

# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MORMONISM

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*The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure  
of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

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Christians (the Former-day Saints of the New Testament) but differentiate the two time periods. Also, they are striving to become sanctified through obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel.

The name unites three themes: (1) the *restoration* theme, since the term has a New Testament origin; (2) the *preparation* theme, since the Saints in the latter days anticipate the coming of Christ; and (3) the *revelation* theme, since the name was received by revelation and recorded in Doctrine and Covenants, section 115.

It is interesting to some that the people of the DEAD SEA SCROLLS also called themselves Latter-day Saints. These individuals believed themselves tied to the PROPHETS and the COVENANT (hence the name Saint) and anticipated the imminent coming of the MESSIAH (hence the term Latter-day).

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## LAW

[Four different articles treat diverse aspects of LDS beliefs and experience with law. Two of the articles are grouped below:

### Overview

#### Divine and Eternal Law

*The Overview discusses the LDS concept of law in general and of divine and eternal law in particular. Divine and Eternal Law summarizes and describes the references in LDS scripture to the central role of law as pertaining to God.*

*The article Nature, Law of discusses the absence of a developed tradition of moral natural law among Latter-day Saints and describes their limited efforts to provide rational explanations for the laws of nature as described by the natural sciences. Constitutional Law summarizes the LDS respect for civil law in general and American constitutional law in particular.*

*The experience of Latter-day Saints and the Church in the courts is reported in Legal and Judicial History. Book of Mormon legal traditions and experience are described in Book of Mormon, Government and Legal History in. Regarding LDS views on specific aspects of civil*

*law, see also Church and State; Civic Duties; Civil Rights; Constitution of the United States of America; Freedom; and Politics: Political Teachings. For information on other law-related topics, see Justice and Mercy; Law of Moses; and Witnesses, Law of. Commandments and gospel principles are often referred to as "laws"; on these subjects, see such entries as Commandments; Consecration: Law of Consecration; and Obedience.]*

## OVERVIEW

Three types of laws exist: spiritual or divine laws, laws of nature, and civil laws. Latter-day Saints are deeply and consistently law-oriented, because laws, whether spiritual, physical, or civil, are rules defining existence and guiding action. Through the observance of laws, blessings and rewards are expected, and by the violation of laws, suffering, deprivation, and even punishment will result.

Basic LDS attitudes toward law and jurisprudence are shaped primarily by revelations contained in the Doctrine and Covenants, and by explanations given by the Presidents of the Church. God is, by definition, a god of order: "Behold, mine house is a house of order, saith the Lord God, and not a house of confusion" (D&C 132:8). God and law are inseparable, for if there is no law, there is no sin; and if there is no sin, there is no righteousness, "and if these things are not there is no God" (2 Ne. 2:13). Law emanates from God through Christ. Jesus said, "I am the law, and the light" (3 Ne. 15:9), and God's word is his law (D&C 132:12).

In an 1832 revelation, Joseph SMITH learned that law is a pervasive manifestation of God's light and power: "The light which is in all things . . . is the law by which all things are governed" (D&C 88:12–13). In connection with both spiritual law and natural law, no space or relationship occurs in which law is nonexistent. "There are many kingdoms; for there is no space in the which there is no kingdom; . . . and unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions" (D&C 88:37–38).

There are as many laws as there are kingdoms, which reflect greater or lesser light and truth. Some laws are higher, and some are lower. The kingdom of God operates in accordance with higher laws befitting God's exalted station, while the earth and all mortality and other kingdoms belong to lower spheres and therefore operate under different laws. The degree of glory that a person or thing can abide depends on how high a law he, she, or it is able to abide (D&C 88:22–25).

Lower laws are subsumed in higher laws. If people keep the laws of God, they have “no need to break the laws of the land” (D&C 58:21). Similarly, when the law of Moses was fulfilled by Jesus Christ, it was subsumed in him.

Existence is a process of progressively learning to obey higher law. Obeying and conforming to law are understood as a sign of growth, maturity, and understanding, and greater obedience to law produces greater freedom (D&C 98:5) and associated blessings (D&C 130:20–21).

At all levels, the principles of AGENCY and ACCOUNTABILITY are in effect: People may choose which laws to obey or to ignore, but God will hold them accountable and reward them accordingly (D&C 82:4). This is not viewed as a threat; law’s purpose is not to force or punish but to guide and provide structure.

In the divine or spiritual sphere, law is not the product of a philosophical or theoretical search for what is right or good. It emanates from deity and is revealed through Jesus Christ and his prophets.

Spiritual laws given by God to mankind are commonly called COMMANDMENTS, which consist variously of prohibitions (“thou shalt not”), requirements (“thou shalt”), and prescriptions (“if a man”). The commandments are uniformly coupled with promised blessings for faithful compliance. Thus, Latter-day Saints describe themselves as covenant people who may be rewarded now, and in the hereafter, for their faithfulness. Many such COVENANTS are bilateral in character; that is, members make personal commitments in a variety of formal ordinances to keep in accord with certain commandments.

Spiritual laws, or God’s commandments, are generally understood to have been purposefully decreed by a loving Heavenly Father, who desires to bring to pass the exaltation of his spirit children. Thus, “there is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated” (D&C 130:20). Latter-day Saints believe that God knows or stipulates all types of acts and forbearances required by all individuals in order for them to attain that blessed eternal state of exaltation and that he has revealed these requirements to humankind through his servants. No law given of God is temporal (D&C 29:34).

“Irrevocability” in the foregoing quotation connotes permanence and unchangeability. Since

God cannot lie, the commandments and promises contained in his covenants with people will not be revoked, though he can revoke a specific commandment to individuals when they have disobeyed (D&C 56:3–6). The fundamentals are not situational and do not ebb and flow with changing concepts of morality or theology outside the Church. The President of the Church is a prophet of God who receives revelations and inspiration to interpret and apply those basic principles as human circumstances change.

In accordance with the principle of agency, God commands, but he does not compel. No earthly mechanism exists for the enforcement of God’s laws. The prophet teaches the members correct principles, and they are expected to govern themselves. Missionary work and education of Church members are carried out so that people may make informed choices. They are taught that making an informed choice results either in a blessing (current or deferred) or an undesirable consequence (current or deferred). Ignorance of the law is considered a legitimate excuse. Because of the atonement of Jesus Christ, repentance is not required of those “who have ignorantly sinned” or “who have died not knowing the will of God concerning them” (Mosiah 3:11), even though failure to abide by the commandment may result in the loss of blessings that would flow from proper conduct. In most cases, violators of divine law can escape the punishment connected with the offense by repentance, the demands of justice having been satisfied by the atonement of Christ in the interest of all (*see* JUSTICE AND MERCY).

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#### DIVINE AND ETERNAL LAW

LDS revelation emphasizes the existence and indispensability of law. The relation of divine law to other species of law has not been given systematic treatment in Mormon thought as it has in traditional Christian theology (e.g., the *Summa Theolo-*

gica of Thomas Aquinas). But distinctive observations about divine law and eternal law may be drawn from Latter-day scriptures and related sources.

Aquinas identified four categories of law: (1) eternal law, which is coextensive with the divine mind and with the overall purpose and plan of God; (2) natural law, which addresses mankind's proper participation in eternal law but is discovered by reason without the assistance of revelation and promulgation; (3) divine positive law, also a part of the eternal law, which pertains to the SACRAMENTS and ORDINANCES necessary to the attainment of mankind's supernatural end made known by revelation; and (4) man-made positive law, which regulates the affairs of mankind not specifically addressed by God's law (e.g., laws that regulate such things as corporations, stocks, bonds, wills, and trusts) or which mandate the natural law with the power of the state.

LDS sources affirm laws roughly corresponding to each of these four types. Unlike traditional Jewish and Christian theologies, which place God outside of, and antecedent to, nature, however, LDS theology places God within nature.

"Divine" laws are instituted by God to govern his creations and kingdoms and to prescribe behavior for his offspring. Such law, in the terms of Aquinas's categories, would be divine positive law (i.e., law existing by virtue of being posited or enacted by God). Some Latter-day Saints believe that "eternal" law is self-existent, unauthored law, which God himself honors and administers as a condition of his perfection and Godhood. It should be noted that the adjectives "divine" and "eternal" do not have fixed usages in writing (*see* TIME AND ETERNITY).

Latter-day scriptures and other sources do not explicitly state that eternal law exists independently or coeternally with God. This characteristic of eternal law is sometimes inferred, however, from two concepts that do have support in scripture and other LDS sources:

1. God is governed (bound) by law. Latter-day scriptures state that "God would cease to be God" if he were to allow mercy to destroy justice, or justice to overpower mercy, or the plan of redemption to be fulfilled on unjust conditions (Alma 42:13). Scriptures further state that "I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say" (D&C 82:10),

implying that God by nature and definition—not by any external coercion—is righteous and trustworthy. Some Church writers have said that "[God] himself governs and is governed by law" (*MD*, p. 432) and that "the Lord works in accordance with natural law" (*DS* 2:27). They likewise speak of "higher laws" that account for providence and miracles.

2. Intelligence and truth were not created; they are coeternal with God. "Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be. All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence" (D&C 93:29–30). Joseph Smith expanded upon this teaching in his KING FOLLETT DISCOURSE, stating that "we infer that God had materials to organize the world out of chaos. . . . Element had an existence from the time he had. The pure principles of element . . . had no beginning, and can have no end. . . . The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is coeternal with God himself" (*TPJS*, pp. 350–53). If truth and intelligence were not created by God and are coeternal with him, it may be that they are ordered by and function according to eternal laws or principles that are self-existent. This may be implied in Joseph Smith's phrase "laws of eternal and self-existent principles" (*TPJS*, p. 181).

Consistent with the eternal laws, God fashions and decrees laws that operate in the worlds he creates and that set standards of behavior that must be observed in order to obtain the blessing promised upon obedience to that law. Joseph Smith taught that "[God] was the first Author of law, or the principle of it, to mankind" (*TPJS*, p. 56).

Latter-day scriptures emphasize the pervasive nature of divine law: "[God] hath given a law unto all things, by which they move in their times and their seasons" (D&C 88:42). "This is the light of Christ . . . which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space—The light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne" (D&C 88:7, 12–13).

These same sources suggest, however, that divine law operates within the domain to which it inherently pertains or is assigned by God and, therefore, has limits or bounds: "All kingdoms



have a law given; and there are many kingdoms; for there is no space in which there is no kingdom; and there is no kingdom in which there is no space, either a greater or a lesser kingdom. And unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions” (D&C 88:36–38).

The above references apparently pertain to descriptive law—that is, the divine law that operates directly upon or through physical and biological orders (*see* NATURE, LAW OF).

Other laws of God are prescriptive. They address the free will of man, setting forth standards and rules of behavior necessary for salvation and for social harmony. Latter-day Saints embrace such prescriptive commands of God as found in the TEN COMMANDMENTS and the SERMON ON THE MOUNT. Latter-day revelation also confirms that blessings and salvation come through compliance with divine laws: “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:20–21). “And they who are not sanctified through the law which I have given unto you, even the law of Christ, must inherit another kingdom, even that of a terrestrial kingdom, or that of a telestial kingdom” (D&C 88:21).

Of these prescriptive laws or commandments of God, LDS teachings tend to emphasize the following characteristics: (1) the extent of the divine laws revealed to mankind may vary from dispensation to dispensation, according to the needs and conditions of mankind as God decrees; (2) they are given through and interpreted by his prophets; (3) they are relatively concise, but “gentle” or benevolent, given to promote the happiness he has designed for his children (*TPJS*, pp. 256–57); and (4) they are efficacious for mankind as God’s harmony with eternal law was, and is, efficacious for him, and will bring to pass the exaltation of his righteous children.

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## LAW OF ADOPTION

The house of Israel in a spiritual and eternal perspective will finally include all who are the true followers of Jesus Christ. Although those of the direct blood lineage of the house of ISRAEL are genealogically the sheep of God’s fold, they must fulfill all the spiritual conditions of discipleship. Those not of the blood of Israel can become Israel through adoption (cf. Rom. 8:14; Gal. 3:7, 29; 4:5–7; Matt. 3:9; JST Luke 3:8; Abr. 2:10), through the principles and the ordinances of the gospel: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; repentance of sins; baptism by water and reception of the HOLY GHOST; and enduring to the end.

In a larger sense, everyone must be adopted into the family of God in order to enjoy the fulness of his blessings in the world to come. As the Only Begotten of the Father in the flesh, Jesus is the only natural HEIR and therefore the only one whose birthright is the kingdom of his Father. If others are to qualify as joint-heirs with Christ in his Father’s kingdom, they must be fully adopted by God.

The adoption process is, in the Prophet Joseph SMITH’s words, “a new creation by the Holy Ghost” (*TPJS*, p. 150). As summarized in the Doctrine and Covenants, individuals who enter into the COVENANT and “magnify their calling” are “sanctified by the Spirit unto the renewing of their bodies. They become the sons of Moses and of Aaron and the seed of Abraham, and the church and kingdom, and the elect of God” (D&C 84:33–34).

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## LAW OF MOSES

Distinctive views concerning the law of Moses and its relationship to Christ and to the attainment of individual salvation are set forth in the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that this law was given by God to MOSES, that it formed part of a peculiar COVENANT of obedience