

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

So What Happens In an LDS Temple? New Guide Offers First-Timers Real Answers

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Peeling away some of the mystery may calm anxieties, but will it lessen the spiritual experience?

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The bride's room in the Hartford Connecticut Temple
(File photo courtesy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)

Temple rituals in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are as sacred as ever, but they recently have become far less secret.

And the increased openness is coming not from critics or cranks but from the church itself.

A few years ago, the Utah-based faith posted [photos and a video, showing and explaining the symbolic clothing](#) that members wear in temples and the garments (which some

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outsiders refer to as [“Mormon underwear,”](#) as noted in the video’s headline) that faithful Latter-day Saints don daily as an outward sign of their inner devotion.

And just last month, the church added a section to its [General Handbook](#), which spells out the specific promises participants are asked to make in temples, places where members perform their religion’s holiest ordinances.

Now comes a new book, [House of Light: Your Guide to the Temple](#), which lays out some of the “logistics and principles” of the temple-going experience.

“There are so many things people stress about when they go through for the first time,” says Utah author Rosemary Card, who owns [Q.Noor](#), which sells temple and baptism dresses. “There is so much confusion about what we can and can’t talk about.”

The reality is “we can talk about most of it,” she says in an interview, “as long as we are respectful.”

Her self-published online volume “is meant to provide the answers to questions you didn’t know you had,” Card writes in the introduction. “...Where you go, what you need to bring, what to wear, what will happen, [and] what will be expected of you.”

Card reveals none of the language the church asks templegoers to keep confidential, but she provides specific, useful advice, like when to go to the restroom, how long certain ceremonies will typically last (seven minutes for “washing and anointing”), whether temples accept cash to rent ceremonial clothing (they don’t) and how to deal with occasionally irritable temple workers (“Most of them are like real-life Santa and Mrs. Claus and some are ... a little grumpier”).

She also explores the nature of the five covenants, or promises — the laws of obedience, sacrifice, the gospel, chastity and consecration — that members make, their meanings and the scriptural foundations for them.

A question arises: Does outlining these mundane details help calm the novice’s anxieties or does it reduce the awe that mystery can provide?

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Temple Rites a 'Worst-Kept Secret'



Temple in Kirtland, Ohio. (Tribune file photo)

The church has been building temples since its earliest days in the 1830s, the first one in [Kirtland, Ohio, dedicated on March 27, 1836](#), though the ceremonies have changed and evolved through the ensuing decades.

The main ceremony, called the [endowment](#), is a ritual reenactment of the creation, Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, mortal experience, and the return to God's presence. At each stage of this progression, participants make covenants in the name of Jesus Christ.

Temple rituals also include an eternal marriage ceremony, known as a sealing, and baptism by proxy in the name of ancestors who died without having a chance to join what members believe to be the true church.

Critics assert that some of the [temple rites were adapted from Freemasonry](#) after church founder Joseph Smith participated in that fraternal order in Nauvoo, Ill. They point to the common use of symbols such as the all-seeing eye, the fraternal handshake and the compass and square.

Mormon scholars say the comparison is overdrawn.

"Resemblances between the two rituals are limited to a small proportion of actions and words," [Kenneth Godfrey writes in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism](#). "...Latter-day Saints see their temple ordinances as fundamentally different from Masonic and other rituals and think of similarities as remnants from an ancient original."

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Those elements and wording — known as “signs and tokens” — are among the aspects that members promise not to reveal.

They are also among the ones church opponents, starting in the 1840s, most gleefully have sought to expose.

“Renegade Mormons ensured that the temple rites were among the nation’s worst-kept secrets,” historian Spencer Fluhman writes in a recent essay, “Secrets and the Making of Mormon Moments.”

In 1911, a Utah entrepreneur [offered to sell 68 photos secretly taken](#) of Salt Lake Temple interiors to then-church President Joseph F. Smith for \$100,000.

An outraged Smith reportedly responded, “I will make no bargain with thieves and traffickers in stolen goods.”

Instead, Smith tapped future apostle James E. Talmage to write about Latter-day Saint temples with extensive photos of exterior and interior views as well as detailed commentary.

Talmage’s book, [*The House of the Lord: A Study of Holy Sanctuaries, Ancient and Modern*](#), became a monumental work on the topic. It remains in print more than a century later.

That didn’t stop others, though, from further attempts to reveal temple secrets.

In the 1980s, many evangelical churches showed a film, “The God Makers.” Over its eerie audio tracks, Fluhman writes, a voice introduces viewers to what it says are “an authentic, firsthand, first-time ever on film reenactment of secret Mormon temple ceremonies.”

Even during Mitt Romney’s 2012 U.S. presidential campaign, [Catholic writer and blogger Andrew Sullivan posted footage](#) of the entire endowment ceremony, secretly filmed by an ex-Mormon.

Silence and secrecy can “oppress and marginalize as well as unite and fortify,” Fluhman writes. They can “mystify and reinforce power as easily as pull it down.”

Contemporary writers should “seek that space between taboo and fetish with regard to secrets,” he says. “Ideally, [scholars] steer clear of both the zealotry of determined secret keeping and the zealous compulsion to expose.”

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How to Build Real Reverence



A sealing room in the Rome Italy Temple
(Photo courtesy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)

To [University of Utah religious studies scholar Colleen McDannell](#), reverence is not created by withholding information.

“Nothing good comes from keeping secrets,” says McDannell, an expert on Catholicism who has studied Catholic abuse cases. “In today’s world, transparency is crucial and almost nothing is secret. If it is, it’s suspicious.”

Religious wonder, she says, is born of relationships, beliefs and expectations.

“What you bring into a religious space is what creates a sense of awe,” McDannell says. “You can feel moved in a big, bright modern Swedish church in the same way as in a dark, ancient Gothic church — depending on what perspective you bring with you.”

The scholar, who once was criticized for writing about Latter-day Saint garments as an outsider, applauds the church and Card for publishing accurate information about temple clothing.

What gives temple undergarments their sacredness is not their secrecy, McDannell says, “but their intimacy — they are worn against the skin and cover all the private parts involved in intimate acts like sex and nursing.”

The church’s website has [photos of the undergarments](#) for men and women, accompanied by explanations of their symbolic meanings.

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Beyond a few principles and guidelines about the proper wearing and caring of the garment, Card writes, “there is no other formal instruction on the garment. When and how you wear your garment is completely between you and your Heavenly Parents.”

Speaking of Sex



The Garden Room in the Idaho Falls Temple
(Photo courtesy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)

One of the covenants members make in the temple is to live the “law of chastity.”

Many Latter-day Saints, however, don’t fully understand what that means beyond forgoing sex before marriage, Card writes, so she invited Utah [therapist Julie de Azevedo Hanks](#), who has explored the issue extensively, to write the section on chastity.

“The law of chastity is about making a promise to reserve your sexuality for a legal marriage relationship according to God’s laws,” Hanks writes in the book. “...The law of chastity is not only about a behavioral standard regarding sexuality, it is also a state of your heart and mind.”

Jesus said lusting after someone is a form of adultery, which seems to condemn any sexual thoughts, she writes. But having “sexual feelings and desires is a normal part of the human experience.”

The lust that Jesus decried was about “coveting and envy,” she writes. Sin is looking at another “as a sexual object...failing to see them as a fellow human being.”

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The law of obedience also has been misunderstood, Card says. “Our motivating factor for obedience should be love.”

Though the word “love” does not appear in the endowment script, the business owner says that the two “great commandments” mentioned by Jesus — love of God and love of neighbor — underpin all of the promises.

Why Not Discuss Sacred Matters?



The Celestial Room in the Jordan River Temple in South Jordan
(Photo courtesy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)

Tens of thousands of Utahns and hundreds of thousands worldwide have toured Latter-day Saint temples before they were religiously dedicated.

They’ve seen altars and bride rooms and baptismal fonts and locker rooms — and hundreds of church-approved photos online.

There are several temple “prep” books, Card says, but none clearly spells out the expected commitments.

“A friend was so anxious about it that she went to a shady online website and read the entire script,” Card says. “She felt guilty but said she needed to know what she was covenanting to. What if it was something she disagreed with?”

The book is full of scripture references, relevant talks by church authorities, historical analysis and various reference books. Each section also contains prompts for making journal entries and for extended discussions.

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Card rejects the idea that sacredness is somehow attached to continued secrecy. That's the same justification some members have used to discourage dialogue about a female deity.

"They always say we don't talk about Heavenly Mother," Card says, "because she's so sacred."

That might have been a fair assessment if the standard were applied consistently to all the doctrines considered holy, she says, like [Joseph Smith's "First Vision,"](#) Christ in Gethsemane or on the cross.

But members discuss those latter ideas endlessly, she says, which screams the prohibition on Mother in Heaven talk has been "a silencing tactic" — besides the [church openly writes about Heavenly Mother on its website.](#)

In Card's view, the end of excessive, unnecessary secrecy about the temple can make the experience, well, all the more sacred.

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<https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2021/02/06/so-what-happens-an-lds/>

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