

response linger, leaving us wondering who—if either of them—has it right. Can it be done differently?

Shoemaker's strength is concocting impossible situations perfectly suited to the weaknesses and contradictions at the core of each of his characters. We have here well-intentioned misogynists and benevolent racists, a cast of not-always-sympathetic characters who comfortably look down in judgment on the rest of the world. By the end of the story, their pedestals have often been knocked out from under their feet. Whether they'll stay low or scramble to rebuild them, though, remains unclear.



Priesthood Power

Jonathan A. Stapley. *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xii + 184 pp. Photographs. Endnotes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth: \$29.95. Kindle: \$9.99. ISBN: 9780190844431.

Reviewed by Gary James Bergera

For the past decade-plus, Jonathan A. Stapley (b. 1976) has authored or co-authored a series of peer-reviewed article-length essays treating various aspects of LDS priesthood ritual (expressions of what he defines as liturgy). Though Stapley's academic background is in science (he holds a PhD in food science from Purdue University), his interests have gradually shifted from developing bio-renewable natural sweeteners to tracing the serpentine contours of LDS liturgical history. This, his first book, represents an expansion of Stapley's scholarly interests as well as a significant new contribution to LDS history.

While liturgy usually refers to “public” prayer and worship,¹ Stapley broadens the term to include all forms of ritualized worship, public and private. As Stapley asserts, Mormon liturgy comprises “the services and patterns in which believers regularly participate” and which “celebrate major life events—birth, coming of age, marriage, death” (1). While the LDS temple ceremony and ordinances represent the Church’s “most notorious” liturgical practices, Stapley sees Mormon liturgy as constituting “a much larger and more complex set of rituals and ritualized acts of worship” (2). In fact, Stapley argues, Mormon liturgy literally—and Stapley means literally, not symbolically or metaphorically—orders and structures the Mormon cosmos, both now and forever throughout time and eternity. By focusing on and expanding the concept of liturgy, Stapley hopes to open “new possibilities for understanding the lived experiences of women and men in the Mormon past and Mormon present. . . . By tracing the development of the rituals and attempting to ascertain the work they have accomplished, the Mormon universe, with its complex priesthoods, authorities, and powers, becomes comprehensible” (2). (Stapley is especially interested in rank-and-file Mormons and bookends his chapters with call-outs featuring the liturgical experiences of “average” Mormons.) The remainder of Stapley’s provocative analysis addresses the history and development of such Mormon-specific liturgical practices as priesthood ordination (including women and the priesthood),

1. Samuel Johnson defined liturgy in his 1755 dictionary as “form of prayers; formulary of public devotions”; Noah Webster in his 1828 dictionary as “all public ceremonies that belong to divine service; hence, in a restricted sense, among the Romanists, the mass; and among protestants, the common prayer, or the formulary of public prayers”; the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “a form of public worship . . . a collection of formularies for the conduct of Divine service” (second definition); *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* as “a rite or series of rites, observances, or procedures prescribed for public worship in the Christian church . . .”; and the fifth edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary* as “a prescribed form or set of forms for public religious worship.”

sealings, baby blessings, healings, and the “cunning-folk traditions” of peep stones, astrology, and non-priesthood-based healing.

In each of his chapters, Stapley demonstrates an almost preternatural command of the relevant documentary sources—manuscript and printed. He also repeatedly evinces a tightly focused, scientific-like discussion that will keep scholars debating his interpretations for years. For example, in “Priesthood Ordination,” Stapley argues that over time LDS leaders gradually evolved from defining priesthood as channeling God’s power to comprising God’s power. The difference is crucially important as it allowed leaders, beginning perhaps with Church presidents Brigham Young or John Taylor, to promulgate the exclusively male ownership of the priesthood and its expression in the lives of Church members. However, since the 1970s and the rise of the women’s movement, Church officials, according to Stapley, have increasingly begun to assert a difference between priesthood authority and priesthood power. Thus, Stapley reasons, such rhetorical innovation functions to encourage women to exercise priesthood power and authority without the necessity, which currently remains unavailable to them, of holding priesthood office. While not all Church members understand and implement policy as Stapley’s interprets, his arguments offer hope to members longing for greater involvement in LDS liturgy.

In “Sealings,” Stapley builds on his notion of cosmological priesthood (more below) received as part of the 1840s Nauvoo temple liturgy as the means by which early Mormons—women and men equally—forged a new heaven on earth. Again, however, this early theology, Stapley suggests, eventually became “confusing for church leaders” (36), and Church practice moved away from focusing on salvific liturgy for the living and instead adopted a more generalized approach to salvation that targeted both the living and especially the dead (who previously were seen as unreliable “to function as links in the chain [i.e., sealing] of divine inheritance” [43]). One of the fascinating discussions in this chapter centers on the notion of “perseverance,” whereby, because of

one's eternal sealing to one's parents, one "cannot be lost but will be saved" in heaven (37). A possible corollary of this particular teaching may be found in Brigham Young's statement, during the 1845 Church trial of George J. Adams, who alleged transgressive conduct on the part of Joseph Smith's younger brother, William, that "we don't want you to say a word against W[illia]m [Smith] because [he] is bound to be saved. Joseph [Smith] got a promise of it."² Perhaps not surprisingly, such unconditional promises of salvation have since given way to a more conditionally based theology of salvation.

"Baby Blessing," "Healing, Authority, and Ordinances," and "Cunning-Folk Traditions and Mormon Authority" round out and complete Stapley's book. ("Cunning-folk" is Stapley's, and others', preferred term for "magical" or "supernatural.") Stapley tackles each topic with the same scholarly aplomb that marks his previous chapters. Stapley is a wholly original interpreter. His thoughtful arguments and analysis demand close, patient, repeated scrutiny. While Stapley's voice is distinctive and may be, at times, challenging to some readers—I periodically had to look words up and reread sentences to understand his analysis—Stapley's book is a testament to a mind alive with new ideas and ways of seeing and interpreting Mormon history and theology.

Among the more important—and novel—elements of Stapley's treatment, as I read him, is his coining and use of the term "cosmological priesthood"³ to discuss earlier, more original, notions of priesthood

2. Minutes, Mar. 15, 1845, in *Minutes of the Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1835–1893* (Salt Lake City: Privately Published, 2010), 41. William Smith remained a disruptive influence, his transgressions a continuing distraction, and he was formally expelled from the LDS Church seven months later.

3. See Jonathan Stapley, "Adoptive Sealing Ritual in Mormonism," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 3 (2011): 53–117, esp. 57; and J. Stapley, "The Cosmological Priesthood," *By Common Consent* (blog), Dec. 12, 2011, <https://bycommonconsent.com/2011/12/12/the-cosmological-priesthood/> (including comments).

power. While the LDS Church today identifies two facets of priestly authority and power—Aaronic and Melchizedek—Stapley argues for an expanded definition, one that, he believes, is firmly located in the sacred liturgy of the Nauvoo temple. For it was in the Nauvoo temple that men and women both received the power to call upon God, to be linked together forever as married and eternally sealed couples and families, promised to become gods themselves, and in some cases actually named kings and priests, queens and priestesses, with the power to bind on earth and in heaven. Important for Stapley's argument, wives were explicitly told that such blessings and powers were held in common with their husbands.

Stapley knows that his use of the term "cosmological priesthood" is idiosyncratic but hopes that it may prove useful to readers in considering his expansive notions of liturgy. For this reader, I wonder if Stapley's term may actually be understood more subversively than he intends as it seems to propose a new interpretation of priesthood. In this sense, Stapley is not merely attempting a reconstruction of the development of priesthood throughout Mormon history, he is broadening the meaning of priesthood in ways that may or may not have been foreseen by Joseph Smith and other early Mormons. According to this reading, Stapley is doing more than writing, or rewriting, history—he is attempting practical theology.

Personally, I am of two minds regarding Stapley's "cosmological priesthood." While I recognize its heuristic value, I wonder if some readers might be tempted to dismiss it as wishful thinking. Also, I wonder if Stapley's reliance on and repeated use of "cosmological priesthood" throughout the book could result in some readers concluding that such a priesthood actually exists independent of Stapley's interpretation. It remains to subsequent scholars to embrace or to reject Stapley's term.

Stapley's situating his analysis of cosmological priesthood in the Nauvoo temple seems to anticipate a thorough discussion of the temple liturgy, and especially of the culminating ordinance, the so-called second

anointing. If any LDS liturgical ordinance represents the literal creation of heaven on earth, it is the second anointing—with its promises of godship in mortality—and, thus, is the strongest evidence for Stapley's thesis. However, on these topics, Stapley demurs. He is reluctant to broach the temple ceremonies because of the vows of silence exacted from participants. Stapley's polite reticence may be understandable from a believer's position. However, I wonder if scholars within the Church may actually enjoy more freedom in discussing the parameters and meaning of the temple liturgy, including the temple endowment ceremony and practices, than they believe. Certainly, if anyone is equipped to tackle such an undertaking, it is Stapley.

On a final note, Stapley is a notably confident, self-assured writer, and does not shy away from offering critical judgments. Toward the end of his introduction, for example, he asserts that “many of the beliefs and practices of early Mormonism are now foreign to academics and believers alike” (9). In his discussion of women and the priesthood, he opines that “absent an understanding of the ‘cosmological priesthood’ and its contexts, and based on a belief that the modern liturgy concentrated within the ecclesiastical priesthood was historically normative, scholars have often distorted the past as much as clarified it” (18). Stapley may be correct in these and other criticisms. However, given the gaps in the historical record, and in view of other scholars doing their best to uncover the past, were I asked, I might recommend greater caution and generosity in evaluating the work of the writers and researchers who preceded him.

Reading Jonathan Stapley's book is an exhilarating, roller-coaster-like adventure. Virtually every page contains some intriguing insight, some surprising revelation. I don't know that it's possible to recommend *The Power of Godliness* too highly.