian impulse began to fade. Missionaries no longer sealed unbelievers up to the day of judgment, but returned to homes again and again and gave multiple chances to hear the gospel message. Cursing was advised against and eventually dropped from Church discourse and publications. Doctrinal innovation gave way to the routinization necessary for Mormonism to endure as an institution, and practices viewed as nonessential to the Church's mission were eliminated. Without persecutors tormenting them, the millennium around the corner, and an environment favoring innovative ritual practices, the impetus to curse

was lost for most Mormons. With the Church stable and persecution minimized, the practice was discontinued.

Biblical Precedents and Joseph Smith's Revelations

The Bible was a fertile source of inspiration for Joseph Smith's revelations. Doctrinal innovations such as baptism for the dead, the post-mortals degrees of glory, and polygamy resulted from Smith's poring over the pages of the Old and New Testaments. Similarly, Smith's pronouncements on curses had biblical precedents. Jesus himself told his disciples: "And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear you, when ye depart thence, shake off the dust under your feet for a testimony against them. Verily I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city" (Mark 6:11; see also Matt. 10:14, Luke 9:5). Similar instruction is repeated in his commission to seventy others (Luke 10:10–12). This act of retribution was performed by Jesus' followers elsewhere in the New Testament, as when Paul and Barnabas "shook off the dust of their feet against [the Jews] . . . [and] were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost" (Acts 13:51–52).

Bible scholars have offered various interpretations of the New Testament dust-shaking gesture. Some have drawn parallels to rabbinic literature in which Jews traveling in Gentile lands are expected to remove the dust of an impure foreign nation from their bodies before returning to the holy land. Others have suggested that the act was intentionally humorous. Still others have ignored the subject entirely. T. J. Rogers argues convincingly that these biblical passages should be read in the context of ancient hospitality customs. Guests in the ancient world could expect their hosts to provide water to wash their feet, symbolizing a transition from stranger to guest in the home of their host. To shake the dust from one's feet would therefore serve as evidence that this custom had not been observed, and hospitality had been refused to the apostles. It is implied that God would notice this testimony and execute punishment on those who had refused hospitality to his servants.⁵

The founding prophet of Mormonism offered his own take on the biblical dust-shaking gesture by advocating its renewed practice by Mormon proselytizers as a cursing ritual. With ample bibli-

cal examples (another doctrinal innovation, baptism for the dead, had only a single New Testament verse as precedent), Smith's scribes recorded a revelation in July 1830 instructing missionaries for his new church to "[cast] off the dust of your feet" as a testimony against the unbelieving.⁶ One year later, on August 8, 1831, the doctrine reappeared in a new revelation: "And shake off the dust of thy feet against those who receive thee not, not in their presence, lest thou provoke them, but in secret; and wash thy feet, as a testimony against them in the day of judgment."⁷ Smith produced three revelations on curses in 1832. In the first of these, he stated that those who performed curses would "be filled with joy and gladness," likely alluding to Paul and Barnabas' dusting of feet in Acts 13:51–52. Smith's revelation also declared that "in the day of judgment you shall be judges of that house, and condemn them."⁸ In his second 1832 revelation on cursing, it was implied that water could be used to "cleanse your feet in the secret places by the way for a testimony against them."⁹ The final 1832 cursing revelation specified that this ritual should be performed "alone" and that "pure water" should be used to cleanse the feet.¹⁰ As with other Mormon ordinances, the actions of biblical figures became imbued with special status and ritualized.

After the initial revelations on ritual cursing were received by Joseph Smith, discourse on the subject continued in official Church publications. In November 1835, Smith wrote on the subject in the Latter-day Saint *Messenger and Advocate*. In cases where a man forbade his wife and children from joining the church, the responsibility for their sins would be answered upon him as head of the house. "[T]he guilt of that house is no longer upon thy skirts: Thou art free; therefore, shake off the dust of thy feet, and go thy way."¹¹ The January 1, 1842, edition of the *Times and Seasons* included a letter from Orson Hyde discussing his travels in the Holy Land. He noted that by journeying during the dry season, his feet and legs were completely coated with dust. "I then thought how very convenient it must have been for the ancient disciples to fulfill one injunction of the Saviour, 'shake off the dust of your feet.'"¹² An 1842 epistle from the Nauvoo High Council to be read in "all the branches of the church" admonished members to bear their afflictions "as becometh saints," and that when they

were unable to obtain justice they should “shake off the dust off your feet.”¹³ Joseph Smith’s authority to curse was reemphasized in an 1843 revelation with the following language: “whomsoever you curse I will curse, saith the Lord” (D&C 132:47). Continual discourse on cursing published through official church channels created an environment in which Mormon proselytizers were prepared to curse those who rejected their message.

Who Pronounced Curses

Smith’s revelations on ritual cursing were given primarily to Mormon missionaries. Those who rejected the message of the Mormon preachers were to be cursed. The earliest recorded performance of cursing by a Mormon elder preceded Smith’s aforementioned revelations. According to his mother’s reminiscence, Samuel Smith, brother of the prophet and the fledgling church’s first missionary, reported that on June 30, 1830, he “washed his feet in a small brook” as testimony against an innkeeper in Livonia, New York, who rejected the Book of Mormon and denied the missionary room and board.¹⁴ Use of this ritual quickly caught on among Mormon proselytizers.

It was not always easy for missionaries to follow the command to curse. When Orson Hyde failed to convert his sister to Mormonism, he felt compelled to shake the dust off his feet. “[T]ears from all eyes freely ran, and we shook the dust of our feet against them but it was like piercing my heart.”¹⁵ When Wilford Woodruff was followed by Mr. Pitt, a man “filled with the Devil” who was “shouting, hooting, & yelling as though a part of hell at least had broke loose,” he demonstrated humility in the pronouncement of his curse. “May the will of God be done consarning that man, I pray that we may ever be reconciled to his will in all things.”¹⁶ Woodruff consigned Mr. Pitt’s fate to God.

Mormons rarely knew of any consequences of their curses. Generally, the elders had faith that if their curse had no direct effects during mortality, it would take effect in the afterlife. One exception occurred in the West Indies in 1853: “The Elders cursed the Mayor, Hector Michell, whose duty it was to have protected them in their person and position as ministers, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Subsequently they learned that the mayor’s

toes and fingers rotted off and that he soon died with the rot and scabs.”¹⁷

Who Received Curses

Early Mormon missionaries frequently encountered religionists who were equally enthusiastic about their own denominations. When Samuel Smith and William McLellin spoke to an assembly of Campbellites in 1831, the group “spoke out and said that they did not want to hear any more—They called a vote and I [McLellin] was requested to say no more. . . . the[y] rejected all with disdain and desired us to depart out of their coasts. Which we did and wiped the dust of our feet against them.”¹⁸ It was not the last time religious disagreement resulted in ritual cursing.

At times curses were administered against individuals or groups who failed to support missionaries financially. Following the apostolic example of traveling without “purse, or scrip” (Luke 10:4; see also Mark 6:8), Mormon elders often had to rely on the generosity of others for food and lodging. Orson Pratt cursed those who would not render assistance “for the relief of our suffering brethren in zion,” and washed his feet against a family that refused him lodging for the night.¹⁹ William McLellin and David W. Patten cursed a schoolhouse full of congregants who refused their request for a donation at the conclusion of a meeting.²⁰ William McLellin, Brigham Young, and Thomas B. Marsh washed their feet against a man who refused to provide them “bread and milk for breakfast . . . without money.”²¹

Mormon missionaries sometimes faced overwhelming rejection from the communities they visited. In such instances, they followed Jesus’s injunction to leave curses on entire cities where his followers were scorned (Luke 10:10–12). Detroit, Michigan, was cursed in 1831;²² Chicago, Illinois, was cursed in 1831;²³ Sinclairville, New York, was cursed in 1835;²⁴ Paris, Arkansas, was cursed in 1836;²⁵ Beach Hill, Connecticut, was cursed in 1837;²⁶ Collinsville, Connecticut, was cursed in 1837;²⁷ eight households in Belfast, Maine, were cursed in 1838;²⁸ and the Fox Islands, Maine, were cursed in 1838.²⁹ Sensing an urgency to their work, Mormons dusted their feet in these areas and moved on to other communities in the hope of finding more fruitful ground for proselytizing.

Mormons occasionally pronounced curses upon each other.

In an 1840 meeting of the Kirtland Elders Quorum, Henry Moore was charged with false prophecy, deception, laziness, and “trying to persuade a woman to promise to have him while his own wife is still living.” Additionally, Moore was accused of “pronouncing curses upon Elder Charles Thompson because he would not uphold him in the above abominations and washing his feet against me [Thompson] for the same reason.”³⁰ Seven years later, cursing was invoked in sentencing an unknown (possibly Mormon) perpetrator. When someone killed Albert Carrington’s cow in 1847, the Salt Lake Stake presidency and high council met to discuss punishment of the unidentified wrongdoer. As traditional means of litigation were impossible against an anonymous criminal, a novel solution was settled upon. “After several remarks of <by> the counselors, Pres. John Smith sealed a curse upon the person or persons who killed Carrington’s cow until they came forward and made restitution. The curse was sanctioned unanimously by the council.”³¹ These examples demonstrate that Mormons did not exclusively curse non-Mormons; at times they cursed their own, or in the case of Carrington’s cow, those who were unknown.

Cursing was used as a means of coping with the mob violence and forced migration perpetually endured by the Mormons. Prior to their departure from Nauvoo in 1845, the Saints spent a night dancing in the temple. This was not only for recreation: “while we danced before the Lord, we shook the dust from off our feet as a testimony against this nation.”³² When they encountered forces they could not overcome, Mormons turned their enemies over to God and his judgments.

How Curses Were Performed

In describing the cursing ritual, Mormons frequently wrote that they “bore testimony” against the disbelieving, echoing language from Smith’s revelations. Joseph Coe, a missionary in New York in 1831, “washed his feet as a testimony” against those who “would not receive my doctrine” five times during a three-week period.³³ John Murdock encountered Dr. Matthews, “a very wicked man,” in September 1832, who “reviled against us, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine we taught. We bore testimony according to the Commandment and the Lord helped us in tending to

the ordinance.”³⁴ Heber C. Kimball and Orson Hyde washed their feet and bore testimony against a Baptist priest who denounced them as false prophets.³⁵ Wilford Woodruff and Jonathan Hale “censed our feet in the pure water of the Sea as a testimony against Gideon J. Newton for rejecting our testimony of the Lord & of the Book of Mormon.”³⁶ William McLellin,³⁷ Samuel Smith,³⁸ and Orson Pratt³⁹ all used similar language in their journals. In effect, testimony was borne twice: first, testimony of the restored gospel was borne for the benefit of those listening; second, testimony was borne to God (as feet were dusted or washed) that the missionaries’ duty had been fulfilled.

In a particularly interesting case, a man was cursed more than once. A Methodist priest by the name of Mr. Douglass was cursed multiple times by Wilford Woodruff, first in September 1837 “for rejecting the Book of Mormon & our testimony,”⁴⁰ and later in February 1838 for “rejecting our testimony & offending our little ones.” Following the latter curse, Woodruff recorded in his journal that it was “the third witness borne to heaven against that man.”⁴¹ This is the only known example of an individual being cursed repeatedly.

The New Testament apostle Paul described a variant of shaking the dust off one’s feet that involved the shaking of a garment. In Acts 18:6, Paul “testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ. And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles.” Similar instances of garment shaking exist in the Old Testament (Neh. 5:13) and Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 9:44). As enthusiastic participants in a primitive church restoration movement, it is not surprising that early Mormons imitated biblical exemplars by occasionally shaking their garments instead of their feet as a variant of the cursing ritual.

In December 1837, Heber C. Kimball and Orson Hyde were encountering difficulties in the mission field. Mormon meetings were being disrupted by priests from other Christian denominations, which resulted in Kimball shaking his garments at them.

After Brother Hide speking [spoke] to the people about one [h]our; I got up and bore testamony to the congrotation and shock [shook] my

garments before them and told them that my garments ware clean of blo[o]d. Thare was menny preas [priests] that ware thare at that time but had Rejected our testamony and cold [called] us evy thing but good and shoock thare fist at us and sisced [hissed] at us and gnashed thare theth [teeth] at us and thretned us evry way that they could. The nex[t] day we felt by the Spirrite of the Lord that we would gow and wash our feet against them and that we would not have now [any] more to dow with [them] for we was clean of thare blo[o]d and that we would have now [no] more to dow [do] with them hare after; then we went and washed our feet and hands and shuck our garments against them and bore testamony to our Father who art in heaven.⁴²

Another interesting example of garment-shaking was related by Ashbel Kitchell, the intended recipient of a curse. After a failed endeavor to preach to a group of Shakers (of which Kitchell was a part), Parley P. Pratt “arose and commenced shakeing his coattail; he said he shook the dust from his garments as a testimony against us, that we had rejected the word of the Lord Jesus.” As this ritual was performed in front of an audience, it received an understandably negative response: “Before the words were out of his mouth, I was to him, and said;—You filthy Beast, dare you presume to come in here, and try to imitate a man of God by shaking your filthy tail; confess your sins and purge your soul from your lusts, and your other abominations before you ever presume to do the like again &c. While I was ministering this reproof, he settled trembling into his seat, and covered his face.”⁴³ Such conflict may shed light on the necessity of following the scriptural injunction to curse “in secret,” as Kitchell was not unique in taking offense at this Mormon practice.⁴⁴

The Millenarian Mindset of Early Mormonism

Most early Mormons shared the belief that Christ’s second coming was nigh, and that the millennium would likely commence during their lifetimes.⁴⁵ One step in the process of cleansing the earth preparatory to its millennial state was the separation of the righteous from the wicked. In the parable of the wheat and the tares, Jesus said, “Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn” (Matt. 13:30). This parable was referenced in two of Smith’s

revelations. The first indicates the tares must be “bound in bundle[s]” before the field can be burned.⁴⁶ The other states:

therefore I must gather to gether my people according to the parable of the wheat and the tares that the wheat may be secured in the garner to possess eternal life and be crowned with celestial glory when I come in the Kingdom of my fathe[r] to reward evry man according as his work shall be whilst the tares shall be bound in bundles and their bands made strong that they may be burned with unquenchable fire.⁴⁷

Early Mormon missionaries were participating in this separation of good from evil. Performance of a ritual curse was, in effect, binding its recipients like tares preparatory to their burning. Orson Hyde performed at least six curses during his missionary travels during the spring of 1832.⁴⁸ His journal entry of March 19 echoes the language of Jesus’s parable, “went on 3 or 4 Miles Sealed up many to the day of wrath, bound the tares in bundles.”⁴⁹

Another millenarian image from the scriptures that took hold in the minds of early Mormons was that of sealing.⁵⁰ Separate but related to the current LDS practice of temple sealings, high priests were authorized in 1831 to seal church members “up unto Eternal life,” preparatory to “the coming of the Son of man.”⁵¹ Elsewhere, Joseph Smith wrote that priesthood holders have “power given to seal both on Earth & in Heaven the unbelieving & rebelious yea verily to seal them up unto the day when the wrath of God shall be poured out upon the wicked without measure”⁵² Mormons took part in the divine pre-millennial separation of righteous from wicked through ritual performance: one ritual sealed worthy individuals up to salvation, whereas the cursing ritual sealed others to destruction. Having shaken the dust from his feet, Orson Hyde wrote in his journal in 1832: “sealed many over to the day when the wrath of God shall be poured out.”⁵³ Wilford Woodruff’s journal entry for May 22, 1836, relates that by cursing those who rejected the Mormon gospel, “We delivered them unto the hands of God <and the destroyer.>”⁵⁴

In August 1840, the role of cursing was questioned by Joseph Fielding in the *Millennial Star* periodical. He described a prevalent belief that curses sealed their recipients to damnation, and

then questioned that assumption. Parley P. Pratt provided an ambiguous response.

Question 6th. —Ought the Elders and Priests, when their testimony is rejected, to wash their feet, &c., and is there no hope of those against whom they wash their feet? An idea has gone out that we consider such sealed up for destruction. Is the washing of feet, in this way, anything more than a testimony that we are clear of their blood, when we bear testimony of it before God?

Answer. —Certainly . . . when the Elders and Priests have borne a faithful testimony to any city, town, village or person, and that testimony is rejected, and they have fulfilled the revelation, that city, town, village or person is in the hands of a righteous God, who will do with them according to his own pleasure; we are clear from their blood.⁵⁵

Whether priesthood was required to perform curses was never specified. It seems likely that when Joseph Fielding listed “Elders and Priests” in his question above, he did so not because of prerequisite priesthood office, but because they were the ones proselytizing. Joseph Smith’s revelations on cursing were directed chiefly to Mormon missionaries, and it was they who most often put the ritual into practice.

Influence of the School of the Prophets and the Kirtland Endowment

In December 1832, Joseph Smith received revelation to organize a school for the instruction of church leaders. As part of the initiation into this “School of the Prophets,” Smith dictated that “ye shall not receive any among you into this school save he is clean from the blood of this generation; And he shall be received by the ordinance of the washing of feet” (D&C 88:138–39). Elsewhere in the same revelation, a command is given to “clean your hands, and your feet . . . that you, are clean, from the blood of this, wicked generation.”⁵⁶ Orson Pratt indicated that his initiation ceremony in 1833 involved the washing of both hands and feet, and that “my garments were clean from [the] blood [of this wicked generation].”⁵⁷ By 1836, Smith was preparing to reveal special temple blessings to worthy participants in Kirtland. In an exclusive meeting of priesthood holders on January 21, Smith and others “attended to the ordinance of washing our bodies in pure water. We also perfumed our bodies and our heads.” Once

the temple was dedicated in March of that same year, Smith emphasized the ordinance of washing of feet.⁵⁸

Rituals and ordinances in these formative years were fluid, often inconsistent in their performance. Cross-pollination between simultaneously developing ordinances took place, as when the initiation ceremony for the School of the Prophets was adapted to fit the Kirtland temple endowment, which was later reframed in Nauvoo as a temple initiatory ordinance. Shaking the dust off one's feet was likewise influenced by these other washing ordinances.⁵⁹

In 1836, after having received the washing rituals in the School of the Prophets, Wilford Woodruff recorded three separate occasions on which he cursed unbelievers by washing his hands and feet.⁶⁰ His journal entry for the last of these, dated October 12, describes the cleansing of his entire body with water and alcohol.

12th Retired in company with Elder A. O. Smoot unto the banks of Blood River aside from the abodes of men to spend some time in Prayer & Praise to God & to Perform a solemn duty that is required of all the Elders of Israel whose testimony is rejected by this generation while they are preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ & bearing testimony of his NAME. after we had Cleansed our Bodies with Pure water & also with strong drink or spirits this not by Commandment but from Choice we then according to Commandment cleansed our hands and feet and bore testimony unto God against the Benton County mob & also against Paris & many others who had rejected our testimony. We enjoyed a solemn, spiritual, & interesting Season.⁶¹

Woodruff's journal entries for 1837 (by which time he would have received the Kirtland endowment washings) include two more instances of washing hands and feet in conjunction with the performance of a curse.⁶²

Often the injunction that invites to the School of the Prophets be "clean from the blood of this generation" (a phrase that was later included in temple rites) was echoed in descriptions of the cursing ordinance. Missionary companions Wilford Woodruff and David Patten cursed a Mr. Jackson, "that our garments might be clear of his blood."⁶³ Joseph Fielding's question about curses to Parley P. Pratt, when Pratt was editor of the *Millennial Star*,

asked, "Is the washing of feet, in this way, anything more than a testimony that we are clear of their blood, when we bear testimony of it before God?"⁶⁴ In August 1841, Woodruff related his missionary endeavors with Dr. Noah Porter:

I bore testimony unto him of the work of God Book of mormon &c but he rejected my testimony in the Strongest term & evry thing in the form of Prophets Apostles, revelation, Inspiration or the gift of the Holy Ghost, Healings Miracles tongues &c. Seemed to be much stired up because the work had come to Farmington. But I done my duty answered my mind, bore testimony of the truth.

After he left the house I prayed with the family & those present could see the spirit manifest in Dr Noah Porter was dictated by the powers of Darkness. I was glad to have this opportunity of bearing testimony to Dr Porter of the work of God that he might be left without excuse. I returned to my Fathers house but before retiring to rest I repaired to the river & cleansed my feet with water in testimony against Dr Noah Porter In obedience to the commandment of God that my garments might be clear of his blood & I say in the name of Jesus Christ that if he does not repent of the course he has persued in this thing, he will no longer Prosper but the judgments of God will be upon him.⁶⁵

What it meant to these early Mormons to be clean from the blood of others is explained in the same revelation outlining the commencement of a School of the Prophets: "it becometh evry man, who hath been warned, to warn his neighbour, therefore they are left with<out> excuse, and there sins are upon your own heads."⁶⁶ A similar theology of divine responsibility is present in the Old Testament:

Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. Again, When a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumblingblock before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless if thou warn the

righteous man, that the righteous sin not, and he doth not sin, he shall surely live, because he is warned; also thou hast delivered thy soul (Ezekiel 3:17–21).

Here Ezekiel expounded the duty of the Israelites to warn others to repent. Should a member of the faith fail in this duty, God would hold him responsible for the evildoings of those he might otherwise have saved. A doctrinally analogous passage is present in the Book of Mormon: “answering the sins of the people upon our own heads if we did not teach them the word of God with all diligence . . . otherwise their blood would come upon our garments” (Jacob 1:19). Thus, when Mormon elders cursed, they did so not only to call down wrath upon their opponents, but also to free themselves from the burden of the sins of those around them. Only then could they “be filled with joy and gladness.”

The Practice Wanes

Despite repeated enjoinders to shake the dust from one’s feet and the enthusiasm with which some followers embraced the cursing ritual, there emerged from early on a counter rhetoric warning against the flippant condemnation of others. Warnings were given to avoid “over-zealousness in declaring judgments against the wicked,”⁶⁷ and Mormons were cautioned to “talk not of judgments.”⁶⁸ W. W. Phelps instructed church elders in 1832 to “warn in compassion without threatening the wicked with judgments.”⁶⁹ In 1835, church leaders explicitly stated, “Pray for your enemies in the Church and curse not your foes without; for vengeance belongs to God.”⁷⁰

Although cursing was initially embraced as a vital and necessary ritual of Mormonism, over time the recorded instances of cursing became fewer and farther between. Part of this was due to the Mormons having removed themselves to a remote area of the continent. In the process, they left many of their enemies behind, and shifted their focus from proselytizing to community building. Orson Pratt mentioned cursing in passing in an address given in 1876,⁷¹ but it appears that the Saints were not very concerned with cursing during the years 1850–1880. The work of settling a new land, organizing a territorial government, and confirming church organization under the leadership of Brigham Young took

precedence over the responsibility of cursing the occasional outsider.

Eventually, missionaries were sent out to preach the gospel and an increasing number of outsiders entered the Utah territory. With renewed exposure to the rejection of non-Mormons, the practice of shaking the dust off one's feet resurfaced, but never again with the same widespread performance as was seen during the early years of the church. B. H. Roberts recorded only a single instance from his 1880–1882 mission to Iowa when he “felt at liberty” to curse someone. After receiving “rather rough treatment” in the home of a man he thought might help him obtain permission to preach at a nearby schoolhouse, Roberts departed and journeyed a mile eastward. Climbing over a fence for privacy,

I stripped my feet and washed them in witness against this man and house for the rejection of me. This I recount as the only instance when I felt at liberty to attend to this ordinance of the washing of feet against one who had rejected me. I never returned to the house and never knew what became of it, but I left my testimony thus registered according to the commandments of the Lord.⁷²

By this time, mentions of cursing in discourses from church leadership were rare and generally made in passing. In an 1883 session of the reformed Salt Lake City School of the Prophets, Wilford Woodruff “gave instructions and stated the effects that have followed this ordinance. Spoke upon the shaking off the dust of the feet and washing the feet in pure water in summer or in winter and the judgements of God have followed.”⁷³ President George Q. Cannon cautioned that “[in] our prayers we should not condemn our enemies but leave them in the hands of God.”⁷⁴

Use of the Prayer Circle

Joseph Smith introduced a heavily modified version of the temple endowment to church leaders in Nauvoo in 1842, and by 1843 the endowment included ritual prayer circles.⁷⁵ After the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in 1844, a prayer or oath was added to the endowment. Known as the “oath of vengeance” or “law of retribution,” the recipient of the endowment prayed that God would avenge the blood of his slain prophets.⁷⁶ By the 1880s, Mormons were accustomed to including a call to God's wrath upon their foes in their temple ceremonies. Although curses over-

all were becoming fewer in number, the 1880s saw a brief flourish in cursing and a new variant in its ritual performance. Cursing practice had been influenced in the past by the washing rituals of the School of the Prophets. In the 1880s, cursing would cross-pollinate with temple ordinances, influenced by the oath of vengeance and incorporating the prayer circle.

In 1880, Wilford Woodruff was president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The Church was under immense pressure from the federal government to end the practice of plural marriage. Woodruff recorded that God spoke to him, promising plagues, wrath, and judgment against the Church's accusers. God's anger was kindled against those in positions of governmental authority, such as:

the president of the United States, members of the Supreme Court, Cabinet, Senate, and House of Representatives; governors of various states and territories; judges and officials; Missouri and Illinois mobbers; and others who have taken part in persecuting you or Bringing distress upon you or your families or have sought your lives or sought to hinder you from keeping my Commandments or from enjoying the rights which the Constitutional Laws of the Land guarantee unto you.⁷⁷

In an effort that bears striking resemblance to the oath of vengeance, a list was compiled of over 400 "Names of Persons, to be held in Remembrance before the Lord, For their Evil Deeds, and who have raised their hands against the Lord's anointed." The list included four U.S. presidents: Martin Van Buren, Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, and James Buchanan.⁷⁸ To secure God's judgments against those on the list, Woodruff was instructed to gather the Twelve and wash their feet as a testimony against their enemies.⁷⁹ The apostles were then to clothe themselves in temple robes and form a prayer circle.

Woodruff describes the eventual performance of this ordinance in solemn terms:

O Pratt was vary feeble yet we all performed the ordinance of washing our feet against Our Enemies And the Enemies of the Kingdom of God according to the Commandmet of God unto us.

W. Woodruff opened By Prayer And John Taylor was Mouth in the washing of feet. At the Prayer Circle Lorenzo Snow was Mouth at the opening And Presidet JOHN TAYLOR was mouth at the Altar, and

Presented the Prayer written By W. Woodruff (By request of President Taylor) And the names were presented before the Lord according to the Commandment.

It was truly a solomn scene and I presume to say it was the first thing of the Kind since the Creation of the world. . . . We were 3 hours in the Meeting & ordinances.⁸⁰

The actual prayer, written by Woodruff and read by President John Taylor, reads in part:

Now O Lord our God we bear our testimony against these men, befor Thee and the heavenly hosts and we bear testimony unto thee Our heavenly Father that we according to thy Commandments unto us we have gone alone by ourselves and Clensed our feet in pure water and born testimony unto Thee and thy Son Jesus Christ and to the heavenly hosts against these wicked men by name as far as the spirit has manifested them unto us. We have borne our testimony against those who have shed the blood of thy Prophets and Apostles and anointed Ones, or have given Consent to their death and against those who have driven thy saints and imprisoned them and those who are still ready to deprive us of Life, Liberty and the privilege of keeping the Commandments of God.

And now O Lord our God Thou hast Commanded us that when we have done this we should gather ourselves together in our holy Places and Clothed in the robes of the Holy Priesthood should unite ourselves together in Prayer and supplication and that we should bear our testimony against these men by name as far as wisdom should dictate.

. . . O Lord hear us from heaven thy Holy dwelling place and answer our Peti[tions] Sustain thine anointed ones and deliver us from the hands of Our Enemies. Overthrow the Evil designs of the wicked and ungodly against thy Saints and break Evry weapon formed against us.⁸¹

This episode is notable for a shift in the provocation to curse. In the past, curses had been performed primarily against those who rejected a proselytizer's message. Here the curse was called down upon the church's political enemies.

On one other known occasion, a prayer circle was formed with intent to curse. In 1889, a prayer circle was convened to curse R. N. Baskin, a lawyer who was actively engaged in the anti-polygamy crusades of the time.⁸² According to the journal of newly-ordained apostle Abraham H. Cannon, a group of nine church lead-

ers convened on December 23, 1889. All but two of them were dressed in their temple robes. Each member took a turn acting as mouth for the prayer circle. Joseph F. Smith “was strongest in his prayer and urged that Baskin should be made blind, deaf and dumb unless he would repent of his wickedness.”⁸³ It is unclear whether feet were dusted or washed in connection with this prayer circle. The Church was struggling to beat Baskin in the courtroom, and church leaders expressed their frustration by requesting that God stop the trouble at its source.

Decline and Disappearance

With the renunciation of polygamy in 1890, Mormonism continued its evolution from a small, persecuted sect toward a stable, respectable institution. As persecution declined, so too did the discourse and practice of ritual cursing. The last publicized endorsement of cursing by a general authority came from John W. Taylor in the April 1899 General Conference. “[This] is the way Christ is going to Judge the world, for He gave a special commandment that . . . if they reject you shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them, for it shall be more tolerable in the day of judgment for the city of Sodom or Gomorrha than for that city or household that rejecteth you.”⁸⁴

Around the time of Taylor’s address, church discourse shifted toward ignoring cursing or mentioning it only with some degree of antipathy. In response to inquiries regarding shaking the dust off one’s feet from President B. E. Rich of the Southern States Mission, George Reynolds of the Seventy was authorized by the First Presidency to write the following letter (dated March 11, 1899):

I am directed by the First Presidency to say in reply to your favor that the business of the wholesale washing of feet, &c should not be indulged in by the elders. If an elder feels that he has just cause and is moved upon by the spirit of God to wash his feet against a person or persons who have violently or wickedly rejected the truth, let him do so quietly and beyond noting it in his journal let him not make it public.

Nothing should be published in the “Southern Star” or elsewhere on this subject. Elders should be privately instructed and should let the matter rest between them, the Lord and the persons concerned. George Reynolds⁸⁵

Such a direct statement against the wholesale practice of cursing cast a shadow across the potential future of this ritual. Another mission president, Nephi Pratt, was recorded in the Conference Report for April 1906 as doubting the propriety of cursing. There had been “indifference manifested in the larger cities of [the Northwestern States mission], and we have some times thought that all had been done there that ought to be done there. . . . Always we had a doubt whether we ought to shake off the dust from our feet against some of the cities in the northwest.”⁸⁶

Ritual cursing was not mentioned in general conference for the next sixty years. In April 1968, S. Dilworth Young spoke of the cursing ritual in a distinctly past tense.

There have been times when we thought that if we approached a man and he, hostile because of stories he had heard about us, or suspicious because we were strangers, rebuffed us, then we had done our duty by shaking off the dust of our feet against him. We have not done that duty until we have given him a fair chance to learn that his prejudices are unfounded.⁸⁷

In the sixty years of silence over the general conference pulpit, cursing was transitioning from a practiced ritual to a historical relic. Mormons had less cause to be interested in ritual cursing as they became more mainstream and less persecuted. The millenarian impulse that motivated early missionaries to shake the dust from their feet had waned. The 1946 edition of *The Missionary's Hand Book* included as one of forty-two rules, “Bless, but do not curse.”⁸⁸ Any mention of the ritual in church publications referred to cursing as something done in the past, not as a practice to be engaged in the present.⁸⁹ An excerpt from the *Doctrine and Covenants Compendium* (published in 1960) is illuminating:

Today it is not the general custom in the Church for our Elders on missions to shake off the dust of their feet against the people who do not receive them. In our time the Lord is giving men everywhere ample opportunity to receive the Gospel. Consequently, Elders may return to the same people time and time again, thus giving them every opportunity to receive the word of God before His judgments come unto them.⁹⁰

President J. Reuben Clark mentioned the biblical dusting of one's feet twice in his *On the Way to Immortality and Eternal Life* without ever discussing its parallel practice in the modern Church.⁹¹

Modern commentators have followed suit, mentioning cursing only as an interesting footnote in the church's history.⁹²

The disappearance of this ritual from Mormon liturgy may be due to a number of factors. The tone of church discourse on cursing evolved from commandment and instruction to caution and discouragement. With passing generations, the sense of Christ's impending return lessened. When a missionary was rejected, it was no longer believed that the disbelieving parties had lost their one chance for salvation. The missionary mindset shifted from one of binding wheat and tares up to the day of destruction to one of returning to homes again and again to give people multiple chances to accept the gospel. With the move to Utah and subsequent renouncement of polygamy, Mormonism's enemies became fewer and the accompanying physical violence was reduced. As Mormons gained control of their lives and their surroundings, the apparent need to shake the dust off their feet lessened. The spirit of doctrinal and liturgical innovation that permeated early Mormonism waned over time, particularly with the rise of Correlation in the 1960s. Together with the loss of other non-salvific Mormon ordinances (e.g., female healing blessings, baptism for health), there may have simply been no place in modern Mormonism for cursing. The modern Church's heightened awareness of national attention and public relations would likely make the continued practice of cursing an embarrassment.

Although anecdotes describing present-day episodes of shaking the dust off one's feet persist,⁹³ mission presidents do not receive instruction from general authorities regarding the performance of this ritual. According to one former mission president, it is generally understood that to curse someone in the mission field today would be wholly inappropriate.⁹⁴ No current Church handbook or manual lists cursing as an official ordinance.⁹⁵ Although no longer formally practiced, curses live on in the form of missionary folklore⁹⁶ and Mormon fiction.⁹⁷

Conclusion

Mormon cursing flourished for a time, but by the 1900s it was extinct for all practical purposes. As the factors that had precipitated ritual cursing during the early days of Mormonism dissipated over time, performance of the ritual ceased. Modern Mor-

monism no longer consists of a small group of violently mistreated social outcasts as it once did. As the Church has become more stable and prosperous, its goals appear to be more geared toward integration and contribution to the surrounding community rather than separation from, and condemnation of, unbelieving Gentiles. While not denying cursing as part of its history, the Church has experienced a paradigm shift to a more blessing-focused theology. President Joseph F. Smith's words from a 1904 general conference reflect on the practice of cursing while simultaneously looking forward to a future of love and redemption:

[I]f they cursed, in the spirit of righteousness and meekness before God, God would confirm that curse; but men are not called upon to curse mankind; that is not our mission; it is our mission to preach righteousness unto them. It is our business to love and to bless them, and to redeem them from the fall and from the wickedness of the world. . . . We are perfectly willing to leave vengeance in the hands of God and let him judge between us and our enemies, and let him reward them according to his own wisdom and mercy.⁹⁸

Without a powerful modern resurgence of liturgical innovation, Christian primitivism, millenarianism, or violent persecution, cursing is unlikely to reemerge as a practice within Mormonism. However, an appreciation of its role in the early restoration provides a fascinating window into the mindset of Mormonism's founding generations.

Notes

1. The author would like to thank the following individuals for their feedback on various drafts of this manuscript: Jonathan Stapley, Amberly Dattilo, and Christopher Blythe.

2. Revelation, July 1830, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Documents, id:6476 (D&C 24:15).

3. See Gregory A. Prince, *Power from on High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), Chapter 3: Ordinances, 1829–1830, and Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1999), Chapter 4: The Bible, the Mormons, and Millenariansim. See also David Golding, "The Foundations and Early Development of Mormon Mission Theory" (M.A. thesis, Claremont Graduate University, 2010). For an excellent collection of primary sources on Mormon curses, see "Feet Dust-

ing and Washing,” <http://saintswithouthalos.com/n/feet.phtml> (accessed August 9, 2012).

4. For an analysis of an important period of transition within Mormonism, see Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana and Chicago, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

5. T. J. Rogers, “Shaking the Dust off the Markan Mission Discourse,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 2 (2004): 169–192. Thanks to Jared Anderson for directing me to this article.

6. Revelation, July 1830.

7. Revelation, August 8, 1831, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Documents, id:6520 (D&C 60:15).

8. Revelation, January 25, 1832, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Documents, id:1471 (D&C 75:20–22).

9. Revelation, August 29, 1832, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Documents, id:5039 (D&C 99:4).

10. Revelation, September 22–23, 1832, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Documents, id:1542 (D&C 84:92–95).

11. Joseph Smith, Letter to the Elders of the Church, Kirtland, Ohio, *The Latter-day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2 (November 1835): 211.

12. Orson Hyde, Letter to the Editor, St. Louis, *Times and Seasons* 3 (January 1, 1842): 848, 852; on Smith Research Associates, *New Mormon Studies: A Comprehensive Resource Library*, CD-ROM (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998 edition).

13. Nauvoo High Council, “Communications. An Epistle,” St. Louis, *Times and Seasons* 3 (June 1, 1842): 809–10; on Smith Research Associates, *New Mormon Studies* CD-ROM.

14. Lucy Smith, *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Smith’s Family Memoir*, edited by Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 478–79.

15. Orson Hyde, Journal, September 16, 1832, quoted in Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1992 printing), 193. Hyde counterbalanced the pain of cursing by blessing when he could. “[Traveled] on from House to H[ouse] shook off the dust against some and blest others.” Orson Hyde, Journal, October 23, 1832, microfilm of holograph, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City. Quoted on <http://www.saintswithouthalos.com/n/feet.phtml> (accessed August 9, 2012).

16. Wilford Woodruff, June 19, 1840, *Waiting for World’s End: The Di-*

aries of Wilford Woodruff, edited by Susan Staker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 30.

17. Report of Aaron F. Farr, *Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (chronological scrapbook of typed entries and newspaper clippings, 1830–present), February 11, 1853, quoted in Prince, *Power from on High*, 111.

18. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch, editors, *The Journals of William E. McLellin: 1831–1836*, (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press; Provo: *BYU Studies*, 1994), 47.

19. “Feb. 27th. We left Painesville and came to Thompson. On the way we endeavored to obtain some assistance from the world for the relief of our suffering brethren in zion, but they refused to render any assistance. We therefore washed our feet against them. . . . Mar. 20th. Brother John Murdock and I left Geneseo and came to the village of Dansville. About dark we called upon the family of a man by the name of Parkman for lodging during the night, but they refused to keep us. Therefore we washed our feet as a testimony against them.” *The Orson Pratt Journals*, compiled and arranged by Elden J. Watson (Salt Lake City: Elden Jay Watson, 1975), February 27 and March 20, 1834, unpaginated transcript online at <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/OPratt.html> (accessed August 9, 2012); compare Orson Pratt, “History of Orson Pratt,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 28 (April 1937): 92–93.

20. “[A] Methodist priest arose and said that he had an app. here at five o clock and he wished to fill it and he wanted to know if I would get through so as to give place. I told him that I did not know how long I should speak but I desired to speak until I should get through—However I told him that we would leave it to the people. A vote was called. Three or four voted for me to close and for him to speak but a majority Voted for me to continue—consequently I continued until I had spoken about two hours on the plain simplicity of the Gospel and its spiritual gifts and powers. After which Elder Patten called for a donation but not a man moved his tongue or his finger to help us consequently we left them believing that we had done our duty as to delivering our message and we wiped the dust off our feet and we also censed our feet in pure water as a testimony against them and we passed on toward old Oswego about 4 miles.” Shipps and Welch, *The Journals of William E. McLellin*, 182–83.

21. “. . . we call at a Mr M. Hawley who kept tavern and told him that we were preachers of the Gospel and we wanted some bread and milk for breakfast and we asked for it without money but he abused us and after we had born testimony to him we came to a little brook and censed our

feet as a testimony against him—” Shipps and Welch, *The Journals of William E. McLellin*, 189–90.

22. “We left the boat immediately and took lodging in a tavern; we breakfasted and dined freely with a merchant’s wife, a sister to Almira Mack. We four brethren labored from morning till noon endeavoring to get a chance to preach, but we were not successful. I was turned out of doors for calling on the woolcarder to repent. After dinner we took leave of the two ladies and the family with which we had dined and wiped our feet as a testimony against that city.” John Murdock journal, *Journal History*, June 14, 1831, quoted in Prince, *Power from on High*, 109.

23. John Murdock journal, late 1831, cited in Prince, *Power from on High*, 109.

24. “At 4 Oclock we attended in the village in order to fill our app. [in Sinclairville, New York] but the schoolhouse was locked and only One person who was an old lady attended—consequently we left them shaking the dust from our feet as a testimony against them. . . .” Shipps and Welch, *The Journals of William E. McLellin*, 174.

25. Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 1833–1898*, typescript, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1981–1984), 1:100–101; on Smith Research Associates, *New Mormon Studies* CD-ROM.

26. “We left Mr Bidwell and beach hill and repaired to a stream of pure water aside from the abodes of men and in company with my brethren Elders Stillman & Hale and myself we clenused our hands and feet in testimony against the inhabitants of beach hill who had rejected us and our testimony.” Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:159.

27. “Brother [Jonathan] Hale & myself repaired to a stream of pure water & we there clenused our hands and feet and bore testimony before God against Mr Vanarsdalen a Prysbyterian priest who rejected our testimony & against the whole villedge who rejected our testimony.” Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:163.

28. “During the day we repaired to the sea shore & clenused our feet with pure water & bore testimony against eight houtholds before God who had rejected us or turned us from their Doors the evening before.” Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:228–29.

29. “. . . while the Sun was sitting in the western horizon, I retired aside from the abodes of men by the sea shore alone by myself and clenused my feet with pure water and bore testimony before GOD against the inhabitants of those Islands of the Sea for rejecting my testimony while in their midst and were excedingly mad against me. . . . This is the last night I ever spent or shall spend upon those Islands of the Sea.” Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:278–79.

30. Lyndon W. Cook and Milton V. Backman, Jr., eds., *Kirtland Elders' Quorum Record, 1836–1841* (Provo: Grandin Book Co., 1985), 50–51.

31. Journal History, December 18, 1847, quoted in Prince, *Power from on High*, 111. < and > characters enclose shorthand text.

32. Lee Nelson, ed., *The Journal of Brigham: Brigham Young's Own Story in His Own Words* (Provo: Council Press, 1980), December 30, 1845, 119; compare Joseph Smith, et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948 printing), 7:557–58.

33. “On the 16th (Lord’s day) Brother Thayer, by mutual consent, left me. I went to Foresville, (in the same county) and attended a meeting of Baptists and Presbyterians. In the evening I requested and obtained liberty to speak, but was stopped in a very few minutes; went to the tavern again and washed my feet as a testimony against the people in the schoolhouse. . . . On the 19th I preached in Perrysburg, (Cattaraugus Co., N. Y.); the congregation was ignorant and unbelieving. On the 24th I preached in Lockport (lower town), but to no effect; I bore testimony against the people. On the 28th I settled some temporal concerns with J[.] W. Colliers, and on the 29th went to the town of Royalton to see J. Turner, an old friend, but he would not receive my doctrine; therefore I bore testimony against him. On the 30th I left Lockport (Niagara Co., N. Y.) for Middleberry Newcombes, attended a Baptist meeting in the evening, spoke a few words and requested to make an appointment, which I did and preached in the evening of Nov. 1st. Some reviled; others were fearful and unbelieving, and I bore testimony against them. . . . From [Warsaw] I went to the town of Portage (Wyoming Co.), where I tarried for some time, and preached there in several places. Some believed, but were not baptized; others were unbelievers, but their prejudices were fast giving way; thence I went by way of Yates county (N. Y.) to Springport and Scipio, in Cayuga Co., N. Y., preached in a number of places in Cayuga county. I found the people there unbelieving, but willing to relinquish a part of their prejudice, but as they did not receive my doctrine, I bore testimony against them.” Joseph Coe journal, Journal History, October 12, 1831, microfilm of holograph, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

34. John Murdock, Journal, September 1832, quoted in Craig J. Ostler, *The Doctrine and Covenants: A Book of Answers* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 132.

35. “At Mendon, his former home, Heber and his companion, Elder Orson Hyde, were confronted by a Baptist priest named Fulton, who

withstood them harshly. Says Heber: ‘He called us false prophets, and, rejecting our testimony, advised us to go home. We declared unto him that we should go forth preaching the Gospel, and no power should stay us. I told him if he did not repent of his sins and be baptized for the remission of them, he would be damned, which made him angry. We then passed on until we came to a pure stream of water, and there cleansed our feet, bearing testimony against him, as the Lord commanded.’” Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball, an Apostle* (Salt Lake City: The Kimball Family, 1888), 80.

36. Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:180. “[W]e went by ourselves by a pure stream of water and clenched our hands and feet and bore testamony before God against . . . all that rejected our testamony.” Undated journal entry from the missionary travels of Wilford Woodruff and Jonathan Hale, quoted in Arrington and Bitton, *Saints without Halos: The Human Side of Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1981), 14.

37. “This morning we took breakfast with a Christian preacher (as he called himself). He charged us with being false prophets. Reason or Testimony had no influence on his mind . . . and his heart seemed so hard and wicked that he would have struck us dumb if he had had it in his power, but we left him raging and when we came to a brook Bro. H[yrum] washed his feet for a testimony against him.” Shipps and Welch, *The Journals of William E. McLellin*, 36–44. “. . . we had an appointment at a schoolhouse. an assembly of Campbellites, Methodists Presbyterians and deists attended. I spoke 1 hour & $\frac{3}{4}$ but was called a liar while speaking and interrupted two or three times more by the wicked wretches. we dismissed and I shook the dust off my feet as a testimony against the rebellious.” Shipps and Welch, *The Journals of William E. McLellin*, 72.

38. “Shook dust from our feet as a testimony against them.” Samuel H. Smith, Diary, March 1, 16, 18, and June 1, 1832, microfilm of holograph, L. Tom Perry Special Collections and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. Quoted on <http://www.saintswithouthalos.com/n/feet.phtml> (accessed August 9, 2012).

39. “We called at a house in Arkport village for the purpose of obtaining a meeting in that place, but the woman of the house rejected our testimony, and said that if the Book of Mormon was good she could not receive it. Therefore we washed our feet as a testimony against her.” Orson Pratt, “History of Orson Pratt,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 28 (April 1937): 92–93.

40. Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:80.

41. Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:224–25.

42. Stanley B. Kimball, ed., *On the Potter’s Wheel: The Diaries of Heber*

C. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1987), 21.

43. Lawrence R. Flake, "A Shaker View of a Mormon Mission," *BYU Studies* 20, no. 1 (Fall 1979): 98.

44. "Sunderland found especially offensive the practice that Woodruff and other missionaries had of washing the dust from their feet as a ritual condemnation of those who rejected their message." Thomas G. Alexander, *Things in Heaven and Earth*, 64.

45. Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism*.

46. Revelation, December 6, 1832, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Documents, id:2959 (D&C 86:7).

47. Revelation, December 16, 1833, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Documents, id:2977 (101:65–66).

48. "We journeyed early in the spring of 1832, eastward together, without 'purse or scrip,' going from house to house, teaching and preaching in families, and also in the public congregations of the people. Wherever we were received and entertained, we left our blessing; and wherever we were rejected, we washed our feet in private against those who rejected us, and bore testimony of it unto our Father in Heaven, and went on our way rejoicing, according to the commandment. . . . went on from fairview 6 or 7 miles Shook off the dust of my feet against almost all [March] 2 went on to Mill Creek & found . . . the people verry hard, seemingly no Salvation for them ... [March] 3rd left Mr. Longs & went on 2 miles Blest Some & Shook off the dust of our feet against others. . . . [March] 15th . . . sealed many over to the day when the wrath of God shall be poured out. . . . [March] 18th. went on through a Presbyterian neighbourhood on Sunday shook off the dust of our feet against almost every house. . . . [March] 19th. went on 3 or 4 Miles Sealed up many to the day of wrath, bound the tares in bundles, blessed some." Orson Hyde, Journal, February 1 to December 22, 1832, microfilm of holograph, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City. Quoted on <http://www.saintswithouthalos.com/n/feet.phtml> (accessed August 9, 2012).

49. Orson Hyde, Journal, February 1 to March 19, 1832.

50. David John Buerger, "'The Fulness of the Priesthood': The Second Anointing in Latter-day Saint Theology and Practice," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16, no.1 (Spring 1983): 10–44.

51. Revelation, November 1, 1831, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Documents, id:6527 (D&C 68:11–12).

52. Revelation, November 1, 1831, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Documents, id:6529 (D&C 1:8–9).

53. Orson Hyde, Journal, March 15, 1832.

54. Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:70.

55. Joseph Fielding, Letter to the Editor, August 6, 1840, *Millennial Star* 1 (August 1840): 95.

56. Revelation, December 27–28, 1832, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Documents, id:2960 (D&C 88:74–75).

57. “Washed my hands and feet as a testimony unto the Lord that I had warned this wicked generation and that my garments were clean from their blood, and on the same day I admitted into the School of the Prophets.” *The Orson Pratt Journals*, February 18, 1833, 16. “We now feel that our garments are clean from you, and all men, when we have washed our feet and hands, according to the commandment.” History, January 14, 1833, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Histories, id:7268.

58. History, March 27–29, 1836, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Histories, id:7404.

59. Thanks to Jonathan A. Stapley for insights which contributed to this section.

60. “Elder [David W.] Patten Preached three discourses. . . . After the close of the last discours Mr Rose rejected the testimony given & called on Br Patten to rase the dead that he might believe. Br Patten rebuked him sharply for his infidelity & unbelief. We then communed with the Saints. I then retired from the scene with Elders Patten & Boydston to a stream of pure water & cleansed our hands & feet & testified against that people who had threatened us & rejected our testimony. We delivered them unto the hands of God <and the destroyer. O God, thy will be done.>” Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:70. “We then returned to Mr Jacksons. Had an interview with him. He denied all his former faith & pretentions. He raged much. Was filled with the spirit of anger wrath /and the destroyer/. He rejected our testimony /and denied the revelations of Christ/. We left his house at 10 oclock at night & went to a stream of Pure water & clesned our hands & feet & testified against him that our garments might be clear of his blood.” Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:71. See also Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:100–101.

61. Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:100–101.

62. “We left Mr Bidwell and beach hill and repaired to a stream of pure water aside from the abodes of men and in company with my brethren Elders Stillman & Hale and myself we clesned our hands and feet in testimony against the inhabitants of beach hill who had rejected us and our testimony.” Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:159. “Brother [Jonathan] Hale & myself repaired to a stream of pure water & we there cleansed our hands and feet and bore testimony before God against Mr Vanarsdalen a Prysbyterian priest who rejected our testimony & against the whole villedge who rejected our testimony.” Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:163.

63. Woodruff, *Journal*, 1:71.

64. Joseph Fielding, Letter to the Editor, August 6, 1840, *Millennial Star* 1 (August 1840): 95.

65. Woodruff, *Journal*, 2:115.

66. Revelation, December 27-28, 1832, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Documents, id:2960 (D&C 88:81-82).

67. Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism*, 51.

68. Revelation, June 22, 1834, The Joseph Smith Papers Online, Documents, id:3006 (D&C 105:24).

69. *The Evening and the Morning Star* 2, no. 2 (July 1832): 6.

70. Letter of Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, W. W. Phelps, and John Whitmer (Kirtland, Ohio) to John M. Burk (Liberty, Clay County, Missouri), *Journal History*, June 1, 1835, quoted in Prince, *Power from on High*, 110.

71. *Journal of Discourses* 18:265.

72. Gary James Bergera, ed., *Autobiography of B. H. Roberts* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 90-91; on Smith Research Associates, *New Mormon Studies* CD-ROM.

73. Salt Lake City School of the Prophets Minute Book, December 24, 1883, internally paginated; on Smith Research Associates, *New Mormon Studies* CD-ROM.

74. Dennis B. Horne, ed., *An Apostle's Record: The Journals of Abraham H. Cannon, Member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, 1889-1896* (Clearfield, Utah: Gnolaum Books, 2004), 118-19.

75. D. Michael Quinn, "Latter-day Saint Prayer Circles," *BYU Studies* 19, no. 1 (Fall 1978), 79-105. The year 1843 also saw the introduction of the second anointing, a ritual that bestowed upon recipients the power to bind, loose, curse, and bless. See David John Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship* (San Francisco, Calif.: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 87-90. Samuel Hollister Rogers, a recipient of the second anointing, "told the Lord that his anointed one had been violated," and invoked a curse upon his neighbor. See Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness*, 104. Thanks to Amberly Dattilo for bringing this to my attention.

76. Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness*, 133-36.

77. Woodruff, *Journal*, 7:615-25.

78. Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness*, unpaginated image and text.

79. Woodruff, *Journal*, 7:615-16. This revelation was given a second time to Woodruff only days later, again emphasizing "the duty of the Apostles and Elders to go into our Holy places & Temples and wash our feet and bear testimony to God & the Heavenly hosts against the wickedness of this Nation. My pillow was wet with the fountain of tears that

flowed as I Beheld the Judgments of God upon the wicked." See Woodruff, *Journal*, 7:546-47.

80. Woodruff, *Journal*, 8:6-7.

81. Woodruff, *Journal*, 7:621-25.

82. "‘Mormons’ and Citizenship," *The Deseret Weekly* 59 (November 23, 1889): 684-93.

83. Horne, *The Journals of Abraham H. Cannon*, 119.

84. *Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, April 1899 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semi-annual), 23 (hereafter cited as *Conference Report*); on Smith Research Associates, *New Mormon Studies* CD-ROM.

85. George Reynolds, letter to Ben E. Rich, March 11, 1899; type-script in Scott G. Kenney Collection, "People" series, box 2, folder 11, J. Willard Marriott Library Special Collections, University of Utah. Quoted in Golding, "The Foundations and Early Development of Mormon Mission Theory."

86. *Conference Report*, April 1906, 33.

87. *Conference Report*, April 1968, 65.

88. *The Missionary's Hand Book* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Revised 1946).

89. "The cleansing of their feet, either by washing or wiping off the dust, would be recorded in heaven as a testimony against the wicked. This act, however, was not to be performed in the presence of the offenders, 'lest thou provoke them, but in secret, and wash thy feet, as a testimony against them in the day of judgment.' The missionaries of the Church who faithfully perform their duty are under the obligation of leaving their testimony with all with whom they come in contact in their work. This testimony will stand as a witness against those who reject the message, at the judgment." Joseph Fielding Smith, quoted in *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual: Religion 324 and 325* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 130.

90. Sidney B. Sperry, *Doctrine and Covenants Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 254.

91. J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *On the Way to Immortality and Eternal Life* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1949), 357, 372.

92. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 162-64; Sperry, *Doctrine and Covenants Compendium*, 332; Melvin R. Brooks, *LDS Reference Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960-1965), 111-112; Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet, eds., *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 5: The Gospels* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 234; Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 165; Sherwin W. Howard,

“Cursings,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991), 1:352; Todd Compton, “The Spiritual Roots of the Democratic Party: Why I Am a Mormon Democrat,” Sunstone Symposium speech, Summer 2001.

93. After being rudely rebuffed by an investigator of European descent for bringing a native Guatemalan companion to a missionary discussion, John Dehlin recorded the following conversation with his mission president in his journal: “During my interview with President Romney, he told me that Barrios and Aston told him what had happened w/ the Colonel’s wife. He said to me, ‘Elder Dehlin, how important is that family to you?’ I said that they were ok, and that mostly I was thinking of the future possibility of the kids becoming members, and not so much the mother. Then he sat silent for a second, looked down, and then looked up to me and said, ‘I feel inspired to ask you to go to that lady’s house and perform the ordinance,’” John Dehlin, Journal, 26 March 1990, quoted in John Dehlin, email to Samuel R. Weber, April 10, 2007, printout in my possession. Dehlin later recounted from memory how the ordinance was performed. “A few days later, Elder Pivaral and I walked up to the Colonel’s wife’s house. We stood, quietly in front of the house. We looked at each other with a bit of bewilderment, and then we bowed our heads and gave the cursing, ‘Heavenly Father. In the name of Jesus Christ, and by the power of the holy Melchizedek priesthood which we bear, we leave a curse upon this house, for the wicked, racist acts of the Colonel’s wife. And we do so in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.’ Then we looked back up at the house, stomped our feet on the pavement several times (to dust off the feet), looked at each other again with some bewilderment, and then walked back home.” John Dehlin, email to Samuel R. Weber, April 10, 2007, printout in my possession.

94. Thomas Cherrington, interviewed by Samuel R. Weber, November 16, 2006.

95. Greg Prince has noted that “cursing is not considered an ordinance in the Latter-day Saint church today,” and that “no church handbook or manual lists [cursing] among official ordinances.” Prince, *Power from on High*, 108.

96. “In [some missionary] stories, when the opposition is keener, [the missionaries] are not equal to the task and are forced to bring the Lord in to fight the battle for them. In these accounts, following biblical example, the elders shake dust from their feet and thereby curse the people who have treated them ill. The Lord responds to the missionaries’ actions in a dreadful manner. In Norway a city treats missionaries harshly; they shake dust from their feet, and the city is destroyed by German shelling during the war. Throughout the world, other cities that have

mistreated missionaries suffer similar fates. Towns are destroyed in South America by wind, in Chile by floods, in Costa Rica by a volcano, in Mexico by an earthquake, in Japan by a tidal wave, in Taiwan and Sweden by fire. In South Africa a town's mining industry fails, in Colorado a town's land becomes infertile, and in Germany a town's fishing industry folds. Individuals who have persecuted missionaries may also feel God's wrath. An anti-Mormon minister, for instance, loses his job, or breaks his arm, or dies of throat cancer. A woman refuses to give missionaries water and her well goes dry. A man angrily throws the Book of Mormon into the fire only to have his own house burn down. In one story, widely known, two elders leave their garments at a laundry, and when the proprietor holds them up for ridicule, both he and the laundry burn, the fire so hot in some instances that it melts the bricks." William A. Wilson, *On Being Human: The Folklore of Mormon Missionaries* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1981), 19. The last story quoted above was still circulating in the Germany Hamburg Mission where I served from 2002–2004.

97. "I better warn you, I'm getting mad. I'm getting ready to dust off my feet on you. . . . God's going to wipe his hindparts with you and flush you down a toilet, and I say good riddance to bad rubbish." Levi S. Peterson, "The Third Nephite," *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 170.

98. Joseph F. Smith, quoted in McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 163.