

Revelatory Economics

Discerning Prudence and Realizing Theosis in Latter-day Saint Southern Alberta

By

C. William Campbell

B.A., University of Victoria, 2011

M.A., University of Guelph, 2015

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək'wəŋən (Songhees and Xwsepsem/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək'wəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how Latter-day Saints in southern Alberta use revelation as an epistemological technique for discerning prudence in social-material matters. Drawing on long-term participant observation with Latter-day Saints in Cardston, Alberta, Canada, I show that revelation functions not only as a spiritual experience but as a structured knowledge practice for deciding what to do in matters as diverse as household finance, welfare, entrepreneurship, and municipal policy. Revelation is not an alternative to rational calculation but a technique for bringing together rational calculation, scripture, affect, and social obligations (among other things) in the pursuit of discerning prudence.

I argue that the best way to understand how and why Latter-day Saints subject economic decisions to revelation is as a way of cultivating what I call *divine-human capital*, the capacities that constitute a person's latent characteristics as divine beings *in potentia*. In Latter-day Saint theology, humans are already the same kind of being as God, distinguished only by degree. *Exaltation* names the gradual realization of this inherent divinity and is a form of human theosis. Within this continuous human-divine framework, discernment through revelation becomes a means of developing attributes such as obedience, contextual judgement, and covenantal alignment, capacities understood as both inherently human and, when fully realized, constitutive of exaltation. By cultivating these attributes through the practiced deployment of revelation in even mundane moments of economic discernment, each decision becomes part of the incremental realization of theosis. The revelatory technique therefore both expresses an inherent subjectivity and increments the individual towards a fuller realization of that subjectivity.

Out of this analysis of revelation in LDS economic life I develop a broader analytic. *Revelatory economics* describes economic epistemological practices that both disclose and cultivate a subjectivity. Rather than treating decisions about work, care, or finance as merely instrumental, the analytic reveals how people use techniques of discernment that draw on an understanding of who they already take themselves to be and to become that person more fully. In this framework, economic reasoning is simultaneously epistemological and ontological, a way of knowing what is prudent and of shaping the self toward a desired form.

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Latter-day Saints have good reason to be wary of the ways scholars might portray their tradition, and accepting my scrutiny was not without its risks. I am grateful to the Latter-day Saints in Cardston, Alberta, who welcomed me into their congregations, homes, and who trusted me with their time, their thinking, and their faith.

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I am grateful to my parents for countless things, but one that often goes unacknowledged in our family is the privilege their success has afforded us as their children. The decision to pursue a PhD is, among other things, a financial risk. I do not know that I could have taken that risk if I had not felt, however quietly, that there was a floor beneath me. Others with equal ability and desire may never make that same decision, not for lack of ambition, but because the risk looks entirely different when there is no safety net. My parents gave me more than material stability. They made certain decisions thinkable.

Additionally, they contributed in more specific ways to this dissertation, too. My mother made obvious efforts to prepare me to begin fieldwork in Cardston. Just as one example, being familiar with the region and the culture of southern Alberta as she is, she prepared a genealogy of my family tree that connected my ancestry to a prominent lineage that would be recognized by many Cardston residents. Something only she would have thought to do, and it did prove useful on at least two occasions. Always looking out for me.

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1.0 Questions

For many, the pathway from non-member to member in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) begins with questions. The 18 to 25-year-old volunteer missionaries, numbering in the tens of thousands and dispersed among nearly every nation on earth, all carry with them a lesson manual called *Preach My Gospel* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023b). Tasked with finding people who may be interested in becoming converts to the religion, *Preach My Gospel* instructs missionaries to be on the lookout for people who wonder: Does God exist? Why are there so many churches? Why do I have so many challenges? How can I be happier? In the face of these questions and others, “The gospel helps us answer life’s most searching questions,” the manual asserts (30). This has given rise to iconic and now familiar media representations of male missionaries in white shirts and ties or female missionaries in modest skirts and blouses knocking on doors and greeting those who answer with a question. The hope, on the part of the missionaries, is that the question they pose on the doorstep might resonate with the questions the resident wonders about, and to which the missionary asserts they have the answers.

Even the process of preparing to be an effective LDS missionary is premised on questions. Missionaries studying *Preach My Gospel* are instructed to prayerfully consider hundreds of questions while preparing to teach investigators,¹ such as: What invitation will we extend to help the person build faith in Christ and make progress? How will we help the person learn the doctrine? What can we do to help people keep their commitments after we leave? While ample supplementary content is provided to missionaries to help answer these questions, LDS missionaries these days, unlike their counterparts from decades past, do not memorize

¹ Investigator is the term used by Latter-day Saints to refer to non-members of the Church who express an interest in learning more about the Church.

rote lessons to routinely deploy. They are instead encouraged to let “the Spirit” or “Holy Ghost”² guide them when determining what lessons to teach, in what order, and which invitations to extend to interested parties.

This does not mean missionaries get to run wild with imagination and speculation (as caricatured in the Broadway hit *The Book of Mormon*). For Latter-day Saint missionaries, teaching is grounded in a rigorously disciplined study of the materials that the Church provides. This includes *Preach My Gospel*, as well as the various books of LDS scripture, lesson manuals, and Church magazines. Missionary life is organized around this study, with hours of it built into the daily schedule. Missionaries attend regular training sessions with peers and leaders. This rigorous study is followed by the development of detailed and structured lesson plans specific to each investigator. Because this process is always carried out in pairs, missionaries refine one another’s approach, creating a built-in system of accountability and peer review.

These practices are what scholars would call epistemological techniques, which refers to repeatable and structured efforts that place a person in a position to know something. In this case, they are the techniques through which missionaries come to know what they should teach and how they should teach it. Yet this work has limits. No amount of study can resolve the impossibility of fully knowing another person. Missionaries spend only a short time with those they teach, and they cannot fully grasp their histories, their concerns, or what will most effectively resonate with them.

This is where reliance on the Holy Ghost becomes essential. After all their study and planning, missionaries ask God to confirm that what they have prepared will be effective, or to

² In Latter-day Saint usage, “the Holy Ghost” is the preferred term for what many other Christian denominations call “the Holy Spirit.” Latter-day Saints also use the phrase “the Spirit,” but in everyday speech “the Holy Ghost” is more common, and the terms are understood to be synonymous.

help them modify it if it will not. The entire process of disciplined study and careful preparation is what makes this reliance possible to begin with, because without such preparation the Holy Ghost is unlikely to speak, or, if he does speak, he is unlikely to be heard. In Latter-day Saint practice, relying on the Holy Ghost is not a substitute for preparation but the means through which the limits of human knowledge are addressed. This is what is meant by “letting the Spirit guide,” and the technique is intended to help missionaries answer the most important missionary question: “How can I effectively teach the gospel to this specific individual?”

Like LDS missionary work, this dissertation is the result of numerous layered, overlapping, and sometimes seemingly divergent questions: questions about Mormonism, capitalism, what constitutes “economics,” social obligation, the nature of holy texts, received truths, and how people know what to do in life.

These nebulous, conceptual questions are often what underpin more grounded questions that addressed day-to-day life in specific times and places. Questions like: Why was a large vending machine that dispensed nothing to purchasers deployed to a Calgary shopping mall during Christmas? Why did a retiree-aged couple want to provide room and board to two strangers at a rate well below the market value? Why are there so many women selling baked goods on Facebook in southern Alberta? Why was the Cardston municipal swimming pool closed on a seemingly random weekend during the busy summer months? How does water move around southern Alberta? And why are some people upset that an international charitable organization uses perfectly legal tax laws to move money from one nation state to another while others admire this tactic?

Other questions that informed this work were more inward-oriented: How useful are interviews for the kind of research I conduct? How much can I write about interactions I observed while still upholding the ethical standards of my discipline? Are people telling me the truth? Am I telling the truth? How much of a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints am I? What would my LDS parents say about all this?

Like missionaries preparing to teach an investigator about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, my approach to this dissertation has been premised on asking countless questions. Unlike missionaries, however, I have not posed these questions to God. I have posed them to interlocutors, colleagues, friends, and family. The answers I have arrived at have not been verified through communication with a divine being. This is partly because of my own disbelief and skepticism, but mostly it is because I do not imagine that the answers which I have developed are verifiable truths. They are arguments. I intend them to be compelling, of course, but they remain open to debate.

After all, in the discipline as it is presently practiced, few anthropologists would assert that the answers we arrive at are absolute truths. In an important moment for the discipline, Clifford Geertz (1973) asserted that “anthropological writings are ... fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are ‘something made,’ ‘something fashioned,’—the original sense of the meaning of *fictiō*—not that they are false, unfactual, or merely ‘as if’ thought experiments” (15). Others have called our efforts as anthropologists a “craft” (Ingold 2008), pointing to how the conclusions we draw are at once something skillfully constructed, fabricated, devised, and created, but nonetheless real. There is no “true” chair, but all the chairs that have been crafted are certainly real, with some being more compelling than others—I have, after all, sat on some mightily uncomfortable chairs. Like a chair, anthropological writings are crafted arguments, some more compelling than others. This disciplinary stance toward knowledge provides a useful contrast to the LDS context.

Among the most fervent Latter-day Saints, knowledge is not usually approached as a matter of crafting persuasive arguments. They, unlike me, live in a world where there are correct answers to effectively every question that can ever be posed. Not merely compelling answers, but *best, right* answers, that are *knowable*. This might sound like I am making a claim about Mormonism that resonates with a strong interpretation of anthropology’s “ontological turn” (Costa and Fausto 2010; Henare et al. 2007; Viveiros de Castro [2007] 2014), suggesting that

Latter-day Saints inhabit and interact in a world entirely distinct from that of the rest of us (or, at least, different from mine). But that would be a distraction and, more importantly, it would be inaccurate, and the LDS case itself demonstrates why. Mormonism is a proselytizing tradition, and many of its unique features—missionaries, baptisms for the dead, revelation—presupposes that non-members can understand, evaluate, and be persuaded by LDS truth claims. A tradition premised on radical ontological difference could not coherently send nineteen-year-olds door to door to explain it.

Moreover, the Latter-day Saints I spoke with regularly incorporated secular intellectual frameworks into their own thinking, holding LDS theological commitments alongside commitments foundational to secular liberal thought, even when each of those commitments sit in genuine tension. What this suggests is not that Mormonism is simply a tradition inherently compatible with Western liberal democracy, but that its adherents are practiced navigators of multiple overlapping frameworks. What differs is not the world itself, but the epistemological techniques they deploy to discern the right course of action within it.

That said, I do not reject the ontological turn wholesale. Its more modest methodological ambition is that ethnographic encounters should allow emic concepts to unsettle and challenge the analyst's own categories. This is precisely what this dissertation attempts. The analytical concepts I develop here did not arrive as pre-formed tools that I imposed on Latter-day Saint life from without. They emerged from taking seriously how my interlocutors talked about their own practices, using their own terms. What those practices are, and what they reveal about how knowledge and selfhood are organized in LDS life, is where the analysis begins.

In Latter-day Saint life, every situation has a most correct path forward. This does not mean that God dictates trivial decisions, or that every choice must be posed to Him. But Latter-day Saints live with the expectation that, if they choose to ask, God can help them know what is most prudent. This help is understood to come only after they have prepared thoroughly, exercised sound judgement, and weighed the moral dimensions of the choice. Once this

groundwork is in place, they turn to the Holy Ghost for confirmation or for guidance about how to adjust what they have decided. This is the same epistemological technique missionaries use to discern what to teach, to whom, and in what way, but it is the same technique Latter-day Saints more generally can use to discern the most correct decision or path forward. This technique is called *revelation*. Understanding what revelation is for Latter-day Saints and how it functions as knowledge practice—that is, how it can be used as a way to know what one ought to do in any given situation—is a foundational objective of this dissertation.

Of course, “any given situation” would be too wide a net to cast. As foreshadowed in the questions listed earlier, my investigation into Mormonism has been more narrowly focused on a specific aspect of contemporary life: the “economic,” such as household budgeting, entrepreneurial ventures, and consumption choices. Many North Americans would consider themselves to exist within what is imaged to be a rational and rationalizable system of scarcity: “the economy.” In fact, during the most recent Canadian election, “the economy” was routinely described as the most pressing issue on voters’ minds. Subsequently, a narrow majority of voters chose to elect a banker to run the country and, by extension, the Canadian economy. Mormonism, too, operates within “the economy,” and Latter-day Saints as individuals and families live and make decisions within this system that sits at the forefront of voters’ minds. It is in this space of decision-making within an economy that my exploration of LDS revelation is contextualized. How do Latter-day Saints know what decisions to make when it comes to what we might call “economic decisions”? This is a poignant question, given how frequently Mormonism is held up as particularly fertile ground for producing good capitalists.

1.1 What Makes Latter-day Saints Good Capitalists?

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are often characterized as exceptional entrepreneurs, hard-workers, and good capitalists, perhaps even too good. This perception has been repeated so often that it has become something of a trope. In the

introduction to *The Mormonizing of American*, Mansfield (2012) asserts that there is an “undeniable link” between Mormon theology and a range of visible successes, from the Marriott Corporation to Stephen Covey to the national demand for BYU graduates. When Mitt Romney was running for President of the United States, *Christian Science Monitor* took interest in how his Latter-day Saint upbringing was believed to shape business acumen, reinforcing a broader public narrative that linked Mormonism with seemingly natural managerial and entrepreneurial skill (MacDonald 2012).

Whether this trope accurately reflects LDS life is another matter, but it is a perception of Mormons that has some early historical roots. In their accounts of the Latter-day Saint settlement of Nauvoo, Illinois, (a city the Church was forced to abandon in 1846), Historians Black (2015) and Wycoff (2009) each note how the rapid growth and economic coordination of the Saints contributed to local resentment. Nauvoo’s influx of converts and its theocratic organization under the prophetic leadership of Joseph Smith generated both religious and economic anxieties. At that time, Smith’s community implemented the Law of Consecration, a social, theological, and economic framework in which members deeded property to the Church for redistribution following under prophetic direction. This system did not reject prosperity or market exchange altogether. Rather, it redefined prosperity by subordinating property rights and surplus to centralized religious authority and collective redistribution. In that sense, the Nauvoo economy challenged liberal capitalist ideals of private competition while still pursuing material growth. Outsiders interpreted this combination of theocratic authority and alternative economic practice as threatening. Warsaw newspaper editor Thomas C. Sharp, for example, for example, portrayed the Saints as economic threats to American ideals and helped rally a mob of local businessmen who sought to drive them from Nauvoo, contributing to the violence that culminated in Smith’s martyrdom (Black 2015, 71).

The second prophet of the LDS Church, Brigham Young, presided over the exodus of Latter-day Saints from Illinois to the Salt Lake Valley. For the remainder of his life, he had a

strong, direct influence over the socio-economic trajectory of the Utah Territory's foundation. Young has been described as an entrepreneur as much as he was a religious leader. He was described as "extremely shrewd and had an abundance of foresight to utilize a science of management which would successfully guide his people in economic affairs ... All his policies were oriented toward increased economic welfare of the Church and its members" (Bolino 1959, 181). Later chapters of this dissertation will explore some of Young's specific economic innovations, but for now it is enough to note that the early project of building up The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was deeply economic in character. In that effort, how best to manage scarce resources was not just a logistical concern but a sacred imperative, one over which the prophets have claimed revelatory authority. Opposition to the Church in this period often took economic form, with critics alarmed not only by Mormon theology but by what they saw as the Saints' capacity to marshal labour, resources, and collective will.

Looking to the late 1800s, for example, historian Christine Talbot (2013) examined anti-Mormon rhetoric and identified how it was often premised on a critique that simultaneously took aim at polygamy as well as its associated economic practices, such as the consolidation of household labor and divergent inheritance structures. Critics of the LDS Church at the time objected that "leaders of a Church-ruled monopoly were getting both much married and wealthy through their theocratic authority over property and family relations" (127). Opponents expressed concern over not only the impropriety of polygamous marriages, but also the accumulation of wealth and political power in the hands of polygamous theocrats. However, as anthropologist Jon Bialecki (2022, xix) notes, "twenty-first-century Mormonism is not nineteenth-century Mormonism." The structures of authority, the economic arrangements, and even the techniques of revelation have shifted since the 1800s. Both polygamy and the Law of Consecration, at least as it was practiced in Smith's time and Young's respective eras, have effectively been abandoned in contemporary mainstream LDS practice.

Nonetheless, the business community today in North America continues to pay attention to the perceived economic successes of Latter-day Saints. Unlike nineteenth-century critics, contemporary observers are rarely hostile; they tend instead to be intrigued by, or even admiring of, the prosperity many Latter-day Saints appear to enjoy. A 2012 column from *The Economist's* "Schumpeter Blog" highlighted that while Latter-day Saints may not be a statistically prominent population in the United States, their presence in the commercial sector is disproportionately large:

Less than 2% of Americans are Mormons, yet their commercial prominence belies their numbers. Mitt Romney founded Bain Capital, a private-equity powerhouse. Jon Huntsman senior (the father of Mr. Romney's rival for the Republican crown) founded Huntsman Corporation, an \$11 billion chemicals giant. David Neeleman has founded two cut-price airlines: JetBlue in America and Azul in Brazil. Ralph Atkin started a third: SkyWest Airlines. Eric Varvel is the boss of Credit Suisse's investment bank, Harris Simmons heads Zions Bancorporation, a more local bank, and Allan O'Bryant runs the Japanese arm of Reinsurance Group of America. J.W. Marriott runs the hotel chain his father created. (Schumpeter 2012, 70)

The book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* written by Latter-day Saint Steven R. Covey (1989), has had a lasting impact on management professionals. While the book contains no explicitly theological content, its presumably secular content has been characterized by fellow Latter-day Saint and former Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen as "essentially a secular distillation of Mormon teachings" (Schumpeter 2012a). Still, 22 years after its publication, it was listed as one of *Time* magazine's "25 Most Influential Business Management Books" (Gandel 2011).

The National Science Foundation publishes data that includes the undergraduate alma mater of a doctoral recipient (Boeckenstedt 2020). Between 1998 and 2018, Brigham Young University undergraduates went on to receive 14% of the nation's total business doctorates awarded in that period. That is more than double the 176 doctorates awarded to graduates of the next closest competitor, the University of Pennsylvania. This indicates that BYU undergraduates, who are overwhelmingly members of the LDS Church, earned a disproportionately high number of doctoral degrees in business.

While such examples fuel the impression of extraordinary LDS economic capacity, broader survey data suggest that, taken as a whole, Latter-day Saints are not dramatically different from their peers. On household-level measures, LDS populations appear to fare relatively well, but not exceptionally so. According to Pew Research's 2007 Religious Landscape Survey (Pew Research Center 2009), Latter-day Saints were somewhat more concentrated in the upper-middle bracket (38% between \$50,000 and \$100,000, compared with 30% nationally) and only slightly less likely to fall into the lowest income category (22% under \$30,000, compared with 27% nationally).

More recent data (Pew Research Center 2025) tells a similar story. A greater proportion of Latter-day Saints now report household incomes above \$100,000 (29%, up from 16%), but because these figures are not inflation-adjusted, this apparent increase cannot be interpreted as distinctive LDS upward mobility. What matters more is how Latter-day Saints compare with their peers. In the most recent data, LDS income distributions continue to align closely with national patterns: 18% fall below \$30,000 (compared with 20% nationally), 19% fall between \$30,000 and \$50,000 (compared with 18%), 27% fall between \$50,000 and \$100,000 (compared with 25%), and 29% fall above \$100,000 (compared with 30%).

Taken together, these surveys show that Latter-day Saints occupy largely the same economic terrain as the United States population overall. The overall picture is one of steady middle-class stability rather than exceptional affluence. As later chapters will show, this modest

prosperity is not merely an empirical observation but often an explicit aim within LDS economic practice.

Although the income distributions of Latter-day Saints closely resemble those of the U.S. population as a whole, the perception of LDS economic exceptionalism persists. This perception continues to prompt recurring questions about why Latter-day Saints appear to succeed economically. Writers at *The Economist* (Schumpeter 2012b) have asked, “What explains the Mormons’ success?” and *Business Insider* (Groth 2011) has wondered, “What makes Mormons successful business leaders?” Similar assumptions circulate beyond journalism and industry commentary. On Reddit, for example, user MarionberryFinal1867 (2023) asked the internet, “Why do individual Mormons tend to be wealthy?” and another inquired, “Why are Mormons generally more well-off finically [*sic*]?” (Unknown 2015).

Featuring prominently in *The Economist* article, dominantly in the *Business Insider* piece, and repeatedly in the Reddit forum posts’ replies, the LDS practice of serving a mission is often deployed as an explanatory framework for LDS economic success. Missionary service is often voluntarily undertaken by young, unmarried adults, typically between 18 and 25 years old for men, or 19 and the early 20s for women. Men may serve for up to two years, while women serve up to eighteen months. Missionary service is characterized by highly disciplined daily routines, leadership development, occasions for public speaking, and other opportunities for self-improvement. Indeed, in the 2007 book *The Mormon Way of Doing Business* published by journalist Jeff Benedict, the first chapter titled “On a Mission” relates the rigours of missionary work that presumably set the stage for the book’s subjects’ future economic successes.

However foundational the missionary experience may be for instilling self-discipline, a strong work ethic, and leadership skills, the mission experience is nearly devoid of opportunities to make real world economic decisions and manage personal finances. Regardless of whether they are assigned to high cost-of-living missions such as London, England, or low-cost areas such as Kampala, Uganda, missionaries and their families contribute a flat monthly amount set

by the Church. For those in the United States and Canada this contribution is currently \$500 USD per month (up from \$400 per month prior to 2020), while in many other countries the expected contribution is lower, adjusted to local economic conditions. These contributions are pooled and redistributed so that the actual costs of missionary life are covered collectively. Then, for the duration of their 18- or 24-month missions all major expenses, including rent, utilities, vehicle transportation, gas, health care, insurance, and airfare to and from the mission field, are paid by the Church.

Across the globe, missionaries are frequently fed by local members. In my field site of Cardston, Alberta, Canada, printed calendars were circulated during Sunday services and members were encouraged to sign up to feed the missionaries. These calendars were circulated both in-person and digitally until, ideally, each day of the month was filled by a household volunteering to provide a meal. Remarkably, this ideal is achieved with surprising frequency, and sometimes even exceeded. It is not uncommon for returned missionaries to recount instances in which multiple households had signed up for the same day, requiring the missionaries to attend more than one dinner, prompting the development of strategic eating tactics to accommodate the hospitality of two hosts in a single evening.

To cover incidental costs, the Church provides missionaries with a monthly stipend that varies by geographic region. For example, male missionaries serving in Denver, Colorado, and Oakland, California between 2006 and 2011 received \$120 USD per month for incidental expenses and breakfast-oriented groceries (female missionaries received slightly more).³ Missionaries assigned to South Africa, by contrast, were allocated less. In North America, these funds were distributed via Church-issued debit cards linked to bank accounts over which the missionaries had no administrative access. While the stipend is modest and requires some

³ These amounts reflect both first-hand and second-hand knowledge of missionary stipends in these locations, during this period.

budgeting, missionaries are generally able to manage without difficulty, given how extensively the Church provides for their needs.

It is accurate, then, to characterize the economic realities of the missionary life as collectively funded and institutionally controlled. Effectively every missionary or their family contributes the same amount into the missionary system. Many are routinely reliant on the charity of other Latter-day Saints for daily nourishment. Missionary finances are centrally managed, with individual missionaries exercising little autonomy over day-to-day expenses. Moreover, they bear no financial responsibility for major costs such as rent or transportation. These characteristics of missionary life hardly reflect the realities of the liberal capitalist economy into which they are returned once their missions are complete.

Even the LDS Church itself has acknowledged that returned missionaries often lack the skills necessary to function effectively in the post-mission economy. In a 2001 General Conference address, then-prophet Gordon B. Hinckley introduced a new charitable fund oriented towards returned missionaries from outside North America. He explained that these young missionaries “work with faith and devotion. Then comes the day of their release. They return to their homes. Their hopes are high. But many of them have great difficulty finding employment because *they have no skills*” (Hinckley 2001, 52, emphasis mine). They might have developed discipline, leadership qualities, and a strong work ethic—traits often cited as explanations for perceived LDS economic success—but, by the Church’s own admission, missionaries do not learn the skills necessary to thrive in the job market or as entrepreneurs upon returning home. Cumulatively, this renders the missionary experience an inadequate explanatory framework for why Latter-day Saints are so often imagined as succeeding in capitalist economies.

The missionary experience represents only a brief period relative to the working lifetime of a Latter-day Saint. It may be foundational, but living, working, and thriving in a liberal capitalist society is a daily endeavor. Explanations that treat missionary service as the reason

for LDS prosperity rely on a simple causal model that assumes a 24- or 18- month experience can produce competent economic actors. Such accounts overlook how economic life requires ongoing responsiveness, skill development, and adaptation to changing conditions. Latter-day Saints do not simply become competent middle-class economic actors through a single formative experience such as missionary service. Rather, Latter-day Saint subjectivity, economic and otherwise, is both the object and project of daily life. What I mean by this is that many Latter-day Saints are actively working at being Latter-day Saints. They are already Latter-day Saints, certainly, but many also strive towards being more complete Latter-day Saints. In what I observed, part of this endeavor includes an economic component.

Thus, the question “What makes Latter-day Saints good capitalists?” is ultimately the wrong one to ask. It is a question that arises from perception, repetition, and selective examples, not from the ordinary economic realities most Latter-day Saints inhabit. I have examined the question here simply because it is salient in representations of Latter-day Saints and moving beyond it requires first showing its limits. Aside from its dominance and inaccuracy, this is also a question better suited to sociological analysis. My concern here is different. Rather than asking whether and why Latter-day Saints succeed as capitalists, I ask how they produce themselves as Latter-day Saints, and how economic rationalities figure into that ongoing work. This reframing aligns with anthropology's distinctive interest in subject formation, but it takes that interest somewhere specific: toward the techniques Latter-day Saints use to discern how to act prudently in economic life, what prudence means in that context, and how the very act of discernment becomes a technique of becoming.

1.2 How do “Religion” and “Economy” Relate?

There is a long-standing tradition in the social sciences of examining how diverse religious lives shape the formation of distinct economic subjects. These subjects are recognized through the economic practices they perform and the ethical commitments that animate those

practices. Most accounts of this tradition start with Max Weber (1930) who famously described how ascetic Calvinist Protestantism enabled the emergence of a new economic subject. This subject was shaped by an ethic that valorized vocation and labour as a divinely appointed "calling," compelling the believer to rigorously rationalize all aspects of life. What distinguished this subject from earlier capitalist actors was not simply that legal wealth accumulation was permitted, but that it was understood as a duty—and, crucially, as an end in itself. Weber called this the *spirit of capitalism*, and argued that it emerged and flourished specifically within the context of ascetic Calvinist Protestantism.

To build this argument, he often framed Protestantism against Catholicism, as it existed in his period of analysis, characterizing the latter as less able to cultivate the kinds of discipline and rationalised ethical reasoning that aligned with that emerging capitalist ethic (Weber [1930] 2001, 5-7, 70-71). Subsequent scholarship has shown, however, that while Catholicism may not have produced the historical conditions that generated the spirit of capitalism in Weber's account, Catholic communities have long cultivated their own forms of economic subjectivity. These are not instances of the spirit of capitalism, but they are compatible with disciplined participation in modern financial systems, shaped by distinctively Catholic moral concerns rather than Protestant ones. Hillary Kaell's (2024) study of Desjardins bank in early twentieth century Quebec demonstrates how a model of Catholic capitalism was created in the bank that blended new financial institutions with moralised ideas about thrift, national identity, and proper economic conduct. Rather than resisting capitalist development, these Catholic actors attempted to shape it in recognizably Catholic ways, creating subjects whose financial practices were framed as both economically prudent and spiritually formative.

Bryan Fields (2003) reached a similar conclusion in a different context when examining the Celtic Tiger period of Irish economic history, from 1993 to 2001. He emphasizes that this period of rapid economic expansion occurred alongside "the relatively low levels of secularisation and high levels of Catholic religiosity in Irish society at the very moment when the

economy was at its height” (6). Rather than depicting Irish prosperity as evidence of secularisation or a turn toward a Protestant economic ethic, Fields shows that Catholicism shaped Ireland’s broader economic disposition, influencing how people understood work, equity, and national development.

Taken together, these studies do not contradict Weber’s historical argument about the origins of the spirit of capitalism, but they qualify the broader assumption that Catholicism lacks the internal moral resources to shape subjectivity in ways that are compatible with that spirit. They show that Catholic actors, in different historical moments and settings, crafted forms of economic ethics that were compatible with capitalism while reframing some of its core logics in especially Catholic ways.

Similar endeavours have been made to uncover the religious influences on economic ethics, practices, and subjects in other contexts. Daromir Rudnyckyj (2019) work in Malaysia illustrates how contestations over the interpretation of Islamic teachings in debt finance have led to the development of distinctive financial instruments. Examining these ethical debates, Rudnyckyj identified different kinds of financial subjects whose moral obligations to others are structured in ways that diverge from those of secular, liberal-capitalist subjects. Rather than debt-based financial devices premised on an extractive relationship between creditor and lender, the Malaysian Islamic financial experts Rudnyckyj observed argued for equity-based financial devices on the basis that they formed relationships of partnership and risk-sharing, perceived to be more in keeping with Islamic values. Like the Islamic experts Rudnyckyj studies, Latter-day Saints also engage in economic practices that are shaped by religious moral frameworks, though they take form through different institutional and epistemological configurations.

Contributors to Dion and Pava's (2022) book *The Spirit of Conscious Capitalism* examined a wide range of religious and spiritual traditions. They sought to identify within these traditions the potential for a new kind of subject characterized by “conscious capitalism.” This

kind of capitalist subject is aware of, and strives towards, collective well-being while fostering the interdependence of stakeholders. The authors argue that many religious and spiritual traditions contain a high degree of conceptual flexibility and ethical depth, offering fertile ground for the development of alternative economic ethics. They examined traditions such as Judaism, Buddhism, Māori, and Mayan spirituality, suggesting that religiously informed economic ethics still have much to contribute to the direction the spirit of capitalism will take in the future, and not just its inception. As I will later show, Latter-day Saint economic practices likewise work to reshape capitalist subjectivity in its own distinctive way.

These studies, and others like them, examine the religious influences on economic subject-making and ethics largely within non-Protestant traditions and outside of Western European and North American contexts. My research follows more closely in the footsteps of Weber's foundational observations by examining the influence on the making of economic subjects of Mormonism, a contemporary religion that is influenced by New England-style Protestantism. Moreover, I do so within the very geography Weber (1930, 124) identified as being exemplary of the spirit of capitalism: North America.

Within that Christian-oriented, North American context, scholarly literature connecting religion and economy tends to do so in one of two ways. First, studies have pointed to the ways certain forms of Christianity deploy capitalist logics as evidence of religious authority (Barnes 2013; Bowler 2013; Coleman 2000; Marti 2012). Sometimes termed “prosperity gospel churches,”⁴ these groups portray the accumulation of wealth—especially by leaders—as a sign

⁴ I should note some disparity between the general theology of “prosperity gospel” and “prosperity gospel churches.” In the former, proponents and adherents emphasize the power that lay individuals have to obtain wealth through Christian thinking (Bowler 2013). In this instance, prosperity is open to all who can master the metaphysical techniques taught by proponents of the different prosperity gospels. Whereas in the latter term, the church as an organization and an institution displays its wealth and

of divine favour or evidence that they have been chosen by God to perform the work they are doing. This certainly echoes Weber's [1930] 2001) observations of aesthetic Calvinist Protestantism wherein the accumulation of wealth served as evidence that the individual was faithfully labouring in their vocation *qua* divine calling. Where it differs is in how the accumulation of wealth by the church and its leaders is seen as evidence that the church, as an organization, can rightfully lay claim to authority when it comes to spiritual matters. For Weber, the accumulation of wealth evidenced individual piety. Whereas in prosperity gospel churches, the wealth serves as evidence for institutional authority.

Prosperity gospel churches are certainly not specific to North America, but they are salient in the North American context. It may then be tempting to characterize the LDS Church as preaching a kind of prosperity gospel—in fact, some observers have proposed precisely this (Riess 2023b). However, I argue that this framing does not accurately capture LDS economic practice. Unlike in prosperity gospel churches, I did not observe any easy equations between the accumulation of wealth and spiritual authority or “chosen-ness.” On the contrary, in the LDS context, wealth is not treated as evidence of divine favor, nor is poverty taken as a sign of spiritual deficiency. Rather, what matters is obedience to divine revelation, even when that revelation may lead to economically disadvantageous outcomes.

A second way Christianity and economics have been shown to intersect in the North American context is in research detailing how capitalist companies have strategically deployed religious practices or invoked religious ethics in their business models to further their capitalist objective. For example, Moreton (2009) examined how the Walton family leveraged their

prosperity to indicate to observers that this organization has the divine favour of God. The emphasis here being that the church, not necessarily the individual, is blessed with prosperity as proof of spiritual authority. Though, it is certainly the case that prosperity gospel churches also often espouse a prosperity gospel.

religious values to establish the dominance of their family-oriented Walmart brand. Within the context of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Israelsen (2023) has argued that LDS business dynasties deployed aspects of LDS mythology to sustain a competitive advantage across generations.

What these scholarly investigations into prosperity gospel churches and corporate-religious strategies in Christian North America demonstrate is that capitalist practices can be used to serve religious purposes, and religion can be used to serve capitalist purposes. However, both of these approaches hover at the institutional or organizational level. My interest, by contrast, is not in what the institutional body of the LDS Church does or how it manages itself as a corporate entity. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is, after all, legally organized as a “corporation sole.” This legal structure, often used by religious organizations, names instances in which a single officer holds title to property and conducts business on behalf of the organization as a legal corporate entity. In the case of the LDS Church, this corporation sole is embodied by whomever is the current prophet *qua* president. This partially explains the reason Latter-day Saints routinely refer to the Church’s leader as “President Nelson,” for example, rather than “Prophet Nelson.” The Church did not utilize this legal mechanism until after the death of the organization’s founding prophet, Joseph Smith, perhaps accounting for why Latter-day Saints routinely refer to him as the *prophet* Joseph Smith, not the *president* Joseph Smith.

It would certainly be interesting, were it possible, to undertake an investigation into the internal economic workings of the LDS Church. At least one notable scholarly attempt has been made to that effect (Heinerman and Shupe 1985), though it is now woefully out of date. What they point to, however, highlights why such an investigation would not be possible. The corporate sole that is the LDS Church is comprised of countless other subsidiary entities such as Intellectual Reserve, Inc., Farmland Reserve, Inc., Ensign Peak Advisors, Inc. and more. I say “countless” not because the number of these corporations is literally unknowable, but

because the Church does not provide public transparency regarding the full scope of its corporate holdings. We simply do not know how many such entities exist. This lack of transparency renders any rigorous economic analysis of the Church as an institution effectively a non-starter even if such a project would be of great interest.

However, as an anthropologist, I am much more interested in inquiring after the ways living life as a Latter-day Saint informs the economic decisions one makes; it is in daily life, after all, that adherents encounter diverse messages, ideas, theories, and speculations about which economic choices are prudent or foolish, smart or naïve, ethically praiseworthy or morally suspect. I seek to take account of how those messages are repeated, shared, contested, debated, altered, and tailored to daily life as a Latter-day Saint living in a particular North American, liberal-capitalist context. This dissertation, then, is not an examination of the economics of a religion as corporation. It is a study of religious life—a space in which diverse economic understandings and ways of making sense of economic decisions circulate.

1.3 What does it mean to study religious life instead of a religion?

One way to distinguish an anthropology of religion from religious studies is in the way anthropology has treated religion as an integrated component of daily life since even the earliest years of the discipline. Religious studies, by contrast, has only more recently turned toward analysing religion in this manner. This shift was encouraged in part by Robert Orsi's ([1988] 2010) recognition that understanding the religious object of his historical inquiry, the Madonna of 115th Street celebrations in East Harlem, required more than archival research. To grasp how communities enacted and made sense of this devotion, he found that he needed to conduct fieldwork:

Over a two-year period, I traveled around New York City's outer boroughs and New Jersey, talking with people who had once lived in East Harlem; I spent many months in the old neighborhoods in

northern Manhattan, meeting older and more recent residents and community leaders. This enterprise soon became a cause of real disorientation and anxiety. Was I still doing history? How would I cite my sources? What should I do with the specifics of my fieldwork? Women cooked for me when I stopped by their homes to talk with them and their families about Italian Harlem, for example, so that much of my research was conducted over long days of eating and drinking. I came to realize that I was learning as much from how people were talking to me as from what they were telling me, as much from what was going on around the stories as from the stories themselves. Was there a place for this information in my narrative? Were such interactions even appropriate for a historian? Did I have to validate everything I was told with a printed source? Was it necessary to archive my tapes so others could scrutinize them? (Orsi [1988] 2010, xxix)

The anxieties Orsi articulates are familiar ones to anthropologists who conduct fieldwork through participant observation or, increasingly, who describe themselves as “observant participants” (Moeran 2009), since they must also wrestle with how to translate lived experience into ethnographic representation. It is thus unsurprising that only a few paragraphs later Orsi turns to ethnography and its significance for historiography and religious studies. Since religion is inseparable from daily life, religious studies scholars have, over several decades, adopted ethnography as a methodological resource, drawing on a tradition long central to anthropology, to account for what they describe as “lived religion” (Hall 1997; McGuire 2008).

I, too, examine the religious lives of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as lived religious experience, rather than as a unified or monolithic religious system. This allows me to ask questions about the relationship between religious life and economics in novel ways. Rather than surveying and identifying economic teachings found in official pronouncements, scripture, and other institutional texts, a lived religion-oriented approach attends to the lives of Latter-day Saints themselves. It seeks for recurring connections, themes,

and points of focus that routinely contribute to the formation of an LDS economic subjectivity. This approach enables me to focus on the ways different kinds of economics are taught, fostered, reinforced, exchanged, rejected, and altered through the complex, embodied, and contextualized social interactions that make up daily religious life. Instead of deriving an ideal-type economic subject from doctrinal assertions, I work inductively from observed religious life to describe the salient characteristics that constitute economic life among Latter-day Saints.

Such a practice-oriented approach (Bourdieu [1972] 1977; Ortner 2009) to LDS economic life is necessarily time- and place-specific. This means that I do not strive towards identifying a fixed set of normative LDS economic practices; as a lived religious tradition that spans the globe, I presume that such practices are globally diverse and temporally contingent. A nascent and emergent anthropology of the LDS Church is trending towards confirming that suspicion (Aikau 2012; Colvin and Brooks 2018; O'Brien 2023; Palmer 2024). Though, as anthropologist Jon Bialecki (2022) reflected with respect to both the discipline's outlook on Mormonism and his own, there exists a "widespread (though rarely explicit) anthropological disdain for Mormonism" partly premised on the perception that "the religion is crushingly conformist" (18-19). Bialecki thoroughly rejects this view, and my own research supports this rejection. Latter-day Saints draw on a shared repertoire of values and authoritative texts, yet they interpret and apply these resources in diverse and sometimes divergent ways, which means that consensus in principle often coexists with variation, and at times disagreement, in economic practice.

Readers should understand, then, that the economic practices and perspectives examined in this monograph are specific to the site of my fieldwork: Cardston, Alberta, Canada. While these may share affinities with broader Latter-day Saint populations, they should not be taken as representative of a homogeneous LDS subjectivity that spans time and place. In fact, highlighting the diverse ways Latter-day Saints draw on diverse kinds of revelation to inform their economic decisions and fuel disputes about economic choices is integral to my analysis.

Even within this limited context, Latter-day Saints do not all arrive at the same solutions to economic problems. What many do share, however, is a commitment to pursuing those solutions through the same epistemological tool: revelation.

My approach to LDS economic practices also recognizes that Latter-day Saints' knowledge of Church teachings is specific to each individual person, especially when it comes to economic matters. People do not have encyclopedias of LDS theology memorized. The broader corpus of LDS scripture, official pronouncements, historical documents, and personal journals of important LDS figures is immensely vast. It has accumulated over nearly two centuries, it continues to expand through ongoing revelation, and it contains multiple layers of teaching that address different audiences, times, and purposes. For these reasons, it cannot yield a single authoritative stance on economic life. Instead of attempting such a synthesis, I examine the economic rationalities Latter-day Saints choose to circulate among themselves in specific times and spaces. They share and interact with certain authoritative texts while disregarding others, following a flow loosely directed—but hardly determined—by the institutional body of the LDS Church. Readers familiar with the tradition may sometimes find themselves wondering why I did not include this General Conference address or that scripture in my analysis. Simply put, it is because they did not come up during the conversations I had nor in the observations I made. I prioritize the religious texts and historical stories which I observed being used by my interlocutors to make sense of economic practices.

That is not to say that an attention to practice is absent from this dissertation. But it needs to be said that much of what constitutes LDS religious practice is the sharing of stories. To simultaneously paraphrase and alter an observation made about the Mormon Transhumanist Association by Jon Bialecki (2022, 10), “to a considerable degree, language is one of the chief products of [Mormonism].” A core component of LDS practice each Sunday is the sharing and circulation of theologically informed rhetoric, pithy stories that reflect shared truisms, snippets of half-remembered quotations that index shared understandings, and routine assertions of

knowledge. This sharing of language *is* a practice, amongst many others, that reflects the ways Latter-day Saints try to produce each other as ideal Latter-day Saints.

Because of this important and inescapable language-oriented practice, in this dissertation I frequently pause to unpack the particularities of things said. Much of what I observed involved Latter-day Saints speaking among themselves during Sunday services and Sunday School, at volunteer events, and during Town Council meetings. I also observed Latter-day Saints speaking with me during a few semi-structured interviews and in countless casual conversations at community events, in the halls at church, in the aisles of the grocery store, in carpooled rides to and from Church events, and across coffee-less coffee tables. Words like “bishop,” “ordinance,” and “self-reliance” have general definitions. However, in the contexts in which I heard them being deployed they are laden with meaning that exceed their general definitions. LDS language forms a sort of dialect on its own that indexes theological, ritual, and social formations specific to the tradition. For this reason, I have provided a glossary to accompany this dissertation. It also contains short descriptions of the LDS Church’s key scriptural texts and explains the abbreviations used for their individual books and sections within them.

Beyond LDS-specific definitions of particular words, I also found that LDS speech frequently includes quick allusions to hymns, prominent General Conference talks, memorable phrases from contemporary LDS leaders, and sacred (sometimes secret) temple practices. These references were often made on the fly, without emphasis or explanation, on the assumption that another Latter-day Saint would understand them. These instances make sense to those well-versed in the dialect, but they require more thorough explanation for those unfamiliar with this tongue to grasp the implications of what is being said. Often, even one sentence spoken by a Latter-day Saint may require lengthy explanations to understand exactly what is being said and why. Although such insider shorthand is not unique to Latter-day Saints,

its significance here lies in how these allusions serve as authoritative cues in economic reasoning and in how they signal forms of revelation that shape practical decision making.

Among all this language, my investigation was conceptually structured around a set of interrelated “how” questions. How do Latter-day Saints make economic decisions, and how do they learn which decisions are ethical? How are ideas about economic practices communicated and taken up within the community? How are these ideas applied to concrete problems, and what makes a given economic decision appear “right”? And, crucially, how do Latter-day Saints recognise that they are making the right decision? Taken together, these questions frame a practice-oriented, lived religion approach to understanding LDS economic life.

This dissertation takes up those questions by grounding them in ethnographic observations of Latter-day Saint life in a particular place and time. I observed revelation being deployed and discussed as a technique for navigating matters of social-material importance, including decisions about family finance, municipal bylaws, whether to close a small business for the weekend, and whether to rent a room to an anthropologist. Attending to these practices and tracing the patterns they reveal brings into focus how a defining feature of Latter-day Saint theology, revelation, operates as a distinct epistemological technique.

1.4 How should anthropologists think about economics?

Given how much I have deployed the term “economics” and its conjugations thus far (101 times and counting), it is necessary to sharpen what I mean by it. I have used the term uncritically up to this point because, in many contexts, its commonsense meaning suffices. However, from an anthropological perspective, what economics is or means cannot simply be taken for granted as self-evident or natural; it is not *doxa*, as Bourdieu ([1972] 1977, 164) would say. What constitutes economics, or what economics names, has been the subject of ongoing debate since the discipline’s earliest years. Most often, this debate takes place in the context of

trying to determine how the discipline of anthropology ought to understand its relationship to, and interrogation of, this thing we call “the economy.”

While certainly not the first anthropologist to examine what is now called *economic anthropology*, Malinowski advocated for a particular kind of disciplinary approach that called for a general inquiry into “tribal economies”:

... primitive economics are not by any means the simple matter we are generally led to suppose. In savage societies national economy certainly does not exist, if we mean by the term a system of free competitive exchange of goods and services, with the interplay of supply and demand determining value and regulating all economic life. But there is a long step between this and [the] assumption that the only alternative is a pre-economic stage, where an individual person or a single household satisfy their primary wants as best they can, without any more elaborate mechanism than division of labour according to sex, and an occasional spasmodic bit of barter. Instead, we find a state of affairs where production, exchange and consumption are socially organised and regulated by custom, and where a special system of traditional economic values governs their activities and spurs them on to effort. This state of affairs might be called—as a new conception requires a new term—Tribal Economy. (Malinowski 1921, 15)

From this excerpt, we see how Malinowski positions “economics” as a national system of free competitive exchange governed by supply and demand. Where that model does not apply, other forms of economy must be at work, such as his proposed “tribal economy.” This is not “pre-economic,” but an economy in its own right, as any good cultural relativist would agree. Yet this form of economy is portrayed as being in thrall to “custom” and “traditional economic values.” Whereas the national economy, the presumed default kind of economy, is structured

around “a system of free competitive exchange” with “supply and demand... regulating” value and economic life.

Forgive my sardonic tone. It is not my intent to diminish Malinowski’s contribution to the discipline, but to highlight the presumed separation between economics and custom and tradition evident in his account. In his rendering, the national economy was not governed or regulated by custom and tradition but by impersonal laws and mechanisms, seemingly detached from the humans who enact them. Like many people, Malinowski naturalized what we would now recognise as a neoclassical understanding of the economy, one that separates economic life from social and political life. While Malinowski recognized that other kinds of economies might be out there—and indeed he wanted his peers to go out and find them—these theoretical economies would always remain “other” to, even an infringement upon, the economy properly understood to be a sphere of life that was isolatable, rationalizable, and optimizable precisely because it is not dictated by custom or tradition.

Marcel Mauss ([1950] 2002) appeared to take up this call by identifying yet another form of economy: the “gift economy.” Found in locales as varied as Polynesia, the Pacific Northwest, and ancient Germanic regions, these economies were structured around gifts as pivotal objects of exchange. Mauss maintained that gift economies were still market economies involving exchange and contracts, albeit of a different kind, this time based on the power of “objects given that cause its recipient to pay it back” (4).

We shall describe the phenomena of exchange and contract in those societies that are not, as has been claimed, devoid of economic markets—since the market is a human phenomenon that, in our view, is not foreign to any known society—but whose system of exchange is different from ours. In these societies we shall see the market as it existed before the institution of traders and before their main invention—money proper. (Mauss [1950] 2002, 5)

Mauss here proposes a continuity between the markets of before and the markets of after: between economies premised on gifts and those premised on money. But, he goes on to explain, the difference is significant. In the latter, the commodity being exchanged and the person receiving it are both bound to the commodity's owner until the recipient can free themselves from that bind via the reparative and redemptive exchange of money. Whereas in the gift economy, generosity itself creates that bind. The desired outcome is not immediate liberation through repayment but a relationship of debt to the giver, which Mauss saw as the origins of the contract. In the gift economies of before, the gift was essentially a contract that encoded a debt relationship which, in turn, compelled recipients to reciprocate the gift later. For Mauss, these relationships of obligation set in motion by the giving of gifts constituted a "total social phenomenon" that permeated every aspect of a society, not just its economy.

In some respects, Malinowski's and Mauss's approaches align. Both fulfill economic anthropology's core agenda by identifying alternative forms of economic organization outside of liberal capitalism, that is, an economy which requires no modifiers like "tribal" or "gift." But in other ways Malinowski's and Mauss's approaches diverge. Malinowski treated so-called "primitive economies" as substantially distinct from modern ones, assuming that other, similarly discrete economic systems were scattered across the world, waiting to be documented. Mauss, by contrast, saw a continuity between earlier and later economies, where the one was gradually and naturally elaborated on until it became the other in a sort of social evolutionary framework. Mauss detected in older economies the nascent forms of practices usually presumed to be wholly modern: the legal contract finding its origin in gift economies.

Mauss seeing in gift giving a total social phenomenon—or "total social fact," as he articulated by the end of *The Gift*—resonates with what Karl Polanyi ([1944] 2001) would later describe as the "embeddedness" of economic activity within broader social institutions. In Polanyi's intervention into what scholars call the "formalist-substantivist debate," he rejected the neoclassical view that the economy functions as a separate, self-regulating domain governed by

abstract laws of rationality and scarcity. For Polanyi, not only did it not function this way, but functioning in this way was a fundamental impossibility. For him, even the attempt to realize such a system would be catastrophic. He warned: “Our thesis is that the idea of a self-adjusting market implied a stark utopia. Such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society; it would have physically destroyed man and transformed his surroundings into a wilderness” (3). The stakes were high. We imagine the economy as the neoclassical theorists do at our own peril, threatening to bring about the destruction of humanity. The only way we can or ought to imagine the economy, for Polanyi, is as a system deeply and inextricably embedded into other social systems. Additionally, that the only way to effectively manage an economy requires recognizing these deep interconnections.

Returning momentarily to Mauss, social relationships of obligation and care constitute a total social fact: a force embedded across the domains of religion, law, kinship, and economy. Polanyi, by contrast, emphasized that economic life itself is never autonomous or self-regulating, but always embedded within the broader social order. Rather than being governed by its own mechanistic laws, the economy is inextricable from other institutions, shaped by custom, politics, morality, and social obligation. It, the economy, is the total social fact.

This Polanyian understanding of the economy—as an embedded component of all social life rather than an isolatable and optimizable abstraction—marks a significant shift in anthropological approaches to economics. Earlier anthropologists working under the rubric of economic anthropology typically set out from the context of Western liberal capitalist economies to identify and describe other kinds of economies, just as Malinowski called for, each imagined to be as isolatable and self-contained as the market economy was presumed to be in capitalist contexts. Even Mauss’s gift economy, though conceived as a total social fact wrapped up in other domains of life, was still described as an economy in its own right: a system of exchange governed by its own logic of gifting and obligation. But in Polanyi’s framework, the economy

does not function according to its own laws—or at least not only its own laws. It functions as an embedded component of social life, inextricable from the same social relationships that inform innumerable other facets of life. Thus, the anthropological approach to the economy needed to change. We could no longer go out and identify diverse forms of economies, each isolatable and operating according to their own intrinsic laws. The project of economic anthropology needed to evolve.

As economics increasingly came to be understood as embedded within systems of social and symbolic meaning, even in Western liberal capitalist contexts, the very notion of a separate “economic anthropology” began to appear untenable. So untenable, in fact, that prominent anthropologists like Marshall Sahlins called for the abandonment of the project of economic anthropology. “Forget economic anthropology,” he urged. “We need a truly anthropological economics” (Sahlins [1972] 2017, xxiv).

The linguistic move here may seem minute, but it is important. *Economic anthropology* sought to identify different economic systems. But Sahlins’s *anthropological economics* sought to examine the category of the economics itself as a socially constructed and culturally contextual concept. It also marked a change from examining an imagined economic system to examining the material practices of people living in an imagined economy.

Sahlins’s vision of anthropological economics urged anthropologists to see how—far from adhering to strictly calculus-informed maximization and optimization—people’s decisions about material matters are informed by a wide array of social values, cultural norms, and moral considerations; that when people make decisions, the decisions are really just a reflection of culture with some calculation sprinkled in, rather than hinging exclusively or even primarily on calculation. To make this case, it is telling that Sahlins’s examples tended to focus on mundane daily choices. It is at the level of the human standing in a grocery store deciding between poultry or fish, prime rib vs. spare rib, that economics is practiced. In his anthropological economics,

what merits attention are not the theories of economists, but of people making daily choices about material matters.

In this way, Sahlins anticipated what de L'Estoile (2024) has more recently called an “anthropology of *oikonomía*,” an approach grounded in the study of how people manage the moral and material challenges of everyday life. Working in a sort of Nietzschean/Foucauldian genealogical mode, de L'Estoile recalls that the English word “economy” is rooted in this ancient Greek term, *oikonomía*, a compound of *oikos* (house) and *nemein* (to manage) (Oxford English Dictionary 2024). While the contemporary usage of “economy” often conjures up an imagined broader system of exchange that would fit the vision of any neoclassical economist, its Greek origin actually locates the economy in the home, evoking a sense of prudent management of not only the household resources, but the people within it. Relationships amongst members of the household and the relationships they have with others outside the household were important considerations for conducting shrewd *oikonomía*.

Of particular relevance here is the corresponding term *oikonomikos*, which names of the art or science of managing the household well (Leshem 2013). Deft *oikonomikos*—what we now call the economics, or the study of how to manage an economy—referred to a practical wisdom, a technique for knowing how best to proceed when faced with decisions that bear on the simultaneously social and material management of the household.

Sahlins’s imagined grocery shopper choosing between meats would, of course, consider prices, but would also weigh the occasion (e.g. turkey for thanksgiving, steak for a romantic dinner), the preferences of those being served (e.g. do some attendees prefer or avoid red meats?), and other social cues. An anthropology of *oikonomikos*, like that proposed by de L'Estoile (2024), invites us to take account of the ways humans know what choices to make, how they assess what is prudent (which includes not only calculative reasoning, but ethical and social reasoning, too) when it comes to the management of one’s household. This anthropological approach to economics focuses on decision-making as the site where

economics are actually practiced and reproduced, and it foregrounds how those decisions rest on not only the calculative rationalizations that neoclassical economists would assert are at the core of the economy, but also myriad other considerations owing to the way all economic choices are embedded in myriad social considerations.

What this *oikos*-centric anthropological economics does not account for, however, are the humans who *do* imagine the economy as a distinct and autonomous sphere governed by its own rules, and who act accordingly. Anthropologists may critique and deconstruct the illusion of a disembodied economy all they like, but that does not prevent others from organizing their decisions around precisely that illusion. Central bankers, financiers, stockbrokers, and other economic experts often operate as if the economy were a mechanistic, manipulable, optimizable system of scarcity management. Anthropologists seeking to understand these humans must take their economic imaginaries seriously, even while showing how those imaginaries are themselves culturally and socially constituted, as they invariably are (see, for example, Ortiz 2021⁵). For the anthropological study of such contexts, Rudnyckyj (2024) has called for an anthropology of “expert capitalism,” arguing that entirely new conceptual and ethnographic tools may be required.

In a sense, then, anthropology has come full circle with respect to the economy and economics. Once presumed to be an isolatable aspect of social life that could be cordoned off, described, and analysed, anthropological attention to the everyday practices of humans demonstrated that, in fact, economic life is always embedded in—and contingent upon—

⁵ In his examination of global finance, Ortiz (2021) demonstrates that while financial professionals make decisions about global finance and monetary distribution in ways that reflect political assumptions held by these professionals, the professionals themselves imagine their decisions to reflect strictly rationalized decisions based on the rules of monetary distribution, market efficiency, and narratives of meritocracy.

broader social frameworks, political assumptions, and cultural values. This is not only true in non-Western, non-capitalist, or so-called “tribal” contexts, but also in unambiguously capitalist contexts. Yet attention to practices in these unambiguously capitalist contexts reveals that many people continue to imagine the economy to be a manipulable mechanical system governed by intrinsic, rationalizable, and calculable laws—even if this is only an illusion. To understand economics anthropologically, then, we must adhere to a principle of anthropological ambivalence towards what economics *really* is and focus on how our interlocutors imagine it, even if those imaginations are illusory.

How, then, might we pursue an anthropological framework that can account both for *oikonomikos*—the everyday economic reasoning of ordinary people—as well as the economic imaginaries of “expert capitalists” who treat the economy as a manipulable, optimizable machine for producing profit?

There are two ways, as I see it, to reconcile these seemingly divergent perspectives on economics. The first, which I have already outlined, is to adopt an anthropological stance of analytic ambivalence toward the “true” meaning of economics and to focus instead on how economic ideas and practices are understood by our interlocutors. This approach requires remaining attentive to the diverse ways people imagine, describe, and engage with “the economy,” while also recognizing the culturally embedded forms of *oikonomikos*—the art of prudent management—they enact in daily life. Whether it is a single parent juggling three jobs or a Wall Street financier managing billions, each draw on an implicit theory of economic reasoning, a vision of what must be done, and why.

Of course, this presents a further challenge: how can we observe an interlocutor’s theory of economics? We cannot climb inside their minds and apprehend how they conceive of “the economy.” Asked to articulate a theory of economics, I imagine most people would not really understand what they are being asked.

The second strategy addresses this problem by shifting attention from the economy as something imagined to *economics as an epistemological technique for discerning prudence*. Techniques of discernment leave traces. They unfold in conversation, surface in deliberation, and are rendered “visible” in the sources people consult, the reasoning they articulate, when talking through decisions. These are all things participant observation is well positioned to attend to. Our interlocutors, whether single parents or financial elites, *enact* their economic reasoning rather than merely holding it in their heads. Attending to how they do that—the conscious epistemological techniques through which they determine what is prudent in social-material matters—is what I take an anthropological study of economics to prioritize.

This builds upon the programmatic calls made by both de L’Estoile and Rudnyckyj: an anthropology attentive not merely to economic systems or ideologies, but to the epistemological forms through which economic decisions are rendered. In de L’Estoile’s (2024) examination of Brazilian land reform settlement projects, he examines conflicts over agricultural management. State representatives framed family agriculture as a mechanism of productivity maximization, treating the economy as a system of production that ought to be maximized. By contrast, the families themselves premised their disagreement with the state on their situated knowledge of land and social relations, envisioning the economy as inseparable from those ties. These were not simply competing interests within one framework, but competing epistemologies: divergent ways of knowing what counts as prudent land management.

Similarly, Rudnyckyj’s (2024) programmatic call for an anthropology of “expert capitalism” emphasizes the epistemological techniques used by economic elites. He identifies several ways expert capitalists come to know what would be prudent to do: how large-scale, even global concerns inform situated decisions; how knowledge production and distribution is embedded in economic institutions and mobilized; how agents reflect on and attempt to transform the very institutions they inhabit; and how representations, including depictions of competitors or even scriptural texts, serve as tools for practical reasoning. Each example offers

an opportunity to observe how different bits of knowledge—social, institutional, and symbolic—are assembled to guide judgments about what decisions are prudent.

My approach focuses on practices of knowing (epistemologies) what to do in social-material matters. It is not an examination of the abstract high-level philosophy that asks what knowledge is in general (epistemology), and it is not an examination of what Foucault ([1966] 2005) called “epistemes.” For Foucault, an episteme names the deep, unconscious structure of thought that governs what counts as knowledge in a given period of scientific discourse. My concern lies elsewhere, and it is more focused on the social-material sphere. I focus on techniques of discernment: the practical strategies people intentionally cultivate in order to know what action is prudent. It is not about “knowing that” (e.g., “I know supply and demand affect cost”), nor about “knowing how” (e.g., “I know how to build a household budget”), but about “knowing what to do”; given all that one knows, discerning the course of action one should take.

You may consider this my working definition of what economics names: the epistemological techniques people consciously deploy to discern prudence in social-material matters. Each term is deliberate. “Epistemological techniques” names the practical strategies people use to know what to do. They are intentional, hence “consciously,” to distinguish economics from habit or unreflective behavior—the kind of action that might have economic consequences without being economic practice in and of themselves. And “social-material” follows Polanyi in refusing to separate the material dimensions of a decision from the social relationships, obligations, and cultural values in which such decisions are always already embedded. By “prudence,” I refer to what is judged through these conscious epistemological techniques to be wise, appropriate, or legitimate within a given context. Prudence is not the outcome of a fixed rationality, but the result of reasoning shaped by what the decision-maker considers relevant in the moment. These techniques may involve reflection on past outcomes, reliance on institutional routines, interpretation of market data, and consultation of technical

models. But they might just as easily include moral reasoning, considerations of social obligation, reference to scripture, or revelation.

1.5 LDS Economics

With this definition in hand, I turn to the specific case this dissertation examines. Rather than describing "LDS economics" as a coherent or isolatable system—a move that would echo earlier forms of economic anthropology—I examine the epistemological techniques Latter-day Saints consciously deploy when confronted with decisions that bear on social-material concerns. The question is not what their economy looks like as a structure, but how they go about discerning what is prudent when faced with a social-material matter.

Latter-day Saints do not operate within an economic system distinct from their neighbours, but they do draw on distinctive techniques of discernment. These techniques are shaped by their theology, their community, and what counts as legitimate sources of knowledge within that community. Among them, one stood out consistently in my fieldwork: revelation.

Revelation in the LDS context is not only about scripture, prophets, and divine intervention, though it involves all of these. It also entails a structured epistemological process: identifying a problem, gathering relevant information, reasoning carefully through available sources, and arriving at a proposed course of action before seeking confirmation that the proposed course is indeed prudent. That confirmation comes through affective experience, what Latter-day Saints interpret as the witness of the Holy Ghost. Revelation in this context is less a spiritual event and more a learnable technique for discerning prudence. And, when applied as a technique to discern prudence in social-material matters, it becomes economic in precisely in the sense I am developing.

Describing how revelation functions within LDS economics is a central task of this dissertation. A surface account of LDS religious practice might note that Latter-day Saints pray about their decisions, consult scripture, and seek guidance from church leaders. That is not

wrong, but it is incomplete. When one looks closely at how revelation actually operated as a technique of discernment, something else becomes visible: that revelation is simultaneously epistemological and ontological. It is a technique for knowing what is prudent, yes, but it is equally a practice through which the self is incrementally formed. To deploy revelation as a technique of discernment requires aligning oneself with God's will, cultivating obedience, developing contextual judgment, and deepening covenantal commitments. These are not incidental byproducts of the technique. They are part of what the technique is for and integral to it operating effectively. Discerning prudence and becoming a particular kind of person are not two separate acts. They are one. This is what I call revelatory economics.

1.6 Don't you mean "Mormon"?

As long as we are talking about definitions, the reader may have noticed that I have been using the terms Mormon, Mormonism, Latter-day Saint, LDS, and the LDS Church almost interchangeably. I ought to elaborate, then, on two points about naming conventions that are critical to this study. Mormonism refers to multiple different religious groups that all trace their origins to Joseph Smith's founding of a new religious tradition in 1830. While the term is widely used by scholars to describe this broader tradition, I mostly avoid it in this dissertation because my research focuses exclusively on the largest group to emerge from Joseph Smith's movement: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Other religious groups, such as the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS), Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or RLDS), and Third Convention, also sprung from Smith's tradition. While they each reflect different iterations of Mormonism, they fall outside the scope of this study. Thus, simply for the sake of scholarly specificity I will not use the term Mormon or Mormonism unless in contexts where I am referring to a constellation of related religious groups rather than a particular group within that constellation.

Second, and potentially problematically given what I just said, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as an institution, has variously deployed the term Mormonism and Mormon to describe itself and its members. In recent memory, the use of this term by the Church was especially prominent during the “I am a Mormon” media campaign launched under the leadership of the prophet Thomas S. Monson, which ran until his death (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2011c). However, these naming conventions have since been rejected by the prophet Russell M. Nelson (2018). This rejection occurred before I entered the field. By the time I arrived at my field site, most of my Latter-day Saints interlocutors had begun to follow Nelson’s counsel and generally avoided self-identifying as Mormons, though not consistently.

In addition to rejecting the epithets Mormon and Mormonism, Nelson instructed members to self-identify as “members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” or as “members of the Church of Jesus Christ,” and to avoid the use of the acronym LDS. However, the first two options have proven to be a mouthful, and the acronym continues to be used for its brevity. Most of my interlocutors referred to themselves as Latter-day Saints, used “LDS” as an adjective (e.g., “Is that family LDS?”), described themselves as “members of the LDS Church,” or simply said they were “members of the Church.” Some even continued to use the terms “Mormon” and “Mormonism” (more on this below). I follow the lead of my interlocutors and use a similarly varied set of terms. However, because this study focuses exclusively on members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I avoid “Mormonism” unless referring to the broader tradition from which it emerged.

1.7 Regarding the LDS Leadership

The leadership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is organized through apostolic succession. When the president and prophet dies, the most senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (who are all regarded as prophets, though only the most senior

is referred to as “the” prophet) becomes the next president and head of the First Presidency, the highest-ranking governing body of the Church. Russell M. Nelson served as president and prophet throughout my fieldwork as well as for most of the period in which I drafted this dissertation. He died on September 27th, 2025, and was succeeded by Dallin H. Oaks. Oaks was set apart as president of the Church on October 14th, 2025.

I retain references to Nelson’s leadership in the present tense because this reflects the perspectives my interlocutors inhabited during fieldwork. Adjusting these descriptions to reflect later leadership changes would distort the temporal texture of their decision making and the context in which revelation and prophetic authority were understood.

1.8 How to proceed?

This dissertation builds toward what I call *revelatory economics*. It hinges on understanding how revelation functions as a simultaneously epistemological and ontological technique in the LDS context, as well as on what that case makes visible about the relationship between economic practice and self-formation more broadly. To reach this point, I proceed inductively, through ethnographic attention to how revelation is practiced, reasoned through, and made actionable in everyday social-material matters, organized into two parts.

Part 1: Revelation’s Conceptual Foundations

Part 1 develops the theoretical groundwork necessary for understanding revelation as economics. I begin chapter two by taking us on a sort of textual road trip into the southern Albertan region. The primary objective of this chapter is to introduce the reader to my field site. However, I also use this textual road trip as a vehicle (pun intended) to preliminarily draw attention to the ways various kinds of revelation have contributed to the settlement patterns of Latter-day Saints participating in Canada’s settler colonial expansion. I also describe how revelation played a role in the subsequent flourishing of the region as a Canadian agricultural powerhouse.

If chapter two teases at the edges of revelation, chapter three addresses more directly how revelation functions in Latter-day Saint life as a structured knowledge practice. Drawing on both official definitions and ethnographic observations, I show how Latter-day Saints cultivate revelation as a technique for discerning what to do, often applying it to mundane, seemingly non-spiritual decisions. I draw attention to the kinds and degrees of revelation Latter-day Saints navigate with remarkable precision. A central argument in this chapter is that while the phrase “divine revelation” might suggest something fixed and authoritative, in the LDS context, it is often fluid, flexible, and deeply personal. Revelation operates not merely as communication from God via the Holy Ghost, but as a whole mode of knowing that guides action, structures decision-making, and enables Latter-day Saints to discern prudence across both spiritual and practical domains.

Chapter four continues this focus on revelation as it applies to the LDS concept *self-reliance*. After giving an overview of the self-reliance concept, I argue that the work it does serves to construct a *spiritual economy* (Rudnyckyj 2010) wherein the ends of economic activity are oriented simultaneously towards ontological outcomes as material outcomes in the neoclassical sense. This characteristic is made especially legible because of how LDS theology conflates the “temporal” with the “spiritual,” brought even more into focus by the ways in which self-reliance depends upon personal revelation, with the latter ultimately reconfiguring otherwise ordinary financial or career advice as divinely sanctioned strategies for achieving the state of self-reliance. Put another way, in this chapter we examine how self-reliance depends upon revelation in ways that renders the pursuit of good economic outcomes a matter of piety.

Moral economy is a term that has been used by scholars to identify the interrelated relationships of responsibility, obligation, and care that exist between agents in an economic system (Mau 2003; Scott 1976; E. P. Thompson 1971). In chapter five I map the LDS moral economy I observed, and from which I directly benefitted. In the Latter-day Saint context, the moral economy is structured hierarchically and mediated through personal revelation. Material

support is not given unconditionally but is discerned as spiritually appropriate only under certain conditions—most crucially, a demonstrated striving toward self-reliance. As I show, the LDS moral economy is structured not only around the pursuit of self-reliance, but also the imperative to help others achieve it. Giving thus becomes a recursive pedagogical process through which morality and economics are simultaneously exercised and cultivated.

Foucault ([1979] 2008) argues that American neoliberal thinkers in the mid-twentieth century developed a distinctive theory of human capital, reformulating liberal capitalist subjectivity in novel ways. The earlier formulation of *homo oeconomicus* was the “man of exchange,” a participant in the ethical trade of goods and currency under free market conditions. Under neoliberal rationalities, however, this subject was reimagined as “an entrepreneur of himself” (226), with subjects now oriented towards the maximization of their human capital—their ability to make an ever-increasing income, which this new subject is morally obligated to cultivate. In chapter six, I argue that Latter-day Saint theology makes distinctive claims about human nature, the nature of the divine, and humanity’s eternal progression towards becoming divine. The result is what I call *divine-human capital*: those human abilities that, when cultivated, accumulate to enable human theosis (what Latter-day Saints call *exaltation*). When using revelation to discern prudence, these entrepreneurs of the self are simultaneously engaging in an ontological process through which their divine-human capital is incrementally cultivated. The goal is not income maximization, but exaltation—to become, quite literally, like God.

Part 2: Revelation in Ethnographic Contexts

If chapters two through six develop the conceptual frameworks necessary for understanding revelation as economics, the chapters in Part II shift attention to how this appeared in lived settings during my fieldwork. Chapters seven through nine examine how Latter-day Saints draw on revelation to navigate specific economic situations, each embedded in political, ethical, social, and spiritual considerations.

This begins in chapter seven with an analysis of one of the defining features of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: the belief that a living prophet leads the Church. The current prophet is understood to receive ongoing revelation on behalf of all humanity, and his teachings are treated as authoritative, even on par with ancient scripture depending on the context. Particular emphasis is placed on the pronouncements of the living prophet and members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who are also designated as “prophets, seers, and revelators.” Making sense of the relationship between ancient scripture and contemporary prophetic guidance—especially when they do not fully align—is a subjective and context-specific undertaking. In this chapter, I examine three ethnographic cases in which Latter-day Saints looked to prophetic revelation beyond scripture to guide their economic reasoning: maintaining food storage, debating alcohol prohibition, and navigating the morality of legal tax avoidance. In the first, the explicit words of prophets were cited to justify economic behaviour; in the latter two, it was the example set by prophets that informed ethical reasoning and shaped views on economic policy.

Most Latter-day Saints read their scriptures to learn about gospel principles, reflect on Jesus Christ, or seek answers to personal prayers. But these scriptural texts are not only seen as spiritually instructive; they are also regarded as revealed historical documents. In particular, the *Book of Mormon* is understood as both a divinely revealed and historically accurate account. For some Latter-day Saints, this means it can be read not only to reveal divine wisdom with respect to holy matters, but it can also be read for economic wisdom, too. In chapter eight, I examine the difference between an historical text and a revealed historical text by narrating two contrasting ways I observed scripture being used in this way. In the first, the presumed truth of the revealed historical text validated the economic insights drawn from it. In the second, presumed economic truths were used to affirm the historicity of the revealed text itself. Both cases illustrate how revelation, in conjunction with textual authority, plays a role in shaping LDS economics.

In chapter nine, I examine how revelation in the LDS context can be experienced and organised through sexed⁶ patterns of responsibility and authority, with consequences for economic life and for how people understand their eternal selves. Because Latter-day Saints treat the family as the foundational unit of both social and eternal life, teachings about eternal, sexed identity were taken up by my interlocutors to inform expectations about who should provide, who should nurture, and who is understood to preside in particular situations. Drawing on ethnographic narratives of home-based labour and household decision making, I show how, in my interlocutors' accounts, appeals to prophetic counsel, priesthood structures, and personal revelation can lead women and men to take up different economic roles in ways they understand as faithful to a divinely ordered pattern. In this framework, LDS economics does more than guide choices about work and money. It also participates in an ongoing process through which Latter-day Saints learn to see, and to become, the eternally sexed beings they believe themselves to be.

The conclusion of this dissertation first reviews and synthesizes the characteristics of *revelatory economics*: a simultaneously epistemological and ontological approach to economics. Revelatory economics names those techniques for discerning prudence in social-material matters that at once depend upon, and further cultivate, a sense of self that is presumed innate but underdeveloped.

Then, while having arisen through an analysis of LDS personal revelation, I propose that revelatory economics are not confined to the LDS case. I argue that it is useful in analyzing other contexts where economic reasoning operates not only as a way of deciding—economics'

⁶ I say "sex" here because although biological and social sciences recognize a distinction between sex and gender, LDS theology does not. It asserts that sex at birth is a divinely intended feature necessitating certain gendered outcomes, such as individuals sexed as women at birth not being ordained to priesthood offices. More on this in chapter nine.

epistemological characteristic—but also as a way of becoming, revealing the ontological project of economics.

1.9 Why learn about Latter-day Saint life from me?

This research is based on field observations made amongst and of Latter-day Saints in Cardston, Alberta, Canada. It includes observations made in public discourse, social events, conversations with interlocutors, and semi-structured interviews. The methods used to record these observations were approved by the University of Victoria’s Human Ethics Research Board, which adhere to a standard set by the Canadian Government’s Tri-Council Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al. 2022).

It was not possible or reasonable to acquire informed consent in all contexts where observations were made. Following the protocol established by the Tri-Council, given the nature of the questions being asked, as well as the methods of data collection being used, the risk this posed to this population was deemed to be limited. Nonetheless, that minimal risk was mitigated using a variety of strategies that met the standard of scrutiny by the University of Victoria Human Ethics Research Board. For example, when recording observations made in settings where informed consent was not obtainable from everyone present (for example, during public Sunday service meetings), personal and identifying data about speakers was not collected, and no audio recordings were made. All observations made in these contexts were recorded via hand-written fieldnotes—a practice that is not uncommon among Latter-day Saints.⁷

⁷ It is common in LDS Church-produced magazine literature and blogs written by Latter-day Saints to find stories about Latter-day Saints trying to “get more” out of Sunday meetings. One of the practices that these articles sometimes encourage is note-taking. It is not uncommon to see Latter-day Saints during Sunday meetings taking notes on small pieces of scrap paper or in notebooks (though,

In contexts where informed consent was obtained, such as in semi-structured interviews with individual Latter-day Saints, all interlocutors' identities are kept confidential using pseudonyms. Though, in most instances I simply avoid using proper names entirely, especially in instances where I describe events taking place in public spaces. In addition, in a small number of cases where doing so does not alter the substance of the ethnographic account, certain demographic details have been deliberately modified to protect the identities of my interlocutors. When working in a small, tightly knit community such as Cardston, altering selected personal details is a widely accepted disciplinary strategy for safeguarding interlocutors' confidentiality (Traianou 2014, 66-67).

The few exceptions to this are when discussing the comments of public figures, such as LDS Church leaders who have published their rhetoric for public consumption, or instances such as the comments made by Cardston Town Council members and the mayor during Town Council meetings, which are streamed and published on the internet for public consumption.

The positionality of the researcher is a crucial factor in all scientific research. But perhaps it is especially crucial in contexts where insider status is complicated, contingent, and contested. When studying the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, questions of insiderness inevitably arise. Even anthropologists with no background in the faith have found their colleagues concerned that too much proximity to Latter-day Saint communities might result in conversion (Cannell 2017, 13), suggesting that insiderness in this context carries particular anxieties about the loss of scholarly distance.

increasingly, these notes are being taken on digital devices). Meeting attendees are encouraged to write down what was talked about, phrases that struck them as important or inspiring, and random thoughts that emerge throughout the meetings which are asserted to be divine communications coming to them via the Holy Ghost. See Campbell (2020) for an example.

I want to be upfront that I write from a position shaped by insider experience. I am not a casual observer, nor an observer whose interest in Mormonism stems exclusively from this study. I am an observer who once lived Latter-day Saint life in a committed way. I was baptized at age eight. I was ordained to, and progressed through, the Church's structured priesthood office hierarchy. I served a full-time mission in Oakland, California from 2006 to 2008. I technically hold the Melchizedek priesthood office of elder, and I remain a "member of record" in the Church. I was raised in an LDS family, some of whom continue to participate in the faith, and I maintain close relationships with friends and extended family who remain active, believing members. I clearly remain intellectually entangled with the Church, given my choice of dissertation topic, and my analysis is shaped by a life history that includes significant immersion in LDS lifeways.

At the same time, I write from a place of significant distance. I am no longer a routinely practising member, though occasionally I participate within very specific contexts (for example, when I was conducting fieldwork). I do not believe in the truth claims made by the Church, the truth claims expressed in its scriptural texts, nor its claim to prophetic authority. This distance certainly shaped how I was received, what I understood, and how I interpreted the experiences I describe. But it would also be easy to overstate the importance that this disbelief has in LDS circles and the ways membership/insiderness is understood.

Belief does not cleanly determine insider status in Latter-day Saint contexts. In colloquial LDS terms, I am considered a "less-active" member, or even an "inactive" member, though the latter has fallen into disuse since the early 2000s. Crucially, what the category less active denotes has more to do with practice than conviction. Even less-active membership entails limited institutional privileges and responsibilities, and there are plenty of less-active members who believe in the Church. From an administrative perspective, being a less-active member simply means I attend Sunday services with little to no regularity. But even this is not an official label that is affixed to my membership records.

Moreover, one's status as less active vs. active is not something that would be announced or discussed in public settings. What matters in most contexts is simply whether someone is or is not a member, and my status as a member was disclosed and announced, as is customary, when new members are welcomed into a congregation.

Nonetheless, many of my interlocutors knew that I am a less-active member. Often this was because I was able to disclose it in social circumstances where such a disclosure would be neither surprising nor off-putting. Others figured it out through the myriad ways Latter-day Saints have of trying to suss out one's level of dedication to the faith, something Latter-day Saints are especially deft at.

In fact, Latter-day Saints have a range of vernacular terms used to describe different kinds of members, none of which are formalized. I have heard members distinguish between "active members" and "Molly Mormons" or "Peter Priesthoods." These sexed terms describe especially fervent, sometimes irritatingly zealous believers whose devotion is seen as exceeding what "active member" implies, and so requires a marked label. At the opposite end of the spectrum are the so-called "Jack Mormons," a term whose meaning has shifted considerably since the nineteenth century (de Santiago 1997), but which in my field site usually referred to members who may appear active (attending regularly), yet were known to flout core behavioural expectations, such as by drinking alcohol or engaging in extramarital affairs. Recently, the acronym PIMO has come to describe members who are "physically in, mentally out." These members often attend meetings and may even hold leadership callings, yet no longer fully believe in the Church's teachings. They may be present in the institution ("physically in") while inwardly disengaged ("mentally out"), and their participation is often motivated by factors such as supporting a believing spouse or maintaining social/ethical ties for the sake of their children. Similarly, some observers have highlighted the emergence of "cultural Mormons," which describes people who explicitly do not believe in the Church's truth claims, but who nonetheless enjoy participating fully in LDS lifeways (Hale 2016). I have heard members described as

“PoMo’s”: individuals who remain members of record, but who are living their post-Mormonism life. And there are “ExMo’s”: those who have officially had their memberships revoked from the Church’s records. I have even heard of “NeverMo’s”: people who have gone to Sunday services and participated in the social aspects of LDS life for decades but who, for various reasons, remain unbaptized and thus non-members.

Among this diversity of membership categories, what stands out is the persistent use of “Mo” or “Mormon.” These terms are most often used to describe those operating on the fringes of orthodox LDS life, where the more formal categories of active and less-active member no longer suffice. So, it is fitting that the now-unorthodox term “Mormon” persists precisely in reference to those whose membership status is also, from a certain perspective, unorthodox. Official Church designations, such as “member of record,” which simply refers to anyone baptized or officially listed on Church rolls, or active/less active, which refers to patterns of attendance, capture administrative status more than lived faith. Belief plays little role in determining one’s status. As anthropologist Jon Bialecki (2022, 140) phrased it, “Latter-day Saints seem to be a contemporary example *par excellence* of what might called ... Asadian religion” wherein belief takes a backseat to practice, ritual participation, and affect. Hence the proliferation of vernacular terms that Latter-day Saints use to navigate the social nuances of membership on the margins of belief.

But it would also be inaccurate to say that belief does not matter. Much of LDS religious practice focuses on sharing statements of belief called “testimonies,” which I explore in chapter three. Certain forms of ritual participation, such as temple worship, are also restricted to those who attest to belief through formal interviews with local volunteer leaders. While baseline participation in weekly services does not require belief or even membership, deeper forms of engagement are contingent upon both. The more one seeks to participate fully, the more belief becomes a gatekeeping criterion. Thus, even as formal categories emphasize practice over belief, belief still matters, even if its significant tends to emerge in more bounded contexts.

How this all matters for this analysis is that my status as a member of record shaped the kinds of access I had. As a member, I was welcomed into Sunday services, firesides, and devotionals—settings which are open to both members and non-members alike. I was even extended a small and extremely limited leadership position as a “ministering partner,” a low-stakes position that is commensurate with a less-active member (and even prescribed as a potential way to turn a less active into an active member). In some cases, conversations happened because I was a member; in others, they unfolded precisely because I was not fully active. Some Latter-day Saints saw me as a potential returning member and extended fellowship accordingly. Others reacted more cautiously, particularly when my intentions were unclear or my questions might have been perceived as critical.

At the same time, there were instances where my status seemed to matter very little. While Latter-day Saints are adept at getting a sense of a peer’s level of engagement with the Church, they rarely ask to know someone’s beliefs or what their activity level is. Most members simply knew I was a member and left it at that. What this means for the present study is not that my status as a less-active member was irrelevant, hidden, or exaggerated to suggest deeper engagement than was true, but rather that it registered unevenly. It opened certain doors, flavoured some conversations in particular ways, and introduced a layer of complexity to how I was received. But it did not wholly define my research. When it mattered—meaning, when it had a specific and important impact on an ethnographic account—I attend to it in the analysis that follows.

There is, as Donna Haraway (1988) reminds us, no view from nowhere. The observations that follow are necessarily situated, shaped by both my past participation in LDS life and my present distance from it. If this creates a kind of epistemological tension, I do not think to resolve it here. But I do want to be clear: my identification as a member should not be read as an attempt to secure insider authority through proximity and belonging, just as my identification as a less-active member should not be read as a bid for scholarly objectivity

through critical distance. Neither is a strategic posture. Rather, I present it here simply as an honest description of how my membership status has shaped the work that follows.

It also means that I, as the ethnographer, am taking you, the reader, into a cultural space where some of the peculiarities of Mormonism are familiar and even mundane. In this ethnographic space, members are not bewildered by the Church's historical practice of polygamy. Nor do they dwell on the Church's exclusion of Black members from full participation between 1852 and 1978, a policy that contrasted with the earlier inclusion of Black priesthood holders during the first 22 years of Church history. Some of the theological claims we will encounter may appear unusual to readers, even to those well-versed in forms of Christianity: the divinization of humanity, the existence of a female deity known by Latter-day Saints as Heavenly Mother, or the religion's central text, the Book of Mormon, which recounts the appearance of Jesus Christ, post-crucifixion, to populations in the Americas. These may strike readers as unfamiliar or even implausible. But I am, by virtue of my long history with the Church, perhaps uniquely able to take you into a cultural and ethnographic space where such matters are ordinary.

This is not to say that all members are untroubled by these matters. In fact, scholars of LDS disaffiliation have shown how deeply such questions can affect some of those who do wrestle with them (Brooks 2018). Most popular literature concerning the LDS Church seems to be heavily focused on these matters, points of rupture, and historical peculiarities. The same could be said of scholarly historical inquiries in the Church (Coviello 2019; Talbot 2013), and understandably so. These issues have provoked spiritual crisis, doctrinal debate, and public scrutiny, so they rightly merit scholarly attention.

But for the majority of members I engaged with, these matters were relatively unimportant compared with the more immediate task of trying to live faithfully. While eating dinner with a couple, they both reported having been descendants of polygamous families. This was not only an unremarkable fact to relate, but they appeared to have deftly integrated this

knowledge into their existing spiritual frameworks without much upset. They both expressed distaste, even disgust for the practice. They each vocalized not wanting to live polygamously themselves, but one of them offhandedly noted that they have some non-LDS extended relatives who continue the practice elsewhere, right before asking whether I wanted some apple pie. For them, polygamy was not a crisis. It was something more akin to a footnote.

Anthropologists have an oft-cited refrain we like to say about the discipline. It usually goes something like this: anthropology is about making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. It is unclear to whom we ought to attribute this idea (Myers 2011), but it is certainly a favourite phrase amongst anthropologists, and one that is applicable here. Latter-day Saint theology and history may be strange to some, but it is familiar to Latter-day Saints themselves, and it is familiar to me. My proximity to Latter-day Saint life, paired with my simultaneous distance from it, I think, equips me as perhaps an unusually well-positioned ethnographer to do the work of inviting you, the reader, into an ethnographic space where the supposed strangeness has already been normalized. And once that strangeness is set aside, we might begin to see that Latter-day Saint knowledge practices are not only more familiar than they first appear, but that their epistemologies deserve to be taken seriously—not as curious aberrations from secular rationality, but as meaningful and instructive forms of reasoning in their own right. To get there, we need to travel to southern Alberta.

Part 1
Revelation's Conceptual Foundations

2.0 The Heartland of Canadian Mormonism

2.1 South, but not too far south

From my parents' home, located fifteen minutes from Calgary in Okotoks, Alberta, Canada, I departed southwards along the Highway 2 on a sunny, blue-skied day in April of 2022. While many of the COVID-19 policy limitations on human-to-human interaction had been lifted by that point, I was glad that my research had been planned to take place within the borders of Canada. The legal and social permissibility of transnational travel in the previous twelve months had been inconsistent, and at times outright disallowed.

Despite having spent the majority of the previous 14 years living in the neighbouring province of British Columbia, driving southwards from Okotoks through Alberta's prairies felt decidedly like home. I was familiar with the milestones that marked my eventual arrival at my destination. First, the exit near High River that would take me to my mother's hometown of Vulcan, a route I had taken countless times to visit my grandmother. Then, I would pass the famous Candy Store in Nanton, after which full the breadth of the prairie horizon would really open up. Though the Albertan landscape between High River and Nanton was certainly flatter and more sparsely treed than it was travelling northwards towards Calgary, it is upon leaving Nanton that the landscape really leans into the gently rolling, but effectively flat and treeless prairie that characterizes much of southern Alberta. I would stop for gas in Claresholm, of course (it is always cheapest in Claresholm). Then I would continue on through Fort Macleod, the first Alberta outpost of the Northwest Mounted Police. From there, I would take my first turn off the main highway onto the secondary route that would take me into the Blood 148 reservation, the largest First Nation reservation in Canada. Finally, at exactly the moment I would leave the reservation boundaries (marked by an intersection between the highway and a municipal road), the highway would descend a gentle slope into a depression in the prairie landscape carved out by the Lee Creek called a *coulee*. This descent into the Lee Creek coulee

would mark my arrival in Cardston after almost exactly two hours of driving. If I continued southward only 15 minutes more, I would run up against the Canada-US border.

I was familiar with this route, having travelled to Cardston routinely in my youth as a young Latter-day Saint. The town is home to the Cardston Temple, which was the first LDS temple built outside of the United States. Construction began in 1913, and the temple was dedicated for use in 1923. It is common practice in the LDS Church for wards⁸ to organize periodic youth trips to a temple to enable young Latter-day Saints to participate in some of the temple rituals called saving ordinances,⁹ some of which are allowed to be performed by youth. My first memory of Cardston was attending a public open house of the temple in 1995, following a renovation. However, my most vivid memories of the town were formed through youth temple trips, when I learned the milestones marking the journey there.

⁸ A ward is an administrative unit that describes an LDS congregation. Wards are usually formed when, within a given geographical boundary cartographically defined, there exist a minimum of 300 members of record, of which there is a ratio of at least one “active, full-tithe-paying Melchizedek Priesthood holder” for every twenty members who are available to serve in leadership positions (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023, 36.2).

⁹ In LDS speech, *ordinance* is the name given to any ritual performed by someone with priesthood authority. Some ordinances are designated as *saving ordinances*, which are those rituals required for the most desired outcome in the afterlife. Since they are required for ultimate salvation, and since many people have lived and died without performing them, saving ordinances can be performed by the living on behalf of the dead to enable those who were, for example, never baptized in this life to become baptized by proxy. Some saving ordinances are performed outside of temples; for example, baptisms are usually performed outside of temples. While other saving ordinances are only performed in temples, such as the *endowment* ordinance. However, any saving ordinances performed on behalf of the dead are only performed inside of temples. Youth temple trips focus around performing *baptisms for the dead* and the accompanying saving ordinance, *confirmation*.

Nonetheless, there were parts of my April 2022 trip that surprised me. It had been a particularly dry year. Precipitation in the first half of that year only amounted to roughly 50% of the usual volume and less than 40% of the normal precipitation for that month (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada 2022, 3). This meant that farmers and ranchers (agriculture and livestock being the most salient industries in the region) were relying more on reservoir water via the robust irrigation system crisscrossing the southern Alberta landscape. However, those reservoir levels were already low from the previous year, which was also an uncharacteristically dry one. So, the situation was dire.

The already dry conditions and low reservoir levels were worsened that April by a local dispute between the government and the Piikani First Nation. The Piikani had closed a key irrigation canal gate that normally diverted water from the Old Man River into the Lethbridge Northern Irrigation District. That year, the province had advanced renovation plans for the headworks without adequate consultation, and the Piikani closed the gate in protest.

The cumulative dryness of the region, exacerbated by that closure, was evident in the signs of high soil alkalinity that often accompany an over-reliance on low reservoir water sources: a white alkali crust covered significant portions of fields, dried-up livestock watering ponds, and roadside ditches. This disagreement between the Piikani First Nation and the provincial government over irrigation infrastructure highlighted to me the way southern Alberta relies on a robust reservoir and irrigation system to enable its agriculture and ranching industries.

Prior to the implementation of irrigation, this southern Alberta region was considered by a British North America landscape assessment expedition to “forever be comparatively useless” for agricultural purposes (Wolfe, Hugenholtz, and Lian 2013, 700). The 1857-1859 expedition led by John Palliser coincided with a period of prolonged drought. Palliser and his team, travelling through “miles of burning sand” (Palliser 1862, 413) and along dry river beds, witnessed evaporated sloughs encrusted with alkali, just as I was seeing in 2022. Without

knowing that he was making his observations in a period of drought, Palliser mapped out a sort of triangle in his report to colonial authorities, stretching from present-day Calgary in the north, south to the US-Canada border, and east to Brandon, Manitoba. This area would later become known as “Palliser’s Triangle,” an area deemed unfit for agriculture and of only limited use for ranching by the Dominion of Canada (Marchildon 2016; Wolfe et al. 2013).

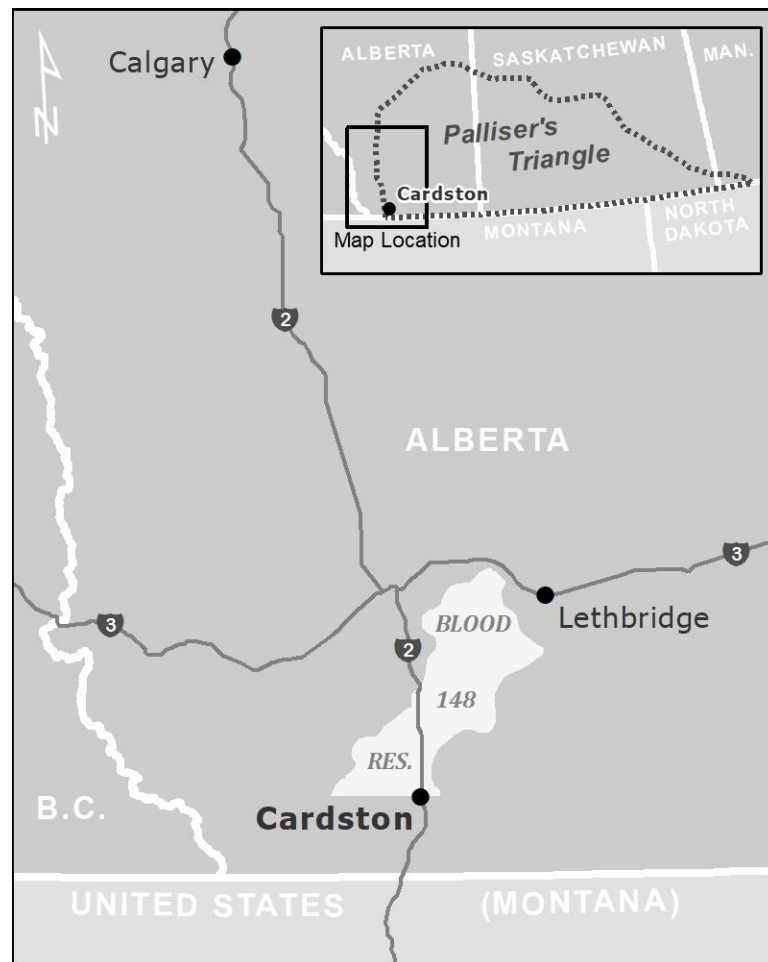


Figure 1: A map of my field site situated along the edge of Palliser’s Triangle, adjacent to the Blood 148 Reservation, and close to the Canada-US border.

In spite of this perceived uselessness, the region was home to several Indigenous populations, primarily the nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Piikani, Kainai, and Siksika), who were familiar with the volatile hydrologic patterns of the region and who had sustained

strategic water management practices for generations (Marchildon 2016, 183). Nonetheless, geopolitical, technological, and epidemiological pressures converged in the late 1800s to coerce Indigenous populations in the region, including the Blackfoot Confederacy as well as neighbouring nations such as the Stoney Nakoda and Tsuut'ina, to sign Treaty No. 7 with the newly confederated Government of Canada in 1877. This led to the establishment of several reservations, including the Blood 148 Reservation. While the Blood 148 reserve may be the largest in Canada, geographically speaking, given the perception the colonial government had of the region as being “useless,” this could hardly be interpreted as an act of generosity on the part of the government.

It was into this landscape that divine revelation first intervened, eventually resulting in the settlement that would later become known as Cardston. A series of revelations directed not only the settlement pattern of the region by LDS colonists, but also the implementation of widespread irrigation throughout the southern Alberta region, turning Palliser's notion of the land's comparative uselessness on its head.

2.2 North, not south

On July 26th, 1886, Salt Lake City's *Deseret News* reported that Charles Ora Card had been arrested (Hudson 1961, 77). A stake¹⁰ president from Logan in Cache County, Utah, Card was also a polygamist. At the time, polygamy had recently been made illegal in the United

¹⁰ Stakes are regional administrative units that are comprised of several wards or branches. The term alludes to a variety of scriptural verses that describe Zion as an expansive tent anchored by stakes. For example, from the Book of Mormon scripture Moroni 10:3, “awake, and arise from the dust, O Jerusalem; yea, and put on thy beautiful garments, O daughter of Zion; and strengthen thy stakes and enlarge thy borders forever”. The term evokes the expansionist aims of the Church, to plant the stakes of the tent of Zion all across the globe. Subsequently, stakes are also sometimes referred to as part of a fuller, more idiomatic phrase: “the stakes of Zion.”

States with the passing of the Edmunds Act in 1882, which laid the legal groundwork for the criminalization of polygamy. This was followed by the Edmunds-Tucker Act in 1887, which extended and intensified the legal condemnation. The passing of these laws marked an era wherein many Latter-day Saint polygamists, who often held positions of leadership in the Church and community, were subject to persecution and prosecution by federal authorities. Such was the case for Charles Ora Card. He was arrested and taken by train to stand trial in Ogden.

Card, however, had no intention of going to Ogden to stand trial. Instead, he “jumped from the moving train, appropriated a saddled horse tied to a rail, and galloped through Logan streets towards bushes along the Logan River, where he would hide until dark” (Card 1990, 84). Now a fugitive, Card had to leave the United States. But first, he would need approval from the Church’s authorities. To understand why simply fleeing was not an ethically sound option for Card, we need to understand something about how leadership positions in the LDS Church are designated.

It is routine in LDS discourse to state that someone has been “called” to perform in leadership roles. The callings are usually communicated by existing priesthood leaders as invitations. However, a central tenet of the faith is that leaders are called by God, via prophecy (Articles of Faith 1:5), and not simply called by other leaders. In the *General Handbook*, a leadership manual provided to Church leaders, it states that “Those who serve in the Church are called of God. Leaders seek the guidance of the Spirit in determining who to call” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023, 30.1.1). The will of God to call someone to a given position is ideally communicated via revelation to an existing authoritative figure who seeks the guidance of the Holy Ghost in making that determination.

What this meant for Card is that because he had been called to serve as stake president in Cache County, he could not simply abandon the position: God had called him to it. Before he could flee the United States, he needed to seek a formal release from that calling. This required

contacting the president and prophet¹¹ John Taylor, the head of the LDS Church in 1886. Coincidentally, Taylor was also in hiding for practicing polygamy, but Card was eventually able to make contact with Taylor.

Card anticipated that Taylor would tell him to go south to Mexico, where other fugitive polygamists were already setting up colonies. This made Mexico the most logistically rational choice and, evidently, Card thought so, too. He had already prepared to leave for Mexico, packing a wagon with that destination in mind (B. Y. Card 1990, 85). However, when Card managed to get in touch with Taylor, meeting in secret, the prophet told Card, “I’m impressed to tell you to go to the British North West, for I have always found justice under the British Flag” (Bates and Hickman n.d., 1; Hudson 1961, 80-81¹²).

For Latter-day Saints, the term “impressed” carries with it specific meaning owing to the way God is asserted to communicate with humanity. In an *LDS Newsroom* article, the official public communications branch of the Church, a press release titled “Divine Revelation in Modern Times” provided a useful description of how the LDS Church and Latter-day Saints envision revelation contemporarily. “In its broad meaning,” it begins, “revelation is divine guidance or inspiration; it is the communication of truth and knowledge from God to His children on earth, suited to their language and understanding ... Latter-day Saints generally believe that

¹¹ The head of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints is recognized as both the president and prophet of the Church. He is supported in this role by two counsellors, both members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. While all the apostles are recognized as “prophets, seers, and revelators” (Holland 2004, 7), simply stating “prophet” is inappropriate when referring to the apostles. The unmodified title of “prophet” is generally reserved for reference to the sitting president of the Church.

¹² Note that in Hudson (1961) the author cites the quote from Taylor as being located on page 3 of the Bates & Hickman (n.d.) manuscript. I have reviewed this manuscript, and the quote is found on page 1.

divine guidance comes quietly, taking the form of *impressions*, thoughts and feelings carried by the Spirit of God” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2011b, emphasis mine). Thus, the “impressions” of the prophet carry special weight as revelation.

After Card heard from John Taylor that the prophet was impressed to send him northward, he began preparing for the journey. Less than two weeks later, Apostle Francis M. Lyman, under the direction of the prophet, called and set apart¹³ Card for a mission to Canada to establish a new settlement for political refugees of the Edmunds and Edmunds-Tucker Acts (Hudson 1961, 81). This new mission overrode his calling as stake president, though it is worth noting that he was not released from the latter role at this time. Two companions were also selected for him and set apart for the journey.

While the trio travelled through southern British Columbia and later southern Alberta, Card recorded in his journal that they constantly prayed, “Father, direct us by revelation that we might find the right place” (C. O. Card 1886, 22). Eventually, they arrived at the confluence of the St. Mary River and Lee Creek, just south of the Blood 148 reservation, where they identified the site that would one day become Cardston. Some of the rationales for selecting that location are described by Card. For example, he identified a good deposit of coal in Lethbridge, approximately 70 km away. He also mentioned moderate winters and access to water. However, not all the reasons for selecting the site were economically oriented: among the reasons given was that it was “in the heart of Indian country, and thus an advantageous place for a mission” (B. Y. Card et al. 1990, 86).

Since the publishing of the Church’s “keystone” (Benson 1986) scriptural text, *The Book of Mormon*, Latter-day Saints have asserted that the book contains a divinely revealed historical record of some ancient inhabitants of the Americas, whom they have often identified with

¹³ The emic term “set apart” describes a formal priesthood ordinance that authorizes someone to serve in a Church calling.

Indigenous peoples. Moreover, they believe the book was written specifically for a remnant of those peoples—the Lamanites—to help them eventually come to know Jesus Christ and his gospel. A revelation given to Joseph Smith before the book's publication, now recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 3:19-20, reads:

And for this very purpose are these plates preserved, which contain these records—that the promises of the Lord might be fulfilled, which he made to his people; And that the Lamanites might come to the knowledge of their fathers, and that they might know the promises of the Lord, and that they may believe the gospel and rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ, and be glorified through faith in his name, and that through their repentance they might be saved. Amen.

So common was the understanding amongst Latter-day Saints that Amerindian populations were descendants of the population the Book of Mormon calls “Lamanites” that the 1981 edition of the book included an uncredited introduction which asserted that the Lamanite populations described therein were the “principal ancestors of the American Indians.” This assertion has since been walked back by the Church with the publication of the 2006 edition of the Book of Mormon. The introduction now asserts that Book of Mormon populations are “among the ancestors of the American Indians.” But, for early Latter-day Saints such as Card, being in close proximity to “Indians” was desirable for it enabled the fulfillment of the revealed directive to convert the Lamanites to the gospel using what was (then) commonly considered to be the Indians’ own divinely revealed history.

Card acquired the property he identified without issue from colonial authorities owing to an expired lease on the tract of land. He sent word to the prophet John Taylor about the site and, shortly thereafter, other LDS settlers began to arrive. By the second week after the arrival of these colonists, Cardston’s first official Sunday services were held and the Sunday School

was organized. To preside over this Sunday School, Jonathan E. Layne was called to be superintendent. After being set apart to the role, Layne prophesied that a temple would one day be built there (Bates and Hickman n.d., 22-23), a feat that would certainly solidify the settlement as a uniquely LDS fixture on the Canadian landscape—to that point, no temples had been built outside of the United States.

The small settlement grew steadily, and while most of the new LDS settlers were not polygamists, some were. Like Card, they had left behind their polygamous spouses and many of their children. Desiring to reunite these families, the apostles Francis M. Lyman and John W. Taylor—the latter a frequent resident of the early Cardston community, not to be confused with the prophet John Taylor—travelled to Ottawa in 1889. They went to ask federal officials about “the possibility of bringing the plural families of the settlers to the colony” (B. Y. Card 1990, 92). The request was not granted, and the apostles were instructed that settlers with one wife would be welcome, but polygamy would not be tolerated. This distinguished the settlement on the banks of Lee Creek from the LDS colonies in Mexico and elsewhere where polygamist refugees continued to co-habit and perform new polygamous marriages. In Cardston, however, plural marriages were never performed, nor did any extant polygamists co-habit, meaning that plural wives and their children remained in the United States, where they continued to be supported from afar rather than relocating to the Canadian settlement.

Throughout the earliest years of the colony’s founding, Card oversaw not only the settlement and spiritual aspects of early Cardston life, but he directed many of the economic and development efforts as well. Under his leadership as president of Cache Creek Stake, of which the Cardston settlement was officially designated a branch,¹⁴ Card directed a general

¹⁴ Branches are smaller administrative units than a ward, but they still designate a congregation.

The minimum requirements for forming a branch are distinct from those required to form a ward.

Branches need only twenty members, and require a minimum of four active priesthood holders who can

store to be opened, launched a stagecoach and a postal service, and more. He often mixed economic and spiritual instruction together in his Sunday discourses. Reflecting on one such discourse delivered in May 1890, Card wrote in his journal:

I spoke to them upon the necessity of unity among us in all things temporal and spiritual. Advised cooperation in our business operations. Advised the brethren to herd our stock and save our grain. Advised the brethren to take the Oath of Allegiance to the Canadian Government. Also to pay their tithes and offerings. Referred to the propriety of buying a sawmill that we may obtain building material more convenient and cheaper. We should seek to market our butter and other produce under management that would secure best market prices. Advised them to buy their merchandise in bulk and divide it among themselves. We should seek to breed from the best horses and cattle. Advised the brethren in gathering the things of this world to not set their hearts upon them and think more of the gift than the Giver and constantly nurture the good spirit and live by the light of revelation. They should follow their leaders in everything that was good and praiseworthy. (as quoted in Wilcox 1950, 99-100)

Owing to his overlapping roles as stake president, branch president, and president of the Canadian Mission, each conferred by ordination from the prophet and apostles, the most faithful listeners would not mistake the nature of these exhortations. They would understand their leader's counsel as revelation. Card himself opens by emphasizing "the necessity of unity among us in all things temporal and spiritual," clearly signaling the integration of economic and spiritual concerns. This pairing, an integral feature of LDS economics, cues listeners to interpret

perform in leadership roles (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023, 36.2). Thus, branches are substantially smaller than wards.

the remainder of his advice, from livestock management to cooperative purchasing, not as practical wisdom alone but as part of a divinely sanctioned way of life.

Not all local economic development was directed by Card. Other revelations came from the prophet in Utah. Given the arid conditions, irrigation was critical for the fledgling settlement. When no volunteers stepped forward to build a canal, Church leaders in Utah issued mission calls to skilled Latter-day Saints who had already gained irrigation experience in the Salt Lake Valley, which was also an arid geography. These were treated as “serious mission calls [to construct the irrigation system], beginning with a letter from a presiding church official, and ending with a formal release” (B. Y. Card 1990, 97). It was the building of the resultant 50-mile canal and other irrigation networks that enabled the flourishing of not only Cardston, but the other, smaller LDS settlements that had begun to spring up such as Magrath, Stirling, and Raymond.



Figure 2: The Pot Hole Creek Diversion Canal outside of Magrath, Alberta, constructed largely by LDS settlers and missionaries (Unknown 1900).



Figure 3: An irrigation canal located outside of Raymond, Alberta. The contemporary iteration of a canal system originally constructed by LDS settlers and missionaries (C. W. Campbell 2022b)

A final key revelation that would solidify the LDS presence in the southern Albertan region was received by apostle John W. Taylor. While on a carriage ride surveying the settlement, Taylor and company stopped on a hilltop overlooking Lee Creek to make a dedicatory prayer. This prayer blessed the land of Cardston for the prosperity of the LDS pioneers who had come to settle it. In addition to that blessing of prosperity, or perhaps in support of it, Taylor said, “I now speak by the power of prophecy and say that upon this very spot shall be erected a temple to the name of Israel’s God and people shall come from far and near to praise His Holy Name” (as quoted in Wood 1989, 27). Recalling the earlier prophecy by Jonathan E. Layne regarding a temple, this one was made with greater specificity, naming the exact spot, and greater authority, coming from an apostle, “prophet, seer, and revelator” (Holland 2004).

It is not, however, the typical practice of Latter-day Saints (or Church leaders, for that matter) to follow prophecies without some degree of scrutiny. As we will see, “studying things out” is a critical component of the way Latter-day Saints approach the topic of divine revelation. Owing to this, despite the prophecy made first by Layne and later by Taylor, it was not until

1912 (24 years after Taylor's prophecy) that the Church announced it would build a temple in "some city in Alberta, Canada" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1912, 85). The Church then requested proposals from the Canadian Latter-day Saints and several of the pioneer communities put forward their favourite locations for consideration. Residents of Raymond boldly named the hill they had selected "Temple Hill." To their disappointment, Church leaders ultimately decided to build in Cardston, on the very spot that Taylor had prophesied, for reasons that have not been made public. Today, the temple-less hill in Raymond still bears the name Temple Hill, but it is now home to the town's cemetery.

The construction of the Cardston temple was completed in 1923, and for the next 67 years it was the only temple available to Canadian Latter-day Saints who wished to participate in temple rituals without crossing an international border. It also served as the focal point of a temple district¹⁵ that stretched across the border into Montana and nearby states.¹⁶ Subsequently, Cardston became a sort of pilgrimage site where faithful LDS would "come from far and near," as per Taylor's prophecy, to participate in the rituals performed therein. Additionally, Cardston has hosted government dignitaries, regional Indigenous leaders, and non-LDS farmers who would come to study the innovative irrigation systems the Latter-day Saints had built.

¹⁵ A temple district is regional administrative unit that indicates to Latter-day Saints which wards and stakes are associated with which temple. If you are a Latter-day Saint living in Calgary, for example, you would fall within the Calgary Temple District, and attendance at the Calgary Temple would be your default option. Though, attendance at other temples is neither restricted nor discouraged.

¹⁶ As of 2024, the Cardston Temple District still includes wards and one stake located in Kalispell, Montana.



Figure 4: The front entrance to the Cardston Temple on a warm July evening (C. W. Campbell 2022a)

2.3 Cardston in 2022—2023

The reason I relate these stories about the colonization of Cardston and area is to illustrate how the LDS concept of revelation—inclusive of prophetic impressions, personal divine communication, revealed texts, missionary mandates, and apostolic prophecy, all of which will be fleshed out more thoroughly in the next chapter—is interwoven into the historical economic development of the southern Albertan region. These revelations drove not only the settlement patterns of Latter-day Saints in the area, but the development of the agricultural economy. Today, the region is highly productive agriculturally, in large part thanks to early LDS irrigation initiatives (Brassard 2018), countering Palliser’s assessment of the land being comparatively useless for agriculture.

Equally important to livestock production, the region today is home to several of Alberta's most significant cattle ranches. Among them are the Bar K2 and Knight Ranches, which are operated by Deseret Ranches of Alberta Ltd. This company is a subsidiary of AgReserves, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' global agricultural holding company. Few details about Deseret Ranches of Alberta are publicly available, but a short Canadian Press article from 1996 described the scale of its operations as "breathtaking" by provincial standards, noting that it was "Alberta's largest cattle ranching operation" (The Canadian Press 1996). In addition, the LDS oriented online magazine LDS Daily reported in 2016 that the Alberta branch of AgReserves controlled as many as 100,000 acres (Brandon Young 2016).

Today, it would be inaccurate to portray Cardston as an exclusively Latter-day Saint settlement, much less a colony. While the town remains majority LDS, the degree of religious homogeneity has shifted. The current mayor, Maggie Kronen, was cited by the National Post stating that the town's population was roughly 80% affiliated with the LDS Church (Gerson 2014). Though, in a town council meeting I attended in 2022 she estimated it was closer to 65%. In fact, one of the town councillors serving during my fieldwork in Cardston, John Grainger, is not a member of the LDS Church and, as will become apparent in chapter seven, this shift in religious demographics has prompted changing attitudes towards the economic development of the town.

Cardston has grown to become a conventional Canadian prairie town in many ways: it boasts A&W (a typical mainstay of Alberta prairie towns), Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Subway fast food restaurants. There is a picturesque waterfront golf course, as well as a campground stretching along the banks of the Lee Creek. The public swimming pool is a popular spot during the hot, dry summer months. Diverse other businesses exist, the vast majority of which are not affiliated either loosely or directly with the LDS Church. As one friendly neighbour who stopped me in the street to get to know me said, "If it weren't for the temple, we'd be nothing. But now

Cardston has everything,” after which he began to enumerate businesses. His list emphasized five gas stations (which he corrected to three, though he was right the first time), five garages for mechanical repair, an ice rink, swimming pool, movie theatre, live theatre, two pizza places, and two museums. Whether or not that consists of “everything” one might want in a town is up for debate. But for this resident, none of it would likely exist were it not for the temple. He may be right, too. Neighbouring towns such as Raymond, Magrath, and Mountain View share the same settlement history, yet they have fewer services despite comparable or even larger populations. Cardston’s population does not fully explain its density of amenities. For residents like my neighbour, the presence of the temple remains the most intuitive explanation for why Cardston functions as a regional hub in ways these other towns do not.

Pointing to all the ways Cardston is just a normal prairie town is not to say that the LDS Church and the Latter-day Saint population are not salient within the community. The prominence of Latter-day Saint settlement in southern Alberta is widely recognized by Albertans. However, the Church no longer explicitly directs the economic lives of residents in ways similar to how Card oversaw the efforts of early LDS settlers. Nevertheless, as I will show, revelation continues to play a pivotal role in how many Latter-day Saints in Cardston discern prudence in social-material matters.

Before I turn to examine revelation more closely, however, Cardston has one more characteristic that distinguishes it significantly from other prairie towns besides its salient LDS population. As already mentioned, Cardston’s municipal boundaries directly border the Blood 148 reservation. The proximity of the reservation makes its Indigenous presence in and around Cardston equally salient. However, where that presence was curiously absent was in Church settings. The congregations I attended in Cardston were predominantly comprised of Caucasians, with scant Indigenous attendees. Now, this is not likely to be curious to most readers. After all, why would anyone expect members of First Nations to become members of the LDS Church? While the Church still maintains that a principal purpose of the Book of

Mormon is to help evangelize Christianity to the American Indigenous populations, that does not mean they would necessarily be amenable to that proposition. However, this absence was curious to me because there are, in fact, many Indigenous members of the LDS Church living in the Blood 138 reservation. The LDS Church provides members with a directory¹⁷ of households in their stake and ward. This includes information about the individual members of each household, along with their addresses, which are identified and pinned as part of a Google Maps overlay. Scanning the map provided for the Cardston wards showed a significant number of households residing in the Blood 138 reservation. Yet during Sunday services, firesides, and volunteer events, I did not encounter them, indicating that these members were mostly less-active or inactive members, even if they remained members of record.

My concern in this dissertation is not with disaffiliation, but with bringing readers into an ethnographic space where Latter-day Saint life has become ordinary. It would certainly be fruitful to seek out First Nations members of the Church to better understand their experiences and why they seemed to be distancing themselves from the Church. However, that inquiry fell outside the scope of this project. Moreover, there are other anthropologists and social scientists who have already examined the intersection of this particular faith with indigeneity in Canada (Murphy 2018) and elsewhere (Aikau 2012; Colvin and Brooks 2018; Palmer 2024). My focus here is different. I examine how revelation shapes the everyday religious and economic lives of the Cardston members I came to know, and the ones I came to know were those who were regularly present during Sunday services.

¹⁷ This is an “opt-out” program. Meaning, some members can, and have, opted out of having certain details about their household published in the directory. So, while the directory is not 100% complete, it nonetheless contains significant amounts of information about the membership in given geographic region.

3.0 Revelation, Personal and Otherwise

3.1 Moving Records, Joining Quorums: An Ethnographic Entry into LDS Revelation

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints utilizes meticulous record-keeping practices and digital technology to manage membership records and communicate with ward members. To prepare for my arrival in Cardston, I knew that the prescribed practice was to request that my membership records be “moved” to a local ward. I used the Church’s Meetinghouse Locator webapp (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.), searching for the address where I would be staying, and it indicated which ward boundaries that address fell within. After clicking on the indicated ward, I was provided with the email address of the ward clerk.¹⁸ I sent that clerk an introduction, informed him that I would be moving into the ward, provided my serialized membership number,¹⁹ and asked that my records be moved into the ward. This triggered an update to that ward’s directory of local members as well as the ward’s email distribution list, which now included the email address registered to my membership number. As a result, I began receiving routine ward communications to my email inbox even before I had arrived in Cardston. Among these communications was the weekly bulletin which, among other things, indicated the topic of each upcoming week’s Elders Quorum meeting lesson.

¹⁸ Each ward has an assigned a clerk. This volunteer position has a range of administrative responsibilities. Prominent among them are supporting the Bishopric with administering ward records, such as membership records, and with managing ward finances.

¹⁹ Every member of record is assigned a numerical membership number. This number is used to keep track of the member’s various records such as date of baptism and other ordinances, kinship structure, the contents of certain blessings pronounced upon them by a patriarch, etc.

Elders Quorum is the standard Sunday meeting for adult men in a Latter-day Saint congregation and is organized around those who hold the office of elder, although any adult male may attend, including those who have not yet been ordained or who are not members of the Church. Ordination to the office of elder is generally bestowed upon active male members of the Church once they reach adulthood. Elder is the lowest office within the Melchizedek Priesthood,²⁰ or “Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God” (D&C 107:3). Other offices within this priesthood order include high priest, patriarch, seventy, and apostle. Every active adult male Latter-day Saint is typically ordained as an elder, which is one reason male LDS missionaries are referred to as “elders” even though they are usually only eighteen to twenty-one years old. Female missionaries, who are not priesthood holders (more on this in chapter nine), are called “sisters.”

Holders of the Melchizedek Priesthood are authorized to perform important rituals, called ordinances, such as confirmations following baptism, blessings for the sick, and the conferral of the Melchizedek Priesthood to new inductees. They are also authorized to perform all ordinances pertaining to the lower priesthood order, the Aaronic Priesthood, which is usually conferred upon active male members between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Which is all to say that while the Elders Quorum belongs to the same order of priesthood as the Church’s highest revelatory authorities—the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency—every ward has an Elders Quorum comprised of the majority of its adult males. It is a relatively large body of men that meets bi-weekly to instruct one another. A notable feature of this structure is that priesthood authority is distributed broadly among Latter-day Saint men, rather than concentrated in a small professional clergy. At the ward and stake level, the system is

²⁰ Latter-day Saints recognize two orders of priesthood. The Aaronic and the Melchizedek. The Melchizedek Priesthood is considered the higher of the two.

carried out by lay membership, all volunteers, who share responsibility for the administration of sacred rites and mutual instruction.

Adult women who, again, hold no priesthood office, meet as the Relief Society. This female-only group often serves as a counterpart to the Elders Quorum, but it has its own leadership structure, with women presiding both locally and at the global institutional level. The General Relief Society Presidency, comprised of the president and her counsellors, occupies the highest leadership roles available to LDS women. However, they are not considered General Authorities. Instead, they, along with the presidencies of other organizations such as the Young Men's and Young Women's organizations, are classified as General Officers—a subordinate category within the Church's hierarchical structure.

It is worth noting that the content taught in Elders Quorum and Relief Society rarely aligns. In the Cardston wards I attended, lesson topics for each meeting were communicated in advance by email, and only a handful of times did the content overlap. Typically, lesson topics are selected by the leaders of each organization's local leadership in consultation with the assigned instructor for that week, all of whom are volunteers. These selections are guided by the perceived needs of their respective, sex-segregated membership, informed by official sources such as recent General Conference messages, and occasionally the bishop or stake president may offer suggestions.

For the first week I attended in Cardston, the weekly bulletin sent to ward members indicated that Elders Quorum attendees should come having read an address given by the apostle Dieter F. Uchtdorf at the then-most-recent April 2022 biannual General Conference.²¹ In

²¹ General Conference is a biannual event, televised and streamed to the global body of the Church, almost always hosted in Salt Lake City. Though the specific organization of the sessions has varied over the years, today the conference spans two days, across which there are five 2-hour long

LDS parlance, such addresses are called talks rather than sermons or homilies, a term that applies equally to lay members speaking in Sunday meetings as it does to apostles addressing the global body of the church. The word signals the characteristic tone of LDS addresses at every level: less formal preaching, more narrative instruction, delivered in a style that is conversational yet reverent. Lessons in both Elders Quorum and Relief Society typically draw on recent General Conference talks, as directed in the Church's administrative handbook (*The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023a*, 8.2.1.2, 9.2.1.2). Like all such talks, this one, titled "Our Heartfelt All" (Uchtdorf 2022), was redistributed in print in the LDS Church's flagship magazine, *The Liahona*. Readily accessible via the Church's publicly available digital archive and mobile app, *The Gospel Library*, I downloaded a PDF version of Uchtdorf's talk to my personal device and began my study.

Structurally, the talk is composed of a mix of biblical parables, analogies crafted by Uchtdorf himself, reflections on key LDS covenants²² or "laws," and an exhortation to the audience or reader based on these. It concludes with a testimony affirming the truth of the talk's teachings and the LDS gospel more broadly.

Thematically, Uchtdorf structures his talk around a conceptual and practical problem: what constitutes "whole-souled commitment" to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and how are people

sessions. Each session features multiple talks given by senior members of the Church leadership and numerous musical numbers, performed by organ-accompanied choirs.

²² Covenants, as generally understood by Latter-day Saints, represent almost contractual arrangements with God. The terms of these are always dictated by God and non-negotiable. However, since God dictated the terms, He is considered to be irrevocably committed to the covenant. As one scripture states, "I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say; but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise" (D&C 82:10). Covenants therefore require specific human action, and when those conditions are met, God is obliged to fulfil His side of the agreement.

to “balance the many demands of life with [their] desire to offer [their] whole souls to the Lord?” “Our challenge” he continues, “is that we think balance means dividing our time evenly among competing interests. Viewed in this way, our commitment to Jesus Christ would be one of many things we need to fit into our busy schedules. But perhaps there is another way to look at it” (Uchtdorf 2022, 122). Thus, he sets the stage for a rethinking of the structure of Latter-day Saints’ day-to-day lives that would see even the seemingly mundane and temporal aspects of daily life get reconfigured toward spiritual ends. “Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not just one of many things we do. The Savior is the motivating power behind *all* that we do” (Uchtdorf 2022, 123, emphasis in the original). No matter the task, he teaches, it ought to be motivated by the “common, overall objective” of following Christ and returning to God. Rather than dividing life into work, home, and church, everything one does—at work, at home, at church, or elsewhere—should be oriented toward that overall objective. This, he teaches, will bring joy, unify one’s purpose, and help prepare for a “glorious future” (124).

Unfortunately, he offered no concrete strategies for doing this. He mentions that approaching life this way may require sacrifice, and that it will necessarily require Latter-day Saints to offer up parts of their life in service of godly purposes. But no techniques for achieving this reorientation are found in this talk. “No matter,” I thought, “that’s what Elders Quorum is all about.” Thus, armed with my study of Uchtdorf’s talk, I attended my first Elders Quorum in Cardston—the first I had attended in several years—ready to discuss this rethinking of seemingly competing obligations, the misconception of balance and, most importantly, how to unify all of life’s activities into one Christ-oriented objective.

The room where Elders Quorum was hosted featured a large, long, polished, wooden table situated in the middle of the room. The table was ringed with more than twelve plush, wheeled, ergonomic, office chairs. Enclosing this table arrangement, most of the walls of the room were lined with expensive-looking wooden chairs, each with built-in cloth cushions. There were large printed and framed paintings of scenes featuring Jesus Christ on the walls, a

projector screen, and a wall-mounted cabinet made of dark wood at the head of the table. This opened to reveal a whiteboard. Because this was during the post-COVID era, there was also a small tripod in the middle of the table that held a mobile phone being used to broadcast the meeting to digital attendees via Zoom.

This was the High Council room at one of the two stake centres in Cardston. The High Council is the principal advisory and judicial body under the stake presidency, which accounts for the fine furnishings. When not used for High Council meetings, the room also hosted various other meetings, including Elders Quorum in this ward. Not every ward building has such a space, though. Most meetings are held in far plainer classrooms with folding, non-ergonomic chairs, like the one used by the Relief Society in this same building.

As mentioned, elders in the LDS Church are always men, and they can be as young as 18. The office is held in perpetuity unless the individual advances to another office or is excommunicated from the Church. So, while it was possible I would find a room full of young adults, this was not the case. In part, this is because young single adults aged eighteen to thirty²³ in a given region are routinely organized into a separate singles ward, which means that single elders in that age range would be attending a different Elders Quorum elsewhere. The Elders Quorum I attended was therefore comprised of all married adult men, or single adult men aged thirty and older. As such, there was no one obviously under the age of thirty except two missionaries. In fact, it appeared to me that only three or four individuals were in their thirties.

²³ This has since changed. Young Single Adult wards now include members up to age 35. These wards are intended to provide single adults with community and opportunities to associate with single peers of their own faith. While the Church has not publicly framed the adjustment in terms of marriage timing, I presume that the expanded age range reflects broader demographic trends toward later marriage, even among Latter-day Saints, who have historically married younger than their North American peers.

The remaining twenty or so attendees appeared to be forty years old or older, a perfect group of men to discuss the problem of balancing work, life, and church commitments in my assessment, since they all seemed to have years of experience in this regard.

After some initial quorum business, which included my introduction as a new member of the ward and a few questions about what brought me to Cardston and about my research, what followed was what I would describe as a collective brainstorming exercise. The facilitator read sections of Uchtdorf's talk as a conversation prompt, and meeting attendees raised their hands or simply interjected to offer their own insights, knowledge, and wisdom, generally presented through personal experience or analogy. One individual's comment would prompt another to share their own take, and the meeting unfolded through a series of loosely connected contributions oriented to the general theme of the lesson. This occurred in a free flowing, moderately organized manner that would be the envy of any university instructor tasked with encouraging undergraduates to discuss an assigned reading.

Curiously, the conversation never moved beyond the portion of the talk where the problem was presented: how to create balance between competing priorities. When this was read by the facilitator, the discussion quickly centred on that issue, with individuals sharing analogies and experiences about how they managed it in their own lives. Analogies about fair pie slicing were common. Stories of sacrificing family, work, or Church obligations in favour of one or another were shared. Strategies for negotiating spousal expectations were discussed. Several individuals expressed difficulty, even struggle, with achieving balance. In response, sincere and caring counsel was offered by peers.

Tangible, practical support was also offered. One elder offered to watch another's children so the latter could go out with his wife. Another elder offered to have his wife send some meals to a peer's home while he would be away on a business trip, thus alleviating some of the demands on the traveller's wife's time. By the end of the roughly 40-minute meeting,

several expressions of gratitude were expressed, someone volunteered to give a closing prayer, and the meeting closed with a pervading sense of having achieved something meaningful.

Something I noted at the time was the flexibility evident in the way the elders offered their suggestions, strategies, and narratives to one another. One speaker, for example, related a difficult experience in trying to find work-life balance. To solve the problem, he said, he first prayed to God, then serendipitously read an inspiring General Conference talk, and finally received an impression from the Spirit. He described “knowing what to do” and acted on that impression with positive results. He emphasized, however, that his approach “might not work for everyone,” and that “everyone’s circumstance is different, so you have to pray about it.” His concern was not to share the specifics of his strategy, which remained vague and did not even include which talk he had read, but to highlight the process by which it emerged: prayer, study, and revelation.

In contrast, another elder shared a strategy for finding balance that he presented in a rather authoritative, almost formulaic way. He related sitting down to budget his time between work, family, and other obligations, which he then used to reprioritize his time to favour his family obligations. He offered this as a strategy that was able to be universally applied to everyone present. But, in response to this, another peer interjected, emphasizing that “everyone’s situations are different, but with the Lord’s help we can all figure it out.” This was met with murmured agreement, and the elder who had shared his budgeting strategy also agreed, saying that the process was one of the ways he “felt guided to figure it out”. But, of course, each person should “find their own method following the spirit.”

One of the elders, who appeared younger than most in the room, shared an ongoing conflict with his spouse, who felt he was spending more time fulfilling his Church calling than fulfilling his duties as a father. After narrating how he resolved the conflict, he reminded everyone that they ought to pray about their conflicts and assured everyone that the Holy Ghost would guide them to the correct solution, just as he had experienced. Meaning, the solution he

had found was not to be modelled. Rather, what was to be modelled was the method of seeking out personal, divine guidance. “God knows us and what we need,” he assured everyone.

It was not lost on me, however, that the point of the talk we were supposed to be discussing had never been communicated. In fact, the conversation seemed to me to reinforce the assumptions underpinning the problem as presented by Uchtdorf. Uchtdorf wanted his audience to cease thinking of these various aspects of life as separate, competing domains and to see how they could all be unified in following Christ. Yet in all the analogies of slicing the pie fairly, and in the examples of sacrificing work, family, or Church time to make room for another, the group relied on spiritually informed reasoning that still assumed a zero-sum framework. The separateness of these domains appeared to me to have been reified in this meeting.

What made this experience even more interesting was that it was repeated. After a few months in Cardston, I moved to another address in town. This new address fell within the boundaries of a different ward. Following the same pattern, I requested that my membership records be moved and began attending that ward’s Elders Quorum.

To my surprise, the first Elders Quorum lesson I attended in this new ward just so happened to be focused on the same Uchtdorf talk, and the discussion unfolded in exactly the same way. Many experience-based insights about how best to balance these competing responsibilities were shared, and peers exhorted each other to seek personal revelation through prayer in order to identify the best way for them specifically to manage the problem of balance. No one touched upon the proposal found within Uchtdorf’s talk about how to see those aspects of life as being unified in a Christ-oriented purpose and thus not competing or conflicting at all. Once again, the separateness of these competing domains appeared to me to have been reified in this meeting.

I was wrong about this, though. I could not see it at the time, but all these exhortations to seek personal revelation to solution life’s logistical problems *were* the way to reorient all aspects

of life to Christ. Still, it took me several more months of observant participation in LDS practices, study, and reflecting on these two Elders Quorum experiences before I understood how.

3.2 Knowing through Personal Revelation

The key to my misunderstanding was that my understanding of revelation had become decidedly etic. In the years since leaving LDS practice, I had come to see revelation as a mystical event—a moment when truth is suddenly and miraculously transmitted to the individual experiencing it. It was only after re-immersing myself in routine LDS practice that I regained a more emic view of revelation: not as a rare, otherworldly event, but as the ordinary way God communicates with believers about how to act in their lives. From an analytic perspective, this can be understood as an epistemological technique, a structured and routinized practice for discerning what one ought to do. In this sense, revelation resembles one of Mauss's ([1950] 2002, 100) “total social facts”: a practice so embedded in a social group that it both expresses and organizes multiple dimensions of social life at once.

With that shift, those two tightly mirrored Elders Quorum experiences suddenly made sense. What those men were doing, I came to realize, was not merely solving logistical problems—they were actively reorienting their lives toward Christ through the process of seeking revelation. Because revelation in LDS contexts requires practices like prayer, obedience, repentance, and studying scripture to be effective, even the effort to do something as mundane as balance work and family becomes a spiritual pursuit when approached through revelation. In seeking revelation, they were already enacting the Christ-centred integration Uchtdorf described.

In this chapter, my objective is to help the reader arrive at a similarly emic understanding of LDS revelation. This requires more than simply defining the concept. It involves approaching revelation as a flexible epistemic practice. Latter-day Saints (particularly the most devout) use the pursuit of personal revelation as a method for acquiring knowledge. While this knowledge

often pertains to gospel principles or presumed eternal truths, it can also address mundane, seemingly secular matters. Though “divine revelation” may appear rigid or top-down—something that flows only from prophetic authority—LDS theology distributes revelatory authority broadly, allowing lay members to pursue revelation as a deeply individualized endeavour. The results of such pursuits can vary immensely. However, this variability is strategically managed by both Church leaders and individual Saints, generating a system in which revelation is at once flexible and highly structured. Explaining these characteristics is the purpose of this chapter. To begin, we must enter the ethnographic space where revelation is already taken as a real, accessible, and actionable means of acquiring knowledge.

3.3 “Revelation is real”

The most foundational form of revelation in the LDS context is what members call “having a testimony,” a divine confirmation from the Holy Ghost that the Book of Mormon or some other aspect of LDS history or theology is true. From that conviction follows the belief that Joseph Smith was a prophet and that the gospel as taught in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the true gospel of Christ. Because this confirmation is available even to non-members, it functions as the gateway into life in the Church. The same principle applies to less-active members like me, who are often approached by full-time missionaries in hopes of rekindling participation through the promise of revelation. In both cases, revelation is presented as real, accessible, and foundational to all. So let us begin there, with a visit from the missionaries.

Within a couple weeks of arriving in Cardston, I met with a pair of local missionaries. They had reached out to me by phone, knowing I was both new to town and, I suspect, aware I was less active. There’s no official registry of less-active members in a ward, but Latter-day Saints have subtle ways of distinguishing the active from the less active, such as speech patterns and dress in meetings. These are not foolproof techniques, to be sure. Some active

members wear jeans to church despite the norms, though they are usually well known and their eccentricities accepted. Nonetheless, it is often surprising how accurately Latter-day Saints detect their less-active peers.

For example, the first time interviewing one woman about her stance on alcohol prohibition in Cardston (more on this in chapter seven) I told her up front, as I did in all my formal interview settings, that I was a less-active member. She gave a knowing grin and told me she already knew. “Is it that obvious?” I asked. She reminded me of a time we had sat beside each other during a Sunday School lesson. We had exchanged introductions and pleasantries, but it was hardly a thorough getting-to-know-you opportunity. Still, during that brief interaction, she had smelled coffee on my breath. I did, in fact, tend to ensure I had some coffee in my system on Sunday mornings to stay alert during the often slow (to me) meetings. But coffee on the breath of a member is about as clear an indicator of less active status as it gets—generally, Latter-day Saints eschew coffee as part of a scripturally informed health code. Mortified, I made a note to acquire some breath mints.

It was not surprising that after a few weeks in Cardston I received a call from the missionaries asking if they could visit. Although missionaries do meet with active members from time to time, especially when encouraging member involvement in missionary efforts, they often focus attention on less active ones. Being such a member, and new to the ward, I soon found myself sitting on a couch in the living room of the house I was renting, facing the two missionaries across from me. After significant small talk about my background, my mission in Oakland, California, and the focus of my PhD research, one of the two Elders asked bluntly, “Do you have a testimony?” Matching the abruptness of a question that did not grow naturally out of the conversation, I simply replied that I did not. Seemingly unsurprised and undeterred, the Elder asked whether I had recently read the Book of Mormon and prayed about whether it was “true.” I responded that while I had read countless excerpts in recent years (“bits and pieces,” I

said) it had been more than a decade since I had read it cover to cover or prayed about anything, let alone its veracity.

Sitting forward on the edge of the couch, elbows resting on his knees, forearms parallel to the ground, hands outstretched with thumbs pointing upward, the Elder looked at me and made a promise. It was a promise I knew well from my own years as a missionary: if I read the Book of Mormon “fervently” and prayed, I would “know” by the power of the Holy Ghost that it was “true.” Then, as if to say, “don’t take my word for it,” he reached for the copy of the Book of Mormon beside him, flipped through its pages, and located a particular passage. Turning the book toward me, he asked me to read the highlighted verses, Moroni 10:4-5, which read:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things.

Having finished reading this aloud to the two young men, the Elder proceeded to share with me his testimony: a series of assertions about the truthfulness of the gospel as taught by the LDS Church, the power of the Holy Ghost, and the Book of Mormon as a “true” book, understood to be both a historically accurate record and a source of revealed truth about God, Jesus Christ, and the gospel. From my perspective, the most significant element was his affirmation that “revelation is real.” If I were to follow the counsel in the verses I had just read, he explained, I could reacquire the testimony that I had lost.

The idea that “revelation is real,” though often not articulated in precisely this way, is one that LDS missionaries routinely deploy given the central role revelation plays in the faith’s origin

mythology.²⁴ That mythology, referred to using the emic term the Restoration (with a capital R), recounts the story of a young Joseph Smith Jr. living in upstate New York in the early 1800s. This region, later called the burned-over district of the Second Great Awakening, was saturated with evangelical revivals where Protestant denominations, especially Methodists and Baptists, competed for converts. Confused about which religion to join, Smith found himself reading the book of James from the New Testament. Smith took the passage in chapter one, verse five²⁵ to mean that he could simply ask God which church he ought to join and that God would respond “liberally.” Inspired by the words, he went to a nearby grove of trees to do just that.

In a spectacular display of theophany, Smith reports that both God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him. They instructed Smith not to join any church, stating that “all their creeds were an abomination” (JSH 1:19). In the years that followed, he described numerous angelic visitations, the translation of new scripture, and the restoration of priesthood authority, all of which established his role as a prophet and asserted that through him the gospel of Jesus Christ and the priesthood keys²⁶ necessary to perform its ordinances would be restored after

²⁴ Note that I am using the term “mythology” in the anthropological sense. In this sense, myth does not imply that a narrative is untrue, but rather that it is told and accepted as true in ways that authorize a particular understanding of the world. Myths are culturally authoritative narratives that organise meaning, legitimise social arrangements, and, as a result, have real effects on the communities who share them (Geertz 1973a; Lévi-Strauss 1963).

²⁵ The full text of this verse found in the LDS version of the King James Bible reads “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”

²⁶ Priesthood keys refer to the authority to direct and authorize the use of priesthood power in performing sacred rites. In LDS teaching, a baptism or other ritual performed without the proper keys is not considered eternally valid. This concept distinguishes ordinary ritual acts from ordinances, which are

having been lost for centuries since the time of Christ's apostles. This unfolding sequence of events is what Latter-day Saints refer to as the Restoration.

"Lesson 1" in the missionary teaching manual *Preach My Gospel* centres around recounting this Restoration mythology (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023, 30-45). It is the first formal lesson that missionaries are to teach investigators,²⁷ positioning the Restoration as the central narrative around which Latter-day Saint missionaries structure their accounting of the faith to non-members. The lesson's introductory content about ancient prophets, Jesus Christ's ministry, and the apostasy or "falling away" that came after the death of the ancient apostles, these all serve as preamble to the telling of the story of Joseph Smith as the prophet of the Restoration.

While the Restoration mythology is primarily about Joseph Smith and his prophetic mission, the other principal point it makes is that revelation is real and universally available. The story is about a young boy who had a divine right to receive personal revelation to know how to conduct his religious life; it is about a humanity that requires ongoing, present-day, prophetic revelation to guide it; and ultimately it is about individuals' divine right to receive their own testimony-generating revelation about the truthfulness of the Restoration. After all, the lesson on the Restoration culminates with a section called "Pray to Know the Truth through the Holy Ghost," and it instructs missionaries to invite their interlocutors to "know the truth for themselves" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023, 43) by praying and receiving revelation, much like Joseph Smith did. Following precisely the same formulation as they would teaching a non-member, the promise that missionary made to me was that I could know truth—not through observation, not through seeking mortal, authoritative, expert opinion,

binding because they are performed under authorized priesthood keys. I return to this idea more thoroughly in section 9.2.

²⁷ The term used to refer to non-members who accept meetings with the missionaries.

and not through any sort of physical evidence, but through divine revelation given to me via the Holy Ghost.

Months later in a different conversation, I asked an interviewee “what is your favourite part of the Church? What’s the thing that draws you to it the most? What distinguishes it from the other Christianities out there for you?” Her immediate, almost reflexive response was that the Book of Mormon was true. Then, after a thoughtful pause she said “We’re the only ones with a prophet. The only ones with divine guidance today. We have a living prophet who gets revelation for us. And I can seek my own revelation, too. I don’t have to just, like, trust a book. I can talk to God and get my own revelation, just for me.” Certainly, the presence of this additional book of scripture distinguishes the LDS Church from other Christian denominations that assert the Bible to be the sole word of God. But when she gave it a moment’s thought, she articulated the core of the LDS offering in terms of revelation: that it is real, that there is a prophet who receives it on behalf of everyone, and that individuals can receive their own revelation, too. Revelation is the total social fact that, I argue, most clearly distinguishes the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from other forms of Christianity. It at once expresses and organizes LDS life in all its dimensions.

3.4 How to Receive and Detect Personal Revelation

The most obvious next question, then, is: how does revelation happen? As the story of young Joseph Smith is intended to illustrate, and as the elder promised me, anyone, member or not, can pray to know the truth of the Restoration narrative or other gospel principles. Unlike Joseph Smith’s experience, however, Latter-day Saints do not expect theophanic events when they pray for personal revelation. Instead, among the diverse phrases routinely deployed by Latter-day Saints to describe how revelation is communicated, the Holy Ghost is almost always attributed as the agent who delivers revelation.

As the third member of the Godhead, the Holy Ghost is understood as a distinct personage of spirit, the only member without a body of flesh and bone. He is invariably described as male and is distinguished from both God the Father and Jesus Christ. His role is to mediate divine communication with humanity, though always in ways described through emic terms such as a “still small voice,” “impressions,” and “feelings of peace, comfort, and joy.” Navigating these modes of communication is a skill developed through practice and deliberate methods.

The complexities of Holy-Ghost-mediated-revelation were on display in November 2022 when I attended a ward fireside. This fireside was a sort of retrospective on the events of that year’s summer youth trip, Moroni’s Quest, or “Quest” for short. Quest is a yearly, multi-day event organized by the local stakes in southern Alberta, not by the global institutional Church.

For the youth, it is both fun and faith-promoting, anticipated for months in advance. For many parents and leaders, however, Quest represents a heavy burden to organize, execute, and chaperone. Its effects are felt beyond the Church as well. It was obvious when Quest was taking place because when I went to the swimming pool that weekend, I found it closed: all the teenaged lifeguards were away at the event. Several other businesses also shut their doors, either because their youth employees were attending or because their owners and managers were volunteering. Quest reshapes the rhythms of the town as much as it does the faith of its participants.

More than once I heard organizers, with a weary laugh, ask aloud, “Is this all worth it?” In each instance this question was answered (often by the speaker themselves) in the affirmative because of how it contributes to the strengthening of the youths’ faith, meaning their personal sense of spiritual conviction and willingness to live according to gospel teachings. The repetition of the question was less an expression of doubt than a way of highlighting the immensity of the logistics and the personal sacrifice required to host Quest: in vacation days, volunteer labour, and actual dollars.

At this retrospective fireside, various youth attendees spoke about their experiences at that year's Quest. Then, several of the adult leaders who had volunteered at the event spoke about their experiences. One of these leaders related that in the months and weeks leading up to the event he was unsure whether he would attend that year. Though he actively encouraged his children to attend, for him the timing was a challenge. He owned a building in which someone leased the space and ran a restaurant. The speaker related that he had plans to open his own restaurant in that space years down the line. However, the existing restaurant owners had suddenly decided not to renew their lease. If he wanted to realize his own restaurant plans, he would need to launch it right away, accelerating his entrepreneurial plans by several years, which he did.

In the weeks leading up to Quest, the speaker concluded that running his newly launched restaurant while preparing for and attending the multi-day event would be too much. Volunteers are expected to make material, financial, and spiritual preparations, and in the face of his new business, he felt these preparations would need to be put on the back burner. "I didn't think it would be fair to the youth," he explained, if he showed up unprepared. Moreover, he reported having some physical pain, speculating that it was from overworking himself. He worried the pain would be aggravated by Quest activities, which often involve long hikes and other demanding physical exertions.

It is not uncommon that when Latter-day Saints seek support for personal problems, they turn to a friend or fellow member who holds the priesthood and request a blessing, hoping it will bring direction, comfort, and relief. Because priesthood authority is widely distributed among Latter-day Saint men, such blessings need not come from a bishop or prominent leader but may just as easily be offered by a neighbour, relative, or friend. Owing to the ongoing and pervasive unease this speaker felt about both his business and whether to attend Quest, the evening before the event he asked a fellow priesthood holder for such a blessing. These blessings consist of the priesthood holder placing his hands on the person's head, stating the

authority under which the ordinance is being performed, and giving “words of blessing, comfort, and counsel as guided by the Spirit” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023a, 18.14.2). The specific contents of this blessing were not related to the audience. However, he did relate key details about how the Holy Ghost communicated wisdom to him about how to proceed.

In my notes I recorded how “Immediately following the blessing the pain went away, and I felt such peace.” “All my worry melted away.” Moreover, he suddenly “knew that the adversary” (Satan) was trying to stop him from going to Quest, but that the Holy Ghost had let him know that he needed to overcome those obstacles. He suddenly knew that “that there was something waiting for me at Quest that I needed to experience.” Without specifying what those experiences were, he described them as spiritually uplifting and invaluable, and expressed gratitude that the Holy Ghost had “prompted” him to attend.

This was a message sent and received, and it was communicated through several of the prominent ways Latter-day Saints assert that the Holy Ghost communicates. First was the sensory relief of pain, dramatic enough that he “stopped taking pain medication that evening.” Second was the pervading sense of peace, heightened by its contrast with his earlier worry, anxiety, and concern. Third was the sudden “knowing” of new information, often described as an “impression”: a conviction whose source is difficult to articulate but is nevertheless sensed as coming from outside oneself. As this speaker explained, he suddenly “knew” that his efforts in life were being strategically impeded by “the adversary.” With that knowledge, he concluded that there was some experience at Quest specifically waiting for him that would advance his spiritual progression and which the adversary did not want him to encounter.

There are myriad other ways Latter-day Saints report receiving personal revelation. “Promptings” is used to describe a persistent sense of needing to either do or not do something. Alternatively, “promptings” might describe seemingly random but repeated thoughts. For example, an interlocutor described to me an experience over several weeks during which she

suddenly found herself thinking about a community member she had not seen or heard from in many months. She would dismiss the thought, only to suddenly have that individual come into her mind while doing some mundane tasks; “When I was washing dishes, or driving in my car, when my mind was quietly wandering, that’s when I would think of [the absent community member].” After listening to a General Conference talk about personal revelation and how the Holy Ghost communicates, she concluded that these recurring thoughts were “promptings” from the Spirit. Although such experiences might resemble what outsiders would call a moral conscience or intuition, for Latter-day Saints the crucial distinction is that they are attributed to the Holy Ghost as an external divine source of knowledge, not to an internal mechanism.²⁸ Acting on that impression, she reached out and discovered that the individual was in need of emotional and material support.

This narrative highlights another key element to how Latter-day Saints receive and perceive spiritual communication: one must achieve the correct conditions under which to hear “the still small voice” of the Holy Ghost. For this interlocutor, it was a “quiet” mind, allowed to aimlessly wander and thereby be influenced by the subtle promptings. Thus, the immediate environment plays an important role in one’s ability to hear the Holy Ghost. For example, when I was a youth, my Latter-day Saint peers and I enjoyed going to local pubs on Wednesdays because we could purchase chicken wings at a substantial discount. Even though we did not purchase or consume alcohol—which would have been sinful according to LDS teachings—some of our parents (mine included) were opposed to this activity because pubs were not

²⁸ Joseph Smith described this externally sourced knowledge as “pure intelligence flowing into you,” a sudden influx of ideas that, if noticed and heeded, enables a person to “grow into the principle of revelation, until [they] become perfect in Christ Jesus.” This articulation underscores that revelation is not experienced as an internal moral sense but as divine communication coming from without that, when cultivated, becomes a tool for spiritual refinement and eventual perfection (Smith 1938, 151).

places where the Holy Ghost could be readily felt. The assertion being that merely existing in and amongst sin and sinful behaviour can negatively impact one's ability to sense divine communication.

Similarly, there are places and forms of company that enhance one's ability to sense divine communication. Temples, meetinghouses, and natural environments were frequently described by Latter-day Saints as settings where the Holy Ghost could be more readily perceived. Being among family, faithful LDS peers, prominent spiritual leaders, and even animals was also described, at different times, as heightening spiritual sensitivity.

A final key way Latter-day Saints prepare themselves to receive personal revelation is to "study things out in their mind." I heard this phrase several times when speaking with Latter-day Saints about personal revelation. I knew I had encountered it before since it is a common expression within the Church. However, I had forgotten its original source until one afternoon when I was visiting another less-active member in her home with my ministering companion.

The ministering program in the LDS Church sees assigned pairs of (usually) sex-segregated companions visit or connect with a prescribed roster of households at least once a month. These households can consist of families or individuals who are either active or less active. Among other goals, one of the primary purposes of the program is to create a network of support and fellowship that persists outside of Sunday meetings.

Being part of a ministering companionship is a volunteer responsibility extended to nearly all active members. It is also used to give less-active members low-stakes opportunities to re-engage with the community. As a temporary member of the Cardston wards, and a less active one at that, I did not expect to be invited to participate in a calling during my fieldwork. However, the Elders Quorum President in one ward asked me to serve in a ministering companionship.

One of the households on my companionship's roster was a middle-aged woman who had not attended church in over a decade and was considered less active. My ministering

companion already knew her well, having been her assigned minister for some time. Typically, he had typically fulfilled his ministering responsibilities through phone calls or emails. Since I was a new face, however, he suggested we visit her in person.

During the visit, which consisted mainly of small talk and introductory conversation (during which my research interests were discussed at length), the tone shifted suddenly when my companion asked whether she had prayed about returning to church. She responded in the negative, and he replied, "I invite you to study it out in your mind, like it says in D&C 9:8 and then pray about it." I was struck that he had the reference memorized. The numbers stuck with me, and when I got home, I looked up the passage.

The revelation found in D&C 9 was addressed to Oliver Cowdery. The text is written in the first-person voice of God, a form characteristic of Smith's revelations and understood by Latter-day Saints as God speaking through him. Cowdery had asked whether he could assist in translating the golden plates on which the Book of Mormon was inscribed. Initially denied, he persisted, and eventually God, through Smith, permitted him to try. Reportedly, Cowdery attempted the translation but failed; then followed the revelation recorded as section 9 in the Doctrine and Covenants. Verses 7 through 9 read:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong; therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me.

While these verses relate a lesson being taught to Oliver Cowdery, via Joseph Smith, all in the context of the translation of the Book of Mormon, they have come to be used by Latter-

day Saints more widely as a sort of general guide to receiving revelation. As the passage instructs, one cannot simply ask God for answers and expect them to appear. Revelation must be preceded by a process of thoughtful study.

An additional requirement for effectively seeking revelation embedded in this narrative concerns asking the right kind of question. God's rebuke, "you have supposed that I would give [the translation] unto you," shows that Cowdery expected God to provide answers directly without any prior effort. This was an incorrect supposition on Cowdery's part. The correct procedure is to first study the matter, then formulate a plan or decision, and only then ask God for confirmation: "then you must ask me if it be right." Revelation functions by confirming pre-considered possibilities.

Finally, the revelation culminates in a sensed yes-or-no response: "you shall feel that it is right," or "if it be not right you shall have no such feelings." Revelation thus emerges as a feeling of rightness that follows study, deliberation, and a prayerful request for confirmation. What began as early instruction in the 1830s continues to shape LDS teaching today. For example, a 2022 *Liahona* article, the Church's official periodical, explains that both study and the formulation of confirmable questions are essential to the revelatory process:

If we are waiting for a specific answer to a general question, then we might want to instead change to a studied-out, specific question and then seek confirmation. For example, if we are praying to know "What should I do next?" without doing much more than praying for direction, then instead we may need to make sure we have explored our possibilities, weighed them thoroughly, and followed gospel principles in selecting the best option, and then present that option to the Lord for confirmation that it is the right choice. (Beattie 2022, "Study it out and seek specific direction")

The author then goes on to remind the reader that they ought to be "open to multiple possibilities," acknowledging the potential range of outcomes to revelatory inquiries.

When my ministering companion told the less-active member we were visiting—and was likely also telling me—to “study [the idea of coming back to church] out in your mind like it says in D&C 9,” he was invoking this well-known narrative of Oliver Cowdery’s failed attempt to translate scripture. Though the revelation was originally directed at Cowdery, it has since come to represent a broader procedural model for how personal revelation is to be sought. This model integrates several elements like study, prayer, and confirmation through the Spirit, but it begins with study.

What ought a revelation-seeking Latter-day Saint to study? Ideally, the process begins with scripture, including both ancient texts and Restoration-era revelations, along with recent prophetic counsel on the topic. Yet Latter-day Saints also understand “studying things out” to involve gathering and weighing ordinary practical information related to the situation at hand. If the decision concerns employment, for example, there are very few doctrinal sources that speak directly to the problem. In such cases, the individual would study the matter by comparing wages, working conditions, commute times, opportunities for advancement, and other concrete considerations. With those practical factors and doctrinal principles in view, individuals then consult any additional learning materials they consider relevant, and not all of these need to be provided by the Church. Effectively any content that helps them think through the problem can become part of the study that precedes revelatory confirmation.

Although this might sound, in ordinary English, like simply thinking a problem through, within LDS discourse it has a more specific resonance. The phrase “study it out in your mind” indexes the narrative of D&C 9, where Oliver Cowdery is instructed to make deliberate preparations before asking God for confirmation. In that way, it denotes a distinctly LDS practice: a spiritually purposeful kind of study, always oriented toward revelation. What happens, though, when this process is only partially carried out, or when participants disagree about whether it has been done sufficiently? One interlocutor, Tony, related a narrative that illustrates this tension.

Tony, a counsellor in the bishopric at the time, was part of a group tasked with choosing a new family history specialist, a ward position responsible for helping members with genealogical work and its connection to temple ordinances. After significant discussion, brainstorming, and consideration of various candidates, a name was put forward. The meeting of men then turned to discuss the individual more specifically, their home and work circumstances, and their social skills, as well as consulting the responsibilities of the position as outlined in the *General Handbook* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023a, 25.2.4). Finally, the small committee prayed for confirmation that the individual they had identified was an appropriate fit for the calling. Thus far, the committee members had followed the correct procedure for seeking revelation about the problem at hand: they had considered the problem, consulted each other about it, weighed their knowledge about the individual against the documented responsibilities as described in the *General Handbook*, identified a course of action, and sought confirmation through prayer.

Tony said he felt a sense of unease. However, his peers did not share this feeling and were enthusiastic about the proposed individual. As the lone dissenter, Tony asked that the group be given more time to consider the decision individually over the coming week. The others agreed, and the decision was delayed. During that time, Tony decided to contact the prospective individual to check in and see how they were doing. In that conversation, although the person explicitly said they were fine and did not need support, Tony sensed that they were overwhelmed by personal issues.

When the decision makers gathered again the following Sunday to discuss the calling, Tony shared his experience with the group before they resumed discussion. The other members of the committee remained confident that this candidate was the person indicated for the position, and they prayed about it again. While my interlocutor continued to feel unease, his peers did not. So, the decision was made to proceed with the calling as planned.

One of the reasons Tony shared this narrative to illustrate how failing to properly study things out can lead to undesirable outcomes. In the months following the appointment, it became evident that the individual was struggling to fulfil the role. Additional support was brought in to assist, but when that proved ineffective, the committee ultimately made the difficult decision to release the individual from the calling.

As Tony explained to me, having studied the problem more thoroughly than his peers, he believed he had received stronger revelatory guidance. He had sought out additional information after the first meeting, while it seemed his peers had done nothing to deepen their prayerful inquiry. In the end, the individual did prove ill-suited for the position. Tony acknowledged, however, that he never encountered any concrete evidence that the role would be too much. When he visited the candidate, his concern stemmed not from anything explicitly said, but from a sensed absence of peace, calm, or assurance, the very feelings that Latter-day Saints interpret as revelatory confirmation.

There are, of course, many other factors that could have shaped this narrative. Personal or personality conflicts between Tony and the candidate came to mind as I listened. But it is important to remember the reason this story was being narrated to me. Tony was trying to explain an instance in which doing due diligence and “studying the matter out” was not done adequately, and the result was decidedly negative. Tony perceived that the revelation he was receiving was more accurate because he had done more to study the matter than his peers. “It’s not that [the other counsellors] were getting different messages [from God about the candidate’s] suitability for the role,” he told me. “But I was getting stronger, clearer direction because I’d done the work.”

Revelation in the LDS context is not an event but an unfolding process, practiced repeatedly to allow Latter-day Saints to develop greater skill in perceiving divine communication. Its effectiveness depends on a constellation of interrelated factors: environment, social context, obedience to gospel principles, and studied engagement with the question at hand. As Tony put

it, he was receiving “stronger, clearer” revelation than his peers. They may have received the same answer, but with less clarity, or lacked the spiritual sensitivity to perceive it. This points to a crucial feature of Latter-day Saint revelatory practice: it is rarely straightforward.

Communication from the divine can be subtle, partial, or uncertain, and the ability to discern it becomes the next essential step in learning how to receive revelation.

3.5 Revelatory Intensity and Discernment

The discussion in the last section might suggest that revelation only comes when it is asked for. But the Holy Ghost is described as a person with agency, and since revelation is communicated through him, that agency also applies to when and how he communicates. Latter-day Saints may seek out revelation using the method described previously, but the Holy Ghost may still communicate with them without being asked. Often, I heard Latter-day Saints describe receiving communication from the Holy Ghost unexpectedly. Sometimes that communication was sensed strongly. Other times it was described as faint, subtle, or easy to miss. The strength of the message was often noted as an important part of how revelation was described.

For example, one interlocutor described having been “impressed” to make a decision that would come with significant financial cost. The decision was a relatively minor one: where to plant a tree on his property. Still, he was paying for the tree, hiring people to plant it, and expected it to stay where it was for the rest of his life. He told me he had been “impressed” to put the tree where it now stood. I asked whether that was an instance of personal revelation. Skewing his face slightly, he replied that “personal revelation [was] probably too strong a word,” and he reiterated that it was merely an “impression.” Although the LDS Church formally defines impressions as a form of revelation (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2011a), this interlocutor was hedging, parsing a difference between an “impression” and “revelation.” He did this not because he perceived this communication as coming from any other source than a

divine one, but because it was important for him to communicate to me the limited strength of this instance of divine communication. Shy of full-blown and obvious revelation, so to speak, this was nonetheless divine communication via the Holy Ghost, albeit in a subtler, weaker sense.

This distinction is not only about the relative strength of revelation but also about the weight of what is at stake. In cases like tree planting, Latter-day Saints do not usually imagine that God has a fixed will about the outcome. Rather, impressions in such contexts are understood as gentle nudges that draw on God's infinite knowledge to guide practical decisions, without implying that one choice is divinely mandated. More broadly, revelation is not framed as evidence that God wills every event to happen in a particular way. The point is less about discerning what God wants to occur, and more about receiving divine help in navigating daily life.

By contrast, in higher-stakes situations, communication from the Holy Ghost was sometimes described as unmistakably forceful. One speaker in a sacrament meeting, for example, described having narrowly avoided running into wildlife while driving the highway at night. She related that a "prompting came on strong and loud" to swerve, even though she had not yet seen anything on the road. She credited this "strong and loud" prompting with allowing her to avoid hitting a coyote that appeared just as she swerved.

This should not be read as a claim that God had a predetermined will about the fate of that particular coyote. Rather, it reflects the idea that God's infinite knowledge allowed him to anticipate what was coming and to communicate it in a way that helped her avoid harm. Revelation, as Latter-day Saints experience it, is often less about discerning God's will and more about receiving timely guidance toward a better outcome. The Holy Ghost, in this instance, was giving unasked-for revelation, but it could be communicated in such a "strong and loud" way that the urgency could be sensed by the recipient.

Edging into even stronger kinds of revelation, I was chatting with a young LDS couple who had recently moved into Cardston while helping them move some furniture. I inevitably

asked, as one does when helping new move-ins: “Why did you choose to move to Cardston?” I expected them to say because they had family in the region, which had been typical for most of the younger Latter-day Saint couples I spoke with in Cardston. However, the young wife told me she had “dreamed clearly” about “a temple with a dramatic mountain backdrop,” offering few other details. Within Canada, few temples fit that description as well as the one in Cardston. Sensing this as a message, given the vividness of the dream, they decided to move to Cardston without knowing why Heavenly Father had told them to do so.

While not common, receiving revelation through vivid dreams is not unheard of. This method of communication appears a few times in LDS scripture. Focusing only on the Book of Mormon, the most distinctively Latter-day Saint scriptural text, 1 Nephi 8 recounts a dream experienced by the prophet Lehi. Another narrative describes a related visionary state in which revelation is received, that of Alma the Younger’s two-day period of physical incapacity during which he later reports seeing God and learning doctrinal truths (Mosiah 27 and Alma 36).²⁹ And in Ether 9:3, God warns Omer in a dream that he needs to flee the region.

Contemporary accounts also include dreams interpreted as revelation, and not always by authoritative figures like prophets who might be presumed to be especially adept at receiving

²⁹ I should note that the language in the Book of Mormon never describes Alma the Younger’s conversion experience as a dream. The narrative describes a period of physical incapacity wherein Alma is struck “dumb,” (Mosiah 27:19) unable to speak, unable to move his limbs, and unable to hear what was going on around him (Alma 36:10-11). During this period, the narrative describes Alma experiencing a structured visionary experience in which he remembers past teachings, undergoes profound affective transformation, and “saw God sitting upon his throne” (Alma 36:22). Some Latter-day Saint theologians distinguish clearly between dream-visions and wakeful-visions (McConkie 1966, 150-51), but whether Alma was awake or asleep is ambiguous. We can say, at least, that he was unconscious. Other scholars have included Alma’s as a comparative example of an “initiatory dream vision” similar to those reported by other shamanistic cultural practices (Wright 2011, 60-62).

such strong communication. For example, George Q. Cannon, a 22-year-old missionary in Hawaii in 1850, had found little success and was preparing to return to the continental United States. In 1851, however, he reported dreaming of the Hawaiian and broader Polynesian peoples, learning in that dream that they were genealogically connected to Book of Mormon populations. Thus, “Hawaiianness and Mormonism came to be fused” (Aikau 2012, 1) through the dream of a young man that, short of becoming canonical scripture, continues to inform LDS understandings of Pacific Islander identity.

Even more recently, apostle David A. Bednar (Bednar 2005, 100) recounted in the April 2005 General Conference the revelatory dream of another Latter-day Saint man, presenting that man’s experience from the pulpit as an authentic instance of divine communication. In doing so, Bednar treated the dream not as a private curiosity but as a spiritually instructive and theologically legitimate moment, thereby signalling that dreams remain a valid medium through which God can communicate with ordinary Latter-day Saints in the present day.

Dream-based revelation thus exists as a possibility, but it is considered an unusually strong and uncommon form of divine communication. Unlike the strong kind of “prompting” that might cause a nighttime driver to narrowly avoid hitting a coyote, which are met with little skepticism, dreams *qua* revelation verge into the less plausible. They can even be met with skepticism. When I shared with a Latter-day Saint in Calgary that I had met someone who claimed to have received a dream telling them to move to Cardston, he replied with dry sarcasm: “Only in Cardston, eh?” He did not dispute the story outright, but his tone suggested that while such a claim might be possible, it fell outside the normative range of revelatory experience. Southern Alberta is seen by many Canadian Latter-day Saints as a region of especially intense devotion, where more dramatic forms of revelation may be more common, or at least more narratable. Promptings and impressions, by contrast, even when intense, are more socially plausible and frequently shared as faith-promoting experiences.

3.6 The Range of Personal Revelatory Topics

Readers may detect that we have moved from talking about revelation regarding the gospel and getting a testimony into other realms of life, like where to plant a tree, where to relocate one’s family, and nighttime road safety. This was intentional. To understand Latter-day Saint revelation fully, one must also understand the range of topics over which it is believed to operate. Missionaries teach that anyone, including non-members, may seek personal revelation to confirm the truth of the gospel as taught by the LDS Church. However, members are believed to have greater access to revelation because they have received “the gift of the Holy Ghost” through the ordinance of confirmation. This ordinance, which complements baptism, usually occurs immediately afterward, though it may also be performed during the next Sunday sacrament meeting. One such confirmation took place on a Sunday afternoon during my fieldwork.

Following the protocol outlined in the *General Handbook* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023a, 18.8), the meeting began with an opening hymn, an opening prayer, and brief administrative announcements. A newly baptized young boy was invited to the front of the congregation. The boy’s father, the bishop³⁰, and four other men (some of whom were members of the boy’s extended family) also approached the stand.³¹ A young priest³² had

³⁰ LDS bishops are unpaid, local leadership positions. Bishops’ responsibilities are diverse but primarily include presiding as the head of the ward. As such, their participation—or the participation of one of their designated counsellors in the bishopric—is required for the confirmation ordinance.

³¹ The stand refers to the front of the sacrament meeting hall. It typically includes the pulpit, organ, choir pews, sacrament tables, and additional seating for leaders and speakers. It is slightly raised and separated from the congregation by a low wall.

³² LDS priests are a male-only cohort in the Aaronic Priesthood order. Typically ordained around the age of 16, they are charged with the blessing of the sacrament. In order to fulfill this duty, during the

positioned a folding chair at the front, and the boy sat down while the men encircled him. Each placed one hand on his head, and the father began to speak into a microphone held by the same young priest.

After stating the boy's name, the father began, "By the authority of the Melchizedek priesthood, we confirm you a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and say unto you, receive the Holy Ghost." Continuing the prayer, he then pronounced numerous personalized blessings and counsels before concluding the ordinance "in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen."

The phrase "receive the Holy Ghost," delivered as an imperative, is in fact a mandated component of the confirmation ordinance. The *General Handbook* gives looser guidance regarding the wording of other elements of the ordinance. For example, it advises that the priesthood holder needs to state the authority by which the ordinance is being performed, but it does not specify the exact phrasing that should be used. Whereas it specifies that these exact words must be used: "'receive the Holy Ghost' (not 'receive the gift of the Holy Ghost')" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023a, 18.8.2). This linguistic precision is notable given how frequently members speak of the *gift* of the Holy Ghost as a permanent endowment, distinguishing it from the more transient and topically specific spiritual communications available to non-members. The Handbook's instruction signals that, even though "the gift of the Holy Ghost" is a common doctrinal and cultural formulation, it is not the wording authorized in the ordinance itself.

first third of Sunday's sacrament meeting, priests are stationed on the stand by the sacrament tables until after the blessing and distribution of the sacrament. This is why the priest in this case was asked to hold the microphone: he was already on the stand, nearby, and able to assist with minimal fuss, though in other wards deacons or teachers may also be asked to help.

During an Elders Quorum meeting about a month later, in a different ward, this specific phrase became a topic of discussion. It emerged during a broader conversation about maintaining one's ability to "listen" and "hear" the Holy Ghost. One commenter explained that the command to "receive the Holy Ghost" is directed at the individual, not the Holy Ghost. That is, the phrase instructs the person being confirmed to live in such a way that they can receive, and then maintain, the presence of the Holy Ghost. In response, another attendee voiced his understanding that since members have received the "gift of the Holy Ghost" they are "entitled" to revelation in ways non-members are not. "The Holy Ghost can and will communicate with anyone about basic gospel truths," I scribbled in my notes while he spoke, "but we have the gift of the Holy Ghost and have a right to call on him when we need to about anything."

The facilitator chose not to dispute the speaker's characterization of the doctrine surrounding members' "right" to the Holy Ghost's communication. Perhaps signalling that he saw no doctrinal error. But the facilitator did choose to temper the notion of a "right" to revelation by stressing its conditions, adding that while members might have the gift of the Holy Ghost, they still need to remain "worthy to hear the Holy Ghost." He suggested routinely reading the scriptures, praying earnestly, and partaking of the sacrament as practices that, in his view, help keep a person spiritually prepared to hear the Holy Ghost. "Having the gift, and being able to use that gift, are two different things," I wrote in my notes at the conclusion of the meeting. He also reminded the group that personal revelation will not override prophetic revelation. For this reason, Latter-day Saints need to search the scriptures when seeking guidance from the Holy Ghost. "Conference talks, too," another attendee interjected, which the facilitator confirmed was a good contemporary source of prophetic revelation toward which Latter-day Saints ought to turn.

Some key understandings about how personal revelation via the Holy Ghost works can be drawn from this Elders Quorum exchange. While it is understood that non-members can receive communication via the Holy Ghost, it may be limited to confirming the validity of gospel

truths. Anyone, including non-members, who hears the Restoration narrative or reads the Book of Mormon can pray to receive divine confirmation about their veracity. For members who have been confirmed and have received the Holy Ghost as a “constant companion” (Eyring 2015), however, the range of topics on which they might receive personal revelation is significantly expanded. This is contingent, however, on maintaining sufficient worthiness to sense the promptings, impressions, or confirmations communicated by the Holy Ghost.

Conversations such as this were typical in Elders Quorum meetings during my fieldwork: iterative exchanges guided organically by comments offered in response to other comments. None of the participants were trained theologians, religious studies scholars, or professional teachers of religion; all were lay volunteers working within the structure of a lay-led church. Infrequently did speakers cite or read from official texts or scripture to support their assertions about gospel nuances or the workings of divine revelation. To an outsider, this certainty, expressed without recourse to authoritative texts, might seem confusing when measured against the expectations of formal theological debate or structured pedagogy. Yet the very fact that lay participants could engage in such nuanced discussion without formal training is less surprising once one considers the way gospel principles are drilled into members from early childhood.

For example, during a Primary³³ presentation in a sacrament meeting I attended, the children sang a song that illustrated the distinction between the Holy Ghost’s capacity to communicate basic gospel truths to anyone and his role in providing Latter-day Saints with

³³ Primary is the organization in the Church that supports the spiritual development of children ages 18 months to 11 years. “Singing time” is the most iconic function of the Primary organization, where gospel doctrines are taught to children through collective singing exercises. At least once a year, the Primary performs in a sacrament meeting presentation, performing a variety of songs learned throughout the previous year.

ongoing personal revelation about the many particulars of life. Titled, “The Holy Ghost,” the lyrics related that:

When Christ was on the earth,
 He promised he would send
 The Holy Ghost to comfort us,
 Our true, eternal friend.
 The Holy Spirit whispers
 With a still small voice.
 He testifies of God and Christ
 And makes our hearts rejoice.

And when we are confirmed
 By sacred priesthood pow’r,
 The Holy Ghost is giv’n to us
 To guide us ev’ry hour.
 Oh, may I always listen
 To that still small voice.
 And with his light I’ll do what’s right
 Each time I make a choice. (Lawler 1989)

In this song, the first verse relates how the Holy Ghost was sent to humanity to “[testify] of God and Christ”. The second verse explains that the confirmation ordinance grants Latter-day Saints ongoing access to the Holy Ghost as a guide “ev’ry hour” and “each time” they need help making correct choices. The result being that Latter-day Saints assert being able to seek personal revelation about essentially everything in life. Indeed, they are encouraged to do so. Latter-day Saints are encouraged to seek revelation when making what one might call “big” life decisions, like who to marry, where to live, what career to pursue, and so on. But they may also pray for direction in the minutiae of daily life, such as managing interpersonal relationships, help studying for a test, or the management of household finances. While these personal revelations are not expected to come as dramatic theophanic events, vivid dreams, or visions, it is generally

understood that the revelations will be communicated by subtle, almost imperceptible promptings or impressions that, if followed, result in feelings of ease and peace to confirm their correctness.

There is great potential within this revelatory practice for Latter-day Saints to arrive at any number of conclusions about various aspects of life that are not ostensibly doctrinal. Problematically, it may even result in Latter-day Saint arriving at conclusions which are opposed to the teachings of Church leaders. The realities of this possibility came to the forefront in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vaccine hesitancy is not a phenomenon specific to members of the LDS Church. However, vaccine hesitancy and outright denial amongst Latter-day Saints during the pandemic was salient. I am unaware of any robust data illustrating this, especially in the Canadian context, but there was one small scale survey conducted that showed 33% of Mormons surveyed in the US were vaccine-hesitant, and another 17% that refused to be vaccinated (PRRI-IFYC 2021). These numbers are surprising given how publicly LDS leadership supported vaccination. President Russell M. Nelson was photographed receiving the vaccine and shared the image on Facebook (Nelson 2021). In March, the *General Handbook* was updated to include admonitions to receive vaccines, while allowing for personal discretion guided by “competent medical professionals and ... the guidance of the Holy Ghost” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023a, 38.7.13). Deseret News also reported a \$20 million Church donation to expand vaccine access in developing nations (Walsh 2021). Finally, in August, the top three prophets and apostles in the Church (known collectively as the First Presidency) released a letter to the general membership stating “we urge individuals to be vaccinated” (Nelson et al. 2021). So, while U.S. Latter-day Saints may have hesitated for a range of overlapping reasons (Omisakin et al. 2023), the Church’s leadership was unequivocal and public in its support of vaccination among members.

But, as noted, the leaders left the door open for individual members to make vaccine-related decision based on the guidance of the Holy Ghost. This allowance enabled many members to choose to forgo vaccination, with some doing so quite publicly. Given the prophetic instruction to get vaccinated, pro-vaccine Latter-day Saints sometimes described their unvaccinated peers as “apostates,” a particularly charged term in LDS discourse that signals serious deviation from expected belief or behaviour, including but not limited to rejection of prophetic authority. Anti-vaccine members, in turn, rejected this label, asserting that they were acting according to personal revelation:

Kristen Chevrier, co-founder of a Utah-based health freedom group that has advocated against vaccine mandates ... she rejects the idea that people who are anti-vaccine are apostates. She cited the church’s history of encouraging members to seek their own personal revelations with God. “How can we say that there’s a blanket statement that applies to everyone regardless of their personal revelation,” said Chevrier, who’s based in American Fork, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) south of Salt Lake City. (Eppolito 2021)

For this individual, personal revelation could override the prophetic counsel to get vaccinated, especially since the Church specifically left the door open to personal revelation with respect to vaccination.

During my fieldwork, while sitting at a dinner table with Latter-day Saints reflecting on the “dark days” of the COVID pandemic, my hosts shared several stories about unnamed community members who refused vaccination based on personal revelation. In some cases, they explained, individuals rejected prophetic counsel by claiming that “President Nelson and the other Church leaders were speaking like men, not prophets” when addressing COVID-19 measures—a perspective which my hosts did not share.

This last statement about prophets “speaking like men and not like prophets” is a revealing one. It circulates in LDS apologetic circles and derives in part from a statement attributed to Joseph Smith: “that a prophet [is] a prophet only when he [is] acting as such” (Smith 2015, 259). Even the contemporary Church leaders acknowledge this distinction. In the April 2012 General Conference address, apostle D. Todd Christofferson explained, “It is commonly understood in the Church that a statement made by one leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well-considered, opinion, not meant to be official or binding for the whole Church. The prophet Joseph Smith taught that ‘a prophet [is] a prophet only when he [is] acting as such’” (Christofferson 2012, 88, square brackets in the original). Christofferson then went on to narrate an instance in which Brigham Young gave two starkly different speeches within a short period of time. Drawing on a chain of quotations from J. Reuben Clark Jr. and J. Reuben Clark Sr., Christofferson recounted that Young opened the second meeting by saying that “Brigham Young had been talking in the morning, but the Lord was going to talk now.” Young’s framing established a clear hierarchy between his earlier remarks, which he attributed to himself alone, and his later remarks, which he presented as speaking for the Lord.

Thus, not only can personal revelation for members of the Church address a wide range of questions, but individual conclusions may also diverge from prophetic counsel, particularly in areas not framed as core doctrine. Such divergence may be viewed with suspicion by other Latter-day Saints, yet it can draw on culturally established and internally valid interpretive categories, such as the distinction between prophetic declaration and a prophet’s personal opinion. Rather than revealing disloyalty, these moments show the practical limits of centralized prophetic authority in shaping individual decision making. If anything, the approach LDS leaders take today foregrounds that Latter-day Saints can and should rely on personal revelation, creating space for such contestations to arise within recognizable interpretive boundaries.

3.7 Managing Revelatory Expectations

Leaders in the LDS Church are not unaware of this potential for divergence rooted in personal revelation. They routinely teach principles intended to manage Latter-day Saints' revelatory expectations. One reason personal revelation via the Holy Ghost may have been so top of mind for my Elders Quorum peers—who, as described above, debated the meaning and implications of the confirmation ordinance—was a then-recent General Conference talk focused on precisely that topic. Just a few weeks prior, during the October 2022 General Conference, a general authority had delivered an address on personal revelation and its limitations.

Like most Latter-day Saints, I was unable to attend General Conference in person, a biannual event that is hosted in Salt Lake City. To witness the proceedings in the 21,200-seat Conference Center, I would have needed to travel to Utah and obtain (free) tickets. Instead, like many others, I had alternative options. General Conference is broadcast live via satellite, radio, and internet streaming to the global Church. Although some wards have, at times, projected the sessions in their sacrament meeting halls, this practice is less common today in the area where I conducted fieldwork. Even as home-viewing options became available in my early teens, this was often how my family participated. We would don our Sunday clothes, drive to the meetinghouse, and sit in the pews with other families while watching a broadcast of the conference, which at that time was transmitted via satellite. As one Cardston resident told me, she preferred the “church-y feel” that attending in a Church building affords the event.

In 2022, however, owing to the widespread accessibility of internet-based streaming options, I did what many Latter-day Saints have grown accustomed to doing and streamed the conference proceedings in the comfort of my home. While some still wear Sunday clothes even when viewing at home, others get excited about the prospect of wearing comfy clothes and having snacks on hand while listening to the prophet and apostles address them. This was the approach I took for the October 2022 General Conference, in which Church leaders placed

repeated emphasis on the role of revelation and the boundaries within which it is expected to operate.

In a talk titled “A Framework for Personal Revelation,” apostle Dale G. Renlund offered members a model to help them understand the limits to personal revelation:

The promise of personal revelation through the Holy Ghost is awe-inspiring ... [But] we need to understand the framework within which the Holy Ghost functions to provide personal revelation. When we operate within the framework, the Holy Ghost can unleash astonishing insight, direction, and comfort. Outside of that framework, no matter our brilliance or talent, we can be deceived and crash and burn. (Renlund 2022, 16)

Continuing, Renlund identified four elements within this framework. The first is the scriptures. Quoting another apostle, he told conference attendees, “When we want to speak with God, we pray. When we want Him to speak to us, we search the scriptures” (Hales 2006, 26-27). This priority is rooted in the belief that the scriptures already contain many of God’s messages and counsel to humanity. When studying out a question in search of revelation, turning to the scriptures should be step one, and personal revelation can never contradict what is found in the scriptures. For Latter-day Saints, “the scriptures” includes not only the King James Version of the Bible, but also the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Excerpts from the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, while not canonized as a separate volume, are nevertheless printed in official LDS scripture editions and are widely used by members as interpretive helps. Finding answers to life’s questions in such a wide array of scriptural texts can be challenging.

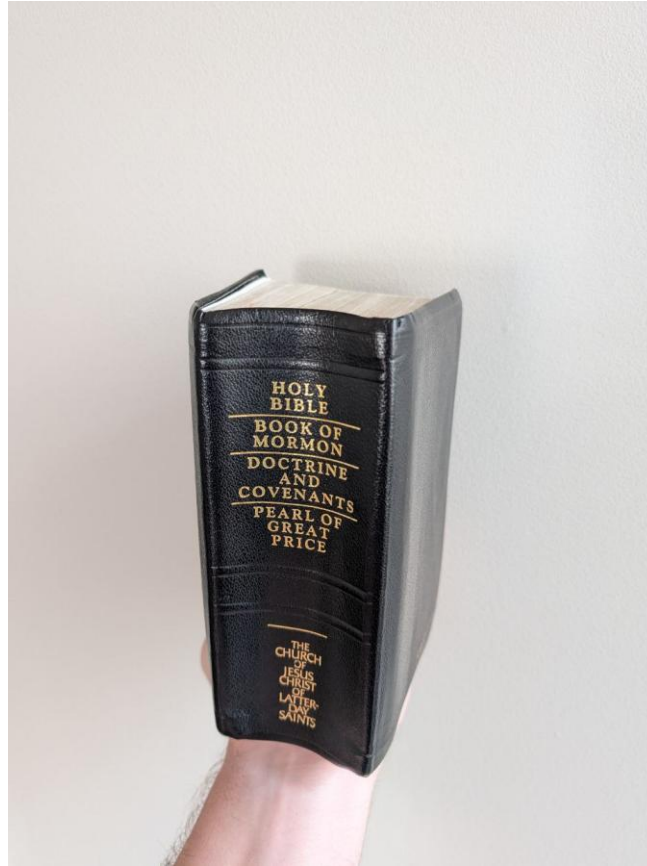


Figure 5: The author holding a standard set of LDS scriptures, often carried by Latter-day Saints with them to Sunday services, though the prevalence of digital options has diminished this practice noticeably. This particular book is structured as a “Quad,” referring to the four foundational scriptural texts (Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price) being published together in one hefty book.

Second, Renlund (2022, 16) taught that “we receive personal revelation only within our purview and not within the prerogative of others.” That is, Latter-day Saints may receive *personal* revelation, but not on behalf of the Church or individuals outside their jurisdiction, which is determined by their priesthood office or calling. There are several, overlapping revelatory jurisdictions in LDS life which, as far as I know, have never been mapped. For example, while the general rule is that one individual does not receive revelation for another outside their family unit (parents, for instance, may receive revelation for their children), someone called to lead an auxiliary organization, such as a Relief Society president, may receive revelation to guide her leadership of the women of the ward. That jurisdiction, however,

would not extend into matters overseen by the bishopric, even if the practical concerns of those roles sometimes intersect.

The third element of the revelatory framework, as taught by Renlund (2022, 17), is that personal revelation cannot contradict “the commandments of God and the covenants we have made with Him.” As an example, he noted that one could not receive revelation to embezzle funds to resolve financial hardship, since theft has already been clearly prohibited by divine commandment.

The final element Renlund related was that once revelation had been received, if circumstances have not changed, then Latter-day Saints should understand that God has already answered the question and asking again is meritless. While this is operating on the same principle as the first and third elements (wherein personal revelation will not contradict authoritative scriptural revelation or revealed commandments), here it is intended to be understood at a more individual level: if a Latter-day Saint has already received confirmation that a given course of action is the correct one to take, they need not ask again at every stage to re-confirm, which would amount to expressing doubt. They should, instead, proceed with faith.

Renlund (2022) concluded by inviting members “to have the confidence to claim personal revelation for yourself, understanding what God has revealed, consistent with the scriptures and the commandments He has given through His appointed prophets, and within your own purview and agency. I know that the Holy Ghost can and will show you all things that you should do” (18).

If the explicit intent behind teaching this framework for personal revelation is to help Latter-day Saints discern inspired promptings from their own thoughts (or, for that matter, deceptive thoughts sent from Satan, which is a possibility), it also has a secondary, more normative effect: it implicitly reinforces the authority of the prophet and apostles. The second element makes clear that no one may receive revelation on behalf of individuals or groups

beyond their authorized purview, including the Church as a whole. No member who is not the prophet or an apostle can claim to have received revelation for the entire Church.

This framework effectively allows faithful Latter-day Saints to dismiss rival prophetic movements, such as that led by Denver Snuffer. A Utah lawyer, Snuffer has been the impetus behind yet another restorationist movement within the LDS Church. Snuffer began his movement with the publishing of several books (Snuffer, n.d.-a) claiming that all the LDS prophets and apostles since Joseph Smith have progressively brought the Church further and further from the truest version of itself, represented by the earliest years of Joseph Smith's Restoration (Stack 2013). After refusing to retract the writings, Snuffer was excommunicated by the LDS Church in 2013. Following his excommunication, his writings adopted an increasingly prophetic tone. Today, a loosely organized movement in his name claims thousands of followers, mostly LDS dissidents. It boasts fellowships (congregations) of indeterminate sizes in nine countries, including Canada, Spain, Italy, Australia, Japan, and China. Adherents view Snuffer as yet another restorationist prophet. In fact, the (as yet, officially unnamed) Snufferite movement has canonized twenty-two of Snuffer's revelations into scripture (Snuffer, n.d.-b).

I met no Snufferites in southern Alberta, but I did speak with Latter-day Saints who appeared sympathetic to aspects of Snuffer's critique. Recent changes within the Church have prompted some Latter-day Saints to question its trajectory. In one conversation, a Latter-day Saint enumerated a list of decisions the Church has made which, in his view, dilute the uniqueness of the LDS faith making it appear as "just another evangelical church." "I used to love the blasphemy of Mormonism against Western Christianity," he declared. "Ahh! What we gave up to become Americans. Polygamy, racial equality,³⁴ and then almost a forgetting of our godhood doctrine—what we've given up to be accepted as Christians is lame."

³⁴ In this comment, my interlocutor folds several different historical moments together. Under Joseph Smith, Black men were ordained to the priesthood. Under Brigham Young, that practice was

This Latter-day Saint effectively shares some of Snuffer's critiques, pointing to early Joseph Smith-era practices such as polygamy and racial equality, and teachings such as human divinization (discussed further in chapter six). Of these, polygamy has been officially abandoned, divinization has been largely backgrounded except in fairly specialized contexts, and the status of racial equality has shifted over time. However, since Snuffer is not authorized to receive prophetic revelation on behalf of the Church, this individual does not see Snuffer's movement as legitimate. It is, in principle, doctrinally impermissible for a Latter-day Saint to accept Snuffer's revelations, since they exceed his revelatory purview. This obviously has not stopped disaffected Latter-day Saints from following the Snufferite movement. However, mainstream Latter-day Saints view those followers as apostates because Snuffer's claim to prophetic authority contradicts what we might call the principle of purview.

So, while the framework for revelation taught by Renlund at the October 2022 General Conference seeks to manage the expectations of Latter-day Saints in their pursuit of personal revelation, it simultaneously reinscribes the hierarchical claim to broad, revelatory authority held by the prophet and apostles.

reversed and a priesthood and temple restriction was introduced. Owing to that temporal disparity in events, how this shift fits my interlocutor's broader claim about "becoming American" is not entirely clear to me. He may have been reading Young's initial reversal as an alignment with prevailing American racial norms, or simply using the phrase as shorthand for the Church's wider nineteenth century accommodations. The point of including the remark, however, is not to assess its historical precision but to show the kind of reasoning it exemplifies: a restorationist longing that reads later institutional changes as accommodationist losses and imagines a more theologically daring past. More on the matter of Blacks and the priesthood in chapter seven.

3.8 Revelation Implies Change

For some Latter-day Saints, like my interlocutor above who lamented the Church seemingly abandoning some of its historical doctrines and practices, changes in doctrinal emphasis or policy represent opportunities for critique—or, at least, an opportunity for whimsical nostalgia for the early years of the Church. For others, those changes represent the fulfillment of the promise of contemporary revelatory authority that is so integral to the LDS faith. Most fervent Latter-day Saints I know would assert that the revelatory authority held by the prophet and apostles *necessarily* results in iterative changes to Church doctrine and practices. A salient example of this came during my fieldwork when, in 2022, the Church released a new version of the *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2022). This new version contained some significant changes that subsequently became a prominent topic of conversation in church meetings.

The document *For the Strength of Youth* is often described as a “pamphlet,” which makes it sound like a relatively small document. And originally, it was. The 1965 version of the document had only 15 pages, much of which were taken up by illustrations. By 2001, the pamphlet contained 47 pages, and the 2011 version 52 pages. The newest, 2022 version shrunk back slightly to 44 pages, but remained substantial enough to warrant an index. The intended audience is youth and their parents, though the boundaries of “youth” are not explicitly defined. The content outlines the standards that youth ought to follow across a range of topics.

Each version of *For the Strength of Youth* is prefaced by a letter from the First Presidency that links adherence to the standards therein to a youth’s ability to receive blessings both specific and general. The 1965 edition noted that the standards were developed in consultation with leaders from the youth-oriented organizations of the time (the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Mutual Improvement Associations), as well as experts from Brigham Young University and the Church School System. In contrast, more recent versions do not specify the source of the recommendations. Rather, the letter which serves as a preface makes

it appear as if the contents of the document are coming from the First Presidency itself, or at least that it was reviewed and authorized by the First Presidency.

A key feature of these introductory letters is the promise that blessings will follow obedience, along with the First Presidency's testimony that the principles are true. The 2001 version states, "We promise that as you keep these standards and live by the truths in the scriptures, you will be able to do your life's work with greater wisdom and skill ... You will have the help of the Holy Ghost ... You will be worthy to go to the temple to receive holy ordinances. These blessings and many more can be yours," and "We testify that these principles are true" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2001, 2-3). The 2011 version offers a similar assurance, "We promise that as you keep the covenants you have made and these standards, you will be blessed with the companionship of the Holy Ghost, your faith and testimony will grow stronger, and you will enjoy increasing happiness" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2011b, ii). The original 1965 version draws an even more explicit link between conformity and divine reward: "Let us never lose sight of the eternal principle enunciated by the Master that while free agency will not be trammled by our Heavenly Father, conformity to established rules of conduct is a necessary prerequisite to the blessings promised" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1965, 3).

Unlike previous editions, the 2022 *For the Strength of Youth* does not include promises of blessings or a testimony affirming the truthfulness of its standards. Instead, the introductory letter describes the contents of *For the Strength of Youth* as a "guide [that] will help [youth] build a solid foundation for making choices to stay on the covenant path" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2022, 2). This letter's tone is much softer, gentler, and the message is focused on the "covenant path"—an older phrase in the Church that has become re-popularized under the prophet Russell M. Nelson. The covenant path refers to the progression from baptism through a series of ordinances, each marked by covenants with God, and culminating in temple

rites. Thus, the 2022 edition aims to help youth make decisions to stay on that path, but it stops short of calling for the kind of conformity emphasized in earlier versions.

Compared to earlier editions, the 2022 version of *For the Strength of Youth* adopts a noticeably softer tone and shifts away from explicit behavioural rules toward guiding principles. This was evident to many Latter-day Saints I spoke with, who noted a general trend toward ambiguity and a greater emphasis on personal revelation. These changes were especially apparent in standards related to tattoos, dating, and dress.

Earlier versions stated plainly, “Do not disfigure yourself with tattoos or body piercings” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2011b, 7). Whereas the newest version counsels youth to “Let ... the Spirit be your guide as you make decisions—especially decisions that have lasting effects on your body” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2022, 27).

Dating standards underwent a similar transformation. The 1965 version clearly stated, “There should be no dating before the age of sixteen” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1965, 12). However, the newest version counsels “For your emotional and spiritual development and safety, one-on-one activities [with the opposite sex] should be postponed until you are mature—age 16 is a good guideline” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2022, 13). It also encourages youth to “counsel” with their parents about this “guideline.” What had previously been framed as a firm prohibition now appears more flexible, leaving room for negotiation. In doing so, it repositions revelation as a practical technique for navigating that ambiguity.

Dress standards followed the same pattern. In the 1960’s, young women were told to wear “skirts long enough to cover the kneecap” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1965, 5), and to only wear slacks when “working in the yard, hiking, traveling to the mountains, camping, or participating in active sports.” Young men were told that shorts should only be worn “during actual participation in active sports,” and that it is “not appropriate for young men to wear

extremely tight-fitting pants” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1965, 7). But, by the 2000s, the guidance had become somewhat more general. Both sexes were told to avoid “extreme” fashions (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2001, 16; 2011b, 7), stating that “the fashion of the world will change, but the Lord’s standards will not change.”

Despite the assertion that the Lord’s standards will not change, the 2022 version essentially omits all these explicit standards. In their place, it adopts a more introspective and principle-based approach: “As you make decisions about your clothing, ask yourself, ‘Am I honoring my body as a sacred gift from God?’ ... Avoid styles that emphasize or draw inappropriate attention to your physical body instead of who you are as a child of God with an eternal future” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2022, 24). It adds, “The Lord’s standard is for you to honor the sacredness of your body” (27). Rather than setting specific boundaries, the text encourages youth to consult with parents and seek personal revelation in making decisions about their appearance.

Some Cardston Latter-day Saints were critical of these changes, perceiving them as inconsistent or “watered down.” Others saw them as evidence of ongoing revelation. For some, however, the changes carried broader implications: it suggested that the responsibility for setting and enforcing standards was being shifted from the institutional Church onto families. This concern surfaced most clearly in a conversation with one interlocutor, whom I will call Meredith, who linked the new youth standards with what she likewise interpreted as an added burden on parents in another area: the Church’s recent change to the Sunday schedule.

Before 2019, Sunday services lasted three hours: sacrament meeting, Sunday School, and a third hour for sex-segregated meetings. The new format reduced this to two hours and, for youth and adults, rotating between Sunday School and Relief Society/priesthood meetings every other week. The rationale for this change, according to the prophet, was to foster a “*home-centred and Church-supported*” approach to learning the gospel (Nelson 2018, 8, italics in the original). He emphasized the role of parents in this matter:

This morning we will announce a new balance and connection between gospel instruction in the home and in the Church. We are each responsible for our individual spiritual growth. And scriptures make it clear that parents have the primary responsibility to teach the doctrine to their children. It is the responsibility of the Church to assist each member in the divinely defined goal of increasing his or her gospel knowledge.

Accompanying this announcement was the launch of a new home-based curriculum, *Come, Follow Me*. The new curriculum called for families to study gospel doctrine and scripture at home, following a schedule that mirrored and was reinforced by Sunday instruction.

For Meredith, this was a big ask. Already struggling to negotiate her work, parenting, and church responsibilities, being asked to take on more of the church-related load was problematic. “I take my kids to church to have the prophet and apostles and other inspired teachers teach them. They are the authorities who have the keys. I put my kids in school to have teachers who know how to teach, teach them ... I didn’t want to take on, like, homeschooling the scriptures to them. I am no teacher.” Then, pivoting to the topic of *For the Strength of Youth* she said:

It's like FSY [*For the Strength of Youth*]. The prophet used to actually tell us what is and isn't acceptable. Rules. Standards. Don't date until 16. Don't have tattoos. Don't wear tank-tops and short shorts. Now I am supposed to negotiate everything with my teens, and I am not the prophet. It's exhausting.

For Meredith, this exhaustion was not just about parenting, it was about being asked to take on the labour of revelation itself. Personal revelation, recall, is not a singular event. It is a process involving study, reflection, and weighing possible courses of action. What had once been declared from the top now had to be worked out at home.

Continuing, Meredith told me how these changes had really shaken her faith in the consistency of Church teachings and, by extension, the veracity of the prophet as a someone

who literally communicates with God. “You’d think God would’ve gotten church right the first time or that tattoos would always be graffiti,” she remarked, referring to the many times in 1990s and early 2000s that the prophet Gordon B. Hinckley described tattoos as graffiti on the temple of the body.

Just then, her husband Michael came home and joined the conversation. I asked him how he felt about changes to the *For the Strength of Youth* standards and he referenced tattoos, too:

I know the Church is strong in places like Tonga where it’s culturally important to get tattoos. I think as the Church is expanding to different cultures a lot of the stuff it teaches needs to—I think a lot of the FSY [*For the Strength of Youth*] stuff used to be really specific to US culture and God’s directing the Church to be more inclusive because the gospel is for everyone.

He then went on to describe how the new *For the Strength of Youth* also included new additions specific to the challenges faced by contemporary youth. For example, he highlighted new content about social media. “We didn’t have any rules [when he was a youth] about social media because it didn’t exist. The prophet’s revealing the dangers of social media to youth now, and, I mean, it’s really important. It isn’t just teachers at school telling the kids social media is dangerous. It’s Heavenly Father telling them to watch out.”

Both Meredith and Michael looked to prophetic authority for guidance, but their expectations diverged. Meredith expected consistency. Michael expected change. For him, the fact that Church standards evolve was not a problem to be explained away—it was the evidence that revelation was still happening.

This rationality is the same kind that sustains Latter-day Saints’ faith when they reflect on what could be considered larger changes in LDS doctrine. Some still wrestle with the legacy

of polygamy, and for many, “rediscovering” the Church’s history with the practice is a faith-breaking event (Brooks 2018, 94-96).

For others, the change from practicing to discontinuing polygamy is all part and parcel of ongoing revelation. Sitting at the dinner table with a couple descended from once-polygamous lineages, they stated that the prophet Wilford Woodruff was “directed to end polygamy out of necessity.” The political realities of the day were such that, had the Church not ended polygamy, the Church likely could not have continued to exist due to legal and military action against the Utah settlers—an interpretation supported by historians (Coviello 2019). What that interpretation meant for the future was uncertain. The couple expressed that, personally, they would not want to live in a polygamous relationship. But if it were required in the future, even in the post-mortal life, “Heavenly Father would reveal it through his prophets.” For them, revelation justified the initial practice, explained its cessation, and preserved the possibility of its return.³⁵

LDS revelation at all levels, then, should be understood as an immensely flexible practice. Just as the elders in Elders Quorum were trying to teach each other at the outset of this chapter, “everyone’s situations are different, but with the Lord’s help we can all figure it out.” With respect to personal revelation, there are parameters—a framework, as the apostle

³⁵ I should also note here that not all Latter-day Saints interpret the existing prohibition on the practice of polygamy as a prohibition on the principle of polygamy. Many understand it as something akin to being temporarily on hold. Or, alternatively, as something that will not make sense until the next life. These members often point to the example of the current president and prophet of the Church, Russell M. Nelson, who was sealed to his first wife before her death and later sealed to his second wife after remarrying. Because temple sealings are understood in LDS doctrine to remain effective in the afterlife, Nelson is now bound to two women: one living, one deceased. The implication is that in the hereafter they will together constitute a plural marriage, even if the earthly practice is prohibited at present.

Renlund taught (2022)—that manage the revelatory expectations of Latter-day Saints while still maintaining and even encouraging their malleability.

Similarly, at the level of the institutional body of the Church, every *time* is different, and it is the role of the prophet and apostles to receive revelation that is responsive to the contemporary context. While continuity in core doctrine is assumed, Church history contains numerous examples of shifts in practice and changing emphasis on various gospel principles. For many Latter-day Saints, such shifts are not signs of inconsistency. They are, instead, affirmations of a central claim in the Restoration narrative: that revelation is real and continues to be an active force in the direction of God's church.

This expectation of change is integral to how revelation functions in the LDS context, and it stands in clear contrast to how revelation is understood in many other Christian traditions. Most Protestant and Catholic theologies hold to a closed canon—that revelation ended with the Bible, and that what remains is interpretation. Catholicism, for instance, allows for evolving understandings of doctrine through magisterial teachings, papal edicts, and liturgical shifts, but these are not framed as new revelation. To do so would challenge Catholicism's claim to continuity with the apostolic church.

Whereas the LDS approach to revelation embraces it as a mechanism for change while simultaneously asserting continuity with the apostolic church—perhaps even *because* of that continuity. After all, Latter-day Saint mythology holds that members of the original Twelve Apostles and other biblical figures appeared to Joseph Smith and others to confer on them the priesthood authority that had been lost in the years between the death of Christ's apostles and Smith's time.³⁶ Owing to that conferral, Smith and his successors claimed the authority to

³⁶ The book "Joseph Smith—History," contained in the *Pearl of Great Price*, recounts the narrative wherein Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery receive the Aaronic priesthood from John the Baptist (see verses 1:68-72). There is no comparable scriptural account describing the restoration of the Melchizedek

receive new, binding revelation on behalf of the Church. Continuity with the apostolic tradition, in this framing, is not a barrier to revelation—it is what makes ongoing revelation possible.

Protestant understandings of revelation may appear to align more closely with what I have described here for LDS revelation, but there are important differences in emphasis, scope, and specificity. In the Protestant context, all revealed doctrine is understood to be contained within the Bible. Whereas LDS scripture already expands on the Bible with the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. But doctrinal development has not stopped there. Throughout its history, the LDS Church has introduced new teachings and reversed earlier practices: the prohibition on Black Latter-day Saints from getting the priesthood (and subsequent revocation of this prohibition), and the revocation of polygamy from LDS practice certainly standing as high-profile instances of ongoing, evolving, doctrinal revelation that exceeds what is contained in the Bible.

There are smaller, ongoing developments as well: changes to the *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet which we already discussed, or evolving interpretations and applications of the Word of Wisdom in the early twentieth century (more on this in chapter nine). Far from standing as reasons to doubt the veracity of claims to ecclesiastical authority because of the ways they elaborate on or contradict the Bible, for many Latter-day Saints these changes stand as *evidence* of the ecclesiastical authority of the Church. Whereas Protestants point to the Church's claim of ongoing revelatory authority as a reason to doubt its ecclesiastical legitimacy.

priesthood. Doctrine and Covenants 27:12 contains a brief allusion to such an event, and several historical documents, including a letter written by Cowdery, also reference it. Taken together, these sources are understood to indicate that Peter, James, and John appeared to Smith and Cowdery to confer the Melchizedek priesthood, but no authoritative narrative describing this event exists. For a more complete discussion of this uncertainty in the restoration narrative of the Melchizedek priesthood, see chapter nine of Bushman and Woodworth (2005), in particular pages 157-159.

This difference between the LDS Church and Protestantism is rooted in institutional practices and in the governing claims to institutional authority that structure who may speak for God. Yet where the divergence is more anthropologically significant is at the lay level. Most Protestant traditions affirm that the Holy Ghost guides, comforts, and inspires believers. After all, Protestants are often encouraged to pray about moral choices to discern God's will, and they also describe this communication using the phrase "still small voice." The emphasis in the Protestant tradition, though, is on discerning what God wants or wills. Whereas in the context of LDS revelation, the emphasis is on specific personal revelation that can answer detailed questions about mundane daily life wherein God might not have a particular will.

Recall one of my interlocutors who wanted to plant a tree. Within Latter-day Saint teaching, God's will is not imagined as covering every small detail of life. Rather, it is oriented toward His overarching purpose, expressed in scripture as "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39), and the placement of a tree does not directly bear on that ultimate purpose. At the same time, Latter-day Saints believe that God knows the future and understands the full range of consequences that may follow from each possible choice, as well as the individual's own circumstances and preference (including future preferences). Humans, by contrast, can only make decisions based on the limited knowledge they have of the present context. This difference creates what might be called an epistemological gap between divine and human understanding. Revelation is understood to step into that gap. The faint impression my interlocutor felt about where to plant the tree was taken as divine communication indicating a better choice when compared with an alternative, but not as a command or expression of divine will. It was God offering up His infinite knowledge to assist in a practical decision, not an imperative.

In this framing, revelation functions less to announce what God wills to occur and more to help the recipient of divine communication identify a choice that will be good in their particular

situation. Curiously, as we will see in section 4.6 of the next chapter, this allows for the possibility of simultaneously contradictory revelatory outcomes for two different individuals.

* * *

Throughout this chapter I have sought to communicate an understanding of revelation in the LDS context that is simultaneously structured, dynamic, and deeply personal. I have also sought to highlight that revelation is not an event. It is a whole process shaped by study, structured by priesthood orders, limited by nuanced considerations for purview, and it can be applied to mundane daily concerns just as easily as it can profoundly metaphysical ones. The existence of revelation is not simply a theological claim but a practical epistemology through which Latter-day Saints discern prudent courses of action within the particulars of their lives.

The next chapter turns to focus more specifically on one key domain where this knowledge practice is put to work: the economic. There, I examine how Latter-day Saints mobilize revelation as a situated technique for making economic decisions. In this context, revelation is not simply spiritual guidance but a means of balancing faith, agency, and discernment in pursuit of economically prudent action.

4.0 A Revelation-Based Spiritual Economy

Having now established a foundational understanding of how revelation functions, and the limitations or “frameworks” (Renlund 2022) placed around personal revelation, we can now turn to how revelation informs Latter-day Saint practices of economic discernment. Central to this is the LDS notion of self-reliance. As I will argue, self-reliance itself operates as one of these frameworks, shaping the expectations of those who seek divine guidance in their economic pursuits.

The Church has institutionalized this ideal most visibly through the Self-Reliance Initiative, a set of standardized courses that combine spiritual instruction with practical lessons on employment, education, personal finance, and business development. Under the same umbrella the Church also launched an Emotional Resilience course at the end of 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. That course addresses mental and affective wellbeing. Since my concern in this chapter is with economic discernment, I focus on the four economically oriented tracks, although the Emotional Resilience material likewise treats everyday life and daily decisions as matters to be approached through personal revelation and all that that entails.

Through the interplay of “studying things out,” praying for direction, the ideal of obedience, and the secular liberal capitalist teachings embedded in these course materials, LDS practices of economic discernment reconfigure adherence to liberal capitalist strategies as a matter of spiritual and eternal consequence. This reconfiguration echoes what Rudnycky (2010) terms a *spiritual economy*, though in this case, one rooted in personal revelation. Because these practices of economic discernment are non-uniform and context-sensitive, Latter-day Saints retain significant flexibility to act in ways that align with both spiritual conviction and economic self-interest.

4.1 LDS Self-Reliance

Self-reliance has long described LDS economic sensibilities. Its antecedents appear throughout earlier periods of Church history, including in Ohio, Missouri, and Nauvoo, where Latter-day Saints often attempted to organise their economic life around communal cooperation and limited engagement with surrounding economies. These efforts were uneven and varied significantly across time and place. What is clearer, and more relevant for my purposes, is that the ideal came into full flower under Brigham Young during the LDS settlement of the Salt Lake Basin in the mid-1800s. At that time, and under Young's direction, self-reliance was perhaps paradoxically deployed as a communal goal. Young saw the encroachment of "gentile" (i.e. non-LDS) merchants and entrepreneurs as a threat to both the Latter-day Saints and the fragile economy they had established (J. P. Thompson 2019, 20). In response, he directed Latter-day Saints to engage in a series of economic experiments aimed at producing communal self-reliance.

Many of these experiments were premised on a robust home industry that saw Latter-day Saints produce and manufacture goods in their homes, functioning like small enterprises (Spilsbury 2019). This home industry was complemented by Church-owned resource extraction (e.g. mining) and manufacturing, and it all combined in a retail cooperative owned by Latter-day Saints. This cooperative, called the Zion Co-operative Mercantile Institution or ZCMI, was designed to shield LDS economies from gentile markets, enrich Church members, and strengthen the Church institutionally (Bolino 1959; J. P. Thompson 2019).

Because ZCMI was intended to serve these ends, shopping there during this time was an imperative. Failing to do so constituted an attack on the Church and fellow Latter-day Saints. In some cases, members who were found shopping outside the cooperative faced public rebuke, official censure, or even threats of excommunication (Thompson 2019, 76).

In another experiment in communal self-reliance, Young established the Church-owned Deseret Mint, which produced gold and print scrip for exchange between Latter-day Saints

(Foster 2007; Rowe 1979). Its purpose was to isolate the LDS economy from the broader US economy and create a self-reliant system of commerce. Though short-lived, it was curiously effective; historians note its role in financing the Utah War as evidence of its practical success (Arrington 1952).

Even Church-employed historians, writing from within the institutional framework of the LDS Church, have described these nineteenth century economic experiments as efforts to “make the territory self sufficient” (Godfrey 2018, emphasis mine), rather than individual or household autonomy. These experiments were attempts at isolating Latter-day Saint economies from gentile economies, making self-reliance a communal goal: building a system that could operate independently of, and in resistance to, the U.S. economy, which Church leaders perceived as a threat.

Self-reliance has evolved into something quite different in the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, it remains a ubiquitous framework through which Latter-day Saints make sense of economic decision-making. Self-reliance was either mentioned or featured in a talk or testimony in roughly one out of every four Sunday meetings I attended. It was the topic of one “fifth Sunday lesson”³⁷ and featured prominently in a second about volunteerism. It was the topic of one talk at the two stake conferences. At the April General Conference, one general authority³⁸

³⁷ LDS Sunday meetings operate on a rotating schedule split between Sunday School and the sex segregated meetings (Young Women’s and Relief Society for adolescent and adult women, and Priesthood meetings for adolescent and adult men). The first and third Sundays in a month are for Sunday School, and the second and fourth Sundays are for the sex segregated meetings. However, when a month contains a fifth Sunday, the topic and audience of that meeting are determined by the ward’s bishop. Fifth Sunday lessons therefore vary from ward to ward.

³⁸ “General authority” is a technical term in LDS usage that refers to a specific set of male-only priesthood offices whose holders preside over the Church as a whole. This category includes the First

focused his talk on how to teach self-reliance to children (Martinez 2022). Most importantly for my anthropological framework, in interviews and conversations with Latter-day Saints when I would ask what the Church taught about economics, self-reliance came up consistently. Clearly, understanding how self-reliance functions today is therefore essential to understanding contemporary Latter-day Saint practices of economic discernment.

With respect to the contemporary understanding of self-reliance, my research has been timely. Prior to 2017, any attempt to understand LDS self-reliance would have required scholars to interpret a vast and heterogeneous body of Church-produced magazine articles, life-help pamphlets, conference talks, and lesson manuals spanning more than a century. These materials emerged from distinct eras of Church history, often reflecting different doctrinal priorities, gender norms, and institutional needs. The result was a fragmented and inconsistent picture of what self-reliance meant at any given moment, and constructing a coherent account required significant selective interpretation. The self-reliance promoted in the early years of the Church is markedly different from the self-reliance of today. Even the self-reliance of the David O. McKay and Ezra Taft Benson prophetic eras (1951-1970 and 1985-1994 respectively) would look quite different from the self-reliance of today given their emphasis on sex-segregated

Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the Presidency of the Seventy, the General Authority Seventies, and the Presiding Bishopric. Leaders of Churchwide organizations such as Relief Society, Young Women, Primary, Young Men, and Sunday School are designated not as general authorities but as general officers. Unlike general authorities, general officers do not hold priesthood keys that authorize them to direct or receive revelation for the entire Church. Their stewardship extends only to the programs and populations of their respective organizations, and any inspiration they are understood to receive pertains to that limited sphere. General authorities, by contrast, hold Churchwide priesthood jurisdiction, including the authority to receive revelation that governs the Church in its entirety. More on priesthood keys in section 9.2.

labour (more on this in chapter nine). Any analysis prior to 2017 would have required scholars to assemble a body of institutional texts from across disparate eras, a process that would have involved significant selective interpretation to construct a coherent picture of LDS self-reliance.

This obstacle changed with the global roll-out of the Church's Self-Reliance Initiative in 2017. Part of the broader Self-Reliance Services, the Self-Reliance Initiative consists of a series of facilitated workshops with learners studying one of four learning streams: *Education for a Better Job*, *Personal Finances*, *Starting and Growing My Business*, and *Find a Better Job*. Each course takes place over 12 weeks with weekly meetings and lots of homework. "If you wanna know what the Church teaches about economics," I was told by one Latter-day Saint I chatted with during a volunteer event, "you're gonna have to take some self-reliance courses." I asked if he had taken any courses himself. Smiling, he held up two fingers.

Like most Church initiatives, official data on participation in the Self-Reliance Initiative is not publicly available. Though, in 2022 *The Church News* (Richards 2022) published a series of infographics that included one about the Self-Reliance Initiative (see figure 7 below). This infographic's intent was to demonstrate its widespread adoption since launch. It is, unfortunately, impossible to tell how much penetration the programs have had amongst Latter-day Saints given the limited data.

In southern Alberta, however, the initiative appeared to have been rather successful. I never encountered an active Latter-day Saint who indicated not having heard of the Self-Reliance Initiative, and many brought the program up un-prompted in conversations about finances, employment, or Church teachings related to economic matters. Several had participated in the courses, either as learners or facilitators. According to one self-reliance specialist I spoke with, "over 50% of the active adult members" in his stake had taken at least one course, a notably high rate for a voluntary program. This figure nonetheless suggests strong uptake in the region.



Figure 6: An infographic published by the LDS Church via *The Church News* celebrating various metrics achieved by the Church's Welfare & Self-Reliance Services programs since launching the Self-Reliance Initiative (Richards 2022).

Self-Reliance Initiative courses are designed to be collaborative, group-based workshops facilitated by volunteers. Sometimes these volunteers are peer participants (learning the material as they lead their peers), and sometimes the volunteers are designated self-reliance specialists. Though, the title self-reliance specialist is somewhat misleading. These specialists are not necessarily specialists in the subject matter of the Self-Reliance Initiative courses like job hunting, personal finance, post-secondary education, and entrepreneurship. They might be, but it is not a requirement for the role. Rather, self-reliance specialists are ward and stake members who have accepted a calling to guide the work of the Self-Reliance Initiative in their ward or stake. What they specialize in, then, is the Self-Reliance Initiative as a program, not the subject matter of the Initiative's courses.

Being non-specialists in the subject matter, facilitators and learners rely on robust lesson manuals produced by the Church to guide them through the coursework. Facilitators receive a small amount of training and a short manual to help them learn to facilitate the workshops, but during the workshops themselves everyone works through the same core manuals together. I use the adjective “robust” here because each of the four core course manuals exceeds two hundred pages, and they are supplemented by worksheets, short videos, scripture reading, and facilitator instructions. If I could get my undergraduate students to read more than two hundred pages of material in a fifteen-week semester I would consider that an unprecedented success. The Self Reliance Initiative workshops cover that amount of content in only twelve weeks (though in practice it can exceed this owing to holidays or difficulty scheduling), and the material is further augmented through in class discussion, collaborative exercises, and homework.

What this initiative represents for scholars is an opportunity to examine an explicit, systematic, pedagogically transmissible, and publicly available blueprint for LDS practices of economic discernment in the twenty-first century. A study of the Self-Reliance Initiative reveals how Latter-day Saints are taught to study and prepare matters of economic importance—a necessary first step toward receiving revelation. The materials appear, at first glance, to promote the ideals of liberal capitalism: rational action, personal responsibility, entrepreneurial initiative. However, this reading misses a more central dynamic. The Self-Reliance Initiative ultimately cultivates practices of economic discernment that reframe each economic choice as a matter of spiritual inquiry, grounded in study, prayer, and revelation.

4.2 Limited Access Revealing the Spiritual Economy

One of the primary pathways to participating in a Self-Reliance Initiative course is via Self-Reliance Initiative Devotionals. These are formal meetings, open to the public, where the program is presented and discussed by self-reliance specialists and local priesthood leaders (i.e. a bishopric or stake presidency member). The benefits of participation are emphasized, and

interested members are invited to speak with their designated specialist or bishop about getting involved. These devotionals can be hosted outside of Sunday services, often as a fireside during the work week. However, I attended one that was conducted as a fifth Sunday lesson during Sunday services.

Owing to the fluid nature of fifth Sunday lessons (see footnote 35 above), the composition of their audiences varies. On this occasion, I lingered in the chapel after sacrament meeting while speaking with the couple beside me. When the devotional began, I looked around and saw that those who remained were adults and adolescents. From this, it was clear that the devotional was aimed at those beginning to, or already making, economic decisions.

Sitting in this audience, the fifth-Sunday-lesson-turned-Self-Reliance-Initiative-Devotional opened with us being shown the video *Self-Reliance: Tools to Become Better* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2016d). It was projected onto a screen that lowered from the chapel ceiling, with audio playing through the speaker system embedded in the sacrament hall's roof. Dan Jones, an area seventy,³⁹ appeared first. "I guess if I were to describe self-reliance in one way," he began, as the video faded to a scene of Jesus Christ preaching to a crowd in stylized biblical dress, "it'd be to model ourself after the Savior Jesus Christ, who was the perfect example of self-reliance."

This video featured a series of testimonials from past Self-Reliance Initiative participants, interspersed with assertions made by leadership figures holding revelatory priesthood authority

³⁹ Area seventies are part-time volunteer positions, called and directed by the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to serve in a supporting role to the local leaders in a designated region. This makes their roles more prestigious than a local bishop, for example, since area seventies are called to their positions by apostles whereas bishops are called by stake presidents. However, area seventies are not designated general authorities, indicating that their revelatory keys are specific to the area in which they are assigned to administer.

like area seventies, stake presidents, and bishops. Cumulatively, these voices reinforced the purpose and intent of the program: highlighting the program’s “power” to “change lives,” help participants “become more Christlike,” “find who they are and find their true potential,” and “become how Heavenly Father sees them.” The takeaway was clear: this was not just training, but transformation.

What followed in the devotional expanded on that promise. Speakers informed the viewers that if participated in a course they would be working towards their economic goals—or “temporal” goals, to use the emic term—but the real purpose was not necessarily to achieve those economic goals. The real purpose was to learn about these ostensibly temporal things such as personal finance and finding a job because they form part of a spiritual progression towards becoming more like Jesus Christ. That is the pitch, delivered with the authority of revelation and presented as a spiritual calling: “We’ve been called to this work,” area seventy Mark Durham, stated, invoking the authority of his calling, conferred to him by apostles. “It’s a holistic approach where we’re talking about temporal and spiritual matters and all of it coming together. And it builds a foundation that nothing else has ever been able to do like this. It will, in fact, change your ward, your stake, and the Church. I know it will work.” Nonetheless, even I, fairly well-versed in LDS doctrine, culture, and rhetorical style, found myself wondering: what about polishing your résumé or learning networking techniques is especially Christlike?

The conflation of the “temporal” and the “spiritual” is a key feature of the theology developed by the LDS Church’s founding prophet, Joseph Smith. In an oft-quoted revelation where Smith speaks as the mouthpiece of God, he declared:

Wherefore, verily I say unto you that all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal; neither any man, nor the children of men; neither Adam, your father, whom I created. Behold, I gave unto him that he should be an agent unto himself; and I gave unto him

commandment, but no temporal commandment gave I unto him,
for my commandments are spiritual; they are not natural nor
temporal, neither carnal nor sensual. (D&C 29:34-35)

In other contexts, the conflation between the temporal and spiritual focuses more on the nature of matter or embodied life (D&C 29:32, 77:2, 93:33, 131:7; Moses 3:5). However, this instance of conflation from D&C 29 has fueled the characterization of *all* of God's commandments as having eternal (i.e. "spiritual") and not just earthly (i.e. "temporal") importance. In an example that demonstrates both aspects of this conflation, a digital article on the Church's "Gospel Living" platform reminds readers that "Even 'temporal' laws involve our spirit too ... But it makes sense when you remember that a soul is made up of a spirit plus a body. So, while at first glance it might seem like commandments related to physical things (such as the Word of Wisdom) are tied only to physical blessings, even those 'temporal' laws are spiritual" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2021c). In this framing, commandments that are ostensibly about the body or material life are reconfigured with eternal significance.

The devotional I attended followed this familiar formulation. The speakers emphasized that by learning what God, prophets, and apostles have counselled about seemingly temporal matters like having a job, getting an education, entrepreneurship, and personal finance, participants would in fact be pursuing spiritual goals. These spiritual goals included repentance, obedience to commandments, and faith-driven perseverance in the face of adversity. In this sense, the program offers a spiritual framework for practices of economic discernment, teaching attendees to approach economic life as part of spiritual development. In the notes I kept during the devotional I recorded and underlined that "the temporal is a method toward spiritual ends, not a method toward temporal ends. The goals are spiritually oriented." Then, loosely paraphrasing the revelation above, "all things are spiritual to God."

The devotional closed with an open invitation to anyone interested to speak with the ward's self-reliance specialist about participating in a course, which I did. We had met once

before, so I re-introduced myself, reminded him about my research interests, and asked if I could participate in a group “with an eye to observing how the course unfolded” (my best attempt at reformulating participant observation on the fly to a non-anthropologist).

He told me that I could, but “only if” I wanted to “participate sincerely and progress towards my temporal *and spiritual* goals.” Hearing the emphasis he put on the words “and spiritual goals,” I awkwardly rescinded my request to participate. As a less-active member with no intention of becoming otherwise, I could not in good faith present myself as sincerely pursuing those aims. Noting the about-face, and seemingly aware of its cause, he encouraged me to engage in a personal study of the Self-Reliance Initiative materials, pointing me to the website where they were hosted (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.-e). If I changed my mind after some personal study, he told me, I could ask again.

Anthropologists have argued that moments of refusal and restricted access can offer insight into how institutions define their boundaries and authorise participation (Chong 2018; Petit 2014; Hull 2012). Probing, as it were, the boundaries which structure the conceptual borders of an institution, these authors argue that we can learn how such institutions are socially constructed, what kinds of subjects they admit, what commitments they require, and how legitimacy is enforced.

There is at least one noteworthy characteristic of LDS practices of economic discernment illuminated by the barrier that prevented me from participating in a Self-Reliance Initiative workshop: access was contingent on what Daromir Rudnyckyj (2011) calls a *spiritual economy*—a framework in which “economic reform is conceived of and enacted as a matter of religious piety and spiritual virtue” (131). For the self-reliance specialist I spoke with, participation in the courses needed to be premised on a desire to achieve not only the temporal, economic goals, but also the underlying spiritual goals described above, since these were understood as the true objective. The economic goals are merely intermediary steps toward

achieving those ultimate, eternal goals. Thus, participation without a desire to achieve those ultimate objectives could not be considered sincere.

Unable to attend a course myself, I spoke with Latter-day Saints who had participated in Self-Reliance Initiative workshops in the past. A recurring theme in these conversations was that the spiritual, rather than the temporal components of the courses were what participants found most meaningful. Stephen, an entrepreneur who already owned three small businesses in Cardston and was in the process of launching another, had taken the *Starting and Growing My Business for Self-Reliance* course the year prior. Reflecting on that experience, he emphasized that the true value of the course lay in its spiritually oriented elements. “I didn’t really learn anything about my businesses I didn’t already know,” he told me. “But how it all weaves together with the Church and faith and things like that—that was important. I learned a lot about that.”

Another learner, Reggie, had taken the *Find a Better Job for Self-Reliance* course. He was disappointed by the temporal course content, but nonetheless valued the spiritual components of the coursework:

I hoped to find something that would help me get a better job. Some new way of approaching things. We learned about resumes and interviews and, like, cover letters. I’ve been looking for better work for a really long time. I’ve gone over my résumé a *lot* already. (Laughs) It wasn’t the most productive course for me, I guess. But it helped me with patience and having—being faithful in my search. Like, I didn’t think repentance had anything to do with looking for a job. Turns out it does. I don’t like my job and want a better one. But I learned that maybe I am where Heavenly Father wants me to be and I gotta focus on how I can provide for my family with what I’ve been given and help others.

Reggie did not think the coursework helped him achieve his employment goal (at the time we spoke, he was still searching). Instead, he reframed his current employment circumstances as a matter of divine will. If he had done everything the course recommended and still found himself “stuck” in his job, then perhaps that was where God intended him to be. This reframing allowed him to shift his attention away from the frustrating, continuous search for new employment and toward the good he could achieve with what he had. “I don’t have much,” he told me. Then, invoking the Parable of the Widow’s Mite from the Biblical book of Luke, “but my mite is mighty.” This illustrates how Latter-day Saint practices of economic discernment can reframe undesired employment circumstances as spiritually prudent, even when they remain economically undesirable.

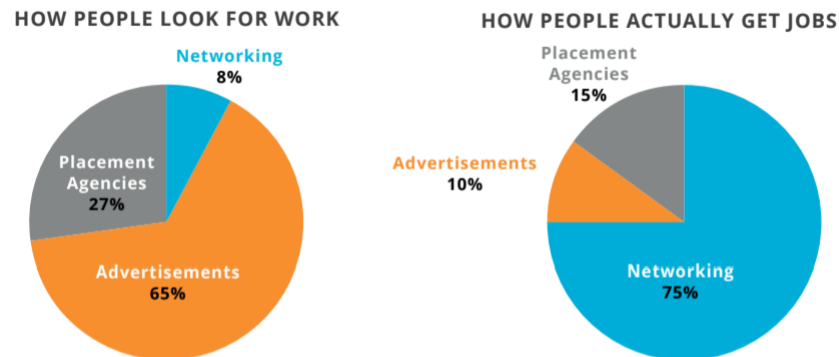
Whether the Self-Reliance Initiative is effective at helping participants achieve their temporal goals, such as securing employment or increasing income, may be better addressed by economists, Church administrators, and curriculum designers. Certainly, the Church frames the program as effective in those terms, and some of its architects do, too. Davis and Maxfield (2016), senior figures in the Church’s Self-Reliance Services design team, outlined early versions of the program and reported preliminary positive outcomes from the international pilot projects that preceded its 2017 adaptation for North America. But from an anthropological perspective, this outcome-oriented framing risks missing the point.

When Reggie told me he had come to see his stagnant job situation as divinely intended, I initially read this as evidence of the program’s failure. Only later did I understand that the mode of discernment at work here does not primarily follow a neoclassical kind of economic logic, but an ontological one: its aim is not simply to improve material conditions, but to reshape how participants understand themselves, their struggles, and their spiritual trajectory. The Self-Reliance Initiative reconfigures practices like writing resumes, managing budgets, launching businesses into forms of religious discipline. The real promise is not prosperity, but sanctification. The anthropological question, then, is not whether the program works in

economic terms, but how it works to render economic life a domain wherein participants can work on reconfiguring themselves as humans with more Christlike attributes.

4.3 Foundations for Self-Reliance

Despite the program’s more metaphysical ultimate aims, perusing the Self-Reliance Initiative course manuals reveals little explicitly spiritual or theological content. Lesson 2 from the course manual *Find a Better Job for Self-Reliance* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2016a) titled “Networking” positions the act of directly contacting people, instead of job agencies or responding to advertisements, as the way “people actually get jobs”. It then instructs learners to craft a sort of “elevator pitch”–style, 30-second self-introduction for use while job hunting, and the lesson concludes with a commitment to make at least three contacts each day. The lesson appears purely pragmatic.



Discuss: What would change in your job search if you networked more?

Figure 7: Graphs from the lesson “Networking” in the Find a Better Job for Self-Reliance course (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2016a, 23). The graphs indicate that most people “actually” find jobs via networking, rather than by responding to advertisements or placement agencies. No source for this data is provided. Participants are then prompted to theorize how the outcomes of their job search might change if they made networking more central to their process

Similarly, Lesson 8 of *Personal Finances for Self-Reliance* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2016c), titled “Getting Out of Debt,” instructs learners that the first step to getting out of debt is to stop incurring debt. It then outlines practical strategies for managing existing debts, including sample charts of interest rates, payment plans, and cost-saving options. Learners are encouraged to build an emergency fund, hold family councils to discuss expenses, and pay more than the minimum when possible. Apart from a single quote from an LDS apostle and one scripture reference at the end, the material closely resembles standard debt-reduction advice found in secular financial counselling programs.

ACTIVITY (5 minutes)

Use the example debt inventory below to do the following:

Step 1: Put a check next to the loan with the highest interest rate.

Step 2: Circle the loan with the smallest balance.

DESCRIPTION	BALANCE	INTEREST RATE	MONTHLY PAYMENT
Credit card #1	4,000	17%	97
Credit card #2	6,500	19%	168
Car	5,000	3%	145
Student loan	18,000	5.5%	300
Mortgage	170,000	4.5%	1,050

ACTIVITY (5 minutes)

Use your own debt inventory (page 123) to do the following:

Step 1: Put a check next to the loan with the highest interest rate.

Step 2: Circle the loan with the smallest balance.

Step 3: Decide which loan to pay extra to first, and indicate that on your debt inventory.

Use the Rollover Method

Read: The rollover method is a great way to pay off your debts. Let’s say you can now pay an extra 100 a month toward your debts. When you pay off a debt, what should you do with the money that had

Figure 8: An excerpt from page 134 of the Personal Finance for Self-Reliance course (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2016c) that is typical of content in this course inasmuch as it is primarily comprised of secular content. It focuses on calculating debts, strategies for paying down debt, and proposes hypothetical situations after which participants should model their own choices. Nothing that would normally be considered “religious” is present here.

To find the more explicit connections to what would normally be considered theological, one must turn to a shorter manual titled *My Foundation for Self-Reliance* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2016b, *My Foundation* hereafter). This 36-page manual serves as a companion to all four of the principal courses.⁴⁰ Comprising twelve lessons, it outlines the divine principles that inform the Church's teachings on the various economic matters. Some are obviously religious, such as #2 titled "Exercise Faith in Jesus Christ," and #4, "Repent and Be Obedient." Though others still appear rather secular, such as #3, "Manage Money," and #5, "Use Time Wisely." Yet it is in this manual that we find the most explicit melding of the spiritual and the temporal. Even in those lessons that appear to be more secular, the way that each lesson's content is structured, communicated, and interwoven into the larger course manuals' content is designed to connect each seemingly secular topic to divine principles.

Take, for example, the fifth principle from *My Foundation*, titled "Use Time Wisely." Participants in the *Personal Finance* learning stream will learn this principle before diving into the details of their sixth lesson, which is about building an emergency fund and acquiring insurance. Meanwhile, participants in the *Education for Better Work* course cover this same principle at the start of their eighth lesson, which is about taking charge of one's education, establishing a successful routine, and strategies for staying on track. This illustrates how these foundational principles are designed to travel across distinct economic concerns, appearing in different course streams yet carrying the same spiritual rationale. Their universality suggests

⁴⁰ In the most recent versions of the Self-Reliance Initiative course manuals, the contents of the *My Foundation* manual are also reprinted into the larger manuals. Sometimes, such as in the *Starting and Growing my Business for Self-Reliance* manual, the foundational principles are reprinted at the start of each corresponding chapter. In others, such as *Find a Better Job for Self-Reliance*, the foundational principles are printed at the end of the manual as a sort of appendix.

that they are not just add-ons, but structural elements of Latter-day Saint practices of economic discernment, adaptable across contexts but consistent in form.

Notably, the principles in each chapter of the *My Foundation* course are presented as rooted in both ancient and contemporary revelation, while also leaving room for personal revelation. Continuing with the example of the fifth principle, “Use Time Wisely,” learners are guided through a structured reflection. They begin by pondering the question, “Why is time one of God’s greatest gifts?” The page margins present two quotations for reflection, one from the Book of Mormon (Alma 34:32) and another from the nineteenth century prophet Brigham Young. “For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors” reads the ancient text. From the more contemporary source, “Time is all the capital stock there is on the earth ... If properly used, it brings that which will add to your comfort, convenience, and satisfaction. Let us consider this, and no longer sit with hands folded, wasting time.”

Young’s language echoes Benjamin Franklin’s famous maxims on time and labor, later analysed by Max Weber ([1930] 2001) as expressions of a Protestant ethic that unintentionally sacralises productivity through rigorous rationalisation. In the LDS context, these quotes construct time as a divine gift, to be used in labour that prepares the soul to meet God. They also suggest that time must be used “properly,” but stop short of prescribing what that use entails. Where Franklin, in the quote deployed by Weber, specifies the characteristics of “proper use” down to the groat, Young leaves the specifics open, to be worked out through revelation. The discipline is present, but its substance is personalised rather than prescribed.

Instead, the specifics are left up to personal revelation. To illustrate this, learners are prompted to view a short, 2-minute video. It depicts a Sister Benkosi sharing how she manages her time through revelation. No biographical details are given; she is shown as an older Black woman wearing colourful clothing and a head wrap, whose presence gestures toward the program’s global reach (a feature common across Self-Reliance materials, which frequently

include speakers of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds). Light percussion plays in the background as she explains, in an African accent, how she “rises before the sun,” “reads the scriptures,” and then prepares a list of what needs to be done that day. Considering them, she prioritizes them numerically based on what she thinks she ought to do most. “How do you know the priorities?” an off-screen voice asks. “I listen when I pray,” she replies.

Mirroring the process outlined in the video, learners are prompted to work with a partner to create a list of tasks they need to do. “Not just daily chores,” the manual indicates. “These should be important tasks for your work, for school, for church, or for family service.” After making the list, the activity has participants “pray for guidance” and “review [the] list of tasks.” It is in this moment, following a prayerful request for guidance, that participants are told to “listen” and numerically prioritize the tasks, after which they are to set goals to accomplish the tasks in the order indicated. Finally, they commit to reviewing the list of tasks that evening “in prayer,” holding themselves accountable to Heavenly Father for what they have or have not achieved. In the event they have not achieved one of the tasks, they are prompted to repent and “feel His love.”

This theme of seeking divine guidance when determining the specifics about how to proceed runs throughout all the *My Foundation* course materials. In the lesson titled “Solve Problems,” participants are taught that effective problem-solving involves three interrelated steps: identify the “real” problem, study potential options/solutions, and then pray for guidance. Participants are then instructed to “act in faith” based on the divine direction they receive. This approach reinforces a core aspect of Latter-day Saint practices of economic discernment: rational deliberation is not replaced by revelation but brought into relation with it.

Similarly, the lesson on seeking education to further one’s employment goals includes a quote from apostle Henry B. Eyring: “Plead that the Spirit will show you what the Lord wants you to do. Plan to do it. Promise Him to obey. Act with determination until you have done what He asked. And then pray ... to know what you might do next” (Eyring 2010, 63). Although originally

delivered during the male only Priesthood Session of General Conference, this directive is repurposed here for a mixed sex audience and used to encourage participants to rely on revelation. It is presented not as spontaneous insight, but as a practical and disciplined epistemology for knowing in moments of decision making.

Throughout the *My Foundation* course content, revelation from ancient scripture, contemporary prophetic counsel, and personal spiritual impressions are brought into relation with the practical guidance found in the larger course manuals. Principles premised on faith—evidenced by study, prayer, and acting on divine guidance—render mundane and seemingly secular choices like budgeting matters of eternal importance.

A similar dynamic appears in Caitlin Zaloom's (2016) examination of Evangelical “financial ministries.” For her Evangelical interlocutors, household budgets become what she calls “doubled forms,” devices that allow users to navigate both biblical and market obligations at once. What these budgets reveal is not a prudent course of action but God’s constant interventions in the secular economy and in the lives of participants, evidenced in small miracles, unexpected gifts, or providential turns of fortune. Budgeting here becomes a way of perceiving God’s will manifest in the midst of a volatile and uncertain economy, where faith might otherwise be difficult to sustain.

However, there are key divergences between the use of budgets in LDS economic discernment and what Zaloom (2016) observed amongst Evangelicals. The budget, in the LDS context, is not directed toward revealing divine will: it is directed toward structuring rational study, defining a subsequent course of action, and then seeking revelation to confirm its adequacy. Revelation in this context is prospective, a disciplined means of discerning an appropriate path forward. Crucially, this path is not fixed in advance by God: it is worked out through deliberation, and it may or may not be the optimal path forward, but its adequacy is ultimately settled upon through confirmatory prayer. The distinction is significant: Evangelical

budgeting reveals divine interventions, whereas Latter-day Saint budgeting itself becomes the intervention, whose authority rests on its revelatory confirmation.

Once confirmed, however, the budget ceases to be a tentative plan and becomes a divinely sanctioned course of action. To abandon or ignore it is no longer merely imprudent but disobedient, introducing new ethical stakes into what had begun as a financial tool. This transformation—where revelation converts planning into obligation—points directly to the broader concern of obedience and accountability that follows.

4.4 Personal Revelation and Accountability

As I have argued, seemingly secular practices such as keeping a budget, solving problems, or managing one's time are reconfigured into tools for achieving spiritual outcomes through the mechanism of personal revelation. The *My Foundation* lessons do not prescribe which tasks to prioritize, which solutions to pursue, or what educational paths to follow. Rather, they aim to cultivate a habit of seeking revelation in the midst of such decisions. This process assumes prior preparation: faithful obedience, worthiness, and sincere study, including the secular guidance offered in the Self-Reliance materials and beyond. Revelation does not override secular reasoning but builds on it, transforming economic life into a site of spiritual accountability.

One element of this configuration I have yet to highlight is that personal revelation is not only a technique for discerning prudence but a moral imperative. Latter-day Saints are counselled that they ought to seek divine guidance in temporal matters, and that once received, that guidance obligates them to act accordingly. In the *Personal Finance* course, for instance, learners are prompted to read a paraphrased account of a Book of Mormon prophet, Amulek, who models how to seek revelation in temporal matters:

Amulek taught among the Zoramites to “cry unto [the Lord] over the crops of your fields, that ye may prosper in them. Cry over the flocks of your fields, that they may increase” ... Counseling with the Lord about your finances means praying to Heavenly Father and asking for guidance about financial matters. One of your commitments this week will be to counsel with the Lord about your finances. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2016c, 7).

This imperative to “counsel with the Lord” is premised on belief in a God who is concerned with the temporal details of individual lives, and on the companionship of the Holy Ghost, received through baptism, confirmation, and continued striving. It is also embedded in a moral framework of obedience and repentance. Recall that attentiveness to the Holy Ghost’s communications is enhanced or dulled according to an individual’s spiritual standing: those who keep commandments, repent sincerely, and strive toward worthiness are more capable of discerning divine guidance. It follows, then, that failing to act on what one perceives as personal revelation constitutes disobedience, necessitating repentance lest future communications be rendered less accessible to the disobedient recipient.

This has important implications for the unique way in which accountability figures into the LDS spiritual economy. In the Islamic context described by Rudnyckyj (2011), individuals were accountable for having developed behaviours and practices “commensurable with the norms of transparency, productivity, and rationalization for purposes of profit” (132). In the LDS case, the orientation of accountability is different. Latter-day Saints are accountable for having pursued revelation and followed through on what it directed, not for having achieved outcomes measurable against a fixed standard.

A curious consequence of this version of accountability is that even undesirable outcomes can be configured as the divinely intended result of obedience. Reggie, as we have seen, used revelation to frame his continued employment as the most prudent course of action,

not in economic terms but as an expression of faithful obedience that would enable future revelation on the matter. In contrast, another interlocutor, whom I will call Derek, experienced revelation not simply as a call to act, but as a call to act against his personal and familial preferences. Derek was not unemployed or underemployed. Derek had a full-time job that enabled him and his wife (who was employed part-time) to sustain their family of five, including an Indigenous foster child. They owned the home they were in, their children participated in extra-curricular sports, they owned two personal vehicles, and occasionally vacationed. By Derek's own account, they were "doing fine financially" and he was not all that interested in necessarily making more money. Instead, Derek was interested in finding employment in a different community. During one of our discussions, I recorded the following notes:

They came to Cardston [from Calgary] because he was unemployed and looking for jobs "like crazy." Submitted "a hundred or two hundred applications" and nothing was happening. A job came up in Cardston. He said, "No way, I don't want to live there". His wife said pray about it and they felt like the job was "something we were supposed to do." [He] wasn't excited about the idea but "Heavenly Father wanted me to take that job." "I knew I should take this job."

"Moving to Cardston has been hard on the kids." "I still hate it here after years." "The community is racist and mean to my kids." He wants to find work "anywhere else." "I keep being grateful for being here with this job." He rejects the possibility of ignoring the Holy Ghost's promptings ("I wasn't going to ignore the Holy Ghost"). "I want Him to tell me where to go next, too." "I know we're still supposed to be here because he hasn't told me to go anywhere else yet."

For Derek, even though following personal revelation led to an outcome he "hated," the overriding principle was accountability to Heavenly Father, premised on having obediently acted

upon divine instruction. “I wasn’t going to ignore the Holy Ghost,” he said, underscoring the danger of disregarding revelation. Had he ignored it, it would have constituted disobedience and dulled his capacity to receive future guidance, which he looked forward to.

This raises a crucial point about LDS economics. Decisions are not judged by whether they increase income but by whether they have been confirmed through revelation. In this framework, prudence is defined by revelation rather than by material gain. As a result, the prudent choice may run against personal preference or family well-being. Derek’s decision illustrates this clearly: although his job in Cardston provided stability, it also meant living in a place he disliked, where his children faced racism and his family’s happiness suffered. Yet because the decision had been confirmed through revelation, Derek treated it as binding. Obedience to that confirmation outweighed his personal misgivings and sustained his expectation of further divine guidance.

Accountability, in the LDS spiritual economy, is not measured by outcomes such as wealth accumulation or employment status, but by one’s responsiveness to perceived divine guidance in economic matters. Practices such as budgeting, time use, and job-seeking are framed as opportunities to receive and act on personal revelation. What matters is not economic success itself but whether one has sincerely sought divine counsel, after first “studying things out,” and then acted accordingly. This is how LDS practices for discerning economic prudence render otherwise mundane economic decisions a matter of spiritual refinement. This is how self-reliance becomes a project in becoming more Christlike. Our next step, then, is to examine how study itself is made a prerequisite for revelation, shaping the very conditions under which divine confirmation can occur

4.5 Study, Affect, and Revelation

A core feature of LDS economics is that individuals must study available options before seeking personal revelation. The *My Foundation* course manual outlines a four-step process:

identify the problem, study possible solutions, select the best course of action, and then pray to ask God whether the choice is correct. This procedure is taught alongside oft-quoted scriptures from Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–8: "... you have supposed that I would give it [revelation] unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore you shall feel that it is right." Additional canonical passages specify how such confirmation is expected to register affectively. D&C 6:23 describes a sensed "peace" as the sign that something is right; D&C 9:8 adds that the recipient will "feel that it is right"; and D&C 9:9 contrasts these positive indications with a "stupor of thought," understood to signal a negative response. In this way, the scriptures not only prescribe intellectual labour before prayer but also establish that divine confirmation operates through distinct affective cues.



MY FOUNDATION: SOLVE PROBLEMS

—Maximum Time: 20 Minutes

Ponder: Why does Heavenly Father allow us to face problems and challenges?

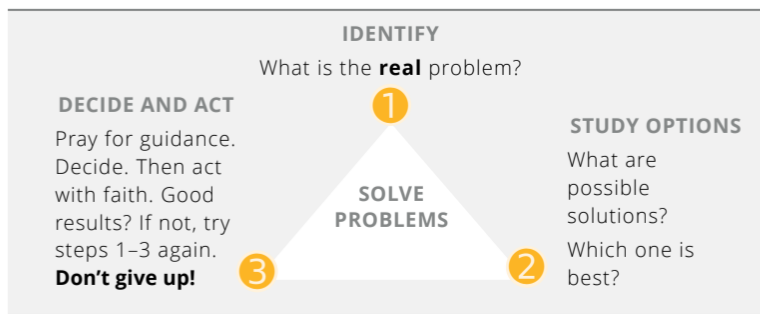
Watch: “A Bigger Truck?” available at srs.lds.org/videos. (No video? Read page 73.)

Discuss: What is the real problem in this story? What are some options for the two men?

Read: Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–9 and the quote by Elder Robert D. Hales (on the right)

ACTIVITY

Step 1: Choose a partner, and read the steps below.



Step 2: Choose a problem you are facing and write it below.

“Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

“But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

“But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong.”

DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 9:7–9

Figure 9: Excerpt from the My Foundation for Self-Reliance course manual. I highlighted in green a portion of the scripture teaching a procedure for seeking personal revelation. It includes the necessity of “studying out” options and choosing the best path forward prior to seeking revelatory confirmation. This is positioned alongside a chart depicting the three inter-related steps in seeking effective, revelation-based problem solving: “Identify,” “Study Options,” “Decide and Act.”

The structure, then, has a sort of self-confirming quality. By the time one prays, the individual has already studied the matter out, often with Church-approved materials, and rationalized a selected path forward which they consider most prudent, otherwise they would not have selected it. Revelation does not interrupt this process: it confirms it. A sense of peace or clarity becomes the sign that the right option has been found. These feelings are interpreted not as internal affirmation, but as communication from God. In this way, the process reinforces what

has already been provisionally determined. When such feelings do not arrive—when confusion, anxiety, or doubt persist—this is taken as a sign to return to earlier steps, revise one’s study, and reconsider the options before seeking divine confirmation again.

In effect, what is being tested for in this procedure is a sense of confidence in one’s chosen path forward; its absence, signalled by doubt, confusion, and anxiety, indicates a need to reassess. As Marshall Brooks (2018) described when trying to articulate how LDS revelation functions, “rather than condemning feelings as merely subjective, the church grants emotion a uniquely objective character. Feelings alone have the capacity to reveal the sacred truth of reality as it is experienced in the banality of day-to-day life” (147). What makes the feelings following prayer distinctive, however, is that rather than being interpreted as coming from within the individual, these feelings are interpreted as coming from an external source: God, via the Holy Spirit.

Most often, this affective confidence is articulated as a “know” statement. For example, one speaker recounted in a sacrament meeting talk about how she received revelation to deal with a challenging family matter. Unsure about which long-term care facility she should put her aging mother in, she described weighing all the available options for weeks and then finally choosing one of them. Then, she prayed about the choice and “all the worry and anxiety I was feeling about this decision melted away. I knew what I needed to do.” The disappearance of anxiety and emergence of clarity became the verification that her choice was correct—a transition from unease to confidence, read as revelation: “I knew what I needed to do.”

Consider, then, how Latter-day Saints who participate in or consult the Self-Reliance Initiative find solutions to their temporal problems. They first identify the problem, which may involve poor or absent employment, the need for better education, the desire to succeed as an entrepreneur, or poor personal financial practices. The next step, studying out the matter, may involve enrolling in a corresponding Self-Reliance Initiative course or engaging in a personal study of the materials. This content is replete with seemingly secular counsel (like how to invest

in one's retirement or how to find customers for a small business) presented to learners with the authoritative backing of the Church's highest revelatory authority, the First Presidency. Learners then choose paths forward based on this study of secular strategies for economic success and pray to know whether the path they have chosen is indeed the correct one for them. In this process, revelation does not introduce an entirely new option but affectively confirms what has already been studied out, providing a sense of clarity and confidence ("I know what to do"), or it invalidates the decision through lingering unease, confusion, or anxiety.

4.6 Revelation for Me, not for Thee

It is important to return to the flexibility inherent in LDS revelation, lest readers conclude that the combination of study and personal revelation produces uniform outcomes in economic decision-making. On the contrary, the results of this process are highly variable. This variation is partly due to the principle that personal revelation is, by definition, personal, and thus may guide different individuals to different courses of action even when they face similar economic problems. This characteristic came through vividly in several conversations I had with Ferris.

At the time, Ferris was seeking land to purchase for a large scale residential and recreational development he and his business partners hoped would revitalize the town, bring in new residents, and complement Cardston's robust sport culture. Having developed a business plan and acquired capital, Ferris then needed to purchase land. Several components went into Ferris's decision making process here, not the least of which was to study out available options before praying about it. Surveying available parcels in and around Cardston, Ferris described navigating several factors such as differences in municipal versus county tax implications, his perceptions of how various administrative offices typically operated, ensuring a good view of the Rocky Mountains, and proximity to the Cardston temple. After narrowing down his options, Ferris selected a parcel to purchase.

As it turned out, the owner of the parcel did not live in Cardston. However, Ferris discovered that, serendipitously, he knew the owner; they had served as missionaries together years before. Instead of reaching out through a realtor, Ferris decided to contact the owner directly, but only after praying about it. He and his wife had consulted together over the purchase for weeks, weighing the pros and cons of various options, praying, and fasting⁴¹ about the decision. This process resulted in him saying he “felt confident in [their] decision.” “You think you received revelation that that was the one?” I asked. “I was sure. That was the one,” Ferris responded.

When Ferris called the owner, they reminisced about their mission service, discussed their families, and Ferris explained how he had come to live in Cardston (Ferris was originally from Alberta, but not from Cardston). Ferris then proposed the purchase. They talked about the details, and the owner ended the conversation saying he would need to consult with his wife and pray about it. Ferris, however, had already sensed via prayer and affect following rigorous study that this was the correct purchase for him. As he put it, he “was pretty sure [the owner] would come to the same conclusion because I knew it was the right decision for me.”

After a week went by, Ferris received a call back from his old mission companion. To Ferris’s disappointment, the owner told him he and his wife “didn’t feel right about it. Sorry, but

⁴¹ In LDS practice, a fast is when an individual refrains from eating for a designated period of time—usually 24 hours. Conceived of as a sacrifice demonstrating faith, the practice is asserted to provide better results with respect to personal revelation than merely praying. It is also often accompanied by an increase in complementary activities such as scripture study, prayer, listening to spiritually uplifting music, and attending the temple. Fasts can be performed by an individual or a collective, with the latter perceived as being more effective as a shared demonstration of sacrifice and faith.

can't do it". I asked Ferris at this point in his story whether he thought the owner had received contradictory revelation. I recorded the following in my notes as he answered:

"Nope." Based on how [he] had said "didn't feel right" meant the Spirit had told him no. But that didn't mean the Spirit had not told Ferris yes. It might have been the ideal and best solution for Ferris's plans, but not the best solution for [the owner's] plans. Ferris's revelation was for him. He can't get revelation for the other guy.

This meant a return to the drawing board for Ferris. He resumed his study of the remaining available options, which eventually led him to select a next-best alternative. Praying on the matter, Ferris confirmed receiving the "prompting" that he could move to purchase this other parcel of land. Ultimately, Ferris was able to acquire it, and at the time he was relating all this to me he was already developing some of the infrastructure required to realize his plans for the land.

I have said that divine revelation may, at first blush, sound like something rigid and monolithic. But the way LDS theology distributes revelatory authority to its lay people enables the pursuit of personal revelation to become a deeply individualised endeavour, the results of which have the potential to vary significantly. Rather than presenting a problematic contradiction, the disparity in outcomes can actually confirm the veracity of the process itself. It works, not because it yields universal agreement, but because it affirms that God knows each individual's circumstances, needs, aspirations, and preferences.

This is demonstrated clearly in Ferris's account. As he understood it, he was receiving spiritual communication to direct his choices. But that revelation was specific to him. The limits placed around revelatory jurisdiction meant that God might communicate something different to Ferris than to another person facing the same decision. Since personal revelation is just that—*personal*—two people can receive different answers to the same question. "Heavenly Father

knows about my plans and how best to achieve them. He knows about [the owner's] plans. He doesn't have to give both of us the same advice," Ferris told me. That kind of reasoning is a core part of how the revelation works: confirmation does not come from consensus, but from the sense that God has confirmed your chosen course of action as prudent for you.

4.7 Bridging Obedience, Faith, and Revelation in an Integrated Spiritual Economy

The LDS concept of self-reliance encodes a spiritual economy that is oriented towards cultivating faith, obedience to divine laws, and diligence through economic practice. As defined in official Church materials, "Self-reliance is the ability, commitment, and effort to provide the spiritual and temporal necessities of life for self and family" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023a, 22.0) These are decidedly modest aims; no one is expected to become immensely wealthy, and the bar is set rather low at simply being able to provide the "necessities." The point is not material accumulation but the alignment of economic choices with divine instruction and moral discipline. These modest goals are pursued not just through rational economic activity, but through a whole epistemological technique for discerning prudence that renders any economic activity spiritually significant when confirmed through revelation.

Secular and fairly mundane advice like "put aside savings each month" gets reconstituted as a matter of obedience, faith, and revelation inasmuch as Latter-day Saints have been counselled by revelatory authorities to save for the future (and thus should obey), they act on this counsel despite uncertain outcomes or challenges (demonstrating faith), and they do so knowing, through the feelings that accompany prayer (revelation), that what they are doing is correct for them specifically, not just generally.

The same structure applies to education. Latter-day Saints have been counseled to obtain as high an education as possible, which can be challenging for many. But those who

choose to pursue this counsel will likely do so bolstered by a sense of confidence that their decision is the correct one for them.

LDS prophets have long counselled members to be cautious about debt and to avoid it when possible, while also recognising that certain forms of borrowing may be necessary or productive, such as debt for education, a modest home, transportation, or a business venture. It will require hard work and diligence to achieve this, as well as a rational approach to budgeting and an understanding of personal finance principles. But by studying out the available options, selecting a strategy, and then seeking divine confirmation in prayer, the chosen path is rendered the prudent one, even if happens to lead to unfavourable economic results.

Practices such as obeying prophetic counsel, exercising faith amid uncertainty, and seeking revelation to confirm a prudent course are ultimately oriented toward becoming more like Christ, just as the speaker emphasized during the Self-Reliance Initiative devotional. To be Christlike, in this framing, is to follow divine instruction even when outcomes are unclear, to work diligently to solve problems, and to rely on revelation as a guide throughout the process. As one female peer in a Sunday School lesson once reminded the class, “Even Christ had to pray to Heavenly Father about the atonement. He had doubts but followed the Spirit.”⁴²

⁴² Latter-day Saints typically refer to Christ’s sacrifice as the atonement rather than the crucifixion. The LDS understanding of the atonement encompasses both the spiritual ordeal in the Garden of Gethsemane and the physical suffering of the crucifixion that followed. Consistent with broader LDS tendencies to conflate the spiritual and physical, the suffering in Gethsemane is also understood to have been physically excruciating. Thus, the spiritual ordeal in the Garden is understood to have been experienced as physical pain, too. Most Christians interpret the scripture from Luke 22:44 that mentions Jesus sweating “as if great drops of blood” as a simile and figurative language. However, owing to a verse in the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 3:7), Latter-day Saints assert that the pain Jesus experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane was so extreme Jesus literally bled from every pore. Some Latter-day Saints,

The ultimate purpose of LDS economic discernment practices like self-reliance and revelation is to inculcate traits asserted to be divine and Christlike. Yes, temporal blessings await those who strive towards developing these traits, but those blessings are not the purpose. They are merely the byproducts of the transformative spiritual changes that shape a person into someone more obedient, diligent, prayerful, grateful, and honest in their stewardship of resources—someone like Christ. Still, those byproducts are actively pursued and ideally achieved: temporal blessings that enable Latter-day Saints to provide for their family's needs, pay down debts, save for the future, and, where appropriate, make prudent investments, including in stocks or other long-term forms of growth.

Once achieved, what then? What does one do in the LDS spiritual economy once they have achieved self-reliance's modest material goal of having the ability to provide one's family's needs? What obligations exist between those who have already achieved self-reliance, and those who have not? Mapping out the LDS moral economy can help us answer these questions.

such as this speaker, will assert that the agony was so strong that Jesus expressed doubt about what was taking place.

5.0 LDS Moral Economy

5.1 A Field Encounter with the LDS Moral Economy

In October of 2022 I was studying books about the history of the Cardston region at the Cardston Public Library. Weeks before, I had taken out a membership that I had paid for using my credit card. Instead of a modern point-of-sale machine, the librarian processed the payment with a manual credit card imprinter and gave me a carbon-copy receipt, along with a small, barcoded keychain to use when checking out material. The odd mix of analogue and digital technologies in this process (the imprinter pressing my credit card numbers into carbon paper and alongside a barcode scanner) struck me as somehow appropriate to a town wherein many “old-timey” sensibilities bumped up against new technology, ideas, and a changing socioeconomic circumstance.

The library had become a sort of regular haunt of mine owing to the desks with electrical outlets to keep my laptop charged, an overwhelming sense of quiet, and several ergonomic office chairs (I have “inherited” a weak back, as we say in my family of desk workers, exacerbated by our lifestyles). It was also conveniently close to all the casual dining options available along Main Street. The library was rarely busy, and you could quite clearly hear any conversation happening anywhere in the place. I was often self-conscious because I tend to type louder than most people. During the colder spells I would try to respect the profound silence of the library by encasing my laptop’s keyboard in my winter toque and gloves in an attempt to stifle some of the noise I generated.

It was thus hard *not* to overhear a series of conversations that took place one afternoon. The desk I was seated at was beside the front doors and in walked a man and woman who appeared to be retirement aged. I looked up as they came in and we smiled at each other, nodding in greeting, but respecting the quiet we exchanged no words. I did not know them and did not recognize their faces from any of the wards I had attended. They both continued on past

me, past the reception, and went to sit on the more comfortable lounge chairs located further into the library's main room. I resumed my study.

After some time, I could hear someone moving around behind me. This was followed by the voice of a man addressing the librarian behind the reception desk asking about the Church. He asked general questions, like whether the library was owned by the Church (the librarian said it was not) and whether the library had any "Church books." To this, the librarian responded in the affirmative and walked him over to the appropriate shelving section. Leaving him by that section, the librarian returned to her post and a dozen or so minutes passed by in silence. Then, the man approached the librarian again and asked whether the librarian was a member of the Church. She responded that she was, and the man asked if she could share anything about the Church with her. He "wanted to know more."

Recalling my own experiences as a missionary in the latter half of the 2000s, this specific phrase was something we were always hoping to hear. We imagined finding people who "wanted to know more." We even structured the quick 20-second spiel about the Church we gave to strangers around ultimately asking if they "wanted to know more." We encouraged the non-missionary members of the wards we served in to keep their eyes and ears open for anyone who "wanted to know more." I fully expected the librarian to take up the man's request in earnest.

To my surprise, the librarian indicated that since this was her workplace, she was not comfortable talking about it right then and there (perhaps also owing to the quiet that is supposed to pervade a public library). Nonetheless, she encouraged him to get in touch with the missionaries. He agreed to the proposal and asked how. The librarian wrote something down on a piece of paper, stating that he could use that website to get in touch with the missionaries. Seemingly satisfied, he went back to sit with the woman he had entered with.

Some time passed, after which yet another shuffle of movement came, this time followed by the voice of a woman, not the librarian, asking the librarian if the Church had any resources

for them because they could use some help. It was not stated outright, but it was clear she meant material help, such as financial or nutritional support. To this, the librarian said that they would need to get in touch with a bishop. However, since he was likely at work (it was the middle of a workday) they should still talk to the missionaries first. Some words were exchanged which indicated the woman did not feel the website was an adequate way to get in touch with the missionaries in a timely manner and she pressed, asking if there was another way to contact the missionaries.

At this point, I could sense that the librarian was getting uncomfortable. Asking to know more about the Church had seemed manageable, but requests for material assistance shifted the tone of the exchange. The librarian's responses became shorter, and her insistence that the couple speak to someone else became more pointed. Perhaps she was unwilling to provide the kind of assistance they were requesting, or perhaps she felt misled, since the couple had first presented as if they were interested in the Church when their real concern seemed to be material support. In any event, it was apparent to me that something different was at stake once material assistance entered the discussion.

Being located only a few feet from this conversation, I spoke up and indicated that I could probably get some missionaries to come over. After all, I had spoken to the missionaries only a few weeks earlier. In that conversation, they had told me to call them "whenever." I figured that this might fit the ticket.

Member Tools is a Church-produced mobile app that contains several web-based resources, including the contact directory for nearly every member of your assigned ward and stake along with their callings. If a Latter-day Saint wants to call their Relief Society president or family history specialist, they can always use the directory to figure out who that is and how to get a hold of them. Members can always opt out of having their contact details published in the directory, but the missionaries' contact details are always listed, including their mobile number,

email address, and even a handy map that shows the boundaries of their proselytizing region overlaid onto Google Maps.

The woman thanked me and came to sit beside me while I quickly wrote a text message to the missionaries telling them that some people at the library were looking for information about the Church, Church welfare, and asked if they could come in the next little while. I received a text back that they would be over shortly and, within fifteen minutes, the two young Elders⁴³ appeared through the library's front doors. The missionaries invited the couple to come outside of the library where they could talk more comfortably (presumably owing to the library's supposed quiet), and they all went outside together. I do not know what happened between the missionaries and these two individuals next. The librarian, however, thanked me for being so quick with the missionaries, and the silence which had previously dominated the space resumed until I left an hour later.

Later that evening I was eating dinner with Sarah and Dave. This was a retired couple from whom I was renting one of their basement bedrooms. We had become accustomed to chatting about observations I was making each day because, in addition to myself, there was another young man, Luke, renting a different basement room from this couple. He was a non-LDS student from the University of Lethbridge, working in Cardston to complete a practicum for his degree. Our dinner conversations often turned to explaining various aspects of LDS culture, with our hosts acting as the full-fledged, insider LDS interlocutors, myself as the "somewhat

⁴³ "The Elders" is a commonly used phrase by Latter-day Saints to refer to male LDS missionaries. If they are female, the missionaries are referred to "the Sisters". It can be somewhat confusing because so many other people in different positions of leadership are also referred to as elders (each of the Twelve Apostles are commonly referred to as elders; each ward has an Elders Quorum, and the body of its membership are referred to as elders) and every woman is frequently referred to as "sister" Knowing who exactly is being referred to is drawn from context clues.

outsider, somewhat insider,” and he as the outsider (which, for my purposes, made for an excellent dynamic in which to explore a range of topics).⁴⁴ That evening, I related the library narrative to them, and the conversation that ensued helps clarify something important about the structure of the LDS moral economy.

“Sounds like she [the librarian] did exactly what was expected,” Dave said, who went on to explain to Luke how it is the missionaries’ responsibility to teach investigators,⁴⁵ but that it is the bishop’s responsibility to administer local welfare. So, when the individuals inquired about the Church, they were directed to the missionaries. But when they inquired about welfare assistance, they were correctly redirected to the bishop.

This led into a longer conversation about the bishop’s storehouse,⁴⁶ fast offerings, and other LDS-specific welfare practices, which are numerous. Without immediately diving too much into the details of each of these practices (which I cover later in this chapter), I want to highlight from the discussion the careful, specific, and prescribed order given to the responsibility of care that Latter-day Saints have towards each other’s temporal welfare.

⁴⁴ We determined that audio-recording dinner conversation would not be appropriate. So, while these dinner conversations served an important role in my data collection and everyone present had given informed consent, all details about these conversations come from notes written after the fact.

⁴⁵ Investigators is the term used to describe non-members who inquire after the Church.

⁴⁶ The bishop’s storehouse is the term used for Church-run facilities that resemble grocery stores, though “not one has a cash register” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.-f). Access is not open to the general public but follows an interview process in which a local bishop approves an order prepared by an Elders Quorum or Relief Society leader. With that approval, individuals can obtain food, hygiene products, and basic household goods at no cost. The operation of the bishop’s storehouse is sustained in part by fast offerings, supplemented as needed by funds allocated from outside the ward, and by labour contributed by Church members.

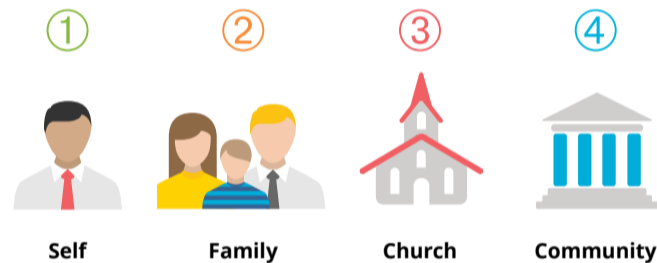
As Dave and Sarah described, every Latter-day Saint has a responsibility of care towards the temporal and spiritual welfare of others. However, this responsibility of care is premised on a hierarchical procedure. First, Latter-day Saints are supposed to be self-reliant. This means that they ought to be able to provide for their own family's needs for things like shelter, food, and clothing (as well as spiritual needs, though, that was not the focus of this discussion). If someone cannot be self-reliant, they can always look to their extended family for support. If they still need support, or if their family is unable to help, Dave explained that "the Church will always support those in need and help them become self-reliant." Then, after discussing the various ways the Church can help, an allowance was given to looking "outside the church" to government programs, but this option was decidedly not important to the overall discussion and was even characterized derisively as "handouts." This perspective, articulated by Dave, is one I return to later, as it reflects a broader logic through which some Latter-day Saints distinguish Church-based assistance from government programs. But for now, the point is that there is a structured sequence embedded within these conversations, a normative order of care that delineates who should help, when, and under what conditions that help is considered appropriate.

5.2 Mapping the LDS Moral Economy

This hierarchy is more explicitly laid out at a more formal level in the second lesson of the *Personal Finances for Self-Reliance* course (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2016c). Learners are prompted to read about how one of God's foundational commandments first given to Adam and Eve upon their expulsion from the Garden of Eden was to work: "He expects us to work hard and take responsibility for our own needs," (22) the manual tells learners. Following this, learners are presented with an infographic detailing a numerically ordered outline of who is responsible for whom. First, "self," illustrated by a man in a white shirt and tie; second, "family," represented by a man, woman, and male child; third,

“church,” depicted by a steepled meetinghouse; and finally, “community,” symbolized by a classical columned building reminiscent of the Lincoln Memorial or Roman Pantheon.

Lord and with his own labors, he will supply himself and his family with the spiritual and temporal necessities of life” (*Teachings of President Spencer W. Kimball* [2006], 116).



Elder Dale G. Renlund, quoting Elder Wilford W. Andersen, taught: “The greater the distance between the giver and the receiver, the more the receiver develops a sense of entitlement” (“That I Might

Figure 10: An excerpt from Lesson 2 of the Personal Finance for Self-Reliance course showing an image outlining the hierarchical order for economic responsibility. Note that the image used to characterize “community” evokes government.

Quoting former prophet Spencer W. Kimball, participants read that “The responsibility for each person’s social, emotional, spiritual, physical, or economic well-being rests first upon himself, second upon his family, and third upon the Church if he is a faithful member thereof.” Then, in even stronger terms, the Kimball quote asserts that “No true Latter-day Saint” would “shift his own burden or his family’s well-being to someone else.” A series of discussion prompts follow, asking learners to converse about “Why it is important to avoid dependencies on government or social programs?” and positioning reliance on others for personal needs as a “risk” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2016b, 23).

This explicit mapping out of economic responsibility conjures up the term *moral economy*, usually credited to the historian E. P. Thompson. First mentioned (and only loosely explored) in his seminal text *The Making of the English Working Class* (E. P. Thompson [1963] 1966), moral economy was more thoroughly developed in his 1971 article *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century* (E. P. Thompson 1971). For Thompson, the

moral economy named a “popular consensus” (79) in the 18th century in England that concerned the limits of legitimate operation for those responsible for providing food for society. This consensus was “grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations” and encoded “the proper economic functions of several parties within the community” (79). In this moral economy, those who produced food for the masses, such as millers, bakers, and farmers, had a moral obligation to operate within certain traditionally set limitations which ensured accessibility of food for all. When these limits were exceeded, this was an affront to the moral economy that merited collective action to rectify the overstep and re-establish the intended status quo. This could even occur before people were deprived of food and went hungry. If food producers merely operated in ways that exceeded these established limitations it constituted a moral outrage, which then legitimized direct, collective action by the crowd in the form of bread riots.⁴⁷

Other scholars, including anthropologists, have also deployed moral economy to describe the varying relationships of social obligation that constitute a given economic system. James C. Scott (1976) similarly argued that a moral economy was at work in three southeastern Asian peasant rebellions. The peasants, he argued, believed that the elites (in particular landlords) had a moral obligation to conduct their affairs in such a way that the peasants’ subsistence needs were always provided for. When they did not, this justified rebellion and uprising.

⁴⁷ Thompson (1971, 79) argues, however, that “riot” is “too small” a word to describe the legitimized outrage exemplified by these instances of direct action. “Riot” suggests an ad hoc and largely disorganized event with negative connotations. Whereas these instances of direct action were positively sanctioned by the moral economy—a popular consensus that determined when such action was legitimized and warranted.

However, even in between periods of rebellion, Scott observed that a moral economy was still at work. During these periods wherein there was no moral outrage, the moral economy served to stabilize the economy and mitigate risk by structuring the terms of exploitation by landlords and other elites. Peasants, or so the argument went, accepted exploitation by landlords “to the extent that they [the landlords] acted as patrons.” Meaning that when times were tough and resources were scarce, the landlords would use the surpluses they had accumulated “to provide crisis subsistence insurances to their clients” (51). What Scott’s contribution offered, then, was an analysis of how moral economies functioned not only to legitimize non-market direct action by an outraged public, but also to structure relationships between economic agents during times of surplus and to stabilize the economy during periods of dearth.

In more recent applications of the concept, moral economy has been used to understand the emergence of the modern welfare state. This has usefully served to liberate moral economy from the pre-industrial economies examined by Thompson and Scott, and which Thompson (1992, 340) once argued was specific to that “particular historical formation.”⁴⁸ In Steffen Mau’s (2003) examination of the moral economy of the modern welfare state, he even went so far as to evoke a different kind of *homo* to describe the kind of human that is formed by and forms the modern welfare state: *homo reciprocus*. Similar to those living in Thompson and Scott’s moral economies, this human interacts and accepts “discomfort and burdens” based on “general conceptions of fairness, social entitlements and notions of deserving” (35). However, while moral economy in the pre-industrial contexts focused on the claimants’ non-market right to

⁴⁸ In this text, Thompson (1992, 339) cautioned that if the concept were applied too broadly, “we will be turning up moral economies everywhere”. a warning directed at attempts to “extend [the concept] to other contexts” (338) beyond the eighteenth century. I note this here because contemporary uses of moral economy in analyses of the welfare state move beyond the historical limits he considered proper.

goods held by elites, in the context of the modern welfare state the concept is redirected towards the state and its obligation to *homo reciprocus* premised on the latter's labour. *Homo reciprocus* pays, via post-labour income tax, into the state budget and social insurance not expecting a proportionate return, but expecting that the state efficiently manages collective contingencies and interests, mitigates collective risks—especially in cases where *homo reciprocus* finds themselves unable to work. Rather than a claim being premised on a more general “right” to the basic goods required to survive, in this context the claim to support is premised on labour, with *homo reciprocus* demonstrating that they have been a productive in the past (evidenced by having been taxed) and are thus owed some degree of support when they are no longer able to labour. From the perspective of the provider of support, the circumstance under which a claim can be made on the state is understood through labour: unemployment insurance being the primary way the welfare state understands when and why it distributes support.⁴⁹

This expanded notion of moral economy is useful for analysing techniques of economic discernment. It provides a way to account for the different responsibilities that agents in an economic system have toward each other. If political economy describes the ways political systems direct, inflect, and inform economic systems, moral economy maps out the ways that norms of social obligation direct, inflect, and inform economic relationships. The map provides the route one may take to go outside of the market economy to solve social-material problems.

⁴⁹ While it is true that Mau's (2003) depiction of *homo reciprocus* lacks the face-to-face intimacy of a patron-client tie such as those seen in Scott (1976) or Thompson (1971), the moral logic remains similar: a system of reciprocal obligation in which claims to support are evaluated through norms of fairness, deservedness, and prior contribution. Rather than erasing the moral economy, the welfare state institutionalizes it, transforming personal obligation into bureaucratically mediated forms of accountability and care.

As already described, there is, in fact, a conceptual map provided to Latter-day Saints to direct their claims for support in times of need. This map functions as a tool for determining what actions would be considered prudent, guiding the member in figuring out where and how to seek assistance. If a Latter-day Saint is unable to provide for their own family's needs (which is the expectation for a "true" Latter-day Saint), they may look first to their extended family for support. Then, to the Church via the bishop and the Church's welfare program. Finally, to the community or state. In my observations in Cardston, however, this option was often left out.

5.3 Conditions of Right to Claim Support

With the moral economy's structure now mapped, we can turn to how it functions as a technique for discerning prudence. For Thompson's (1971) capitalist and Scott's (1976) non-capitalist populations, the moral economies were structured around a general sense of right to subsistence that applied to all those in a position of dependence. For the modern welfare state, the moral economy is more narrowly structured around labour-premised reciprocity, where claims to support are contingent on prior economic contribution rather than on a general right to subsistence. What, then, are the structures and conditions under which support is actually given within the LDS moral economy?

As Dave had explained to me and my dinner companion, "The Church will always support those in need and help them become self-reliant." This support is organized through the local bishop, but it includes the participation of a whole range of other volunteer leaders in varying positions. In addition to the bishop and his two counsellors (all of whom are male), other leadership positions are specifically given responsibility to "seek out and care for those in need" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023, 22.3.1). These include the Elders Quorum and Relief Society presidency (male and female respectively), Ward Councils (comprised of most of the senior leadership positions in a given ward), and ministering partnerships (either a husband-and-wife pair, a parent-child pair, or a same-sex pairing when

they come from different families). Bishops may also call ward welfare specialists to assist in identifying need and providing support.

Given the way Latter-day Saints called to these various positions are supposed to “seek out” and “discern needs” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023, 21.1), assistance is most often directed toward other members with whom they regularly interact. However, non-members may also seek support, and bishops are empowered to allocate support to non-members at their discretion. This, however, is not advertised and official leadership manuals consistently refer to “members” as the default recipients of Church welfare. In fact, the *General Handbook* section on providing assistance to non-members specifically describes these instances as “rare,” “guided by the Spirit,” and suggests that a non-member seeking support should have some sort of connection to a member (22.5.1.4). In accordance with this intended rarity, I have only heard a few reports of bishops assisting non-members. Whether these instances actually took place is unconfirmable,⁵⁰ but what they suggest is that Latter-day Saints at least perceive Church welfare services as being available to non-member and member alike, provided that the same principles are followed as would apply to a member seeking support.

Step 4: What is my personal or family plan to become more self-reliant?		
As part of your plan, consider participating in a self-reliance group.		
Resources and skills needed to become self-reliant	Steps to be taken	By when

Figure 11: An excerpt from the Self-Reliance Plan worksheet showing how claimants of Church support are directed to build specific, actionable plans to achieve self-reliance within a designated period of time.

⁵⁰ Strict rules are established around maintaining the privacy of those receiving Church support.

One of these principled conditions for claimants seeking support is that the claimant strive towards self-reliance. Before any church-provided assistance is given, bishops are required to review the claimant’s resources to determine whether they can meet their needs on their own (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2021b, 22.4.1). If not, then assistance can be provided and the claimant is asked to complete a *Self-Reliance Plan* worksheet (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.-d). This two-page document directs the individual(s) seeking support to identify all their resources, their needs, calculate the gaps between them, and create an actionable plan to acquire the resources needed to address the gaps. Following the pattern present in other Self-Reliance Initiative literature, the fifth section of this worksheet prompts recipients of Church support to contemplate and commit to providing service or work “in return for any assistance received” (2). Within the logic of LDS self-reliance, this reciprocity is framed not as repayment but as spiritual development: serving others is seen as an especially Christlike thing to do, and it is assumed to be an “innate desire” of any faithful Latter-day Saints (Romney, as cited in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2016a, 5). Finally, the Self-Reliance Plan is completed using contract-like language, with the claimant and their spouse given space in the final section titled “Commitment” to sign and date the document.

Commitment	
Member's signature	Date
Spouse's signature	Date

Figure 12: The final section of the Self-Reliance Plan worksheet has the claimant (specifically listed as “Member”) and their spouse sign and date the document.

Dave was not wrong when he told me that “the Church will always support those in need,” though, what was more interesting was the qualifier in the second part of his statement: “and help them become self-reliant.” The LDS moral economy does structure a relationship of care between the institutional body of the LDS Church and “those in need” (usually Latter-day

Saints unless a bishop is directed otherwise by the Spirit). Yet this relationship is specifically structured to abolish itself at the soonest possibility, with the commitment to achieve self-reliance as soon as possible serving as a condition for those seeking Church support.

The Church recognizes that achieving self-reliance may in fact prove to be a long-term challenge. A member may, for example, need to acquire new vocational skills before they can achieve self-reliance, and the Church supports this through more extended programs like the Self-Reliance Initiative courses. In some cases, the Church's Employment Services program can also arrange short-term, probationary work placements to help members gain initial access to employment. Still, both the claimant and the provider of support are expected to work toward dissolving the support relationship through specific, actionable steps, often accompanied by (however flexible) projected deadlines. Unlike the moral economies explored by Thompson (1971) and Scott (1976) wherein the benefactors sustain an ongoing relationship of obligation towards their patrons, the LDS moral economy is transient. It is not designed to maintain long-term relations of care but to render them unnecessary. The Church may affirm its commitment to supporting those in need, but the ultimate goal in this moral economy is that such support eventually becomes obsolete.

5.4 Conditions of Giving Support

There are other principles that structure not only the conditions under which a person may claim economic support from the Church, but which structure the manner in which support can be rendered to claimants. These principles are itemized in the *General Handbook*, and there are five (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023, 22.4). I do not address all five principles here, but two are especially relevant for our understanding here.

The first is to “provide temporary assistance for essential needs.” “Church assistance is meant to sustain life—not to maintain lifestyle” the Handbook reads (22.4.2). However, as is often the case in the LDS leadership manuals, this is not a rigid policy. Rather, it is a principle

that a bishop should strive to follow as directed by the Spirit. In this same section, the Handbook stipulates that “Bishops should exercise good judgment and seek spiritual direction” when determining how much assistance to provide, prescribing generosity and compassion, but without “creating dependence.”

This interpretive flexibility can become a source of contention in bishoprics. On a long drive through the prairies, I spoke with a high priest who had once served as a bishop’s first counsellor. He recalled disputing with the bishop over whether to assist a family in paying for streaming subscriptions during a financial crisis. To him, this clearly violated the principle that Church aid should sustain life rather than lifestyle. The bishop, however, considered the situation differently. He weighed the benefits for a family with several children, listened to his counsellor’s objections, and reasoned through the options. Having decided that covering the expense was justified, the bishop sought revelatory confirmation in his role as bishop and approved the funds dispersal, much to the disappointment of his first counsellor (who continued to express this disappointment even years later, to me). This account illustrates how the moral economy offers a map for weighing claims, but that map does not determine the outcome. Within its structure, revelation operates as the decisive epistemological technique: it legitimizes decisions reached through deliberation, provides the flexibility to override general principles, and reinforces the hierarchical authority of the bishop’s judgment over competing interpretations.

The second principle I wish to highlight is that bishops should “provide resources instead of cash” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023, 22.4.3). Bishops are encouraged to pay for needed groceries or mental health services directly. If paying for necessary bills like electricity or water service, “these payments should be made directly to the service provider” rather than giving the claimant cash to make those payments on their own.

This principle applies not only to bishops, but seemingly to the whole body of the Church. When assistance is to be rendered, it should rarely—if ever—be given in cash. During

Church meetings and via ward digital communications I frequently heard and saw calls for service-oriented support such as packing and moving a family's things to a new home, meals to be delivered to people passing through tough times, plans made to shovel someone's walkways throughout the winter or cut their grass throughout the summer, mattress donations, assistance in organizing someone's cluttered home, and assembling care packages for women in need or refugees. Always things or services, never funds.

This preference for things and services instead of cash was made most apparent during the 2022 Christmas season. That year (and in years since), the LDS Church deployed "Giving Machines" to various major metropolitan centres around the world, with most of them located in North America. One was sent to Calgary's Southcentre Mall and saw wide advertisement across southern Alberta. Despite being located several hours away from Cardston, the Giving Machine was mentioned several times during Sunday meetings and residents were encouraged to tell their friends and family about it. They also encouraged each other to visit the machine themselves should they be in Calgary that Christmas season. Naturally, I went to check it out.



Figure 13: A sticker advertising the Giving Machine on the drive-thru window of a semi-rural coffee shop 27 kilometers away from the Giving Machine.

The Giving Machine is a vending machine. Instead of being filled with consumables such as soda or bags of chips, it was filled with gift-card-like, glossy, thick, paper tokens representing different kinds of donations an individual could purchase for someone in need. At the Calgary machine I visited, one token read: “One Goat: A goat helps a woman earn an income and provide nutrition for her family.” The token featured a photo of a smiling Black child holding a goat, with the donation price—\$80—printed in the bottom left corner and the administering charity’s logo, UNICEF, in the bottom right. The \$80 could be paid by credit or debit and the donor would then watch as their selected item uncoiled from its vending machine slot and fell into a pile of other tokens, presumably purchased by other donors, collecting in the base of the machine.

The machine was located on the ground floor of the Southcentre Mall. It was, in fact, three machines positioned together and unified by cardboard paneling that made it appear like one big machine. In front of the machine was a folding table and chairs where representatives from the Church (local volunteer Latter-day Saints) were positioned to answer questions about the machine. There is not always musical accompaniment. But when I went, there was a pianist at a portable digital piano accompanying a vocalist singing Christ-oriented—though denominationally ambiguous—Christmas carols like “Silent Night” and “What Child Is This.” Flanking the scene was a selfie screen with the words “Light the World” at the top, which is the name the Church had given their Christmas media campaign. Givers were encouraged to snap pictures here and share images of their smiling faces on social media.



Figure 14: The Giving Machine's venue for the 2022 Christmas season at Southcentre Mall in Calgary, Alberta.

Speaking with one of the Christmas-scarved representatives, I asked whether the funds were actually used for the item indicated. She assured me 100% of the funds would go to the indicated charity, and she put special emphasis on how the transaction fees and administrative costs of the charitable donations were being covered by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The transaction and administrative fees that enable donations to charities across borders can be expensive, she informed me, and they can reduce the impact of international donations. However, what she wanted me to understand was that 100% of my purchase at the machine would reach the respective charity—any fees that would otherwise whittle away at the donation were being covered by the institutional body of the LDS Church.

While this reassurance assuaged concerns about administrative fees eating into the donation, it did not fully answer my question. For that, I had to go to the Giving Machine website (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2021a). In the “Common Questions” section of that site it is explained that “One hundred percent of your donations made at a Light the World Giving Machine will be used for the purchased item, similar items, or services of greater need as determined by the applicable charitable organization.” It is thus possible that if I purchased a

goat for a young woman from the machine that the funds would be used to purchase a goat, but that was not a certainty. What would in fact transpire was that after purchasing the goat token for \$80, an \$80 donation to UNICEF would be facilitated by the Church. What UNICEF would ultimately do with that money was unclear.

In addition to the goat, the Giving Machine offered a wide array of donation options in varying amounts: a shuttle ride to a hospital (\$75); a sleeping bag (\$40); a bed linen package for a family (\$225); child immunizations (\$27); and one month of physical activities (\$60). Each donation was administered through a partnering charity, ranging from international organizations like UNICEF, CARE, and WaterAid, to local groups such as Calgary's Inn from the Cold and the Drop-In Centre.

These were effectively cash donations. However, they were framed in terms of services and materials, exemplifying the principle that structures the LDS moral economy and shapes how Latter-day Saints discern what kinds of aid are prudent. Within this framework, simply giving cash does not appear prudent because it does not foster self-reliance. By contrast, donating a goat, a bus ticket, a sleeping bag, or educational support for young girls is rendered a prudent choice: each item signals targeted, actionable aid that can be understood as a tool for achieving self-reliance rather than as a handout that risks encouraging dependence.

5.5 Tithing, Fast Offerings, and Other Monetary Donations

If the previous section explored the principles that structure how support is distributed, this one turns to how that support is materially generated. While person-to-person assistance is usually rendered through goods and services, the person-to-institution mode of supporting the poor and needy operates primarily through the donation of money. In fact, Latter-day Saints donate immense amounts of money to the Church in several ways. The principal methods include tithing and fast offerings. Often spoken about by Latter-day Saints as a pair, they are in fact two distinct practices. While tithing and fast offerings do not involve person-to-person

assistance in the same way as in-person assistance provision requires, they are nevertheless foundational to the LDS moral economy.

Tithing is practised by Latter-day Saints as a donation of 10% of one's income to the Church. On two different occasions (once during an Elders Quorum meeting and once at a social gathering) the question of whether that is intended to be 10% of one's pre- or post-tax income arose. "Should it be your income before or after tax?" one speaker queried, to which several others resolutely confirmed that the expected calculation is based on pre-tax income. The way in which this happened twice, in almost the same way (someone posing the question, followed by several speakers all confidently asserting the official stance), suggests that most Latter-day Saints know about this stipulation, and the question was posed more as a friendly reminder than a question based on earnest doubt—the question was a rhetorical strategy to ensure everyone was on the same page.

Of course, not all Latter-day Saints donate 10% of their income to the Church. Those who do are classified as "full-tithe payers," while those who give less are considered "partial tithe payers." Once a year, typically in the final quarter, bishops hold meetings with any household that wishes to review their tithing status. In these meetings (which were once called "tithing settlements," but which are now called "tithing declarations"), members are presented with the Church's record of all the tithes and other offerings they have paid throughout the calendar year. Then, members are asked to confirm whether the record is accurate and declare whether they are a full-tithe payer. More than mere administrative and accountability sessions for creating compliance, bishops are encouraged to use the meetings to teach attendees about tithing as a spiritual and doctrinal principle premised on obedience, not philanthropy, nor as a transaction for Church services. I heard tithing spoken about many times at Church and not once was it positioned as a something which the Church needed. It was always positioned as a

question of obedience to a commandment that has existed since ancient biblical times,⁵¹ and which continues today as a divinely mandated principle. In fact, on one occasion I recorded in my handwritten notes during a sacrament meeting that a speaker chuckled as he told us, “Heavenly Father doesn’t need your money, but you need to pay your tithing. The Lord’s work will continue whether you pay your tithing or not.”

Tithing, for Latter-day Saints, is often characterized as a “law.” As a law, it is expected to be obeyed to the letter. This prioritisation of following the divine commandments to the letter is not just a curious cultural trait; it is doctrinally reinforced in the most significant ritual of Latter-day Saint life, the temple Endowment ordinance, where members covenant to keep what is called the Law of Obedience; that is, they covenant to obey to obey. Obedience, in this context, is treated as a virtue in its own right, independent of outcomes or intentions.

While the spirit of tithing is sometimes framed in terms of generosity or giving, my conversations in Cardston consistently foregrounded obedience to the law itself. During an interview with a young father, I asked “what are some of your financial goals?” I expected him to mention paying off his mortgage or saving for retirement or his children’s post-secondary education funds. Instead, he said his goal was “to pay one hundred thousand dollars in tithing.” I

⁵¹ The bible contains many mentions of tithing. The LDS Church has organized these mentions into their “study help” called the Topical Guide, a comprehensive index of scriptural references arranged by subject, drawing from the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price. Each entry collects relevant verses from across all four volumes of LDS scripture under a single heading, allowing readers to trace a concept like tithing through the full range of canonical text rather than working through each volume separately. The Church prints the Topical Guide in its standard LDS edition of the King James Bible, and also reproduces it in their digitized scripture app, Gospel Library. The entry for tithing includes 17 entries across the Old and New Testament, though Latter-day Saints would interpret other Biblical scriptures as being relevant to tithing, too.

must have looked confused because he paused and explained: “I cannot just pay more tithing. It is ten percent. If I want to pay more tithing, I have to make more money.” Then I realised what he meant. “You want to make a million dollars in a year.” He shook his head side to side with a wry smile. “No. I want to pay one hundred thousand dollars in tithing.” Even offered with humour, this exchange illustrates how obedience to the precise form of the law is treated as the correct moral orientation. His commitment to the letter of the Law of Tithing meant that he felt unable to give more than that amount without first increasing his income. This exemplifies how LDS techniques of economic discernment value not only moral intention but also correct procedural form: doing the right thing in the right way, as defined by divine commandment.

During discussions about tithing, such as during tithing declaration meetings, children are often prompted to answer questions like “Why does Heavenly Father command us to pay tithing?” and “What does the Church do with tithing funds?” Typical answers include that tithing is used to build meetinghouses and temples, support the missionary program, and fund various Church activities. What is generally understood, then, is that tithing funds are not exactly directed towards the supporting of the poor and the needy—though, big, institutional humanitarian efforts like the Giving Machine are undoubtedly supported by tithing funds. Rather, tithing funds are redirected to the corporate body of the Church to be utilized in myriad ways that focus on the functioning of the Church as an institution. This may include economic support for those in need, but not necessarily.

Fast offerings, a distinct practice from tithing, *are* specifically directed toward supporting the poor at the local level. Usually, the first Sunday of each month is designated “Fast and Testimony Sunday.”⁵² On this day, all Latter-day Saints are encouraged to fast, meaning, to

⁵² Sometimes, the first Sunday of a month fall on dates that are used for events like General Conference or Stake Conference. In these instances, Fast and Testimony meetings are moved to the next week. This illustrates the importances of Fast and Testimony meetings to Latter-day Saint practice—

withhold from consuming food or drink⁵³ for up to 24 hours. Then, the money saved by fasting is donated as a fast offering. Much like tithing, there is an understood gradient of fast offering compliance, with the cost of sustenance for 24 hours being understood as a minimum threshold. I often heard speakers in Sunday services encourage their peers to give a “generous fast offering”—meaning, a donation that exceeds the value of the missed meals. Unlike tithing, which is usually described as a way to pay for more nebulous and varied institutional needs, fast offerings are described by Latter-day Saints as being more specifically directed towards supporting members in need.

In addition to these primary modes of donating funds, Latter-day Saints in the 2020s are also given the option to donate to a specific missionary from the ward, to “Humanitarian Aid” (a fund whose precise scope is not always clearly delineated but is generally understood to support public-facing outreach programs), and a “General Offering.” In previous decades, the options included other line items, such as a Book of Mormon fund (earmarking the donation to be used in translating and printing the Book of Mormon into more languages), the Perpetual Education Fund (a sort of interest-bearing fund out of which the Church offers student loans), and more.

Before the Church digitized many of its services, these donations (with the exception of fast offerings, which are sometimes collected in person by designated priesthood holders) were made in a discreet analog fashion. Unlike other Christian congregations that pass a collection plate, Latter-day Saints would collect a tithing slip from a small box near the bishop’s office. This

when their scheduling conflicts with other events, Fast and Testimony meetings are nonetheless accommodated at another time in the month.

⁵³ I have heard Latter-day Saints debate whether this includes abstaining from water. Those who observed the practice more strictly indicated that water should not be consumed unless required by a medical condition.

slip used carbon paper to create a duplicate: one copy would accompany the donation in an envelope handed directly to the bishop or a ward clerk, while the other was retained for the member's own records.

Thus, even though the preferred form of direct assistance among Latter-day Saints is the provision of goods or services rather than cash, they certainly do donate money — but almost always through the Church rather than directly to those in need. In fact, they donate quite a bit. A self-identified full-tithe payer would pay 10 percent of their income, which could mean as much as 10 percent of their pre-tax income, is likely also to give a generous fast offering that exceeds the value saved by their household not eating for a day, and may also make further discretionary contributions. However, while a great deal of money changes hands between Latter-day Saints and the Church, these funds are rarely given directly to those in need. Instead, they are directed to the Church for redistribution via bishops, mostly to other members, and usually as material goods and services rather than as cash.

Tithing and Other Offerings	
Campbell, Cody William ⓘ Membership Record Number: [REDACTED]	
Tithing	<input type="text" value="0.00"/>
Fast Offerings	<input type="text" value="0.00"/>
General Missionary	<input type="text" value="0.00"/>
Ward Missionary	<input type="text" value="Select a missionary ..."/>
Humanitarian Aid	<input type="text" value="0.00"/>
General Offerings	<input type="text" value="0.00"/>
Total	\$0.00

All donations to the Church are free-will offerings and become the Church's property. In furtherance of its overall mission, the Church may shift donations from any designated use to other uses, at its sole discretion.

Personal Note

Figure 15: A screenshot of the online “Tithing and Other Offerings” form. The page displays donation categories with entry fields and includes a perforation-style header that mimics the tear-off edge used on the paper version of the slip.

Most of these donations made these days are submitted online in the *Member Tools* web portal. Although translated into a digital format, the web form visually echoes the paper slip, including a perforation-style header that mimics the tear-off edge of the printed version. While the term “in-kind” is a holdover from earlier Church practice, its contemporary use is much narrower: it refers almost exclusively to donations of immediately marketable assets, such as stocks or certain forms of real estate, and these require prior approval (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2022, In-Kind Donations, Including Tithing). As discussed in chapter seven, such arrangements remain possible but must be coordinated through Church financial offices.

What these tithing and fast offering practices illustrate is not only the adaptability of the Church's donation system, but also the techniques of economic discernment that underpin the LDS moral economy: giving must be orderly, trackable, and institutionally mediated to be considered prudent. What matters is not simply generosity or redistribution, but the disciplined performance of compliance. Donations are not spontaneous acts of charity, but routinized forms of obedience through which giving acquires spiritual importance.

5.6 Recursively Producing Self-Reliant Subjects

The moral economy embedded in LDS life includes support to be rendered by the Church to (mostly) members in times of need, much like the moral economies structured around benefactors and claimants described by Thompson (1971) and Scott (1976). Members understand and accept the principles which direct the practices of tithing, fast offerings, and other donations wherein they pay into a system to which they can look for support in times of need. They know that having sacrificed and paid into the bishop's storehouse they can faithfully rely on the Church to support them if they really need it. This evokes the sort of "crisis subsistence insurance" Scott described.

However, this is not just a moral economy premised on the rights of claimants to economic support. Like the modern welfare state, the Church is perceived as having an obligation to provide under the right conditions. In state systems, these conditions are typically structured through reciprocity, formed through a calculus of labour, income, taxation, and legal membership such as citizenship or permanent residency, which together determine entitlements. Whereas the right conditions for the LDS Church are not structured around reciprocity. If a member has not been a full-tithe payer, they can still seek support from the Church. Instead, the right condition around which the Church will support a claimant is primarily structured around a *striving*: a demonstrated effort to become self-reliant. The Church, in turn, assumes not only the role of benefactor, but also of teacher. A claimant is obligated to strive

towards not needing to rely on the Church for support, and the Church as the benefactor is obligated to teach the claimant how to achieve that goal.

It is this pedagogical dimension of the Church's obligation that most clearly distinguishes the LDS moral economy from government welfare programs. While no one I spoke with explicitly framed it in these terms, I interpret the dismissal of government support as "handouts" that emerged in my conversations as grounded in the absence of this pedagogical component. The government in Canada offers many excellent resources for those in need. However, from within the logic of the LDS moral economy, such programs are described as handouts because there is no built-in teaching element. The state will give an unemployed citizen funds to support themselves in times of unemployment, and it will indirectly pressure the citizen to find employment.⁵⁴ But the state is not perceived as a teacher obliged to help citizens network, find employment, or build self-reliance. While such programs exist, it is up to the individual to seek them out; the institution has no duty to offer them proactively. Nor is it obliged to teach the citizen to become entrepreneurs, build education plans, or manage personal finances, let alone instil work ethic, faith, repentance, and obedience to divine law. Latter-day Saints thus see state aid as materially helpful but morally insufficient. The state may support someone in crisis, but it does not try to change them. Whereas the Church's obligation in this moral economy is understood to extend beyond ensuring claimants have adequate employment and income—it

⁵⁴ For example, in Canada, federal unemployment insurance funds are only deposited into claimants' bank accounts if claimants submit weekly reports. These reports require claimants to assert having received no income and assert their continued status as unemployed. If some income is reported, the amount a claimant can receive is diminished. This was described to me by some Latter-day Saint interlocutors as something that encourages people to remain on welfare because it punishes them for incrementally striving towards self-reliance.

has a responsibility for producing self-reliant Latter-day Saints, a term that, as discussed throughout this chapter and the last, encompasses far more than economic sufficiency.

One of the things self-reliance conveys, and which I have not addressed, is the way the LDS moral economy's obligation to teach is recursive. The obligation to teach extends beyond Church leaders to members: those who become self-reliant are expected to help others do the same. This obligation is inculcated in Self-Reliance Initiative participants throughout the 12-week course. Every lesson includes covering one of the *My Foundation* principles, and every one of those principles requires participants to commit to sharing what they have learned with friends or family. At the end of the lesson on obedience, for example, learners are prompted to "Commit to do the following actions during the week. Check the box when you complete each action." Then, with empty tick boxes, two actions are indicated. One of which is "to share what you've learned today about obedience with your family or friends" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2016a, 12). The same structure recurs throughout: "Commit to ... share what you've learned today about managing money with your family or friends" (9), and "Share what you've learned today about work and perseverance with your family or friends" (17).

These commitments to share principles of self-reliance are doubly committed to by their inclusion in the list of additional commitments made at the end of each of the bigger course's lessons. After completing the lesson "Nail the Interview Part 1," learners in the *Find Better Work* stream commit—amongst other things—to "practice and share today's Self-Reliance principle" (125), something which they have theoretically already committed to when covering that week's principle. Identical instances of double commitment are found throughout the various courses.

This cycle of support and transformation is not incidental to the LDS moral economy—it is one of its core logics. Through structured forms of giving, the Church helps members become self-reliant, and those who attain that ideal are expected to guide others in doing the same. This recursive pattern is not only moral, but epistemological: it is a way of knowing what action is appropriate and legitimate in economic life. To fail to engage in this recursive work is to signal

that one has not yet fully grasped or embodied its purpose. As apostle Marion G. Romney (1982) explained during a General Conference: “Once a person has been made whole or self-reliant, he reaches out to aid others, and the cycle repeats itself” (92).

I saw this recursive quality exemplified by Sarah and Dave, the couple who rented two basement rooms to me and another student. They were a retired couple living comfortably off a generous pension and savings. They were by no means living a life of luxury—their home was a fairly standard prairie bungalow, if a bit on the large size. They enjoyed modest hobbies like quilting and genealogy (staples for Latter-day Saints). They tended to go on vacations, but modest ones, with no second home or cabin in the mountains. They did not contract out household cleaning or pay people to do their yard work. They did all these things themselves, even rejecting my offer to help with things like shovelling snow. Sarah and Dave epitomized self-reliance: they could meet their material and spiritual needs without assistance and were prepared for future contingencies.

Having achieved self-reliance, Sarah and Dave felt it was their responsibility to support others in their own efforts at achieving self-reliance. Speaking about this over dinner, Sarah quoted by memory a portion of a *Book of Mormon* scripture that lays out this ethical imperative:

And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good—to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted. (Jacob 2:19)

She explained to Luke, the other renter who was not a member, and to me that although they had two empty basement bedrooms, they never listed them on the rental market because they did not need the income. Instead, they kept an eye and ear out for people who appeared to be striving towards self-reliance but might need support. Sarah and Dave were people who had obtained riches in life and now sought to use those riches to do good. When they saw my

Facebook post stating that I was a PhD student looking for a place to rent, this met the criteria: I was working towards a goal that, in their estimation, would lead to my own self-reliance (and I hope they were right!).

This prompted them to reach out and offer me one of their bedrooms with an unusually generous offer: \$300 per month for both room and board. This included shared meals at the family dinner table four or five times a week, internet access, cable TV, furniture such as a desk and office chair, access to their laundry machines, and effectively free range of their home and its amenities (I frequented their upright piano to pink away at, for example). Hearing about Luke's needs through some word-of-mouth exchanges, they offered him something similar to help while he completed his practicum in Cardston. He, too, was perceived as a student striving toward self-reliance, and thus a fitting recipient of support within the structure of the LDS moral economy.

This arrangement and the rationalities which supported it arose in another instance some months later. I had been away from Cardston for several weeks but still paid Sarah and Dave the agreed upon sum for the month. When I returned after the extended absence, they offered to give that month's sum back to me, since, I had not really needed the space, nor had I consumed any food. Taking the \$300 from me when I had not derived any benefit from it was, in their eyes, antithetical to how they envisioned our arrangement.

I objected twice, first using market-based rationalities. I told them that they should keep the sum because even though I had been absent, they had nonetheless held the room vacant for me during those few weeks. They could have rented the room to someone else in the meantime, I explained, but they did not.

This clearly made no sense to them. They looked at me blankly before Dave explained that they did not actually need or even particularly want the money; they had not even intended to rent the room when I left. The point of my payment, he clarified, was not to compensate them in market terms but to ensure I "sacrificed something." What I had treated as rent they treated

as a token of commitment, a sign that I was actively striving toward self-reliance—the premise around which their support was structured. “We’re not in it for the money,” Dave told me, “We want to help you help yourself.” Having achieved self-reliance themselves, they understood their obligation not simply as providing for me but as teaching me. Free room and board would have contradicted that obligation by requiring nothing of me. By contrast, even a minimal sacrifice marked me as working toward self-reliance rather than coasting on generosity.

My second objection was better received because it could be understood as sacrificial. I explained that my fieldwork expenses were being covered by a grant from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, and that if I did not use the funds for fieldwork-related expenses they would not be disbursed at all. It was, in effect, a “spend it or lose it” arrangement. On that basis, Sarah and Dave agreed to retain the month’s payment. What mattered to them was not the bureaucratic rules of the grant but the way the payment could be read as a sacrifice tied to my academic striving. In this framing, the money preserved the moral structure of our relationship: it still marked a contribution on my part and confirmed that I was working toward self-reliance. More than that, it reinforced their role as teachers. By insisting that some form of sacrifice accompany their support, they modelled the principle that true help must cultivate self-reliance rather than replace it — a lesson at the heart of the LDS moral economy.

It would be tempting to describe this negotiation between Sarah, Dave, and myself as an instance of what Weber ([1930] 2001) identified in *The Protestant Ethic*—that God favours those who help themselves. But the dynamic I observed here exceeds that individualist frame. In the LDS moral economy, self-reliance is not only a personal virtue but a relational obligation: those who have become self-reliant are expected to help others become so as well.

Moreover, what unfolded between Sarah, Dave, and me was not simply the application of a fixed moral rule or a spontaneous act of generosity. We were reasoning together about what kind of exchange would properly reflect their obligation to support my striving toward self-reliance. Their concern was not with the market value of the room but with whether the payment

upheld the moral terms of our arrangement. That concern shaped the evaluative framework for deciding whether to return the money. Prudence in this situation was not defined by financial efficiency but by the need to sustain the moral and pedagogical structure of the relationship. My compliance with that structure, even through a technicality like grant eligibility, was enough to affirm the appropriateness of the exchange.

As participants in the Self-Reliance Initiative program read, the principles which guide the manner in which the Church manages its own welfare program not only pertain to the institutional body of the Church, but they also apply to members—members like Sarah and Dave:

The way [supporting those in need] is to be done is clear. Those who have accumulated more are to humble themselves to help those in need. Those in abundance are to voluntarily sacrifice some of their comfort, time, skills, and resources to relieve the suffering of those in need. *And the help is to be given in a way that increases the power of the recipients to care for themselves and then care for others.* (Apostle Henry B. Eyring as quoted in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2016a, 21, emphasis mine)

Self-reliance, in this context, is not a destination but a moral mode of being—cultivated, demonstrated, and transmitted. It is achieved through sacrifice, expressed in stewardship, and sustained through teaching. To be self-reliant is not merely to be economically independent, but to become the kind of person who helps others do the same. The actual way that this help is rendered, however, is shaped by specific techniques of discernment, including the moral economy and the principles described throughout this chapter. These techniques determine not only who receives help, from whom, and under what circumstances, but also how that help must be given in order to be considered legitimate, prudent, and ideally transformative. This transformative aspect comes to the forefront in the next chapter, which examines how LDS

approaches to self-reliance are not merely about sustaining life or alleviating hardship, but about theosis—that is, becoming Gods.

6.0 Developing Divine-Human Capital

If revelation is the mechanism through which secular practices are reoriented toward spiritual ends, I have not yet addressed their ultimate purpose. I have alluded to this in several instances using emic phrases such as “becoming more Christlike,” mirroring the ways Latter-day Saints themselves speak about this topic in day-to-day discourse. And it was using this phrase that the self-reliance specialists promoting the program to would-be participants sought to motivate participant: that through participating in a Self-Reliance Initiative course they would become more Christlike. But what, exactly, is Christlike about self-reliance? How does revelation help participants become like Christ? To answer these questions more directly, in this chapter I propose develop a concept to which I refer as *divine-human capital*. This concept elucidates how becoming Christlike is pursued in practice.

As we have been exploring, revelation functions as an epistemological tool that operates within institutional, interpersonal, and moral frameworks to help Latter-day Saints discern prudence; that is the *epistemological* element of revelation. Divine-human capital, I propose, helps reveal the *ontological* element of revelation by naming the traits and orientations required by, and further cultivated through, the pursuit of revelation. These include, but are not limited to: an understanding of the scope of one’s responsibility (what I have been referring to with the shorthand “purview”), which in turn requires an understanding of one’s position within a social structure and proper orientation to others within that structure; humility and submissiveness to God’s will; routine habits of spiritual formation like daily prayer, scripture study, and weekly participation in ordinances like the sacrament; deliberate study of the problem at hand, and consideration for potential paths forward; consultation with secondary sources like scripture, Church literature, and secular sources of knowledge; a knowledge of, and a commitment to, divine commandments and covenants (what I have been referring to with the shorthand

“covenantal alignment”); and more. All of these elements and more are what I call divine-human capital. They are at once the abilities and traits required for revelation to function effectively in the first place, as well as the abilities and traits that are further cultivated through the pursuit of revelation. And all of this is what makes something like self-reliance become a matter of becoming Christlike.

To understand exactly how, and how revelation functions to help achieve it, a detour through terrain less familiar to anthropology, into the domain of theology, is necessary. In doing so we learn that revelation deployed in service of discerning prudence in social-material matters does not aim at capitalist accumulation or the realization of endlessly renewed profits. Its ultimate end is the condition known emically as *exaltation*, the scholarly term theosis, and colloquially as becoming a god.

6.1 A Christian Objection to Mormonism

During my fieldwork, I interacted almost exclusively with Latter-day Saints in Cardston. This is not because all Cardston residents are Latter-day Saints—far from it. While reliable numbers are difficult to pin down, estimates suggest Latter-day Saints make up perhaps 65% of the town’s population, a figure I explore in more detail in the next chapter. What matters here is that the remainder—those who are not LDS—rarely came into view. Despite the religious diversity of the town, my efforts to connect with Latter-day Saints at Sunday services, during community events, and across dinner tables, meant that opportunities to meet non-members were uncommon. Uncommon as they were, they were not entirely absent.

During one sacrament meeting, I sat on a pew beside a fellow who appeared to be attending church alone (I later learned that his wife and children were away that week). We struck up a conversation which included describing what I was doing in Cardston. He identified as a member of the local Rotary Club and suggested that the group might be interested in

having me speak. Happy to have the opportunity to talk about my research outside of a Church setting, I expressed interest. Within a few weeks, a date was set for me to speak.

The Rotary Club is a politically and religiously unaffiliated international nonprofit organization run by volunteers. Members around the globe, known as Rotarians, meet in Locals to plan service events in their communities. These meetings sometimes include guest speakers, such as community leaders, business owners, or other visitors, although each club sets its own guidelines.

That week, the Cardston Local was meeting in the Cobblestone Manor's dining room, a venue that we will return to in the next chapter. This building has been a community icon in Cardston since the early 1900s and is in fact a provincially designated Alberta Heritage Site. It acquired this designation owing to its unique architectural history. The underlying structure of the building is that of a rustic log-cabin, built in the late 1800s by one of Cardston's pioneering LDS families. However, it was later purchased by a Belgian finishing carpenter, Henry Hoet, who expanded significantly on the log cabin framework, finished, and furnished the building with décor that better suits a Victorian manor: stained glass windows, Tiffany lights imported from Italy, and an intricately paneled hardwood ceiling in one room comprised of interconnecting and elaborate hexagonal ceiling tiles like honeycomb (Musson 1995).

One of the reasons this manor was eventually designated an Alberta Historic Resource was because Hoet had worked on other iconic architecture in Alberta: the Cardston Temple, as well as the Prince of Wales Hotel located in the nearby Waterton Lakes National Park. The latter is not just a designated Alberta Historic Resource, but a National Historic Site as well.

Today, the Cobblestone Manor operates as a hotel and restaurant, with the main dining hall occupying the room with the honeycombed roof. A beloved local venue, many wedding parties, family reunions, and Rotary Club meeting have been hosted here. It was under that iconic ceiling where I addressed the Cardston Rotary Club Local.

My talk introduced the audience to the kind of work social-cultural anthropologists actually do. I began by describing the discipline in general, so that no one would expect me to talk about dinosaurs or potsherds. From there, because my particular interest is in the anthropology of economics, I introduced Max Weber ([1930] 2001) and his text *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. I provided a few more recent examples of research in economic anthropology and described what I hoped to learn about LDS economics during my time in Cardston. This was certainly a headier, more academic style talk than the Local is used to, but its contents were given approval by the fellow who invited me in advance. I closed by inviting attendees to brainstorm ideas with me—to collaboratively think aloud about how Latter-day Saints “do economics” distinctly.

In the audience of nineteen Rotarians, the majority (twelve) presented as men, and they were all adults. Many of the faces were ones that I had already seen during Sunday services. These were active Latter-day Saints who, during our brainstorming activity, told me about things like an LDS tendency to be frugal. Another proposed that Latter-day Saints avoided debt. A female attendee remarked that perhaps the high number of stay-at-home mothers necessitated men to take on higher-paying jobs.

This comment prompted some jokes about how many doctors and medical professionals there were for such a small town. “I’ll bet it’s the healthiest town in Alberta,” one attendee remarked to general laughter. At the time, Cardston, a town of roughly 3,700 residents, supported multiple family physicians, several dentists, at least three chiropractors, and an optometry clinic. A nearby non-LDS-majority town of similar size, Pincher Creek (population roughly 3,700), also had multiple physicians and dental clinics, several chiropractors, and its own optometry practice. The comparison does not reveal a dramatic difference. What it does reveal is that Latter-day Saints often perceive Cardston as unusually professionalised, a perception that has some precedent in earlier sociological work. An analysis of the 2001 Canadian census, although now dated, found that Latter-day Saints were overrepresented in

health services and other professional occupations (Jarvis and Jarvis 2017, 514). Whether Cardston in 2022 fits that broader pattern would require contemporary quantitative study beyond the scope of this ethnography, but the perception itself is ethnographically meaningful.

What most caught my attention, however, was a different suggestion: that Latter-day Saints were more likely to put their economic decisions to prayer and then follow through on their “gut feelings” than they were to follow more “sensible financial advice.” I had not yet landed on revelation being a key object of inquiry at the time, but this meeting proved to be a turning point in that respect.

Not everyone present was vocal, however. I had taken note of one woman with greying hair whose face I did not recognize. She was hard to miss because she kept looking at me rather intently throughout the discussion, as if she was really engaged in the discussion. But she did not laugh along with her peers when the kind of jokes were being made that I described above. Being a non-religiously affiliated group I knew that there was potential for there to be non-Latter-day Saint attendees that day. As it turned out, she was one of them.

She approached me after the meeting had concluded, shook my hand, and gave me her business card, inviting me to get in touch. About a week later, I called her and we arranged to meet at the A&W restaurant, one of the few places in town that, in her evaluation, served good coffee. This was my first clue that she was not an active member of the Church, since most Latter-day Saints do not drink coffee, believing that God has instructed them not to.

Her non-affiliation with the LDS Church was confirmed to me during our meetup at A&W when, over coffee, she related complaints about various LDS members of the business community. I will not describe these complaints in detail given that my interlocutor requested I give special attention to maintaining her anonymity (in large part fearing reprisals towards her business), but to summarize her concerns she recounted instances wherein various LDS members of the community had failed to honour business contracts. This was even more egregious, in her eyes, because of the Mormons’ supposed moral integrity. A second complaint

concerned how LDS members would give preferential treatment in their business dealings to their LDS peers. Both reported behaviours were things I have heard Latter-day Saints complain about with respect to their own peers, too. For example, one Latter-day Saint told me he felt socially pressured to hire a Church peer but ultimately chose otherwise, “Cardston gossip be damned.” So, the concerns of my Rotarian interlocutor were not specific to her position as a non-member. Rather, it is worth noting that these complaints echo many of those levied against the Latter-day Saints living in Nauvoo under Joseph Smith’s theocratic economic leadership—clannish economic practices and the perception of hypocritical holier-than-thou business dealings were amongst the injunctions against Latter-day Saints that Thomas C. Sharp communicated to the mobs that would eventually martyr Joseph Smith and drive the Latter-day Saints from Nauvoo (Black 2015; Wycoff 2009).

More to the point, throughout this conversation my interlocutor asserted that it was decidedly “un-Christian” to behave so dishonestly and discriminatorily in business. Then, at the end of a long-winded string of narratives, she concluded by saying that “Mormons are Christian, sure. But they don’t know what that means, you know? Because they don’t know who Jesus is.” Latter-day Saints, she explained, “worship Jesus and believe he’s the Savior, but they think he’s their brother and that he’s not God.” More blasphemously still, “Mormons think they’ll become gods.”

My interlocutor, who attended one of Cardston’s other Christian churches, was drawing on a common theological inflection point that many Christians use to distinguish their own properly Christian beliefs (capital C) from LDS beliefs. They might acknowledge LDS beliefs as a form of christianity (lower case), but they see those beliefs as diverging from true Christianity in at least one especially prominent respect: the properly understood nature of God.

Most Christianities, especially in North America, adhere to the theological tenets formalized in the 325 CE Nicene Creed, including the Trinity or Triune God, which holds that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are three distinct persons who share one

divine essence. Mormonism represents a stark departure from Nicene Christianity in its assertion that God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost⁵⁵ are three separate and distinct beings who are united in purpose rather than in substance.

In one of Joseph Smith's earliest blasphemies (at least, according to the Protestant sensibilities of the day), he asserted that God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him simultaneously as two distinct "personages" (Joseph Smith—History 1:17). Meaning, they both appeared to him at the same time, with bodies that had distinct characteristics, illustrating their separateness. Expanding on this, the apostle Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal a moment when Smith clarified this rejection of Nicene trinitarianism. Speaking at the Nauvoo temple, Smith reportedly said:

The teachers of the day say that the father is God the Son is God & the Holy Ghost is God & that they are all in one body & one God. Jesus says or prays that those that the father had given him out of the world might be made one in us as we are one. But if they were to be stuffed into one person they would make a great God. If I was to testify that the world was wrong on this point it would be true ... Any person that has seen the heavens opened knows that their [sic] is three personages in the heavens holding the Keys of Power. As the father hath power in himself so the Son hath power in himself, then the father has some day laid down his body & taken it again so he has a body of his own—so has his son a body of his own so each one will be in their own body. (Smith as quoted by Woodruff in Ehat and Cook 1980, 214)

⁵⁵ Latter-day Saints' preference for the term *The Holy Ghost* instead of the more common *Holy Spirit*, typical to other forms of Christianity, is simply a matter of conventional preference. Latter-day Saints will read passages of scripture that refer to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Lord, or the Comforter and attribute all of these to the personage named as the Holy Ghost.

In Smith's explanation, we not only see a rejection of the unified Trinitarian Godhead, but also an assertion of the embodied nature of divine beings: both God the Father and Jesus Christ having "a body of his own." Each, moreover, having "laid down" those bodies and taking them up again, referring to the death and resurrection of not only Jesus, but of God the Father, too, in some preceding event.

This (then emergent) theology of embodied gods was further elaborated in one of Smith's most famous non-canonical⁵⁶ discourses, delivered just months before his martyrdom. At the funeral of a close friend, King Follett ("King" was his given name), Smith addressed death and the nature of eternal, mortal, and post-mortal life. He declared to mourners that "the great secret" is that "God Himself who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a Man like unto one of yourselves." He continued, saying:

For I am going to tell you how God came to be God and what sort of a being He is. For we have imagined that God was God from the beginning of all eternity. I will refute that idea and take away the veil so you may see ... that He once was a man like one of us and that God Himself, the Father of us all, once dwelled on an earth

⁵⁶ "Non-canonical" because it has not been accepted by the Church as scripture. Smith's revelations that have been accepted into scripture form the majority of the content that makes up the book of scripture called the *Doctrine & Covenants*. The prose of these revelations usually takes the form of Smith speaking in a sort of "prophetic mode" wherein he speaks as if speaking for God, using phrases such as "Behold, I am God; give heed to my word" (D&C 14:2). Whereas for Smith's other discourses, when he was not speaking in a prophetic mode, these are compiled in other books such as *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Ehat and Cook 1980). They are respected texts, much examined by Latter-day Saints who have an interest in the tradition's more esoteric texts, but these discourses are not considered canon scripture.

the same as Jesus Christ himself did in the flesh and like us.
(Smith as quoted in Larson 1978, 200-201)

After collapsing the gap between an earth-bound humanity and the God of Christianity in this manner, pronouncing that both Jesus and God the Father once lived in bodies on earths much like our own, Smith followed the logic of his argument to its zenith, bringing the applicability of this doctrine into sharp relief for practitioners:

You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods in order to save yourselves and be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done—by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection of the dead, from exaltation to exaltation—til you are able to sit in everlasting burnings and everlasting power and glory as those who have gone before, sit enthroned. (Smith as quoted in Larson 1978, 201)

Note in the quote above how godhood is something humanity can “learn,” characterized by “capacities” that can increase by “degrees.” This gradual acquisition of capacities culminates in being “able” to dwell in divine power and glory, rendering godhood an ability that is cultivated through effort, as much as a state or being. In other words, exaltation requires the development of learned capacities or traits, but these capacities or traits are nurtured, developed incrementally, and accumulated until, through divine assistance, they become perfected and exaltation is achieved.

The purpose of life in LDS theology is not merely to strive for righteousness in order to wind up in some ultimate state of ecstatic joy in a heavenly domain, but to develop *abilities*—abilities that enable humanity to become Gods, just like Jesus Christ did, and just like our God did, who is also our Father.

6.2 The Plan of Salvation and Exaltation

This state of ultimate godhood, achieved in part⁵⁷ through the learning and the development of abilities, is what Latter-day Saints refer to when they use the term *exaltation*. Though, unlike in Joseph Smith's discourse where the humans-becoming-gods aspect was made explicit, when Latter-day Saints talk about exaltation, they often elide this aspect, preferring to describe exaltation as "living with God" or "living in the celestial kingdom" in ways that render exaltation more similar to the usual Christian notion of heaven. Still, there are specific contexts wherein the god-becoming aspects of exaltation endure and are discussed amongst peers using more explicit language. The most prominent of those contexts is inside LDS temples where the theology of exaltation and the steps to realizing it are described to Latter-day Saints in the most detail (albeit using a great deal of symbolic language). These steps form what is commonly called the "Plan of Salvation," a sequential narrative of premortal, mortal, and postmortal existence. In LDS temples, participants ritually enact this plan, making covenants at key stages and learning about the ordinances, teachings, and techniques that are understood to mark and enable progression towards exaltation.

Now, discussing temple ordinances in much more detail than that is ethically fraught for researchers, so I should pause here before continuing and discuss why. In his April 2019 General Conference address, apostle David A. Bednar (2019, 103) outlined guidelines for

⁵⁷ I say "in part" here because most Latter-day Saints readers will object to how much weight I am giving to the human-achievement side of this process. Yes, humanity has a role to play in their own achievement of exaltation, but it is a core element of LDS theology that this cannot be achieved by humanity alone. Christ is required, along with his atonement, resurrection is necessary, as well as other transformational elements, all of which are outside of humanity's control. That being said, the human-achieved elements I am drawing attention to in this chapter are pre-requisites for those other necessary elements to effectuate exaltation.

discussing temple ritual outside the temple. He reminded members that “the special symbols associated with the covenants we receive in sacred temples” are not to be disclosed or described, “nor should we discuss the holy information that we specifically promise in the temple not to reveal.” Although Latter-day Saint discourse commonly emphasize that temple ordinances are “sacred, not secret,” Bednar’s statement draws attention to a nuance that this common phrase does not fully capture. The entire ordinance is considered sacred, yet only particular elements are subject to explicit vows of non-disclosure. This distinction produces a selective boundary concerning the ritual where some aspects may be openly discussed and others may not. From a scholarly perspective, this structure functions as a form of ritually controlled disclosure, in which specific ritual knowledge is restricted to those who have participated in the rites.

For researchers, this acknowledgment underscores the need to be careful about what can and cannot be described when talking about temple ordinances. As a once-active member who has participated in these rituals and made vows of non-disclosure, I continue to treat that restricted knowledge with care. This is not because I still regard the vow as personally binding in a religious sense. Rather, it is because breaking it would undermine my integrity as a researcher. Revealing restricted aspects of the ordinances would signal to everyday Latter-day Saints that I am willing to violate commitments made within the community and would therefore jeopardise both trust and the possibility of further meaningful engagement.

However, in an effort to remain especially respectful of the most sacred rituals in LDS practice, perhaps the best way to analyse the still-prevalent theology of exaltation *qua* theosis will be to look outside the temple itself. As an anthropologist, I would be inclined to go the ethnographic route and interview Latter-day Saints about it. However, given the way Latter-day Saints are reticent to talk about temple ordinances (especially with a researcher, regardless of their membership status), we should look elsewhere still, and there are options available.

In the widely referenced learning manual *Gospel Principles*, the final and culminating chapter titled “Exaltation” defines it as “the kind of life God lives. He lives in great glory. He is perfect. He possesses all knowledge and all *wisdom*. *He is the Father of spirit children. He is a creator. We can become like our Heavenly Father. This is exaltation*” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [1978] 2011, 275, emphasis mine). This definition brings to the forefront the way “exaltation is a family matter,” as recently articulated by the prophet Russell M. Nelson (2019, 89). Exaltation is a state characterized by the ability not only to create worlds but also to bring forth spirit children. Those children, in turn, are understood to inhabit other earths, each unfolding its own history. In this way, exaltation is envisioned as participation in an eternal expansion of the universe and divine life without end.

But exaltation is not something bestowed without preparation. Although Latter-day Saints understand exaltation as ultimately made possible by the grace of Christ, they also emphasize that it requires the gradual development of God-like attributes and capacities. In his April 2022 General Conference address, apostle Dallin H. Oaks reminded Latter-day Saints that exaltation is a matter of “develop[ing] the godly attributes and the change in nature necessary to realize our divine potential ... This is what we teach in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints because *the purpose of the doctrine and policies* of this restored Church is to prepare God’s children for salvation in the celestial glory and, more particularly, for exaltation in its highest degree” (Oaks 2022, 102, emphasis mine). Thus, my interlocutor having coffee with me in the Cardston A&W describing how Latter-day Saints “think they’ll become Gods” was not wrong. However, from the Latter-day Saint perspective, they would argue that the assertion that humanity stands poised to become Gods is premised on an even more precise understanding of their relationship to God and Jesus: a literal, even biologically understood familial relationship wherein the children of God have the innate capacity to become divine (pro)creators themselves.

6.3 Pursuing a Different Kind of Foucauldian Ability-Machine

In the quote from Oaks's conference address above, I emphasized part of his statement in italics in order to draw attention to the way "policies" was included alongside "doctrine" in his formulation of what the purpose of the Church's teachings are. It is easy to understand the relationship between doctrine and divine purpose, but it may be more of a stretch to grasp how something as mundane as Church policy can be oriented towards preparing Latter-day Saints for exaltation.

I do not believe that I am incorrect in stating that no Latter-day Saint would articulate the content taught in the Self-Reliance Initiative courses like understanding interest rates, adjusting one's business model to meet market shifts, or improving basic budgeting and cash-flow planning as doctrine. These are important skills for functioning in the contemporary capitalist economy, but they are not framed as revealed truth. It is Church policy, however, that when someone visits their local bishop and requests financial or material support that they are also offered these courses. It is Church policy to "Help them assess and address short-term needs," yes, but also to "help them build long-term self-reliance" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023, 22.3). As a policy, following Oaks's formulation above, the purpose of teaching Latter-day Saints these techniques is to help them develop the godly attributes that culminate in exaltation. Their intended outcome is not to achieve some capitalist outcome—though that is certainly hoped for in the process—but to develop Christlike, *Godlike*, abilities.

In some ways, this reflects the neoliberal notion of human capital. In describing the rise of neoliberalism, Foucault ([1979] 2008, 226) argued that the shift from liberal capitalism to neoliberal governmentality was accompanied by the reformulation of the *homo oeconomicus*. No longer the "man of exchange," under neoliberalism he comes "an entrepreneur of himself." Under this new model for *homo oeconomicus*, individuals are imagined as enterprises—that is, as something into which they can invest in order to enhance their ability to generate an ever-greater income. The *homo oeconomicus* of neoliberalism is an "ability-machine" (226, 229), and

that machine's productive capacity can be increased through investment in the self. This is what Foucault terms human capital.

Virtually any human practice can be rendered an investment in one's own productive potential, which is in part what makes neoliberalism so ubiquitous in contemporary life. Foucault ([1979] 2008) describes education as the most obvious instance of investing in one's ability-machine, but he also points to the time mothers spend with their children, public health, migration, and other social phenomena too (229-230). Foucault's argument is not that all instances of these social practices are necessarily constructed around a neoliberal rationalization of investment in the human *qua* enterprise, but that when they generally become rationalized in this way, this represents an extension of economic rationalities into "a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic" (219).

It is only after this conceptual shift—when *homo oeconomicus* is reimagined as an enterprise of the self, an "ability-machine" for generating income—that new forms of governance become possible. Once human beings are understood in this way, as sites of internal economic potential, governance can begin to operate not just through markets, but through techniques that shape individuals as investors in their own economic capacities. This is the emergence of human capital as something that can be deliberately managed, cultivated, and directed.

If Foucault's theory of human capital describes a shift wherein economic reasoning is extended into non-economic domains and individuals are reframed as sites of self-investment aimed at income production, then the LDS approach reflects a reversal of this logic. Beginning with recognizably economic concerns—finding employment, paying off debt, obtaining education—Latter-day Saints extend religious rationalities into these spaces. These economic problems become opportunities to cultivate qualities such as stewardship, faith, obedience, humility, repentance, and covenantal alignment, which Latter-day Saints understand as essential to attaining eternal life. Moreover, if you recall from chapter three the kinds of preconditions required for personal revelation to function as an effective tool for discerning

prudence, these qualities that enable exaltation, what I am calling divine-human capital, are the same ones which allow revelation to operate in the first place. In this sense, approaching economic problems through revelation mirrors the investment logic of human capital, but with a different end. What is being invested in is not one's earning potential (human capital), but one's capacity to pursue, receive, and act on revelation. Revelation is the epistemic technique through which prudent decisions are discerned, and the repeated cultivation of that capacity moves individuals incrementally closer to exaltation.

Recall that in Latter-day Saint theology, God is not an intrinsically different kind of being from humanity. He is the literal Father of human spirits, and a long-standing, widely accepted teaching holds that He once lived as a mortal before progressing to His current exalted state. Because of this, the attributes associated with divinity are not foreign to human nature. They are capacities that humans already possess *in potentia*. The ability to receive revelation is one such capacity, and it depends on the prior development of the others. These capacities, including the ability to receive revelation, are not only divine—they are human. Cultivating them is not about reaching toward something external, but about developing what Latter-day Saints understand to be an inherited, even biological, potential. Revelation, in this sense, is a divine-human ability. When Latter-day Saints navigate social-material problems as a deliberate exercise in problem-solving, which requires reflecting on what one has power and responsibility over (what I have been referring to as “purview”), weighting potential paths forward against existing commandments, supposed “eternal laws,” and covenantal alignment—all these elements that comprise the revelation-seeking process are not just about arriving at prudence. They are instances where the individual is choosing to invest in the development of their human-divine capital—those characteristics and abilities that incrementally accumulate towards exaltation.

The way Latter-day Saints use revelation to discern economic prudence is thus “revelatory” in two senses. In the first, most straightforward sense, it is revelatory because it depends on revelation, the structured, disciplined, epistemological practice that enables the

discernment of prudence. It requires preparation, reflection, prayer, and the willingness to test impressions against prior commitments. Through repeated use, the technique becomes familiar, even habitual, and believers understand this repetition as something that sharpens their ability to recognise divine guidance. In this initial sense, revelation is a practical epistemological method. It guides decisions about employment, education, household finances, or welfare administration, and it invites individuals to cultivate the skills and dispositions that make this method reliable.

But the second sense of how these techniques of discernment are “revelatory” is more profound still. As Latter-day Saints act in faith, obey covenants, and discern the Spirit in everyday decisions, they are not merely learning how to hear God. They are learning that they are, by nature, the kind of beings who can become exalted divine beings. Revelation in this sense is not only epistemological, enabling prudent decision-making in daily life, but also ontological, for it reveals and affirms a particular understanding of what it means to be human.

6.4 LDS Economic Agnosticism

A reasonable question to ask at this point is whether all this is not just another instance of neoliberalism encroaching onto religious life? After all, as I have formulated it, Latter-day Saints are studying strategies for self-reliance that are based on financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and techniques for increasing their incoming-generating capacity that, when rendered through revelation, become a matter of religious piety. Is that not a textbook case of then extension of market rationalities into a non-market domain of social life?

My answer to this question is no. While today’s techniques of discernment often take the form of capitalist strategies—financial literacy, entrepreneurship, getting an education—this is because Latter-day Saints live in the contemporary capitalist world. The revelatory process requires that they “study things out” before seeking divine confirmation, which means the tools they study are the ones their economic context makes available. In southern Alberta, one of the

most fiscally and socially conservative regions in Canada, those tools are deeply marked by market logics. That the Church also circulates these kinds of tools worldwide via the Self-Reliance Initiative does not reflect a theological commitment to capitalism *per se*. It simply reflects the fact that most members now live in economies structured by capitalism.

Additionally, recall that the ends of these revelatory practices differ fundamentally from those of neoliberalism. The goal is not only wealth accumulation, profit maximization, market efficiency, or the development of human capital for reinvestment and return. The aim is also to cultivate divine-human capacities. Revelation serves as a means of discerning prudence, but a substantial part of its real significance lies in the traits it both requires and develops: stewardship, faith, obedience, patience, repentance, and other divine-human qualities that gradually cultivate the divine form of human subjectivity. It is through learning how to receive revelation that Latter-day Saints learn who and what they are. This theological teleology reframes practices that might otherwise appear as fairly normal neoliberal strategies for managing life—such as budgeting, entrepreneurship, or time management—and re-orientes them toward the transformative ends tied to eternal identity and divine progression.

These alternative ends help explain why the LDS form of revelation has been applied across very different economic systems in the past and why it may adapt to new ones in the future. Recall that the early LDS Church's economic practices were decidedly not capitalist. In the 1800s, Latter-day Saints practised the Law of Consecration, a communitarian system in which members voluntarily deeded *all* of their property to the Church with the expectation that its redistribution would be approached through revelation. Although this proved too difficult to sustain and was later replaced by the Law of Tithing (Givens 2017, 306-307), revelation remained the central technique: members would have relied on it to discern whether it was prudent to consecrate their property, and leaders claimed to use it in determining how that property should be redistributed.

In another economic experiment, the Church purchased and operated the Lā'ie sugar plantation in Hawaii in 1865. The plantation was initially governed through a hybrid model that combined capitalist management with Indigenous Hawaiian land tenure. Hawaiian Latter-day Saints were given plots following *ahupua'a* practices and engaged in traditional taro cultivation, while also participating in collective labour on the sugar cane fields. The profits from the latter labour were reinvested in communal infrastructure, proselytizing efforts, and eventually temple construction. Religious training and secular education were central to daily life on the plantation. In her broader exploration of this history, Hokulani Aikau (2012) traces how this once more Indigenous and communitarian social project was gradually overridden by colonising capitalist logics—a trajectory shaped as much by external economic shifts in Hawai'i as by changes within the Church. For present purposes, the point is that Lā'ie was not a capitalist settlement. It was a contextual hybrid: an Indigenous agrarian enterprise embedded with LDS religious practice and operating within a colonial capitalist framework.

Within that setting, techniques of discernment through the process of revelation still operated. Residents at Lā'ie were decidedly not being taught literacy in the capitalist system and how to find jobs in a job market. Instead, they studied Indigenous agrarian practices, all approached through revelation as a means of striving toward exaltation. The content of these practices was markedly different from the self-reliance strategies the Church teaches today, but the function was consistent: to use revelation as a way of discerning prudence in economic life and, through that process, to develop qualities understood as necessary for exaltation.

Both of these instances of revelation shaping economic life outside a capitalist framework are historical. However, Latter-day Saints also anticipate a future wherein the economic context within which they will live will be quite different than the one they are in now. It is commonly understood within the Church that the practice of tithing was instituted not to

replace the higher Law of Consecration permanently,⁵⁸ but because earlier Saints failed to live it adequately. The return of the Law of Consecration is thus not only possible but expected.

This expectation is reinforced in temple ordinances. In the LDS endowment, participants covenant to uphold a series of divine laws, including the Law of Consecration. Although the nineteenth century system of consecration is not currently practised, many Latter-day Saints speak of it as the higher law that tithing temporarily replaced, and some anticipate the possibility of its fuller implementation in a future era. This understanding appears regularly in lay commentary. One example is Richard Gardner (2017) observed that “God did not ‘revoke’ the Law of Consecration” even if He did “take away *for a time* its ‘higher’ form” (181, emphasis mine). My aim in highlighting this framing is not to verify its doctrinal accuracy, since others treat contemporary practices such as tithing and service as ongoing expressions of consecration, but to illuminate the economic imagination it reflects. When Latter-day Saints describe consecration as a higher law that will one day return in its institutional form, they implicitly envision a future economic order organised around communal stewardship and revelatory discernment rather than market logics. This expectation is significant for my purposes because it suggests that the LDS commitment is not to capitalism itself, but to revelation as the guiding technique for economic life. Capitalism is simply the system within which Latter-day Saints currently operate, not the one to which they are ultimately oriented.

In this light, approaching economic discernment through revelation is not a veneer hiding otherwise routine neoliberal rationalities oriented towards individuals increasing their human capital. It is the inverse: revelation is the rationality to which all other rationalities are subjected. Whether the problem is personal finance, starting a small business, or deciding where to plant a tree, Latter-day Saints are expected to study matters out in ways that reflect the tools of their

⁵⁸ I acknowledge that some apologetic authors such as Kent Huff (1988) have argued that tithing is the higher law, but this perspective is a decidedly minority one.

contemporary context, but also to weigh those tools against spiritual and moral commitments, covenantal obligations, and prophetic guidance, many of which would not adhere to market rationalities and do not contribute to the production of human capital.

This process is revelatory inasmuch as it reveals the correct path forward. It is, in this sense, epistemological. It is about knowing what one ought to do. But this process is also ontological. For it discloses the divine-human capacities that Latter-day Saints believe they already possess *in potentia*. Divine-human capital names the accumulation of those capacities. The iterative work of studying, praying, repenting, and discerning is not aimed at market efficiency or profit maximisation, but at the gradual development of the attributes necessary for exaltation. This is why LDS economic life cannot be reduced to capitalism, even when it adopts capitalist tools. The tools may belong to capitalism (at least, for now), but the ends do not.

Because revelation functions in these dual senses, its significance emerges only in practice. The technique is taught institutionally, but it becomes meaningful only as Latter-day Saints mobilise it in their own lives, drawing on scripture, prior experience, institutional materials, counsel from leaders, and the pressures of local circumstance to work out what prudence requires in their particular contexts. Having established in Part 1 that revelation is the central technique through which economic reasoning is reoriented toward divine-human ends, the chapters in Part 2 return to a more ethnographic narrative frame. There, I examine how Latter-day Saints in Cardston live these principles, negotiate them, and make them meaningful in the everyday economic decisions through which divine-human capital is imagined, cultivated, and enacted.

Part 2
Revelation's Conceptual Foundations

7.0 Studying Things Out: Diverse Ways to “Follow the Prophet”

Primary is the organization within the Church directed at children aged about two to eleven. Much of the Primary experience consists of singing songs from the Church's *Children's Songbook* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1989). Though the Church is currently revising this songbook, many of its songs remain widely sung in Church meetings and are deeply embedded in LDS culture. One of the most well-known is “Follow the Prophet” (110). I noted two instances of someone absent-mindedly humming it while out and about in Cardston: the first at a grocery store and the second while walking by a woman picking weeds out of her flowerbeds. More than simply having a catchy tune, this song communicates a core maxim that many Latter-day Saints draw on for the rest of their lives.

Each verse of the song contains a short summary of the story from a biblical prophet: Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Jonah, and Daniel. In most of these abbreviated narratives, “the people” choose to either “follow the prophet” or not, and then the song elaborates on the associated good or bad consequences which follow. The verse about Enoch states that the people “did what they should” and as a result “Heav'nly Father took them up to live with Him.” Whereas the verse about Noah describes how instead of listening to him the people “were busy sinning” and “They wished they had listened when they saw the rain.” Then, each verse is followed by the chorus' refrain:

Follow the prophet, follow the prophet,
Follow the prophet; don't go astray.
Follow the prophet, follow the prophet,
Follow the prophet; he knows the way.

“Following the prophet” may appear to some like prescribing blind conformity (an interpretation I heard from disaffected Latter-day Saints). Yet in my observations I encountered

Latter-day Saints who endeavoured to follow not only “the” prophet, but many prophets, prioritizing some over others following a range of discretionary criteria. As Latter-day Saints attempt to study matters out in their mind as part of their practices of economic discernment, many turn to the words of the prophets, plural, to guide their reasoning. Moreover, Latter-day Saints recognize that the words of some prophets, in certain contexts, can override the words of other prophets. “Following the prophet” is not simply about obedience. It is a moving interpretive target.

I found myself discussing this with Duncan and Dana, a millennial-aged married couple with no children. Duncan and I had connected during a volunteer service event over a shared love of boardgames, a common interest among Latter-day Saints and one I carry with me from my own LDS past. When I have asked other members why boardgames are so popular, many point to “family home evenings.” These Monday-night gatherings, promoted by the Church as a means of building family unity and faith, often feature the playing of boardgames. Though, for Duncan and Dana who had no children, they theorized that their interest in boardgames persisted because “we need reasons to gather socially that don’t include alcohol.” With pub nights and happy hours off the table, their Latter-day Saint social circles often revolved around board gaming.

Whatever the reason for a love of boardgames amongst Latter-day Saints, during an evening playing *Settlers of Zarahemla* (an officially licenced Book of Mormon-themed version of the immensely popular game *Settlers of Catan*), the topic of the various theological changes that had taken place in the Church since the Joseph Smith era had come up. Given my interest in LDS economics, the topic began focused on the significantly altered Law of Consecration.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ While Latter-day Saints still believe in practicing aspects of the Law of Consecration, the original practice of allocating all of one’s possessions to the Church for redistribution has not been practiced since the 1800s.

As the conversation continued, we also touched on the 1978 reversal on the prohibition placed on Black members entering into LDS temples and receiving the priesthood,⁶⁰ the ceasing of the practice of polygamy,⁶¹ and changing understandings of the “literal gathering of Israel.”⁶² Each of these is, by any measure, a momentous change in Latter-day Saint history, often distinctly out of step with the social sensibilities of their day. Many outside observers and disaffected members have treated them as reasons for critique or cause for crises of faith—perspectives which I sympathize with. Yet in my conversation with Duncan and Dana, they appeared instead as part of what one should expect in a religion that presents itself as guided by ongoing revelation through a living prophet.

The following day, I texted Duncan to thank him for the evening. I also took the opportunity to remark on the conversation, indicating my continued surprise with how little importance Latter-day Saints seem to give to foundational, theological changes:

WILLIAM: Thank you for the game night and the conversation! I always find it fascinating when a fundamental change happens in

⁶⁰ Between 1852 and 1978, the LDS Church prohibited Black members from receiving the priesthood or participating in temple rituals.

⁶¹ The practice of polygamy was official discontinued, by prophetic declaration, in 1890 (Woodruff 1890). However, some Latter-day Saints continued the practice in secret, and communities outside the United States continued the practice more publicly. This resulted in a second prophet declaration denouncing the practice, published in 1904 (Joseph F. Smith 1904).

⁶² The early Church emphasized a literal gathering that required Latter-day Saints to move to the places where the community was being established, first in Kirtland, Ohio, then in Jackson County, Missouri, later in Nauvoo, Illinois, and finally in the Salt Lake Basin. In recent decades, however, the emphasis has shifted toward a sort spiritual gathering in place (Givens 2017, 38-39). A milestone marking this tonal shift that took place over decades can be found in the April 1973 General Conference address by the prophet Harold B. Lee.

the Church and everyone is like “meh.” But I’m like “Wait, but that changes everything!”

DUNCAN: With continual revelation you need to be willing to drop one belief and follow the next one as each prophet interprets and reveals things for their day. Only one rule is sacrosanct. Follow your prophet.

What Duncan was reminding me was that prophets are considered prophets for their day, and that one of the core beliefs amongst Latter-day Saints is that revelation is ongoing, and thus subject to change. Far from being a cause for disbelief, some Latter-day Saints (as we saw in chapter three), see changing prophetic counsel as indicative that the Church is a living institution in the sense that it is not stagnant or stuck in the past. From my own standpoint, it is clear that the Church remains behind on issues such as gender equality and gay rights, and I do not want to understate that. Yet what matters for my purposes here is that members often experience the institution as actively changing, even if not always in ways that align with prevailing social sensibilities. This perception of ongoing adaptation does not mean Latter-day Saints disregard earlier teachings. Many devote significant effort to studying the words of both past and present prophets, and they use these teachings to guide their discernment in economic life.

This is what I explore in this chapter. I relate three ethnographic narratives that point to different ways Latter-day Saints “follow the prophet” in relation to their practices of economic discernment. This chapter focuses specifically on following Restoration-era prophets—an emic term that names prophets from Joseph Smith up until today. The following chapter turns to ancient prophets.

First, I relate my observed instances of Latter-day Saints seeking to build and maintain a robust system of food storage as an example of Latter-day Saints striving to listen to the explicit counsel of prophets. While the most recent prophetic counsel on this matter has grown more

ambiguous and less specific, many still strive to fulfil the clearest prophetic instructions, even if they came from earlier decades.

My second ethnographic case concerns the introduction of alcohol sales into Cardston's municipal bylaws. This was a hotly contested question of social and economic importance during my fieldwork. Many Latter-day Saints turned to prophetic guidance to inform their votes in a municipal plebiscite, but they did so in strikingly different ways. Some drew on theological interpretations of gospel concepts such as agency, seeking to align their choices with covenantal obligations. Others turned to prophetic examples, treating the actions of past Church leaders as reliable models to follow in the absence of direct prophetic instruction. Across these divergent strategies, the economic and political question of liquor sales became an occasion to practice economic discernment through revelation and to invest in divine-human capital.

Finally, I examine a third way Latter-day Saints understand what it means to “follow the prophet”: following the institutional practices of the Church itself. Because Church policy is understood to reflect prophetic direction, some Latter-day Saints treat administrative behaviour as a kind of revelation-in-practice. I explore this ethnographically through one interlocutor's reaction to a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) report about how the Canadian branch of the LDS Church transfers donated funds to Church-owned institutions abroad. For my interlocutor, these practices were not only acceptable but instructive—examples of how they, too, might prudently act. In this case, institutional policy itself functioned as a model for economic reasoning.

What I aim to demonstrate by drawing attention to these diverse ways of “following the prophet” is that the practice of studying matters out through revelation can yield divergent economic actions, even when rooted in the same imperative. This variation is not a weakness or inconsistency, but a feature of the practice itself. Each ethnographic narrative illustrates how Latter-day Saints invest in developing their sense of obedience by discerning prudent action

through different prophetic referents, including explicit instruction, prophetic example, and institutional precedent.

7.1 Following Explicit Prophetic Counsel: LDS Food Storage

While preparing for my fieldwork, during the throes of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Church conducted its first “digital-only” General Conferences in April of 2020. The 21,200-seat Conference Centre sat empty as Latter-day Saints attended virtually, tuning into the proceedings via internet streaming or satellite transmission. Music, normally performed live by choirs, was pre-recorded and edited into the stream. Speakers delivered their talks to an audience composed solely of film crews. Only the maskless First Presidency sat visible at the front of the theatre, their chairs spaced six feet apart. For the October 2020 General Conference, similar procedures were in effect, though this time with the entirety of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency at the head of the theatre. Still spaced six feet apart, they all wore blue, black, or white masks. The other General Authorities and officers slated to speak were located somewhere off camera.

Recall that 2020 was a time of grocery store shortages, runs on toilet paper, and general uncertainty concerning what could be called temporal matters. In this time of uncertainty, W. Christopher Waddell, a member of the Presiding Bishopric—that body of leaders charged with overseeing the management of temporal matters like humanitarian aid, Church welfare programs, and the administration of tithing and fast offerings—approached the stand from off camera to address the global body of Latter-day Saints. His talk focused on two ways to achieve “temporal preparedness,” encouraging Latter-day Saints to “diligently study” the contents of the *Personal Finances for Self-Reliance* manual and to engage in a “gradual build up of food

storage” (Waddell 2020, 45). He did not elaborate on what constituted food storage but counselled members to follow storage principles “based on individual and family needs.”⁶³

This less specific language in Waddell’s address was a far cry from the much more explicit and specific prophetic counsel given on the matter in years past. By the time of the April 1976 General Conference, the prophetic directive to build and maintain a substantial store of food, water, and other necessities in one’s home was already established. But, in that conference, the topic was given special attention. Vaughn J. Featherstone, also a member of the Presiding Bishopric, directed members to act:

Follow the prophet. He has counseled us to plant a garden and fruit trees. This year don’t just think about it—do it. Grow all the food you possibly can. Also remember to buy a year’s supply of garden seeds ... in case of a shortage ... Find someone who sells large bulk of grains ... Make arrangements to buy a ton or so of grain. Find someone who sells honey in large containers and make arrangements to buy what you can afford on a regular basis or buy a little additional sugar each time you go to the store. Purchase dry milk from the store or dairy, on a systematic basis. Buy a case of salt the next time you go to the store. Store enough water for each member of your family to last for at least two weeks. (Featherstone 1976, 116)

⁶³ While this counsel may resemble broader prepper culture, it is distinct. The First Presidency has actively discouraged “extreme” preparation, alluding to secular prepper movements (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2007). The food storage programme draws instead on LDS notions of self-reliance, developed during the Church’s 19th-century frontier period—much earlier than the rise of contemporary prepper culture—even if those notions have shifted significantly since (see chapter four).

Featherstone had already framed these directives as a way to “follow the prophet.” As if to reinforce this, the prophet Spencer W. Kimball endorsed Featherstone’s recommendations, tying food production and storage to the family’s spiritual and temporal welfare:

Recognizing that the family is the basic unit of both the Church and society generally, we call upon Latter-day Saints everywhere to strengthen and beautify the home with renewed effort in these specific areas: food production, preservation, storage ... We encourage you to grow all the food that you feasibly can on your own property. Berry bushes, grapevines, fruit trees—plant them if your climate is right for their growth. Grow vegetables and eat them from your own yard. Even those residing in apartments or condominiums can generally grow a little food in pots and planters ... Develop your skills in your home preservation and storage. We reaffirm the previous counsel the Church has always given, to acquire and maintain a year’s supply—a year’s supply of the basic commodities for us. And Brother Featherstone has pretty well outlined those commodities for us. (Kimball 1976, 124-125)

This prophetic guidance to build and maintain a year’s supply of food was, from the mid-20th century onward, applied with relative consistency across the Church. Though local adaptation always existed in practice, the institutional message remained remarkably uniform for decades and until very recently. Today, the Church has pivoted away from calling specifically for a year’s worth of storage, favoring instead the language of building a “short-term supply” and then “gradually building a supply of food that will last a long time” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2021b). In Waddell’s 2020 address quoted above, for example, no specific quantities were mentioned. Additional changes to the practice have come in the form of globally diverse recommendations: the Church provides regionally-crafted lists of dry goods that indicate local staple foods which can be stored for up to 30 years under the right conditions (Church

Jesus Christ Latter-Day St. 2023). After all, not every Latter-day Saint in the 21st century lives where wheat is grown and sold in bulk.

The Church has not elaborated on the reasoning behind this shift in messaging, leaving observers to speculate (Riess 2023a). Whatever the cause, for many Latter-day Saints I spoke with the change does not constitute a rescission of earlier counsel. Despite the most detailed prophetic instructions coming from several decades ago, many Cardston Latter-day Saints continue to prioritize those earlier directives with precision: purchasing grain, honey, and other dry goods like lentils and powdered milk in large quantities. For them, the language of storing a “year’s supply” remains a benchmark in measuring obedience to prophetic counsel.

Of course, the prophet did not counsel Latter-day Saints to simply go out and buy food at whatever price they could find it. Grocery stores may offer small bags of these goods, but at the quantities that food storage-oriented Latter-day Saints want them (“a ton of grain,” for example), this becomes a costly proposition. As the prophet counselled, members should look for opportunities to purchase these goods in bulk. This requires putting in significant effort to find such opportunities before making a purchase, and I observed Latter-day Saints treating the acquisition of such quantities of these specific goods as a community effort.

During the first few minutes of any given Elders Quorum meeting, time is usually set aside for general business and announcements. On one occasion, a man stood to relate that harvest time was coming and if anyone would be interested in purchasing raw wheat in bulk then they should indicate their interest on a sign-up sheet, which he circulated. Though neither the lesson that afternoon nor any sacrament meeting talks that day had anything to do with the topic of food storage—meaning, there had been no reminder or “push,” so to speak, from speakers or leaders recently about building and maintaining a robust food storage—by the time the list reached me there were already five names on the list, and I estimated that about a third of the elders present had yet to see the list. Food storage-oriented Latter-day Saints are always

on the lookout for opportunities to obey prophetic counsel to augment their food storage, and equally on the lookout for opportunities to do so in cost-effective ways.

Another strategy for acquiring large quantities of storable food included pooling individual orders into a bulk order. In September 2022, a member in the ward I was attending organized a mass order of honey. Members were invited to order honey in a range of sizes from five-hundred-gram jars to seven-kilogram buckets. A physical sign-up list was circulated during that Sunday School meeting, and further sign-up opportunities were conducted via the ward Facebook group. I was surprised by how many names were on the list. When I mentioned this to the woman sitting next to me, she explained that it was a yearly ward tradition and that many members waited for this time of year to stock up on honey. By combining orders from many families into one bulk order, she explained, participants in the purchase were able to acquire honey at a significant discount from retail price.

In addition to collectively placing bulk orders, identifying and sharing deals on food storage items was also common. Whenever local retailers were offering large-format food on sale, word about the opportunity tended to spread quickly. One Facebook announcement let the ward know, "Food storage item! Extra Foods- No Frills has canola oil on sale for \$5! 3 litres. Go grab some, no limit. These are 50% off or more." Other such announcements reporting various hot deals were communicated using social media.

Storing this quantity of food is one of the main logistical considerations Latter-day Saints must tackle. When Katherine, a mother in her 40s and a prolific home baker in the community, showed me a #10 format can of freeze-dried strawberries, we were standing in her household's food storage room. Located in the basement, this room was somewhat smaller than a child's bedroom. It had no furniture except shelving which lined three walls, floor to ceiling. Each shelf held rows of cans and packages of dehydrated, freeze-dried, or dry goods: lentils, beans, berries, fruit, beef, fruit drink crystals, powdered milk, cheddar cheese, sausage, rice, and more. Most prominent in the room, owing to their size and quantity, were goods stored in those #10

cans. These cylindrical containers hold about 3 litres of volume and measure 16 x 16 x 18 cm. There were also many foil-lined pouches, some large plastic buckets (one I noted was clearly marked “Honey, 7KG”), bottled water, and glass jars of pickled foods and preserves. I asked if this was all of it. “No,” she said, “we have cans and things squirreled away all over the place. Under the stairs and in the garage. But this is the best place because it’s cool.”

Dedicating a whole room to food storage requires significant space. Note that this room is not the same as a food pantry, which she also had, and which was located in the kitchen. It, too, contained packaged, canned, and jarred food. The food in the pantry was for everyday use, whereas the food in the food storage was intended for long-term storage with only occasional, periodic “rotating out” of older stored foods for newer ones. In the homes of Latter-day Saints like Katherine who choose to build and maintain the “year’s worth” of food storage, two spaces or more are given up to food storage. Because Cardston is a prairie town dominated by relatively large, single-family, detached homes of two and often three floors, finding space for food storage is not especially problematic. For others, it is. I interviewed one retiree-aged woman who lived alone in a relatively small rental suite. She told me that she had no room for long-term food storage. So, she focused primarily on a short-term storage goal of 1-3 months’ worth of food.

Sometimes, however, the sheer quantity of stored food becomes problematic. In one instance, a family was moving out of the community and to another continent. Multiple call outs were vocalized in Sunday meetings and on digital platforms that the family needed to offload their stored food. While smaller items like cans and pouches went to new homes relatively quickly, it was a struggle to find a new home for the four full-sized garbage cans full of wheat. As one elder vocalized when it was brought up during Elders Quorum, “I don’t even have enough room for *my* wheat cans to take on two more.”

If acquiring and storing large quantities of preservable food is its own logistical challenge, another related challenge is utilizing that stored food strategically to prevent spoilage.

Many of these foods are able to be stored for decades at a time, but the Church teaches members to utilize stored foods in such a way that they “rotate out” the older stored food in favour of new stored food (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.-b). Katherine explained to me how she altered one of her muffin recipes to substitute fresh strawberries for the freeze-dried ones she had in storage. “I know they can keep for a really long time,” she said while holding the can, “but I figured I should use them since I have them and this way I get to rotate them out.”

The sharing of recipes that utilize food storage items like powdered milk, wheat, and dehydrated meats was a practice that was encouraged amongst Cardston Latter-day Saints. An invitation to a 2024 Stake Relief Society event was circulated to my email inbox that advertised three free classes women could choose between. One, called “Physical Nourishment,” asked participants to bring and share recipes that used food storage ingredients to help with rotation. The event also included a headline “life hack” recipe, advertised using the description: “Learn how to make bread in 5 minutes a day using your food storage.”

It is common practice in wards to call someone to fill the role of ward self-reliance specialist. In Cardston, this role sometimes came with a designated focus in one of six areas: employment, education, preparedness, emotional health, nutrition, and personal finances. One of the self-reliance specialist’s calling in a ward I attended was focused on preparedness and nutrition. He challenged members to live off their food storage exclusively for one month. After the month, he issued a poll on the ward Facebook group asking members to self-assess their “level of food storage.” Most respondents placed themselves in one of three categories: indicating they 1) had one to six months of food storage, 2) had a year or more, or 3) had tested their food storage by living off it for a month. The categories were not mutually exclusive and were not particularly well constructed (which perhaps reflects the non-specialist nature of the calling). A fourth option, “No food storage,” was available but not chosen by any of the respondents. Given the cultural context, it is reasonable to assume that publicly selecting that

option would be seen as acknowledging a lapse in a well-established norm and would likely prompt social pressure, maybe even some shame, and likely follow-up from the specialist. For what I am demonstrating here, its absence shows that even as official discourse around food storage has become less prescriptive in recent years, the cultural expectation to maintain one remains strong in Cardston.

Many LDS prophets have counselled Latter-day Saints to build and maintain a robust food storage, often using very specific language about quantities. However, the contemporary Church leaders have moved away from providing explicit prescriptions like “a year’s worth.” Nonetheless, following the counsel of prophets, however far back in time, who have been explicit in their directions is still prominent in Cardston. For Latter-day Saints I spoke with who were so inclined, adhering to earlier prophetic specificity is understood as a matter of faith and obedience, even when it creates financial or logistical strain. For members like Katherine, who adhered to this more explicit understanding of the prophetic counsel to store food, it proved to be providential. Like many parts of Canada, 2020 saw the Government of Alberta institute a range of bans on gatherings of people, shutdowns of schools and public libraries, and limits on retail capacities. As Katherine told me, “I didn’t have to worry about going to the store during the shutdowns. At first, we were worried, but we’d been obedient, we’d done the work. People were freaking out about the shutdowns, but we had plenty to use. We didn’t think anything had to shut down. It was way too aggressive of the government. But we were ready. We obeyed the prophet, and we were okay.”

More than simply an investment in her own capacity to endure times of economic uncertainty, Katherine described how her food storage enabled her family to support others. Reflecting the recursive nature of LDS economic practices described in section 5.6, Katherine saw it as her responsibility not only to share surplus, but to assist others in building up their own storage systems and capacities. We were speaking in 2022 when COVID-19 restrictions had largely been removed, but she described how many of her friends and family had experienced a

renewed desire to strengthen their own food storage. Several had reached out to her for advice on learning skills associated with food preservation and organizing, like canning and pickling. “I think they were reminded by COVID and all that we’re provided for after we first make the effort to provide for ourselves. It isn’t just buying stuff; it’s learning how to do it all and keep it organized and managing the whole thing. Storage. It’s huge.” To outside observers, food storage might appear to be a one-time investment. But for Katherine and others in Cardston, it is an ability—a whole range of practices that need to be learned and maintained. The counsel of the prophets, after all, is not to just have food stored, but to maintain a *system* of food storage.

This discussion about food storage illustrates how Latter-day Saints follow the counsel explicitly given by prophets in matters of economic concern, even if more contemporary language has become less specific in that regard. Despite associated logistical challenges, and despite a diminished emphasis on food storage in recent years, building and maintaining a robust system of stored food, aiming for a 1-year’s-worth target, remains popular amongst Cardston Latter-day Saints. Mitigating those logistical challenges was a matter of communal concern, with diverse methods established for buying, storing, utilizing, and sharing stored food in cost-effective ways. The food storage system is not a one-time task but a durable, skill-based process—a technique of prudent household management that blends obedience with study, logistical adaptation, and practical action. The divine-human capital cultivated through this practice is that of obedience to prophetic instruction: the willingness to act on prophetic guidance with precision and persistence, even when its relevance is uncertain, its utility unproven, and its demands substantial.

However, prophetic instruction is not always explicit, nor is it always delivered from the pulpit of General Conference, which Latter-day Saints understand to be the most authoritative venue for contemporary prophetic teachings. When clear and unarguably authoritative directives are absent, Latter-day Saints often rely on a different form of prophetic counsel, one rooted not in specific instructions but in the prophet’s behaviour as a guide for prudent action. What the

prophet does is understood to express his role as the senior revelatory authority on earth, not only what he says. This behavioural model of counsel took two forms in Cardston, the first of which I observed in the context of local debate over prohibition.

7.2 Following the Prophet's Example: Introducing Alcohol into one of Canada's Last "Dry Counties"

On December 5th, 1901, *The Lethbridge News* published two, quick sentences concerning Cardston and area as part of its "Local Topics" column. "The people in License District No. 11, voted on prohibition last Saturday and declared in favor of prohibition by 257 to 147 votes." The district, encompassing Cardston, Mountain View, Magrath, Stirling, and other nearby settlements, all predominantly comprised of Latter-day Saints, thus enacted local prohibition more than a decade before Alberta's province-wide ban in 1916.⁶⁴ They achieved this by taking advantage of the "local option" to enact prohibition laws at a municipal and county level given by the Canada Temperance Act of 1878.

Those familiar with the LDS Church might not be surprised at the move Cardston made. It is widely known today that members of the Church generally do not consume alcohol. However, even in the present, adherence to what is sometimes called the Church's "health code" is not entirely uniform. Survey data from Riess (2018, 157-162) shows that younger Latter-day Saints express more flexible attitudes toward dietary prohibitions than their older peers. Still, formally declaring that one follows the prohibition on liquor and other substances is a required step in the temple recommend interview process.

At the turn of the twentieth century, however, such prohibitions were far from universally observed or enforced among Latter-day Saints, and they were not a requirement for determining temple worthiness. The prohibition on alcohol, along with tobacco, tea, coffee, and other health

⁶⁴ Following the outcome of a 1915 plebiscite, Alberta enacted province-wide prohibition in 1916. Alberta then repealed the prohibition laws in 1923 (Hamill 2015).

considerations, is based on a revelation attributed to Joseph Smith now known as the Word of Wisdom, recorded in section 89 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*. But in 1901, the Word of Wisdom was not adhered to in the ways it is today. From a present-day perspective, it might seem unsurprising that Cardston enacted prohibition, since most of its civic leaders were also Church leaders and Latter-day Saints today are widely known for abstaining from alcohol. Yet that assumption reads the present back onto the past. At the time, views on the Word of Wisdom were contested, and Church-wide prohibitions on alcohol were only just beginning to crystallize.

Owing to the contemporary emphasis on following the Word of Wisdom, it is sometimes surprising for present-day Latter-day Saints when they learn that it was not considered a requirement for entering the temple until 1921. In fact, perspectives on the Word of Wisdom in the years leading up to 1921 were much more divided than today's strict interpretation of the revelation, even among the general authorities (Alexander 1981). For some, like the then-apostles Heber J. Grant and Joseph F. Smith, the Word of Wisdom represented a complete rejection of the substances named by the revelation, a perspective that more closely reflects the present-day interpretation of the Word of Wisdom. For others, however, like the prophet Lorenzo Snow, the emphasis was put on restricting the consumption of meat, rather than alcohol, tobacco, coffee and tea. Others, like the apostle John H. Smith and apostle Brigham Young Jr., had personal preferences for certain kinds of alcohol and rejected the idea that the Word of Wisdom be used to impose a blanket ban on all alcohol. And others still, like apostle John Henry Smith, "believed that the more important question was one of free agency and that those who continued to insist upon strict adherence to the Word of Wisdom were ignoring [that] more serious [principle]" (79).

The prophet Lorenzo Snow, who resisted interpreting the Word of Wisdom as a strictly understood requirement, died in October of 1901. He was succeeded by Joseph F. Smith,⁶⁵ who had long supported a stricter interpretation of the Word of Wisdom. As prophet, Smith stopped emphasizing the Word of Wisdom's moderate restrictions on the consumption of meat and began preaching the importance of abstaining from all substances prohibited by the revelation. Under his leadership, the Church-owned Saltair Saloon was closed in early 1902, wards began substituting wine for water when preparing the sacrament (Bray 2012; Tucker et al. 2022), and bishops began to be told not to grant temple recommends to "flagrant violators" of the Word of Wisdom (Alexander 1981, 79).

It is in this context of debate within the Church regarding the Word of Wisdom that Cardston's move to institute prohibition must be understood. A shift was occurring in the Church that would eventually see the Word of Wisdom switch from being disparately practiced and variously understood to becoming an institutionally enforced and strictly interpreted prohibition on certain consumptive behaviours.⁶⁶ This shift was personified and ultimately institutionalized by Joseph F. Smith becoming the prophet and president in October of 1901 at precisely the same time Cardston organized and voted on utilizing the local option to prohibit the sale of liquor.

Alberta went on to institute province-wide prohibition in 1916, but the laws would not last long. The province abandoned prohibition only seven years later in 1923, but Cardston and area would not follow suit. Cardston was able to maintain its status as a "dry county" through various iterations of provincial liquor-control laws in large part thanks to a provision that specifically

⁶⁵ Succession in LDS leadership is resolved through seniority. The longest serving apostle in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles becomes the next president and prophet.

⁶⁶ It should be noted that some of the Word of Wisdom is prescriptive, instead of proscriptive. The prescriptive elements include the consumption of "herbs," "grain," and "fruit" (D&C 89).

named it as a perpetually unlicensed region. The *Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Act*, Chapter G-1, prior to 2020, contained provision #54 which stated, “Despite anything in this Act, no liquor licence, other than a special event licence or a duty free store licence, may be issued for the area described in section 146(a) and (b) of the *Liquor Control Act*, RSA 1980 cL-17, as it read on July 14, 1996.” The referenced section of the *Liquor Control Act* defined that area as “part of the County of Warner or the Municipal District of Cardston.” Thus, Cardston and area had been written into provincial law as a region wherein no liquor license could be issued, except for special events or a duty-free store.

Moving into the more contemporary timeframe, as the Cardston mayor Maggie Kronen explained to journalists, this legal legacy meant that even if Cardston residents wanted to change their status as a dry county, the town council was powerless to make that change. “If [residents vote] in favour of allowing liquor sales,” she said, “it will be up to the province to amend the liquor laws as they apply to Cardston” (The Canadian Press 2014). Thus, any plebiscite on the matter would be non-binding—a change at the provincial level was required.

However, such a change to the provincial laws is precisely what happened. As part of a larger amendment to the *Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Act* enacted in 2020, the provincial government repealed provision 54. This resulted in Cardston and area suddenly becoming subject to the same liquor licensing laws as the rest of the province, effectively opening the door for entrepreneurs and businesses to apply for liquor licenses. A curious effect of this rescission was that, under these new rules, even though liquor licencing in Alberta is provincially managed, and even though the province previously had control over prohibition in Cardston and area, the power over prohibition suddenly fell into the hands of the municipality. This is because Cardston was a place where no previous liquor licence had been issued.

In practice, the process works as follows. In areas where no liquor licence has previously been issued (such as Cardston), applicants submit their request to the provincial liquor board, who must then forward the application to the municipality. If the municipality rejects it, the

licence is denied, and no new application may be submitted for up to three years. However, if the municipality approves the request, the licence is granted and, critically, future applications in that area no longer require municipal approval. As such, the issuing of a *first* licence in a previously unlicensed region becomes a high-stakes decision: it permanently shifts control away from local authorities.

Put another way, so long as an unlicensed municipality's town council continues to reject liquor license applications, the municipality remains in control of its "dry" status. But, if a municipality accepts one liquor license application under these rules, then the municipality relinquishes control over future applications to the provincial liquor board.

These changes came as a surprise to Cardston residents for two reasons. First, because law-makers in Cardston and area were reportedly not consulted by the province on whether they wanted the prohibition clauses removed from the provincial lawbooks, according to Jeff Shaw, Chief Administrative Officer for the Town of Cardston (Anderson 2020). Second, because the town had conducted a plebiscite on the matter just six years prior. The results of this 2014 plebiscite were fairly clear: 1,089 against the sale of liquor and 347 for it (The Canadian Press 2014). Given the approximate town population at the time, this represented a turnout of roughly 60% of Cardston's voting-age population,⁶⁷ making it a decisive victory for those desiring to continue with prohibition.

The sudden potential for liquor licensing in Cardston proved to be divisive not only in the town, but in other parts of the region previously covered by section 54 of the *Gaming, Liquor and Licensing Act*. In 2022, the town of Raymond conducted a survey of its residents on the issue. The results showed that residents desired to uphold their status as a "dry community" by a small margin: 52% opposed ending prohibition in Raymond (Dorozio 2022).

⁶⁷ The federal census conducted in 2016 counted 2,275 people aged 20 and over.

The debate in Cardston, however, was just ramping up when I arrived. At that time, the loudest voices in favour of liquor licensing came from restaurateurs who asserted that the absence of a liquor license resulted in diminished economic opportunity. Ivan, owner of the iconic heritage-site-turned-restaurant and hotel, the Cobblestone Manor where I spoke with the Rotary Club, was outspoken on the matter. Becoming an iconic voice for the pro-liquor vote, Ivan was interviewed not only by me, but also local and national news media outlets such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Simmons 2023). He also advertised, via Facebook and word-of-mouth, all town council meetings on the matter, encouraging residents to come and voice their support for lifting prohibition in Cardston.

In official settings, such as in these town council meetings, the matter was most often discussed in strictly secular economic terms, and the rhetoric often focused on the golf course. This was because the golf course in Cardston is owned by the town. The operating costs of the golf course are supported by municipal tax dollars and bylaws have been created in order to enable the Town of Cardston to take out bank loans to furnish the golf course with equipment (Borrowing Bylaw—Golf Course 2019; Borrowing Bylaw - Golf Course 2024). An advisory committee has also been established by municipal bylaw to advise town council on how to direct the operations of the golf course (Lee Creek Golf Course Advisory Committee Bylaw 2018). Thus, the economic viability of the golf course is a matter of shared public concern.

In addition to being a matter of public concern, the golf course represented the most strategic pathway for pro-liquor advocates to initiate broader change. Recall that once the first license is granted by a municipality, all future license applications would go through the provincial Liquor Control Board, not the municipality. So, if proponents of liquor in Cardston could convince the municipality to give the golf course a liquor license then that would open the door for other business owners to submit applications for their own licenses.

Thus, proponents of lifting prohibition, such as Ivan, focused on the golf course not only because it was a matter of shared public concern, but because it offered the most viable route

to shifting the town's prohibition policy. This kind of secular, economic, and golf course-focused argument was exemplified during the January 10th, 2023, bi-weekly, public, town council meeting. Speaking on behalf of a small delegation "for business purposes and for the golf course," Ivan argued that the absence of liquor sales was undermining the course's financial viability:

The revenue stream is the most important thing that I'm concerned about. It's the loss of revenue that the Cardston golf course is losing every year in liquor sales. The information here is that Cardston golf course does between 25 and 33 million—er, thousand rounds a season with zero liquor revenue. Claresholm, Nanton, and other golf courses who are less quality than ours do about the same, between 15 to 33 thousand rounds. Their liquor sales revenue ranges anywhere from \$40,000 to \$300,000 thousand a season. That's a lot of revenue. We, on our golf course, we go collect empty bottles from the garbage cans. Because we allow people to bring their own liquor on the course, drink it, and leave the garbage behind. Our revenue, I'm guessing, is \$20 or \$30 a month in bottle depot refunds. We want to build a clubhouse, in excess of \$200,000 dollars. We're running out of tax dollars to fund this golf—this clubhouse.

This focus on missed revenue continued, with Ivan identifying additional ways the absence of a liquor license limited the golf course's profitability, such as its inability to host tournaments. "We can't entertain large tournaments," he explained, "because large tournaments require a liquor permit." His argument then pivoted to another secular concern, legal liability:

If we allow liquor permits on the golf course, it will do several things. It would control the consumption, it would legalize the consumption of liquor, and it would give the golf course management control of who brings liquor on and how much gets consumed and what happens with it. Because, right now, it's

smuggled onto the course. It's drunk on the course, and everybody's turning a blind eye to it saying it's not really happening. But it is happening. And it's a liability issue because if somebody gets hurt on the course—if somebody injures somebody else on the course, and they bring liquor onto the course illegally and we as the town allow it, what's our liability? There was a golf course charged in Ontario just two years ago with an incident where they were allowed to overconsume alcohol. On the way home there were an accident, and one person was killed. The golf course was sued. The town was sued. The management was sued. Everybody involved in the golf course was sued because what happened. I don't think we want to see that happen in Cardston.

This kind of secular economic argument, either for or against liquor sales, was typical in formal settings where prohibition was debated. For example, in an open letter written and published to the Town of Cardston, one proponent of keeping prohibition wrote about the public costs associated with liquor such as health care and policing. A Latter-day Saint and former town councillor, the author acknowledged the town's cultural identity, estimating that 80 percent of residents in 2014 (the year of the previous plebiscite) were LDS. He suggested that maintaining prohibition aligned with the will of this majority. But his argument focused mostly on non-religious rationalities, foregrounding how his position was informed by "personal research":

My personal research has found that there is not an economic advantage at all and in fact there is a huge cost, province-wide, associated with the consumption of alcohol regardless of the venue where it is sold and consumed. In my opinion it is naive to think that allowing the sale and consumption of alcohol at the golf course in Cardston would be any different than the statistics have shown in the rest of the province.

Without prejudice my concern is that [those in favour of lifting prohibition] feel it would be an economic boost to the community and in particular the golf course. In my opinion their assumptions on this matter are misguided and wrong.

If this was representative of the rhetoric in public spaces such as town council meetings, open letters, and news media interviews, the conversation about prohibition in other spaces, both physical and digital, included a much wider range of rationalities. In these less formal dialogues, the debate was shaped by revealed knowledge about the premortal existence, LDS conceptions of agency, and the examples set by former prophets.

Recall the quote from above that described how the apostle John Henry Smith “believed that the more important question was one of free agency and that those who continued to insist upon strict adherence to the Word of Wisdom were ignoring [that] more serious [principle]” (Alexander 1981, 79). As if recreating the same kinds of debates that Church leaders in the late 1800s and early 1900s had over the Word of Wisdom, Cardston residents’ debate about liquor licenses also focused on agency because it is a central and pivotal component of LDS cosmology.

LDS doctrine teaches that prior to the formation of the earth, all of humanity existed in a premortal state as the literal spirit children of heavenly parents—God, our shared Heavenly Father, and an unnamed Heavenly Mother. In a great premortal council, God presented a plan to enable His children to become like Him—that is, to achieve exaltation. The spirit who would become Jesus Christ affirmed this plan and volunteered to serve as the Saviour. The spirit who would become Satan rejected it and proposed an alternative. His alternative plan removed the element of moral risk by forcing all of humanity to comply with divine commandments, thus ensuring universal *salvation* from sin (Moses 4:1-4; Abraham 3:27-28). However, Satan’s plan would have eliminated agency, thus making *exaltation* impossible.

It is useful here to highlight the distinction between salvation and exaltation in LDS thought. Salvation refers to deliverance from the consequences of sin through the atonement of Jesus Christ. Exaltation, by contrast, refers to becoming like God through the gradual development of divine traits, which requires the active and continual exercise of moral agency. It depends on freely choosing, practising, and refining godly attributes over time. In this framework, a proposal that removes or nullifies agency might guarantee universal salvation from sin but cannot lead to exaltation, since exaltation requires the experiential work of becoming Godlike. In the way many Latter-day Saints understand this cosmological myth, Satan's plan could not accomplish the plan's central purpose, because exaltation requires agency.

Angry at God's decision, Satan waged a war in heaven against God and the other spirits who supported Jesus's plan. Satan ultimately lost this war, and he and his supporters were "cast out" of the premortal realm, precluding them from obtaining bodies. Those who supported the side of agency in this war were allowed to come to earth to get bodies. Meaning, according to this cosmology, every human that was or will be born has already fought for human agency in this pre-moral war. Mortal life, then, is not simply a testing ground, but the continuation of a commitment to the idea that exaltation depends on humans choosing righteousness, not being compelled into it. It is precisely this capacity for choice that enables individuals to cultivate divine-human capital: the voluntary development of godlike traits such as faith, obedience, and discernment. Without agency, the acquisition of such traits—and thus exaltation—would be impossible.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ For a more thorough overview of this cosmology, see the chapters titled "Agency" and "The Plan of Salvation" from *Doctrines of the Gospel—Student Manual* (Church Educational System [1986] 2010), and the chapters titled "Preexistence and Foreordination of the Christ" and "The Need of a Redeemer," from *Jesus the Christ* (Talmage [1915] 1916). For a contemporary authoritative source that

Thus, for Latter-day Saints, agency must be understood in the strongest terms. The entire premise of the earth's creation was to enable God's plan of salvation, and literal wars between spirit-siblings have been fought in defence of that right to choose. Intriguingly, and as a Latter-day Saint scholar observed decades ago, "to many Mormons, free enterprise has become synonymous with free agency, to be as earnestly defended and occupying almost as important a place in our theology" (Moss 1968, 121). In my observations of the debate on prohibition in Cardston, this defence of agency maintains its central importance.

Much of the discussion about lifting prohibition in Cardston that took place outside of formal settings focused heavily on this notion of agency. Yes, the Church has a prohibition against the consumption of liquor, but the right to choose—to exercise one's agency—was argued to be the more important underlying principle. In a long Facebook thread debating the issue in the Cardston "Rant and Rave" public group, one commenter wrote a statement in support of allowing residents the option to consume liquor, to which another replied, "AMEN!!! CHOICE is what started our mortal existence in the first place. It's all about AGENCY." Another comment in the same thread asked Cardston residents to "Let others make choices for themselves, we all believe people have their own free agency do we not?" Even those on the fence about the question of alcohol sales expressed strong opinions about agency, with one such commenter writing "I really don't have a strong opinion either way on the subject but taking away peoples [*sic*] voice and their right to choose and free agency, I'm definitely opposed to." In this digital debate that included comments from ninety-three different individuals, thirty-three of them used secular economic argumentation to support their position for or against prohibition. Thirty-two of them drew on interpretations of agency. Often, there was overlap between the two.

exemplifies the kind of war-framed, conflict-oriented language that permeates Latter-day Saint imagination of this premortal event, see Lawrence (2017).

However, not all of those who favoured an agency-centric approach to the question of prohibition were in favour of lifting prohibition. One of the commenters suggested in his posts that his fellow residents were interpreting agency incorrectly, ignoring the bounds placed around what most supposed to be “free agency” following the enacting of a covenantal relationship with God. Intrigued, I reached out to this resident, Dale, and he agreed to speak with me. In our conversation, he described how agency did not necessarily equate to freedom of choice under certain conditions:

DALE: I think everyone’s misrepresenting agency. Elder Bednar has explained that for covenant peoples like us we have the agency to choose God, not to choose whatever we want. A sincere study about agency will help people change their minds about choices they make. Choosing just whatever you want is an improper use of agency. I must choose not to have liquor because that’s a choice in line with God’s teachings. I choose that. That’s me exercising my agency.

WILLIAM: Do you remember what Bednar talk you’re referring to here?

DALE: Oh yeah. It’s the one where he’s in Latin America. Bolivia or something. And he’s talking about moral agency, not free agency. We always say, “free agency,” but it isn’t free. Christ paid for our agency, so it isn’t free. And we’re covenant bound to choose the right. We have a moral, uh, requirement now to use our agency to choose the right.

I was unfamiliar with this specific talk from Bednar, and the reference to Bolivia led me on a bit of a wild goose chase. However, I did eventually locate the talk, of which a video

recording has been published to the LDS Church’s Spanish language YouTube channel.⁶⁹ It was recorded during a 2016 youth and young adult fireside devotional in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In it, apostle David A. Bednar reminds those present that they are a people who have participated in ordinances like baptism. A central component to those ordinances is the establishment of a covenant-bound relationship with God. For example, part of the baptismal covenant includes promises to “serve God and keep his commandments.” As Bednar explains, it was in the moment of making that covenant that they utilized their individual agency, and after which their obligation is to choose to obey God’s commandments “at all times, in all places, and in all things” (Iglesia de Jesucristo 2016, 58:36). He provides an example: “If after having entered into the covenant we do not abide by the conditions of the covenant—so, for example, if you or I don’t pay our tithing, do we have the option not to pay our tithing? Nope. It’s breaking a covenant. It is not the exercise of agency anymore” (1:01:15). In this rendering, agency is enacted when entering into covenant-bound relationships with God, but thereafter one’s agency is limited to fulfilling the terms of that covenant—this is constructed as the only moral use of one’s agency, thus distinguishing “moral agency” (the title of Bednar’s talk) from “free agency.”

You can be forgiven if it remains unclear how denying oneself certain choices can still count as exercising agency. Let me clarify using my analytic of divine-human capital. In LDS cosmology, God grants his spirit children agency not as an end in itself, but as a means to pursue exaltation—to progress in divine likeness. This growth requires not just any use of agency, but the wise investment of one’s choices in opportunities that cultivate divine-human capital: the traits, capacities, and orientations necessary for godhood. Agency, in this rendering, is not merely the freedom to choose, but *the capacity to discern and act on choices that align*

⁶⁹ Bednar is speaking in English, but to the congregation via a translator. So, the direct quotes here are Bednar’s exact words.

with eternal progression. Breaking covenants is not a use of agency—it is a *perversion* of agency, a reversal of the very developmental arc that agency supports.

For Latter-day Saints like Dale, then, this understanding of covenant-bound agency means that choosing to reject allowing alcohol into the community represents the most prudent course of action. The consumption of alcohol is (at least in current Church practice) prohibited by the commandment known as the Word of Wisdom. “I must choose not to have liquor,” Dale said, “because that’s a choice in line with God’s teachings. I choose that. That’s me exercising my agency.” Note the easy pairing of the imperative “I must” with the verb “to choose.” Within this framework, agency is not about maximizing options but about adhering to covenants because that is the *only* use for agency—that is what agency was created to do: enable exaltation. Choosing righteousness is how one exercises agency; to violate a covenant is not simply to choose differently, but to divert from one’s trajectory toward exaltation. No one is forcing Dale’s hand—he is exercising agency precisely by selecting the one option that aligns with his covenantal commitments and, by extension, brings him closer to realizing exaltation.

Dale was not alone in interpreting his baptismal and temple covenants as closely tied to adherence to the Word of Wisdom. While interviewing one of the members of the town council, he described how disappointed he was in the tone of the rhetoric that had been circulating in the community about the matter. “It’s gotten nasty. One of the members [of town council] who’s been in support of the idea of alcohol sales received threats because [they’re] breaking [their] temple covenants or something like that. Threatened to have [their] recommend revoked.”⁷⁰ For whomever was making these threats (the identity of both the threat maker and receiver were not

⁷⁰ Latter-day Saints require a recommend from their local bishop and stake leaders in order to enter the temple. Without one, they are barred from both temple entry and participation in temple ordinances. Because temple ordinances occupy a central place in LDS ritual life, such a restriction carries considerable weight.

made known to me),⁷¹ a vote in favour of liquor in Cardston was considered to be an incorrect application of agency in violation of temple covenants, potentially meriting the revocation of this town council member's temple recommend.

This divergence reveals that competing interpretations of agency coexist within the Latter-day Saint community. One sees agency as sacred freedom: the unbounded right to choose between alternatives. The other, grounded in prophetic teaching, understands agency as the God-given capacity to choose the path of exaltation. Within the logic of the latter, each choice is weighed not by its openness but by its alignment with God's commandments and saving ordinances. From an analytic perspective, such choices can be seen as investments in what I call divine-human capital: the cultivation of divine traits through covenantal obedience on the path toward becoming like God.

Such a perspective, however, does not emerge casually. It demands close attention to prophetic discourse, what prophets have said over time, as part of the process of "studying it out." In Dale's case, this meant attending to an obscure devotional address by Elder Bednar, delivered in Spanish at a regional fireside in Buenos Aires, in which Bednar drew on prior teachings from Church leaders about "moral agency" to distinguish it from so-called "free agency." While rarely emphasized in Sunday instruction, this nuanced distinction circulates among some Latter-day Saints as a form of "deep doctrine," an emic phrase that names esoteric but institutionally grounded teachings.

Most members, by contrast, do not engage with prophetic speech at this level of detail. In fact, I encountered instances where members were discouraged from pursuing "deep

⁷¹ If, indeed, the person levying this threat could somehow revoke this town council member's recommend, that would represent a significant reprisal given how important routine participation in temple ritual is for many Latter-day Saints. Whether the person issuing the threat had any authority to act on it remains impossible to know, though it seems unlikely.

doctrine” discussions on the grounds that such inquiries can distract from what I heard one person describe as “the elegant simplicity of the gospel.” Continuing with the Cardston prohibition debates, then, I want to highlight cases where Latter-day Saints relied less on a close reading of prophetic discourse and more on the behavioural examples set by prophets to inform their stance on prohibition.

Recall that the debate over prohibition in Cardston was not about whether residents could *consume* alcohol, but whether it could be *sold* within the town, a distinction that proponents of lifting prohibition were wont to state. There already were Cardston residents who consumed alcohol in their homes, while camping, and they even brought their own alcohol with them onto the golf course—the matter of the golf course routinely collecting large quantities of empty alcoholic beverage containers from the garbage cans came up several times in the town hall debate as evidence that people were already consuming liquor on the premises. By foregrounding this, advocates for lifting prohibition reframed the issue as one of regulating sales, not restricting behaviour.

For Dale, however, permitting liquor sales was not a neutral policy question but a moral decision with covenantal stakes. While he did not explicitly frame the issue in doctrinal terms, his articulation of agency as covenantal obedience suggests that voting to allow liquor sales could amount to breaking sacred commitments—not by personally consuming alcohol, but by appearing to enable sin. In LDS discourse, covenant-bound disciples are taught not only to obey commandments but to avoid enabling or legitimising transgression. An oft-cited example is that “Shopping on Sunday causes other people to break the Sabbath by making them work on Sunday.” Other phrases like “avoid the appearance of evil” and “stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places” circulate widely and instruct members to align all aspects of life—including civic participation—with divine law. Within the logic of divine-human capital, agency is exercised only when a choice contributes to one’s progression toward exaltation. A vote that facilitates the availability of alcohol would, from this perspective, direct

one's agency away from that progression. It would not be a different use of agency, but a failure to use agency at all.

I was discussing this emerging agency-centred debate with a restaurateur, Stephen, outside of his business just as the last customer had finished eating their burger. Stephen had closed the shop for the day and came to sit with me at a picnic table. The purpose of our meeting was to talk about a secondary entrepreneurial venture he had started. Though, as had happened in many conversations that month, the topic eventually turned to prohibition. Taking it up, I sort of summarized the competing notions about agency I had observed and asked Stephen his thoughts:

STEPHEN: I would open a liquor store if I could. Even a casino, but I'd be crucified for that (*laughs*). It's easy, though. We don't need to understand all this agency stuff to know what we do. Just do what the prophets have done. You've heard what the prophet told Marriott about selling booze in his hotels?

WILLIAM: I have a vague memory, but I don't really know.

STEPHEN: He said do it. It's necessary for the business and it doesn't have anything to do with agency and you're not, like, forcing people to sin by selling alcohol or anything. Brigham Young sold whiskey, too. Follow the prophet and all that.

I had responded that I had a "vague memory" about it because, at the time, this particular bit of LDS lore had received relatively wide circulation amongst Cardston Latter-day Saints in part thanks to its relevancy to the debate on prohibition, but also thanks to a biography written on the life of Bill Marriott that had recently been published (Van Atta 2019a). Even for the author of the book, which covered a wide range of topics, this one story about what a prophet told the Marriotts about liquor sales received specific attention. He republished it as an article in

the Church-owned lifestyle magazine *LDS Living* (Van Atta 2019b), as a chapter in the edited volume *Latter-day Saints in Washington, DC* (Van Atta 2021), and in other LDS digital magazines (Moroni Channel News 2022).

As the story goes, Latter-day Saint, American billionaire, hotelier, and founder of Marriott International, J. Willard (J.W.) Marriott, was trying to open a hotel in Philadelphia in the 1960s. Previous hotels had been opened in “dry” states, so the question of liquor sales had not been a problem. However, Pennsylvania was a “wet” state. This meant that the Marriotts had to decide what to do about liquor sales. Bill, the son of J.W. and current executive chairman of Marriott International, recorded in his journal that he suggested his father ask Church leaders what to do. Being the prominent and influential Latter-day Saints that he was, J.W. Marriott took up the matter with then-president and prophet David O. McKay who reportedly told Marriott to sell liquor:

I will ask you as one brother to another, suppose a sheepman, like you were, goes into a grocery store owned by a Mormon to buy supplies, and he wants cigarettes for his [non-LDS] men. If the storekeeper says, “Sorry, we don’t carry tobacco in any form because it’s against our religion,” why, the customer won’t come back the next time. If he wants coffee for his men and the storekeeper says, “We disapprove of it, and we don’t want your men to drink it either,” he won’t come back again. He’ll go to the store down the street not only for his tobacco and coffee, but for everything else he needs. In the long run, this could put the storekeeper out of business, don’t you agree? As I see it, Brother Marriott, if you do not satisfy your customers’ wants and needs, you could be running the same risk. If liquor today is an essential part of the service that the hotel and restaurant industry offers to its patrons, it seems to me that you’re obliged to sell it to them. To sell it to them doesn’t mean that we approve of drinking, any more than to sell a gun means approval of using that gun to commit a

crime. The patron who believes as we do is not compelled to buy liquor, nor, indeed, is anyone. But it is the patron's life, his money, his right to decide for himself, not ours. (David O. McKay quoted in Van Atta 2021, 269-270)

McKay's words to Marriott were not formal prophetic statements. He was not altering the doctrine surrounding the Word of Wisdom while "speaking like a prophet." He was simply offering situated advice that Stephen then felt could be generalized to the Cardston context. In making that move, Stephen was treating the prophet's offhand guidance as a form of prophetic behaviour—as something that revealed how a prophet acts, and therefore as something that could be emulated.

Then, as if to bolster the assertion, Stephen casually included the accurate statement "Brigham Young sold whiskey, too," which is true. The second president and prophet of the LDS Church, Brigham Young, once described how he built a whiskey still for "rational purposes" (Young [1865] 2004, 201). It appears that "rational purposes" for Young meant for sale to non-Latter-day Saints for their consumption and for use in cleaning, not for consumption by Latter-day Saints. Since Young also spoke out against the consumption of "spiritous liquors" (Young [1865] 2004a, 319), which he asserted was useful for "washing the body" but not as a beverage (Young [1865] 2004, 203). Nonetheless, Young owned several taverns and saloons as a way to cater to the needs of non-LDS travelers (Hirshson 1969, 204-286). For example, Church historian Andrew Jenson (1901, 486) recorded that Young partnered with his nephew Feramorz Little to purchase the Salt Lake House, a prominent hotel and site of the first saloon in Salt Lake City.

"Follow the prophet and all that," Stephen had said: not the specific and explicit teachings of prophets communicated in authoritative contexts such as scripture or general conference, but the examples they set in their personal lives. Neither McKay nor Young had spoken over the pulpit from a position of revelatory authority declaring the sale of liquor

congruent with the Word of Wisdom. However, both had authorized, in a way, the sale of liquor through their actions as men—men who happened to be prophets. McKay had encouraged Marriott to include the sale of liquor in his plans for the Philadelphia hotel, and Young had owned businesses producing and retailing liquor.

Stephen was not the only Latter-day Saint I encountered who drew on these prophetic examples when discussing prohibition. Speaking about the matter over dinner with other Latter-day Saints, the story about the Marriotts was raised by them. In that context, it was used as an example of why they had voted in favour of allowing liquor into Cardston during the 2014 plebiscite, and why they would vote the same way in any upcoming plebiscite on the matter (at the time of our conversation, no additional plebiscite had been announced). They described their earlier decision as the result of deep engagement: they had studied the teachings and lives of the prophets, contemplated the issue in the temple, and prayed for guidance. Through this process, they “felt confident” that voting to lift prohibition followed in the footsteps of the prophets.

That liquor sales were an economic matter was made explicit in secular town council discourse, where debates focused on tournament hosting, municipal liability, and tax-supported infrastructure. For many members, though, the epistemological technique for discerning what to do included attention to economic concerns, certainly, but also a study of prophetic teachings and behaviour, and prayerful reflection in sacred spaces. Examples such as McKay’s counsel to Marriott or Brigham Young’s liquor enterprises were treated as legitimate sources of guidance. Their confidence in the decision was not merely rhetorical: it indexed the affective outcome of the revelatory process itself. As discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, the experience of confidence often functions as confirmation that a decision has been correctly discerned.

In May of 2023, following months of heated debate and public pressure, the Cardston town council put the question to voters once again. A non-binding plebiscite asked residents if they were “in favour of ... allowing limited liquor sales in Town by restricting the sale of liquor to

only Class A liquor licences in restaurants and Class B liquor licences in recreational facilities (Golf Course and Agridome)? YES or NO.” The proposition narrowly passed, with 53% of voters indicating YES. Following this, a proposal was made by town council to amend the land use bylaw in Cardston to allow for Class A and B licenses. As happens when any bylaw proposals are made, this prompted another two sessions of public hearings to be scheduled over the next four months wherein the town council and delegates from the community could debate the bylaw proposal.

Having then moved back into the structured, formal venue of town council meetings, the debate centred again on argumentation that favoured secular rationalities. Delegates spoke encouraging the town council members to heed the results of the plebiscite and act accordingly, appealing to their roles as representatives of the voting public. Another delegate spoke on behalf of “a group of Indigenous individuals who live in Cardston,” positioning alcohol as a danger to the physical and mental health of vulnerable populations, including residents of the nearby Blood 148 Reserve, who were not eligible to vote in the plebiscite. Some speakers focused on the economic health of the restaurant industry in Cardston, with one restaurateur arguing that his business would be more viable in the long-term were they able to sell alcohol.

Agency was mentioned only twice during these public hearings. One speaker, in favour of lifting prohibition, appealed to the principle of “freedom of choice.” Avoiding the theologically loaded term “free agency,” his phrasing stripped the concept of Latter-day Saint specificity, presumably to better align with the expected secularity of the town council setting. He described how his “forefathers fought for freedom of choice,” linking his stance to a broader patriotic tradition. He also invoked recent frustrations with government regulation, noting that “no one wants to go back to” the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A second speaker more explicitly mentioned LDS conceptualizations of agency but did so in a way that rejected agency’s place in the conversation. “The issue at hand is not a matter of religious opinion [or] a matter of personal agency,” he stated. For him, it was strictly a matter

of “democracy and economics” and “enacting the public will.” Other speakers followed this attention to the public will. They spoke about the nuances of vote counting in the plebiscite, with some seeking to cast doubt on whether the plebiscite’s narrow margin actually reflected the public will. But other topics were also salient in these public hearings: public safety on main streets and highways, “slippery slope” -style arguments, maintaining the “character” or “culture” of Cardston, concern over the fact that an economic impact study on the matter had not been conducted, and worry that those families who had moved into Cardston, attracted by its unique characteristics like prohibition, would ultimately want to move away if alcohol were introduced.

At the conclusion of the second and final public hearing, on September 12th, 2023, the Cardston Town Council voted on the motion to enact the bylaw that would allow limited liquor licenses. Just before doing so, the council did something unusual and gave each councillor (should they choose) the opportunity to describe to the gallery why they would vote the way they were about to. One councillor, who identified as a lawyer, included in his commentary the assertion that “all laws are someone’s morality ... we always legislate morality.” Then, he addressed the question of agency directly:

All laws—bylaws, regulations, policies of government—either restrict or demand action. That’s their very nature. You don’t have law—if you don’t care about someone’s action you don’t make the law. Inherently a law either compels or restricts choice. It’s its very nature ... They could be from God, they could be from nature, they could come from man, it doesn’t matter. The principle’s the same. And they all come with the consequence. And we are required within those laws, and given the consequences, to use our agency. So, there’s never a case where you don’t have any agency. You just operate within those laws and the natural consequences that follow.

Seeing no conflict between his understanding of agency and the maintenance of prohibition laws, this counsellor voted against the bylaw. Though, the motion would ultimately be carried in a 5-2 vote in favour of the new bylaw. At the time of writing, one restaurant in Cardston has since successfully acquired a license to serve liquor.

Despite the assertions made in town council meetings by some that the debate over alcohol in Cardston was a secular one, what I aim to have shown is that in the conversations that took place in parks, across dinner tables, amongst friends, and online, as well as even in the context of town council debates, the dispute over this putatively economic decision was often rendered through the process of revelation. In this instance, “studying it out” did not always mean scrutinizing explicit prophetic pronouncements and official doctrine. Rather, it could also mean reading the lived examples of prophets as morally instructive patterns that could be modelled: what they did, not just what they said, became an object of reasoned debate and prayerful consideration.

This contest over alcohol policy also reveals how a political decision became an opportunity for investment in divine-human capital. Latter-day Saints approached the issue not simply as a civic matter, but as an occasion to seek revelation through study and reflection on their covenantal relationships with God. The central question was not whether to follow the prophet, but how: some turned to prophetic statements, others to prophetic example. In treating this municipal decision as a site of revelation, they were not only weighing practical outcomes but also cultivating the attributes required for exaltation.

In the final ethnographic narrative of this chapter, I examine another mode of following the prophet: one in which the practices of the institutional body of the Church are treated as an epistemologically valid tool wherewith to discern prudence, as if the actions of the institutional Church and the prophet were one and the same.

7.3 Following the Church as Following the Prophet: Tithing, BYU, and Taxes

Tithing is an integral part of being an active and fully participating member of the LDS Church. Latter-day Saints assert that God has commanded that 10% of their income ought to be donated to the Church. The question “Are you a full-tithe payer?” is one of the questions asked of members when interviewing with their bishops for a temple recommend, indicating the centrality of the practice. The Church states that it uses tithing to “pursue God’s work of salvation and exaltation.” The Handbook lists the “uses of tithes and offerings” as including “Building and maintaining temples, meetinghouses, and other Church buildings, supporting the activities and operations of the Church and its local congregations, sharing the gospel throughout the world, supporting the programs of the Church, such as education and family history, and providing food, shelter, and other necessities to people in need” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023a, 34.0). Essentially, it goes to the general funding of the Church and its operations.

Coincidentally, while I was in Cardston, the investigative journalism arm of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), *The Fifth Estate*, started advertising an upcoming broadcast related to the LDS Church in Canada. Titled, “The Mormons’ Books” (*Fifth Estate* 2022), the exclusive story promised to reveal something of national importance that the Canadian branch of the LDS Church was doing with the money tithed from Canadians.

Word about this upcoming broadcast spread quickly. I received texts from non-LDS colleagues asking if I was aware of it. I was asked if I knew anything about it by LDS and non-LDS friends alike, and I heard chatter about it in the hallways at church. This proved to be both a blessing and a curse for my research. For a few weeks following the CBC’s initial announcement about the story, I met with interlocutors who were suddenly suspicious about me and my research—one asked me (perhaps sarcastically, though it was not clear) if I was secretly a CBC reporter. On the other hand, others were more open to chatting, often wanting to speculate with me about what the broadcast would reveal. I had two rather robust, speculative

conversations about this topic with two different interlocutors. The first was with Doug, who had many opinions about taxation and tithing.

This particular conversation with Doug (we had several over the span of a few months) took place in the Cardston Subway restaurant over a lunch hour. He had chosen the location, and I suspect it was because it was a place where he regularly ran into people he knew. Throughout our conversation he exchanged greetings with many of the customers who came in, which created a steady series of pauses in the flow of our discussion. What struck me was the number of people he recognized, even though he had mentioned early in our relationship that he was “not really from Cardston.” The scene suggested that, despite being a relative newcomer, he had made considerable effort to integrate into the community.

Doug had strong feelings about tax rates. In particular, he asserted that taxes were much too high in Canada (more on this in chapter eight). When I asked him what he thought the CBC report would reveal, he speculated that it would “say the Church is doing what everyone should do, paying as little tax as possible and still upholding the law.”⁷² He guessed that the Church was doing this by directing the funds tithed from Canadian Latter-day Saints to Brigham Young University (BYU), which is a not-for-profit post-secondary institution owned by the LDS Church. In Doug’s explanation, sending the money to an affiliated institution would effectively allow the Church to “donate” the funds to itself while avoiding taxes. This was a misinterpretation, since tithing is not taxable income for registered charities, but it was an honest one nonetheless.

As it turns out, Doug’s speculation was pretty close to what *The Fifth Estate* ended up reporting (*Fifth Estate* 2022). The Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) allows charitable organizations to transfer donations collected in Canada to qualified foreign charities and

⁷² As a registered charity, the LDS Church is exempt from paying income tax in Canada, although its eligibility for property tax exemptions depends on provincial and municipal regulations.

universities. The LDS Church is a registered charity in Canada, and BYU is a qualified university. As a result, and according to the report, the LDS Church in Canada has used these tax provisions to transfer more than \$1 billion CDN worth of funds tithed from Canadian Latter-day Saints to BYU since 2007. The report noted that such transfers are permitted within Canada's charitable tax framework, but that the associated tax credits "cost other Canadian taxpayers anywhere between 16 to 28 cents for every dollar donated," according to the unnamed tax experts consulted (Angelovski et al. 2022). These costs arise from the charitable tax credits claimed by donors, not from the LDS Church avoiding taxes.

Although none of the report's specifics were yet public when we spoke, Doug was confident enough in his speculation to begin defending what he presumed was the Church's approach. Following an assertion that the "government destroys wealth," Doug explained the virtues of using legal mechanisms to minimize taxes owing:

There aren't taxpayers and tax cheats. There are educated taxpayers and uneducated ones. The uneducated ones pay more than they should. The educated ones pay as little as they can. The Church has an excellent legal team. They're educated, right? They don't pay the government any more than they have to. I'm educated. I know how the system works, and I use it to my advantage, too.

The inclusion of "too" at the end of this quote highlighted to me that Doug thought of his own tax-related practices as being related to the practices of the LDS Church—they both use the tax systems to their advantage, or at least to avoid disadvantage. He read the Church's institutional strategy as a model of economic prudence in which Church behaviour functioned as an instructive pattern for his own financial decision-making. I inquired about how, but Doug was somewhat coy on the matter. "Well, I submit my tithing receipts as donations, of course. And there's some stuff you can do with stocks for, like, capital gains. But it's all normal, legal stuff."

Doug might not have been willing to tell me about how he uses stocks to avoid paying as much tax as possible, but my second interlocutor on this matter, Philip, was. This conversation took place in Philip's car while he drove me back to Cardston from a Church meeting hosted in Lethbridge. After dropping me off, I wrote in my field notes some of what he had told me about the practice of donating stocks to the Church. An excerpt from those notes reads:

The Church has always accepted "in kind" tithes, not just cash. Stuff like chickens. A sort of holdover from the early days of the Church when people paid tithing in chickens and whatnot. Today, you can pay your tithing in stocks. This allows you to realize the gains made without paying taxes on those gains, and in fact getting a rebate of some kind for having made a charitable contribution. He [Philip] didn't know, but he figured the Church sold those stocks and, being a charitable organization, also doesn't pay taxes on it.

I still do not know how the Church handles these kinds of donations and what the tax implications are for the institution—no one authoritative has wanted to talk to me about the institutional side of this practice and the Donations-In-Kind Office of the LDS Church (Donations-In-Kind Office, n.d.) never replied to my email inquiries. Perhaps this is because the practice is "normally discourage[d]" by the Church, though nonetheless facilitated according to its "Step by Step Guide" to making other-than-cash donations (Church Jesus Christ Latter-Day St. 2022).

In-Kind Donations, Including Tithing

“The Church normally discourages paying tithing and other donations in kind. It is preferable for members to dispose of the property themselves and then pay tithing and other donations in cash. However, in-kind donations may be accepted in certain cases and may be a common practice in some areas of the world.

“The Church accepts (1) stocks, bonds, and other securities that are marketable immediately and (2) some marketable real estate. Before accepting these contributions, local leaders should receive approval from Church headquarters or the assigned area office. If members want to contribute other items, the bishop seeks approval from the stake president. The stake president contacts Church headquarters or the area office for approval before authorizing the bishop to accept the items” (General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 34.4.8, ChurchofJesusChrist.org).

For donations of stocks, bonds, or other readily marketable securities, members should contact the Donations-in-Kind Office at Church headquarters. The number to call is 1-800-453-3860, ext. 2-2554, or 1-801-240-2554.

For real estate donations, members should contact the Real Estate Services Division at Church headquarters, which handles property donations. The number to call is 1-801-240-9231.

Figure 16: A partial screenshot from the LDS Church's "Step by Step: Other Donation Methods" website which outlines the procedures for donating stocks, bonds, or real estate to the Church (Church Jesus Christ Latter-Day St. 2022)

There are real advantages for Latter-day Saints like Philip and Doug who pay their tithing this way. In 2022, when Doug and Philip were telling me about the practice, the capital gains “inclusion” rate in Canada was 50%. Meaning, when an investor sells an investment at a profit, 50% of that profit is normally added to their taxable income. Aside from that sum being subject to the appropriate federal and provincial income tax rates, the included income could trigger the individual’s total income falling into a higher tax bracket, too. Donating the stocks directly to a registered charity like the LDS Church, however, avoids triggering capital gains tax while also qualifying for a charitable donation credit.

Say, for example, a fictitious Latter-day Saint named Warren wants to pay \$21,800 in tithing because he earned \$218,000 in a year. Warren could pay this in cash with funds from his savings. However, Warren has \$21,800 worth of stock that he purchased years ago for \$10,000 (A 118% return! Excellent fictitious investment, Warren!). Instead of paying cash, Warren wants to use these stocks to pay his tithing. He has two ways he could go about doing this.

First, he could sell the stock. Doing so would realize the gain and require him to include half of it in his taxable income. Because Warren's base income sits near a federal bracket threshold, the additional included income could push part of his earnings into a higher bracket and increase the total tax he owes. The exact amount would depend on factors such as provincial tax rates and the various credits available to him, but the basic effect is clear: selling appreciated stock creates a taxable event.

In the second option, Warren donates the stock directly to the Church. No capital gain is realized, so his taxable income remains unchanged and he owes no tax on the appreciated value. He still receives a donation receipt for the full market value, just as he would have if he had sold the stock, but without the additional tax that selling the stock would have generated.

While this specific scenario is fictitious, the practice of donating appreciated securities to avoid realizing capital gains is neither fictitious, new, nor specific to Canada. I located an article from 2001 published in the LDS lifestyle magazine *Meridian* touting the financial benefits of paying tithing this way. The tagline for the article toyed a bit with scriptural language: "The firstlings of your flock may be stock" (Halverson 2001). More recently, Redditor Head_Otter (2022) replied in the *r/latterdaysaints* subreddit to another Redditor inquiring about the practice. "You can donate a portion of the stock in kind to the church through their in-kind contribution team," they said. "That allows you to avoid having to pay unnecessary short term or long-term capital gains on the stock if it has appreciated in value since you received it." In the same thread, but in reply to a different Redditor, Head_Otter elaborated further:

It is a very easy process and is by no means discouraged. My wife and I have donated stocks on numerous occasions. There are substantial tax benefits for you as the giver to donate stock instead of selling the stock and then donating the funds. It allows you to avoid having to realize long term capital gains. We had stock that my wife had for almost 20 years and by donating it, we received donation value for the current market value without having to pay

taxes on the gains.

The church has an entire team to assist members with donations in kind. You can find it on the church website. (Head_Otter 2022a)

There is no moral assertion or discussion in these statements about whether one ought to pay taxes—the unquestioned assumption is simply that, when the law provides a favourable mechanism, it is prudent to use it. This aligns with the intent of Canadian tax policy: in 2006, the federal government eliminated capital gains tax on donations of publicly traded securities specifically to promote charitable giving. The practice therefore reflects engagement with, not a workaround of, a state-designed incentive. Within this context, the perception of prudence is reinforced by the fact that the Church facilitates such donations, even though it does not publicly frame the practice in terms of tax efficiency.

Recall what Doug said: “They [the Church] don’t pay the government any more than they have to. I am educated. I know how the system works, and I use it to my advantage, too.” For Doug, the significance lies less in the technical details of tax laws and more in what he believes the Church’s financial conduct represents. The fact that the Church participates in a lawful, state-designed charitable mechanism becomes, for him, a signal of how he can and should manage his own finances. In Doug’s interpretation, the Church’s use of such mechanisms demonstrates a form of financial prudence he ought to emulate, even if the mechanism in question does not operate in the way he assumed. My interest here is not in evaluating the morality of the practice or in foregrounding Doug’s misunderstanding, but in demonstrating the epistemological move at work: Doug treats institutional behaviour as a meaningful indication of what prudent action looks like.

What makes this move plausible to Latter-day Saints, however, is not simply that the Church is a large, stable, or financially competent institution that should then be emulated. It is that the Church is understood to be led by a prophet, which has interesting implications for how

its policies and institutional practices can be interpreted. Because prophetic authority frames institutional action, members can reasonably treat what the Church does as carrying some degree of spiritual validation, even when the decisions in question appear routine or administrative.

This interpretive logic rests on a widely held assumption within Latter-day Saint life: that institutional action is ultimately guided, or at least overseen, by leaders who are believed to seek and receive revelation on behalf of the Church. For example, during a Sunday School meeting I attended, even though the topic of conversation focused on the Biblical figure of Ruth, an audience member seemingly randomly decided to share with the class that she had a “strong testimony of Heavenly Father leading the Church by leaders that are called by Him.” After she spoke at length on the subject, I summarized in my notes: “The prophet receives revelation for everything the Church does. Even the small stuff. If the Church does something (teachings/policy/announcements), it is because the brethren [the apostles and prophets] have received confirmation that it’s the right thing to do. We can trust in a Church led by a prophet.” Her impassioned declarative testimony demonstrates this common understanding amongst many Latter-day Saints that decisions about Church policy and management are, in some real sense, rooted in the process of revelation and prophetic direction.

This was a statement that, admittedly, is difficult to defend as a literal description of how institutional decisions are made; it is improbable that senior Church leaders seek direct revelation for every administrative detail. However, her overstatement is understandable when considered alongside the way Church leaders themselves describe the scope of divine direction. In his Saturday evening address at the April 2020 general conference, the talk given by prophet Russell M. Nelson (2020) focused on what amounted to a marketing change. He revealed a modified logo for the Church that kept all the text from the previous logo, changed some font sizes, and added a stylized image of a marble statue of Jesus Christ that has been popular amongst Latter-day Saints for decades. This announcement was preceded by efforts

made between 2018 and 2020 to rebrand the Church in ways that highlight the centrality of Jesus Christ to the faith: the official website www.lds.org became www.thechurchofjesuschrist.org, for example, along with Church email addresses and social media channels being similarly changed. His summary of these changes was supported by the assertion that Heavenly Father “decreed exactly what His Church should be called” (Nelson 2020, 72), reminding listeners that the name of the Church was a divinely revealed one. Similarly, to close his talk announcing the new logo, Nelson told listeners “This *is* The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He stands at its head and directs all that we do” (74, emphasis in the original). The statement that God “directs all that we do” opens the door for Latter-day Saints like the Sunday School testimony bearer and Doug to interpret even seemingly mundane administrative decisions—such as changes to email addresses and logos, or enabling Canadian Latter-day Saints to take advantage of federal tax provisions—as actions that fall within the scope of divine direction.

My point here is not that every little decision made by the Church *is* the product of revelation. My point is that these kinds of framings—whether articulated by a lay person in the middle of a Sunday School lesson or by Russell M. Nelson speaking over the pulpit about a logo change—create the conditions of possibility under which Latter-day Saints like Doug can interpret institutional policy as prudence *revealed*. Institutional choices can be reasonably understood as carrying at least some measure of divine authorization, which makes mirroring those choices feel like following the prophet.

This is why institutional practice becomes a meaningful source of epistemological guidance for people like Doug. The epistemological move is not simply “the Church does it, so it must be efficient,” but “the Church does it, so it has been weighed, considered, and confirmed” via revelation by those members of the Church who have the most developed capacity for getting revelation. Emulating the Church is a matter of following the prophet.

* * *

This chapter developed our understanding of how the epistemological technique of revelation functions in more contextualized, situated ethnographic moments. It focused on how Latter-day Saints strive to “follow the prophet” in three ways: following the explicit and specific words of prophets in matters of food storage even while the institutional messaging about food storage has become more ambiguous; emulating the prophets’ conduct in contexts where they may not be making authoritative, prophetic pronouncements; and treating institutional Church practices as meaningful indicators of what prudent action looks like, particularly because those practices can be understood to unfold under some degree prophetic direction. As I have argued, revelation is not an event as much as a technique of acquiring knowledge about what one ought to do. In this technique, following the prophet is especially relevant.

Opportunities to utilize the prophet when rationalizing one’s economic decisions is not only an important imperative, but it is also part of cultivating divine-human capital. This is not simply because prophets are seen as wise, but because obedience itself is treated as a divine virtue. In LDS temple ordinances, members covenant to live what is called the Law of Obedience, constructing obedience as a core requirement for exaltation. Efforts to discern how best to follow prophetic counsel, then, are not just practical questions of interpretation and economic judgment—they are exercises in striving towards obedience and, by extension, in the cultivation of this divine trait.

Those who followed the prophet’s direct instruction to store food did so as an expression of obedience, and they tried to do so precisely even as institutional guidance on food storage became less specific. Others, debating how agency factors into local alcohol policy, were trying to be obedient to ambiguous prophetic counsel on the matter, with some choosing to obey esoteric prophetic doctrine, and others to obey the clear-cut and pragmatic examples set by the prophets. Still others, modelled aspects of their personal financial reasoning on what they understood the Church to be doing institutionally, because they regarded institutional behaviour as carrying some measure of revelatory weight. Across these divergent situations, the common

thread was not agreement on what the prophet had said or meant; each case involved distinct interpretive nuances and sometimes contradictory stances. The shared pattern was the effort to obey. Within the epistemology of revelation, this effort itself functions as a cultivated virtue and is therefore treated as prudent to develop.

In the next chapter, I extend this analysis beyond contemporary prophets by examining how Latter-day Saints engage with ancient prophetic texts—particularly the Book of Mormon—as part of their economic discernment techniques.

8.0 Studying Things Out: Taxes, Trade, and Ancient Economic Wisdom in the Book of Mormon

Though many Latter-day Saints prioritize contemporary prophetic counsel over ancient ones, not all LDS knowledge practices are structured around contemporary prophetic counsel. Ancient prophetic texts—especially the Book of Mormon—also serve as authoritative sources of economic reasoning. While these scriptures are most often studied for their spiritual teachings, I observed Latter-day Saints engaging them as revealed histories containing insight into political economy, governance, and prosperity. It would be impossible to survey a comprehensive guide to how Latter-day Saints incorporate the Book of Mormon into their daily rationalities. In this chapter, though, I examine two contrasting cases in which Book of Mormon narratives were used to reason through economic questions.

In the first, a scriptural account of taxation under wicked rule is taken as a moral template for judging present-day fiscal policy, with the assumption that revealed history discloses economic truths. In the other, a presumed truth from liberal economics—that free trade generates prosperity—is used to argue for the plausibility of the Book of Mormon as an accurate, divinely revealed account. In both, the Book of Mormon functions not just as scripture but as a site for practical economic discernment, where the revealed past is mined for truths about prudent present-day economic life.

8.1 Book of Mormon Taxation

I already introduced Doug in section 7.3. A father and a business owner, Doug met with me several times over several months to talk about LDS economics. In the same conversation we had about legal tax avoidance, Doug also related that he often turned to the Book of Mormon to find details about economic policy. Ultimately, he related using his study of this ancient text to inform his stance on taxes in Canada. In this part of the conversation, it was not

only the matter of how to avoid paying as much taxes as possible that was important, but how to feel about taxes more generally based on a study of ancient prophetic texts. To understand how, I need to explain the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon is one of the core scriptural texts for Latter-day Saints. In many ways, it is the tradition's foundational text. I observed frequent reference to it as the "keystone" of the faith, a term that alludes to a popular talk from the prophet Ezra Taft Benson (1986) who popularized this characterization of the Book of Mormon amongst Latter-day Saints. The idea being that if the Book of Mormon is "true," then Joseph Smith was a true prophet to whom God revealed the text. And, subsequently, the Church formed by Smith is thus the true church. However, if the Book of Mormon is not true—meaning, if it was a fabrication of Smith or his peers—then it all comes crumbling down, just like the keystone at the apex of a stone archway. It was for this reason that the promise the missionaries made to me shortly after my arrival in Cardston about being able to receive personal revelation hinged on a study of the Book of Mormon: if I read it, and prayed about it, I would receive knowledge about it being a true text via the power of the Holy Ghost, and thus know that the Church is true.

Since many Latter-day Saints assert that the Book of Mormon contains a record of real events (an assertion supported by the text itself), these Latter-day Saints look to it not just as a source of spiritual guidance, but as an historical text. The book states that it records the rise and fall of several nations or ethnic groups that most Latter-day Saints assert to have existed somewhere in Central America.⁷³ Reading the Book of Mormon this way, Latter-day Saints can

⁷³ While statements made by Joseph Smith support a variety of positions on where Book of Mormon events occurred, the contemporary Church authorities do not make any claims on the matter, simply asserting that the Book of Mormon events took place somewhere in the Americas. In fact, the Church actively dissuades members from speculating about this (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.-a). This has not stopped Latter-day Saints, however, from pursuing this line of inquiry. In

read a revealed record of civilizations that rose to prominence, the conditions under which that rise took place, as well as how those civilizations fell, and what conditions contributed to their decline.

My emphasis on the word “revealed” here is intentional. This record is not simply a historian’s interpretation of historical events which may be critiqued for personal bias or limited sources. While the stated authors of Book of Mormon are men (and historians, at that⁷⁴), they are also described as prophets, and their records were translated by the prophet Joseph Smith with miraculous, divine assistance. So, this book about these civilizations is considered by Latter-day Saints to be a truer account of historical events than what you might get from a

my assessment, the Central American setting is the one that resonates most with Latter-day Saints today, based on several observations. First, prominent LDS authors have published books asserting a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon events (Sorenson [1985] 1996). Second, from 1979 to 2006 there existed a Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) operating out of the Church-owned Brigham Young University that published a journal highlighting research on Book of Mormon populations. Much of this research focused on Central America. Third, tour companies owned by Yucatan-peninsula residents have been formed to take Latter-day Saints on trips to Mayan archaeological sites offering patrons Book of Mormon-informed interpretations of the sites (Alma’s LDS Tours, n.d.; McDannell 2017). Fourth, in the Church-produced media such as the full-length feature film *The Testaments* (Merrill 2000), Aztec and Mayan imagery dominated the portrayal of Book of Mormon populations. Finally, and most specifically to my field site, in locally made artistic renderings of Book of Mormon sites, Cardston residents favoured Aztec/Mayan-style, pyramidal architecture.

⁷⁴ Authorship in the Book of Mormon is complex. In its simplest terms, the book states that it is an abridgement of a series of texts written by diverse authors. The principal author of this abridgment is a man named Mormon. The introduction to the Book of Mormon calls him a “prophet-historian.” This is why the Book of Mormon bears his name even though the book contains many smaller books within it that bear the names of other prophets.

history book authored by a professional historian. This is divinely revealed history, not mere historical interpretation. From this, some wisdoms about what constitutes good or bad socio-economic practice can be discerned, and some Latter-day Saints, like Doug, look to the recorded experiences of these civilizations as social models that have characteristics to either follow or avoid.

Doug and I were having an unstructured discussion about a range of topics, spanning his employment, why his family had chosen to move to Cardston, what his experience had been since arriving, the high school football team, the pandemic, and Alberta politics, when the topic of the upcoming CBC report arose (*Fifth Estate* 2022). The precise contents of the report were, at the time, unclear—it was not broadcast until three days after my conversation with Doug. However, the advertisement made it clear it would focus on how the LDS Church handles the funds tithed from Canadian members. As already related, Doug speculated about what the report would say and, far from finding the supposed contents problematic, he interpreted what he believed the Church was doing as a lawful and sensible use of the tax framework that he ought to follow. However, this stance was not only premised on what the Church was doing at that time; it was also premised on an overall orientation towards taxes that he found support for in the ancient historical account. “Governments should keep taxes low,” he told me. “And we know this because it happened to the Nephites, you know? Noah was a bad ruler because he taxed people too much. And the Lamanites taxed even more—more than King Noah.” Then, in an exasperated tone tinged with humour and resignation, he stated, “And Canada taxes me more than any of them!”

What Doug was referring to here was a narrative found in the books of Omni and Mosiah, two of the fifteen smaller “books” which comprise the whole volume that is the Book of Mormon. At this point in the narrative structure of the Book of Mormon, a nation of righteous Nephites lived in proximity to a wicked nation of Lamanites, the latter group having occupied the lands of the former, who had fled. Years following this occupation, a group of Nephites departed

from their home in exile to go back into the land occupied by the Lamanites. They were not heard from again for many years (Omni 1:27).

About 80 years later,⁷⁵ another small exploratory group led by a man named Ammon departed from the Nephite nation to see if they could locate their lost kin. They managed to find the descendants of this first expedition and, upon meeting their king Limhi, Limhi recounted to Ammon the history of his people since their departure from the Nephite nation.

In this history, the king tells Ammon about his predecessor, a wicked King Noah, who “laid a tax of one fifth part of all they possessed, a fifth part of their gold and of their silver, and a fifth part of their ziff, and of their copper, and of their brass and their iron; and a fifth part of their fatlings; and also a fifth part of all their grain” (Mosiah 11:3). Noah then used this tax to support his frivolous and indulgent lifestyle. This was the King Noah that Doug was referring to, who taxed his people 20% of all they owned, and who was deemed a wicked king.

To be fair, Noah was not deemed wicked simply because of taxation, but because of the indulgent ways he used those taxes, as well as the way he ignored the spiritual teachings and warnings of a prophet sent to rebuke Noah for his wickedness. Instead of heeding this prophet’s admonitions, Noah burned the prophet at the stake. So, Noah was deemed wicked for a variety of reasons. Nonetheless, when Doug invoked Noah, it was as an example of a government

⁷⁵ The headings to most chapters in the Book of Mormon include approximate dates. The heading to Omni 1 states that it covers the years 323-130 B.C., and the heading to Mosiah 7 states that its contents occurred around 121 B.C. Grant Hardy (2023), a professor of history and religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Asheville published an *Annotated Book of Mormon* which includes “scholarly annotations” intended to enhance the clarity of the source text. In his assessment, a more precise date for the departure of the first group takes place around 200 B.C., resulting in the story of Ammon re-locating them taking place about 80 years later.

unjustly enacting an onerous tax on his people. Then, as a comparison, Doug contrasted Noah's taxation practices with those of the Lamanites.

Later in the narrative, Noah fled the kingdom following an invasion by the Lamanite nation. Unable to resist this invasion, the remaining Nephites were subjugated by the Lamanites and a tributary king—Limhi, who is telling this story to Ammon—was set up to govern them. The tribute to be paid by these survivors was “one half of all they possessed, even one half of their gold, and their silver, and all their precious things, and thus they should pay tribute to the king of the Lamanites from year to year” (Mosiah 19:15). It later states that the Lamanites used this tribute (at least in part) to support the guards set up around the surviving Nephite nation to maintain the peace and keep the Nephites in subjugation (Mosiah 19:28). So, while the wicked King Noah used his 1/5 tax to support an indulgent lifestyle, the Lamanites ostensibly utilized their 1/2 tax to fund governmental functions. Nonetheless, when describing the situation to Ammon and his company, Limhi describes their circumstances as follows:

For behold, we are in bondage to the Lamanites, and are taxed with a tax which is grievous to be borne. And now, behold, our brethren will deliver us out of our bondage, or out of the hands of the Lamanites, and we will be their slaves; for it is better that we be slaves to the Nephites than to pay tribute to the king of the Lamanites. (Mosiah 7:15)

Clearly, according to the text, the tax weighed heavily on the Nephites given that they would rather become slaves to their lost Nephite kin than continue to live under Lamanite rule paying this onerous tribute.

For most of the Book of Mormon's overall narrative, the Lamanites are the perennial villains, exemplifying wickedness, pride, sloth, and malice. It tracks, then, that if a wicked Nephite king would impose a heavy 20% tax, then the even more wicked and villainous Lamanite nation would impose an even heavier 50% tax. Doug's statement to me followed this

teleology of unjust taxes, “Noah ... he taxed people too much. And the Lamanites taxed even more ... And Canada taxes me more than any of them!”

While I do not think Doug was trying to suggest that the Canadian government was “wicked” in the Book of Mormon sense,⁷⁶ I believe he was trying to illustrate the unjustness of the tax burden, which then justifies an individual’s decision to try and get out from underneath that tax burden as much as is allowable within the bounds of the laws, since, it is a central tenet of the LDS faith to abide by the laws of the land (Pearl of Great Price, Articles of Faith 1:12). Doug’s assertion that Canadian governments tax him more than the Lamanites did is unlikely, given that according to the Fraser Institute (a fairly right-leaning Canadian thinktank), even the highest income group in Canada, the top 1% of earners, have an effective tax rate of closer to 30% (Cross 2020, 9-10). What Doug was saying, however, was that he feels that the quantity of tax he is paying is unjust, and this was communicated by linking high taxes to governments exemplified as wicked in Book of Mormon narratives.

8.2 Free Trade and Book of Mormon Plausibility

Another instance of Latter-day Saints drawing economic wisdom from ancient, revealed texts came in the form of public address by Daniel C. Peterson. Peterson was the former Director of Research and Chair at the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), now known as the Neil A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. For much of the history of these institutes they were the principal sources of apologetic research addressing the Book of Mormon, and each operated out of the LDS Church-owned Brigham Young University. Peterson served as editor-in-chief of the FARMS Review from its inception in 1989 until 2012, when a schism within the Maxwell Institute led to his removal. Following this, the Maxwell

⁷⁶ The *Guide to the Scriptures*, which the LDS Church publishes as a “study help” to interpreting scriptures, defines wickedness as “Evil, iniquity; to be disobedient to God’s commandments”

Institute abandoned the apologetic component of its mission and Peterson's association with the Institute was terminated (Stack 2012). Peterson, who held that apologetic scholarship was an integral component of the institute's mission, went on to form a new journal that same year: *The Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*. This has made Peterson an important intellectual figure in LDS communities inasmuch as he continues to champion the apologetic approach. This appeals to Latter-day Saints who value a more scholarly approach to defending the truth claims of the LDS faith and the Book of Mormon as an historical document.

In July 2022 I came across an announcement that Peterson would be hosting a talk in one of the Cardston meetinghouses. It was advertised to multiple wards via Facebook, as well as via in-Church announcements. Though, it was not positioned as an official Church event: it was not a broadcast from a general authority, nor was it a designated stake or ward event. It was simply an event where "all who would like to attend are invited" to hear "Dr. Peterson" speak. It is unusual within LDS circles to address someone by the title "Doctor," preferring instead Brother, Sister, Elder, etc. Inviting audiences to come listen to "Dr. Peterson" signaled that this was not exactly a Church-y event, even if it would address Church-related content. In these announcements, Peterson was positioned as the former director at FARMS and as someone who had served for approximately eight years on the "gospel doctrine writing committee" for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He was not positioned as a spiritual leader, but instead as an intellectual leader who would speak intellectually about spiritual topics.

Unfortunately, I was unable to attend this speaking event in Cardston. I lamented this unavailability to a Latter-day Saint in Calgary who, to my surprise, let me know that Peterson had first spoken in Calgary just a few days before. Moreover, he informed me that the event had been recorded and published online (Calgary Alberta Stake 2022), thus enabling me to view it. I later learned that while the Cardston Stake had invited Peterson to address them specifically, other stakes had advertised the Calgary instance of his talk (Raymond Alberta Stake News

2022), and Peterson had been invited to speak to other groups in the region, too (Lethbridge YSA Stake 2022). One of which took place out of doors “from behind a tree-stump lectern out under the trees and the open sky” (Peterson 2022). The Cardston speech which I missed, it seems, formed part of a circuit of presentations Peterson gave across southern Alberta.

In the talk hosted by the Calgary Stake (Calgary Alberta Stake 2022), Peterson addressed a smattering of apologetic research into the plausibility of the Book of Mormon as a real, historical document. As he described it, he delivered “a scattershot presentation” wherein he gave summaries of research ranging from archaeology, linguistics, geography, agriculture, mythology, and literary and cultural studies. These were all presented as evidences that Joseph Smith did not write the Book of Mormon himself, nor that anyone else contemporary to Smith could have come up with the book’s contents. In his 72-minute address, I counted 26 points presented as reasons why the Book of Mormon is plausible history, averaging just under 3 minutes per point. As you can imagine, it was a whirlwind of a talk, and each individual point was given limited attention and effectively no elaboration. Attentive as I was to economic matters, one of the quick points he made caught my attention:

... humans behave in the Book of Mormon the way humans behave. Societies behave in the way that societies behave. They rise and they fall, and they prosper and they fail. And, uh, there are even some passages - I won't point to them now - where at one point, for example, the trade barriers fall down between the Nephites and the Lamanites, and then a few verses later you have the Book of Mormon commenting that they prospered like never before. Well, we know that's what it's like when trade barriers fall and people can trade freely and interact freely. (Peterson in Calgary Alberta Stake 2022, 6:25-7:00)

Peterson does not specify which verses he was referring to here from the Book of Mormon, but he was almost certainly referring to passages from the Book of Helaman, chapter

six, which recounts a relatively unusual period in the Book of Mormon narrative where the Lamanites are considered more righteous than the Nephites. These faithful Lamanite converts to the Messianic tradition began to move amongst the Nephites and to preach to them about the Messianic faith. This results in a general mingling between these two peoples:

And behold, there was peace in all the land, insomuch that the Nephites did go into whatsoever part of the land they would, whether among the Nephites or the Lamanites. And it came to pass that the Lamanites did also go whithersoever they would, whether it were among the Lamanites or among the Nephites; and thus they did have free intercourse one with another, to buy and to sell, and to get gain, according to their desire. And it came to pass that they became exceedingly rich, both the Lamanites and the Nephites; and they did have an exceeding plenty of gold, and of silver, and of all manner of precious metals, both in the land south and in the land north. (Helaman 6:7-9)

What Peterson wanted to draw attention to by alluding to these passages was the way the prophet Helaman reported that trade—free trade across the borders of previously antagonistic nations—resulted in mutual prosperity. Peterson sees this as evidence of the Book of Mormon’s veracity because it fit with his contemporary understanding of the benefits of free trade: “we know that’s what it’s like when trade barriers fall and people can trade freely and interact freely.” The logic here being that since neoclassical liberal economic wisdom holds that free trade results in prosperity, and since we can identify this occurring in this text (alongside other instances of “societies behaving like societies behave”), that makes the Book of Mormon plausible human history.

Each of these examples, Doug’s and Peterson’s, show different ways that Latter-day Saints’ reading of ancient, revealed text can inform the ways they make sense of economic practices. Doug was utilizing a Book of Mormon narrative in a way that equated high taxes to

wicked regimes, and even higher taxes to even more wicked regimes, to articulate why he felt his taxes were too high. His orientation towards high taxes as not only undesirable, but *bad*, was something he could find support for in the revealed text. My point is not to determine whether Doug's position on taxation preceded his reading of the Book of Mormon or was shaped through it, but to show how the text provides a ready interpretive resource for framing an economic stance as ethically grounded. The veracity of the economic principle is reinforced because the text, by virtue of it being a revealed text, is taken to be true.

Peterson's approach was slightly different. Peterson's concern was with identifying the Book of Mormon as true, not with identifying any particular economic practice as good, bad, or even true. To do it, he relied on a logic that began with an assumption about free trade that was not in dispute: that free trade, according to liberal economic theory, tends to produce general economic prosperity. So, he uses liberalism as a tool to verify a disputed claim: whether the Book of Mormon is an actual historical record. The logic being, 1) since this economic practice we know to function in a particular way is true, and 2) since it is identifiable in the Book of Mormon narrative, then 3) the plausibility of the Book of Mormon as a true historical record is strengthened, especially if we presume (as Peterson does) that Joseph Smith was not an economist, nor someone who would know anything about free trade. The neoclassical liberal economic principle here serves as evidence in support of the veracity of the revealed text. The text is true because the economic principle is true.

* * *

This chapter has shown two ways that ancient prophetic texts can inform the economic knowledge practices of Latter-day Saints. These cases do not represent how all Latter-day Saints read the Book of Mormon, but they illustrate two patterns I have observed where readers use this ostensibly revealed text to reason through economic questions. For those who accept its prophetic origins, the Book of Mormon is not merely a record of past events but a divinely revealed history. This lends it a unique epistemological status: its truth is assumed and

foundational for believers, yet it is always contested by those outside the faith. This precarious status creates two complementary orientations. On one hand, economic positions drawn from the text (e.g., Doug's reading of Mosiah as linking high taxes to wicked rule) are treated as true because they appear in the revealed source. On the other, when a reader already accepts an economic principle as true (e.g., "free trade promotes prosperity"), finding it reflected in scripture becomes evidence that the text itself is true. In both cases, the Book of Mormon becomes a site where revelation and economic reasoning become mutually reinforcing.

9.0 Revealing Sexed Economies

Throughout this monograph I have admittedly given little explicit attention to the sexed differences in LDS economic practices. In part, this has been because I was not privy to the ways in which women teach each other economically relevant knowledge in places like Relief Society meetings. As a general rule, being male, I am unable to attend female-only Sunday meetings. This presents a significant limitation to my analysis, but it is a limitation owing to my decision to adhere as much as possible to a method of observant participation. Since I was not allowed to participate in these settings in a way that emerged organically, I did not observe them. Other researchers, like O'Brien (2023), have sought to get around this constraint by asking LDS bishops to eschew stated Church policy and allow them to conduct research in church meetings utilizing research instruments like surveys and audio-recording meetings. I, however, did not think it would be ethical to ask bishops to transgress Church policy, and chose to rely on integration into the community and subsequent observant participation as my ethnographic method. The resulting disparity in my attention to female experience was a direct outcome of that methodological commitment.

However, there were instances both inside and outside of Church settings in which disparity between the sexes in their economic roles was nonetheless evident, even if they were not numerous. What they reveal is how the hierarchical distribution of revelatory authority—particularly as it operates within the family unit—structures the epistemological technique of revelation in sexed terms. Latter-day Saints treat the family not only as the basic unit of earthly society, but as the foundational structure of divine life. Within that cosmology, husbands and wives are both taught that they may seek revelation for their family, yet men alone are ordained to priesthood office and instructed to “preside” in the home, a responsibility often framed in ways that leave room for interpretive variation. This combination of shared revelatory entitlement and sex-specific priesthood responsibilities creates patterns in how Latter-day Saints describe and

navigate revelatory authority. Given that I have been developing an argument that treats revelation as a structured and structuring epistemological technique for economic discernment, it becomes necessary to examine how access to revelation is discussed and enacted unevenly between the sexes. I examine these dynamics through two ethnographic narratives: one focused on sexed labour practices, the other on how priesthood lines of authority structure who may receive revelation on behalf of the family.

To clarify my language: I use *sexed* rather than *gendered* throughout this chapter (and, indeed, throughout this monograph) because Latter-day Saint doctrine asserts a fixed correlation between biological sex and gender. While this theological stance stands in tension with the social scientific consensus that gender is culturally constructed and fluid, it reflects how my most fervent interlocutors understand not only human existence but the eternal order of the cosmos: gender is neither fluid nor socially produced, but eternal and, in all but the rarest cases, determinable by observing genital sex at birth. The Church does acknowledge such cases in which sex at birth is indeterminate (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023a, 38.7.7), yet this exception does not alter the broader doctrinal teaching that gender is aligned with biological sex at birth. Indeed, Church policy states that references to “gender” in official materials should be understood as referring to “biological sex at birth” (38.6.23).

In practice, a sexed male who presented as female would not be admitted to female-only meetings, nor would a female who presented as male be permitted at a Young Men’s campout. Guidelines for ward leaders addressing transgender members stipulate that “Individuals who ... transition away from their biological sex at birth are not called or assigned to (1) fulfill gender-specific roles, (2) serve as teachers, or (3) work with children or youth” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2024, 1).

Such exclusions demonstrate that within Latter-day Saint imaginaries there is no room for gender fluidity: sex is taken to be fixed, visible, and determinative. Although the Church

acknowledges rare situations in which sex at birth is medically indeterminate, these are treated as exceptional medical circumstances, rather than as openings for gender variability.

While in other contexts the social patterns I observe in this chapter would best be described as gender roles, that framing implies a flexibility which, from an emic perspective, is entirely absent here. This is why I use sex rather than gender: to reflect how these patterns are not treated as socially negotiable but as expressions of a sexed identity understood to be eternal and inherent. Within orthodox Latter-day Saint theology, sex is understood as an eternal attribute of the individual, present in premortal existence, persisting through mortal embodiment, and continuing into the next life as a condition that regulates both the roles a person may hold and the activities in which they may appropriately participate.

9.1 Divvying Up Revealed Responsibilities

Home-based industry is alive and well in southern Alberta, having deep roots in the sexed labour of pioneer-era Latter-day Saints. Before my fieldwork began, I was sitting at my parents' dinner table with a friend of theirs from Lethbridge. He, too, was a Latter-day Saint. After telling him about my interest in Latter-day Saint economic practices and that I would be going to Cardston to study this, he enthusiastically offered me the following advice: "Pay attention to the cottage industry." Continuing, he explained that home-based production is prominent in southern Alberta, listing home-based bakeries, pickling and jarring foodstuffs, tailoring services, and furniture refurbishing. Moreover, he explained, it would be "one of the only ways to see women's labour" in the economy. His advice would prove to be revelatory in its own right. Indeed, it pointed me to one of the clearest sites where sexed divine roles are cultivated through everyday economic action.

Among the first things I did when I arrived in Cardston was to schedule a meeting with the president of the Cardston & District Historical Society. Generously, the president agreed to meet and give me a tour of the Courthouse & Heritage Museum, which is the focal point of the

society's efforts alongside the maintenance of the historic Card Home.⁷⁷ After a lengthy introductory conversation, the tour began. It started in the basement of the museum where the exhibits focused on the history of sport in Cardston County and concluded on the main floor with several exhibits demonstrating the robust history of home-based textile production in the early settlement era. Entering the east wing of the historic courthouse-turned-museum, displayed in a prominent, sunlit setting was a spinning wheel, a Singer sewing machine from early 1900s, quilts hanging on the wall, examples of lacework, straw-woven baskets and hats, leatherworking tools, mannequins in pioneer-era dress, and Indigenous beadwork. As my guide explained, the early settlers did not have much, and they had little access to the same kind of stores and manufacturing merchants that they had when they were still in Utah. "What they did have," he said, "were women with homemaking skills and a sense of self-reliance."

These skills and sense of self-reliance were important aspects of the LDS identity that the southern Albertan colonizers brought with them from the Salt Lake basin. Nineteenth-century Church leaders actively promoted cottage industry as both a moral obligation and a practical necessity, with the Relief Society assuming a specific mandate to teach the poor to provide for themselves through domestic manufacturing. Women organized local home-industry societies, produced textiles, and supplied goods that sustained families (Rowley 1992). These efforts were then incorporated more fundamentally into the Church's cooperative economic system, the Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution (ZCMI), when it adopted a policy of giving

⁷⁷ In an effort to increase the visibility of important Latter-day Saint pioneer women, The Cardston & District Historical Society website now calls this site the Charles & Zina Card Pioneer Home (Cardston & District Historical Society, n.d.). Zina Card was among Charles Ora Card's several wives and was the one who accompanied him to Cardston. Zina was an integral part of the founding of Cardston (D. Godfrey 1997). When I began my field work, this historical site was simply called "the Card Home" and residents in Cardston referred to it as such.

preference to the home industries of Mormon manufacturers (654), many of which were women-led. As Sasha Coles (2021) has shown in her study of the nineteenth-century Mormon women's silk production initiative, such "homespun" labour became an integral way through which Latter-day Saint women articulated their religious identity.

Although ZCMI never operated in Alberta, the positive valuation of cottage industry it helped institutionalize travelled north with the colonists. The museum's celebration of pioneer women's production did not merely preserve a historical curiosity; it reflected an ongoing valuation of domestic manufacture as a meaningful form of economic and religious participation. The home industry of the early settlement's population is a celebrated aspect of Cardston County history. Moreover, it is a valued practice which continues to this day. Quilting, in particular, caught my attention as an especially prominent home industry in Cardston, and one which was always on full display when attending outdoor sporting events in Cardston.

On a particularly chilly, early-winter evening, after the sun had set, I walked from the home I was renting to the football field located just behind the town's swimming pool. En route, I saw numerous groups of what appeared to be teenagers roaming Main Street. While some were travelling in the same direction as me, towards the sporting event, others were going the opposite way with soda pop containers in hand and small bags of popcorn indicating that they had already been to the park; they had purchased some concession stand items and were on their way elsewhere to entertain themselves. Rounding the corner of 4th Avenue West and the entrance to the swimming pool parking lot, I was greeted with a mass of spectators flanked by a fire truck. Among the spectators were police, seemingly on duty given their uniformed appearance. Though, rather than watching the crowd or directing traffic they were thoroughly engaged in watching the game. In Cardston, a football game is still a whole-town affair.

While there were a few, small, raised stands for spectators, most of the attendees lined the edges of the football field in an assortment of collapsible camping chairs. All along the east side of the field (where the stands, concession, and parking lot are) the seating was essentially

packed. On the opposite side, the field is flanked by a steep hill which had about two dozen scattered groups seated on it. Up on the overlook above them, a row of viewers in camping chairs sat with the bird's eye view of the game.

I was impressed by the sheer number of people in attendance. For a town of roughly 3,700 people, I estimated at least 400 people were there, though many of them were likely supporting the visiting team. While examining the crowd, however, I was struck by how many of them came wrapped in home-sewn quilts. Patchworks of seemingly random squares of fabric sewn together into a thick, warm blanket. Spectators were sprawled out on them, wrapped up in them, and sharing them across their laps with two or three companions.

The scene was repeated at a soccer game I attended. Few people were in attendance and there was no firetruck or concession. However, on this cool evening many of the spectators were positioned along the sidelines wrapped in quilts that were clearly homemade. Then, again, during Canada Day celebrations, perched on a hillside overlooking the townsite awaiting the firework display, I was quite jealous of my quilted peers. Even though it was a relatively warm July evening, the quilts provided great protection against the ravenous mosquitos that had emerged in the mild cool of the evening.



Figure 17: Spectators at a high school soccer game watch from the sidelines wrapped in large, homemade quilts comprised of a patchwork of seemingly random fabrics, including old t-shirts.

Further evidence of home-based sewing activity could be found online. On the Cardston Buy & Sell Facebook group I could routinely and reliably locate postings advertising quilt-style baby blankets, bibs, “baptism bags,” “temple bags,” and, in the lead-up to an event called Moroni’s Quest, Book of Mormon-themed costumes such as robes, “shepherd’s hats,” sashes, and skirt-like loincloths, all advertised for sale by women.

Local retail businesses exist in Cardston to support home-based production like this. In the absence of the large crafting stores that are common in other parts of Canada, such as Michaels Arts & Crafts or Fabricland, I counted three locally owned stores in this relatively small town oriented towards arts, crafts, and sewing supplies. One of which was somewhat “hidden,” located in the back of a music store; walking into the front of the store I was greeted with a selection of instruments and sheet music, but venturing towards the back of the store I found yarn, thread, and other crafting supplies. Once primarily a music store, the store’s inventory had shifted to reflect local demand for crafting and sewing supplies. The original name of the store was simply The Music Store, and residents referred to it as such during my time in Cardston.

But its full name is The Music Store and Sew Much More, the latter half having been added to reflect the changing inventory.

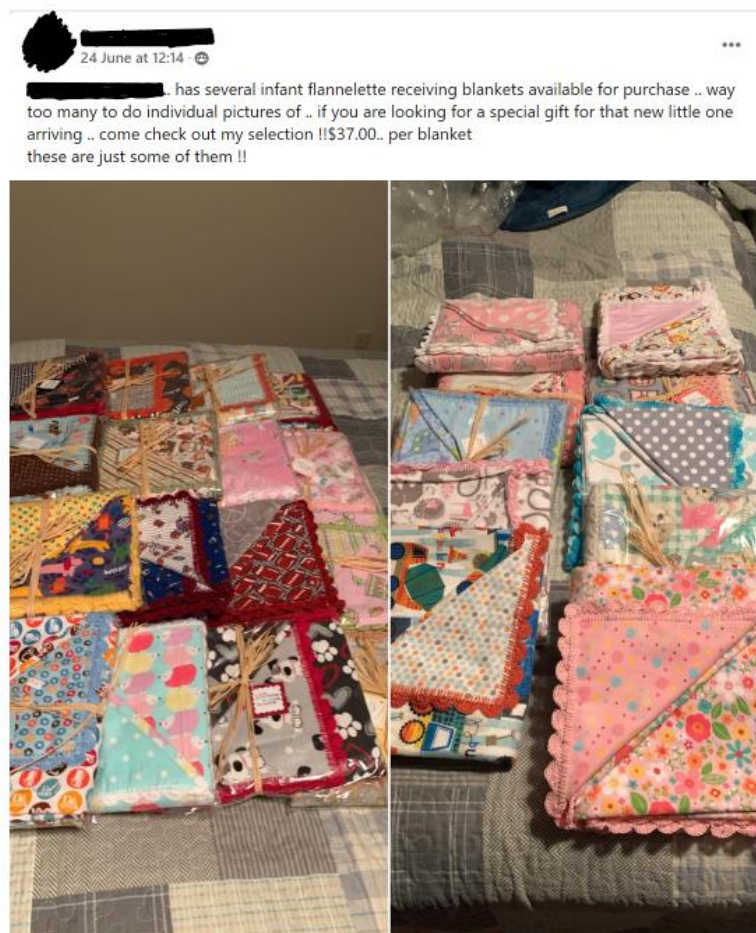


Figure 18: A Facebook advertisement selling quilt-style baby blankets. The array of design options and attention to details, such as the straw twine bows, indicate a dedication to the production of these goods that surpasses being a mere hobby.

Another home-based industry that was salient in Cardston was home baking. These businesses were mostly advertised through the Cardston Buy & Sell group on Facebook and were always advertised by women. It was common to see postings advertising home-baked bread, cinnamon buns, fruit tarts, pies, cupcakes, and cookies. Around statutory holidays, such as Canada Day, the number of postings increased significantly. To better understand how home-based production such as this fit within LDS economic practices, I contacted several of these producers for interviews. Angelina was one of them.

Reaching out over Facebook Messenger, we arranged a time to meet in her home for an interview. For Angelina, it was important that her husband be home at the time of my visit, adhering to LDS norms around interactions between the opposite sex. It is common practice in the Church to ensure that when two adults of the opposite sex are meeting, there be another adult present. This is prescribed protocol in formal, Church settings (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2023, 31.1.4), and LDS missionaries are even instructed to ensure that three adults of the same sex be present when interacting with one person of the opposite sex (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d., 3.5.1). The degree to which this protocol is followed outside of Church settings varies. While it was important for Angelina that her husband be present, Meredith, whom I discussed in chapter three, did not indicate that it mattered to her. For Angelina, however, my visit was arranged specifically around her husband's availability.

When I arrived at Angelina's home I was greeted at the door by her husband, Andrew. Both Andrew and Angelina were retiree aged. We sat, chatting, for several hours in their front living room which featured a large, grand piano and well-maintained furniture that would qualify as "retro." The conversation covered a wide range of topics, and while I periodically aimed to wrangle the conversation back to the topic of Angelina's home baking sales, I found that Andrew was an obstacle in that respect. With frustrating frequency, whenever Angelina and I would talk about how her baking sales contributed to their household finances, Andrew would insert himself into the conversation to change the topic to focus on his career. Sometimes, outrightly dismissing Angelina's contributions.

In one exchange, Angelina had pulled out a notebook where she kept a handwritten spreadsheet of her income and expenses for the previous several months and which she uses to track her income. According to her records that day, her baking business had already contributed several thousands of dollars to their household budget that year. Andrew interjected:

ANDREW: That doesn't count the house or the new oven I bought for you. Or the ingredients—

ANGELINA: I counted the ingredients cost in this.

ANDREW: Did you? Oh. Well, I still pay for the electricity and the house insurance and if you—it's good, but it isn't much with everything else included, you know?

What Andrew wanted to make clear to me was that he was the primary source of financial stability in the home. "His" purchases had enabled Angelina's baking. Moreover, while Angelina and I both referred to her baking as a "business" (even though it is not formally registered as a business), Andrew sometimes called it her "hobby." Demonstrated by the effort Angelina had made to record and rationalize her income and expenses, it was obvious to me that she thought of her baking as more than a hobby.

His motivation for this behaviour became clearer when Angelina left the room to take a phone call. This left Andrew and I alone to chat. Earlier in the conversation I had told them that I was getting married that year, and my one-on-one conversation with Andrew turned to my fiancée, how we met, and what our plans were. Then, Andrew began to give me marital advice. Given that I was attentive to matters of home finance and revealed wisdom, while much of Andrew's advice had nothing to do with these topics, some of it explicitly did. In one instance, I stated that I knew my chosen career as an anthropologist was not likely to be a lucrative one and he replied: "You know you need to be the one providing for your family. It's really important you provide. President Benson was clear about being the breadwinner." Andrew's invocation of prophetic counsel positioned his role not only as economically primary, but as a revealed, sexed responsibility that affirmed his divine identity as a man. Consequently, he treated breadwinning as the prudent course for men generally and extended that counsel to me.

Given that both Andrew and Angelina were older adults, the specific reference to the teachings of Ezra Taft Benson made sense. An apostle from 1943 to 1985, Benson then

became president and prophet of the Church until his death in 1994. Benson's teachings would have contributed meaningfully to Andrew and Angelina's identities as adults. Clearly, something about Benson's teachings had resonated with Andrew enough that he would refer to it in conversation with me, many years later.

This prompted me to study some of the things prophet Ezra Taft Benson taught about gender roles, marriage, and providing for one's family. From relatively early in his presidency, in the sex-segregated Priesthood Session of the October 1987 General Conference, I found some unequivocal counsel offered to the men of Andrew's generation from the mouth of the prophet:

You have a sacred responsibility to provide for the material needs of your family. The Lord clearly defined the roles of providing for and rearing a righteous posterity. In the beginning, Adam, not Eve, was instructed to earn the bread by the sweat of his brow. The Apostle Paul counsels husbands and fathers, "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Tim. 5:8). Early in the history of the restored Church, the Lord specifically charged men with the obligation to provide for their wives and family. In January of 1832 He said, "Verily I say unto you, that every man who is obliged to provide for his own family, let him provide, and he shall in nowise lose his crown" (D&C 75:28). Three months later the Lord said again, "Women have claim on their husbands for their maintenance, until their husbands are taken" (D&C 83:2). This is the divine right of a wife and mother. While she cares for and nourishes her children at home, her husband earns the living for the family, which makes this nourishing possible. (Benson 1987, 48-49)

Patriarchal rhetoric from LDS prophets and apostles about men as the primary breadwinners of a household has decreased significantly since Benson's time. For example, it is effectively absent from the Self-Reliance literature, which frequently depicts women pursuing

careers. And contemporary rhetoric from LDS leaders often emphasizes spouses as equal partners, foregrounding cooperation and shared responsibility between the sexes.

Nonetheless, the expectation of distinct sexed economic roles has not disappeared. It persists both subtly, such as in iconographic representations (see figure 11), and explicitly in learning materials distributed to members. For example, the Church hosts a website containing resources for husbands and wives who want to improve their marriage (Church Jesus Christ Latter-Day St., n.d.). In one of the materials provided there, the *Marriage and Family Relations* lesson manual, Lesson #10 titled “The Sacred Role of Fathers and Mothers” has learners read the full text of Benson’s talk from which the block quote above was taken (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2000, 39-40). Another learning material, *The Family Guidebook*, teaches readers that “Fathers are responsible to provide for the necessities of life” while “Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [1991] 2006, 12-13).

This tension between partnership and sexed responsibility is perhaps most visible in *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, a one-page document that hung in many LDS homes I visited and was cited frequently in talks, Sunday School lessons, and General Conference addresses. *The Proclamation* teaches that fathers “are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families” while mothers “are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.” At the same time, echoing contemporary rhetoric about cooperation, it adds that “In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners” (The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1995). Thus, while each sex is assigned a specific domain for which they are held responsible, contemporary rhetoric simultaneously emphasizes that men and women are expected to give one another mutual support in carrying out those responsibilities.

These assertions are all communicated to Latter-day Saints by revelatory authority. Prophet Ezra Taft Benson not only taught Latter-day Saints from his own position as the

principal revelatory authority on earth at the time, but he also bolstered his teachings by utilizing other revealed sources both ancient (for example, he quoted the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 5:8) and more recent (he quoted the prophet Joseph Smith in D&C 75:28 and 83:2). This is common practice in LDS rhetoric, where assertions are often accompanied by references to scriptural sources, ideally using an array of ancient and more recent scriptural sources. Similarly, *The Proclamation* begins by invoking the status of the authors and utilizing authoritative verbiage: “We, the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints solemnly proclaim ...” And it serves as the header to the newest edition of *The Family Guidebook*, too, thus connecting everything that follows to the revealed truths communicated in *The Proclamation*. In this way, divine sexed roles are not simply theological abstractions but are transmitted and reaffirmed through formal and informal revelation, producing behavioural expectations that reveal how individuals understand their eternal identity.

As is often the case, these assertions are not just communicated to Latter-day Saints by Church leaders as revelatory authorities, but they are often assertions that are communicated among Latter-day Saints themselves. Even in such “lay” settings, they are sometimes framed as revelation as well, though grounded in personal revelation rather than prophetic authority.

The first Sunday of each month is usually designated “Fast and Testimony Meeting,” an open-mic event where the majority of the sacrament meeting is spent listening to the ad hoc sharing of testimonies and spiritually uplifting narratives by effectively anyone in the audience who wishes to speak. On numerous occasions I recorded Latter-day Saints testifying to their peers that they had gained a personal knowledge of the truth of *The Proclamation* through study and personal revelation. What emerges in these settings is not simply the repetition of received teachings, but the reworking of them into personal knowledge. Members study official texts, seek revelation to confirm their truth, and then share experiences of that revelatory confirmation in testimony meetings. In this way, acceptance of doctrine comes to be felt not as second-hand belief but as knowledge personally acquired through revelation.

Understanding all this, it became clear to me why Andrew kept steering the conversation away from Angelina's economic contributions to the household or minimizing her efforts by referring to them as a hobby. His generation of Latter-day Saints had been taught in particularly direct terms that ensuring the economic viability of the home was the man's responsibility, reinforced by prophetic authority and scriptural mandate. While contemporary rhetoric places greater emphasis on spouses as equal partners and often depicts women in careers, the expectation of distinct sexed responsibilities has not changed, even if it is communicated with less force than in Andrew's formative years. In fact, those responsibilities are generally understood to be eternal, divinely grounded obligations that flow from a person's sexed identity. While many contemporary Latter-day Saints frame household labour and economic decisions in terms of partnership, such cooperation is typically interpreted as *complementary* rather than *interchangeable*, and not as a reversal of the underlying sexed responsibilities articulated in *The Proclamation*.

This also explains why he was so confident in the counsel he offered me regarding my own pending marriage; it was not framed as his personal opinion but as divine truth communicated by a prophet, supported by revealed texts, and confirmed through his own study and prayer. Andrew's certainty was not simply personal conviction. It was grounded in a theology of revelation that had shaped his life and assured him of his eternal identity as a provider, a priesthood holder, and a male being progressing toward divinity.

I posit that home-based industry such as the kinds identified here fit into the sexed labour expectations that, while diminished in contemporary Church teachings on the subject, nonetheless linger. In this framing, women's economic responsibilities are cast as supportive and complementary to men's divinely mandated role as providers, while still secondary to their own primary role as mothers and caregivers. Home-based industry thus flourishes as a way for women to contribute to household finances in line with the contemporary rhetoric of partnership, but in a form that reinforces rather than unsettles the expectation that men bear ultimate

responsibility for economic stability in the family. In this sense, sexed labour is not merely a cultural pattern but a consequence of how revelation itself is practised: the very process of seeking, receiving, and applying revelation presumes sexed responsibilities and, in turn, shapes the economic options that Latter-day Saints understand to be prudent, faithful, and aligned with their divine-human identity.

9.2 Who Presides over the Household?

It was not, however, always men asserting primacy over economic matters. I also observed women deferring to men not only by virtue of their sexed responsibility, but by virtue of their role as priesthood holders. For example, during a sacrament meeting one Sunday, a woman was describing to the audience an instance wherein she and her husband “had to make some big life decisions” which would affect different aspects of their family, including where they would live and their standard of living going forward. Despite having discussed the decisions several times, and each having prayed about it, they could not agree on a path forward. As the deadline to make these decisions approached, her husband kept asking her to discuss it more. “I told him to go pray about it and do whatever Heavenly Father told him,” I wrote in my notes. “I have a testimony of the priesthood, which means my default answer is for him to go and pray about it” because “I know he holds the priesthood keys and presides over our family in righteousness.”

What stood out to me, and why I underlined the phrase “default answer” in my notes, was how matter-of-factly she framed her husband’s revelatory authority. In 2022, I did not expect to see this kind of deferral in LDS discourse, when spousal partnership and cooperation in decision-making are so prominent. Although priesthood keys are, in official doctrine, tied to ecclesiastical office rather than to men as a sexed category, as exemplified in this talk, lay Latter-day Saints sometimes extend the term to household presiding responsibilities. Her talk thus conveyed two related points for the congregation: that revelation is real and available for

navigating significant, even seemingly secular decisions, and that the presiding logic associated with priesthood shapes whose revelation carries decisive weight within the family. So, what exactly are these keys and how to they inform sexed expectations when it comes to revelation in the family?

As discussed in chapter three, Latter-day Saints observe hierarchical structures that limit and govern the distribution of revelatory authority, and individuals are only authorized to receive revelation that falls within their purview. Priesthood keys are the organizational tools through which that distribution is structured, and they are at once understood to be both metaphorical and literal—intangible, but nonetheless real, divisible, and transferrable. A Latter-day Saint provided me a copy of a sacrament meeting talk he gave in 2021 that demonstrated each of these characteristics in his description of priesthood keys:

Many of you have received a key to this [meeting house] in connection with your calling. It's engraved with a code, and typically that code begins with the letters GF. Why GF? Well, each stake in Calgary is assigned a letter and the Foothills Stake is the letter G. Similarly, each building in the stake is assigned a letter and this building is the letter F. So, if you ever come across a key that is engraved with something other than GF, then that key is either for a different stake or for a different building.

Now, it is typical that your key will also have a digit or two alongside the GF letters. Those digits tell you what doors the key will open. For example, a GF54 key opens all the exterior doors. A GF10 key opens the library. A GF25 key opens a storage cupboard.

I mention all this because I want to make a point about the keys given to your bishop. He holds the priesthood keys to govern this ward, and he also holds a master key to the building, which is engraved with the code 1GF. The numeral 1 signifies that it is a

master key, and it is given to the number one authority in this building.

Actually, that's a bit of an overstatement, since the stake president may visit from time to time and, in that case, he will preside.

Interestingly, the stake president holds a 1G key, which is a master key for the whole stake. It doesn't have a building identifier engraved on it, like GF, because it will open any door in any building in our stake ...

... Not only do our ward and stake leaders hold building master keys appropriate to their calling, but they also hold spiritual master keys with corresponding scope ... Our bishops, our stake president, and our prophet are all inspired men with special keys. These are not just keys to buildings, but keys to receive revelation for those under their stewardship.

This speaker was constructing a metaphor connecting the physical building keys held by Church leaders with the "spiritual ... keys to receive revelation for those under their stewardship." Unlike physical keys, these priesthood keys are intangible, yet the metaphor makes them legible as objects that exist, can be held, and confer access. More than explaining institutional logistics, it frames priesthood keys as instruments of presiding authority. Although the talk does not explicitly gender this authority, the metaphor nonetheless participates in a wider ecclesiastical system in which only ordained men hold priesthood keys, and in which presiding is structurally tied to male office. In this sense, the talk reinforces, even if indirectly, the sex-specific logic through which priesthood leadership is understood and enacted. What the talk did not explain, however, was how these priesthood keys came to be possessed in the first place.

In LDS mythology, the chain of priesthood key conferral traces back to the Church's founder Joseph Smith and a peer, Oliver Cowdery, who reported having been visited by an

array of biblical persons who conferred on them various priesthood keys. They reported that John the Baptist appeared to them to confer on them the Aaronic priesthood, the order of priesthood that holds the keys necessary to perform baptisms, among other things. Following this, Smith and Cowdery reported that the biblical apostles Peter, James, and John appeared to confer on them the higher order of the priesthood, the Melchizedek, which is the order that holds the keys necessary to perform temple ordinances, among other things. Then Moses appeared, giving keys specific to “the gathering of Israel,” after which “Elias appeared, and committed the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham,” enabling the Abrahamic covenant to be extended to present-day populations. Finally, Elijah appeared to confer yet more keys specific to enabling the salvation of the dead.⁷⁸ In this way, the foundational moments of the Church are narrated as a sequence of divine visitations through which essential keys were restored to earth.

The distribution of these priesthood keys continues today through ordinances performed by those already authorized to bestow them. For instance, when a Latter-day Saint is ordained to the Melchizedek priesthood, the person performing the ordination acts under delegated authority from the key holder who presides over that unit, typically the stake president. In this way, keys do not pass to the ordinand but regulate who may perform the ordinance and under whose jurisdiction it occurs. This system of authorization structures authority in the present while also establishing an unbroken lineage that links contemporary priesthood leadership back to Joseph Smith and, ultimately, to Jesus Christ.

Today, male Latter-day Saints (since it is only ever males who can be ordained to the priesthood) can trace a genealogy of the priesthood authority they hold using the *Member Tools* app. This record lists the names and dates of every ordination in a chain of succession that connects their own priesthood authority back to Jesus Christ via Joseph Smith. Prior to the development of the app, such documentation was available only by special request to Church

⁷⁸ These latter three appearances are canonized in *Doctrine and Covenants* section 110.

headquarters. This shift matters ethnographically: ready access turns what was once an obscure administrative document into an everyday marker of spiritual identity. Men now encounter their priesthood lineage as something carried on their phones and available at a glance, which amplifies its affective force and reinforces the sex-specific nature of priesthood authority.

The spiritual weight of this lineage was illustrated in a sacrament meeting talk where a man announced that he had recently received his Priesthood Line of Authority documentation. He described how it filled him with pride and strengthened his testimony to know that he could trace the ordination he had received all the way back to Jesus Christ.

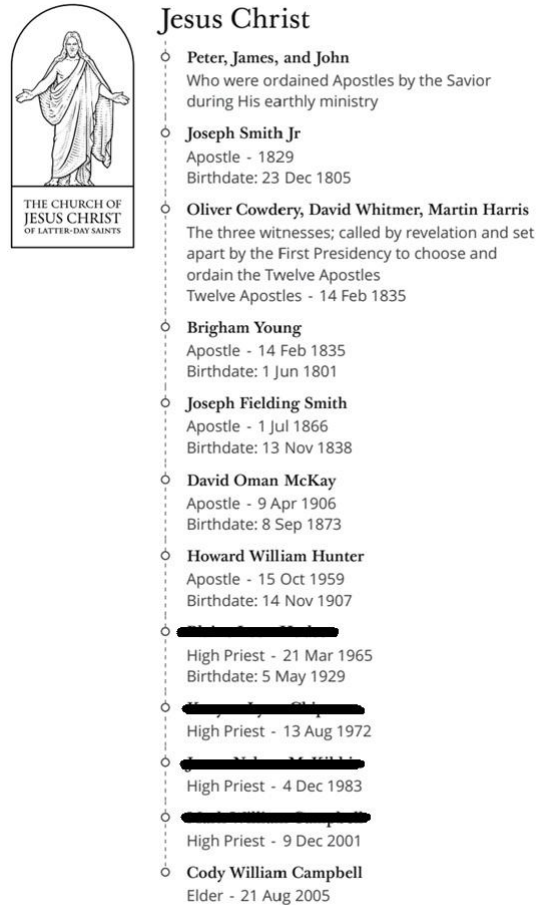


Figure 19: A screenshot of my Priesthood Line of Authority document. This record traces a continual chain of succession going back to Jesus Christ to demonstrate to Latter-day Saints how they received the keys they “hold.” I have removed the names of lay members, since their offices are not publicly available, while apostle names remain because their priesthood offices are a matter of public record.

The very act of tracing priesthood authority underscores the exclusivity of its transmission. These records are only available to men, since only men may be ordained to the priesthood in the first place. Women are not allowed to hold any priesthood offices or keys. While certainly not a new critique, this sex-segregated practice has come under renewed criticism from feminist Latter-day Saints (C. Bushman 2020), such as those who have organized the Ordain Women movement (Ordain Women, n.d.), those who have staged high-profile protests and attempted “walk-ins” at the male-only Priesthood Session of General Conference

(Dicou 2014; Moulton 2013), and those who continue to call for “walk-outs” (Kremer Howes 2024).

As if in response to this critique, Church leaders have increasingly put finer points on the matter of the distribution of priesthood authority in ways that seek to reframe priesthood authority as being accessible to women. I first became aware of this development in conversation with a woman who described herself as an “LDS feminist,” by which she meant someone who embraced feminist reinterpretations of LDS doctrine while remaining firmly within orthodoxy. “But women use the priesthood,” she told me after I brought up the Ordain Women movement, “even if they don’t exactly hold it.” I must have looked skeptical when she announced this, because she laughed and said, “You don’t believe me! But you need to go and listen to this General Conference talk from a few years ago. President Nelson talks about it, and I think there was a whole *Ensign* issue about it.”

As she suggested, I went to find this special issue of the *Ensign*. The March 2019 issue was dedicated to educating LDS women on a range of topics, from parenting strategies to examples drawn from women in the New Testament. Its headline theme, however, was “women and the priesthood,” accompanied by a feature article titled “Connecting Daughters of God with His Priesthood Power.” In that article, Barbara Morgan Gardner (2019) outlined how women enact priesthood authority in the Church even if they do not formally “hold” it.

Gardner’s argument hinged on a distinction between *holding priesthood keys* and *exercising priesthood power or authority*. She claimed that while only men are ordained to hold priesthood keys, both men and women may exercise priesthood power in their Church callings. Quoting Apostle Dallin H. Oaks in a 2014 address, she wrote: We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings, but what other authority can it be? When a woman—young or old—is set apart to preach the gospel as a full-time missionary, she is given priesthood authority to perform a priesthood function. The same is true when a woman is set apart to function as an officer or teacher in a Church

organization under the direction of one who holds the keys of the priesthood” (Oaks 2014, 51). In this formulation, women are affirmed as exercising priesthood power, but always “under the direction” of male key-holders, reinforcing their role as support and complement to men’s presiding authority.

She extended this claim to LDS temples, writing: “All worthy members who have received their endowment and keep the covenants they have made in the temple have priesthood power. Thus, women, married or single, can have *priesthood power* in their homes regardless of a visit from a *priesthood holder*” (Gardner 2019, 33, emphasis mine). Here, women were said to access priesthood power in ways not immediately tethered to male presence, but still within a theological framework in which men alone hold the keys.

While some of the statements Gardner cited came from previous generations of LDS authorities, she stressed the importance of attending to “the most recent teachings of Church leaders” (2019, 31). Reiterating this, she later listed, “Be up to date on the words of the brethren and our women leaders” as one of the things readers can do to better understand women’s role within the priesthood (35). This emphasis reflects a common LDS sensibility that present-day prophetic teachings are considered especially relevant to contemporary life: “It’s not that past prophets were wrong,” one Latter-day Saint explained to me, “just what they taught was more specific to their time.”

It is important to note, however, that this article was not written by a general authority such as an apostle, bishop, or member of the Quorums of the Seventy, since there are no female general authorities in the LDS Church. Women’s organizations are instead led by general officers, who hold lower positions in the hierarchy. While general officers may administer and direct Church programs, they do not hold priesthood keys and therefore do not speak with the same revelatory authority as general authorities. For that reason, it was striking to me that the headline article in an issue dedicated to “women and the priesthood” was

authored not by a Church leader, but by a lay member whose secular academic credentials, rather than ecclesiastical office, were foregrounded.

Many lay members contribute to Church magazines, and their authorship is typically credited only by name. For example, in this same issue, several articles were written by lay members, including one by Kealohilani Wallace (2019), with no indication of Church leadership or other authority beyond personal experience. By contrast, the headline article credited Gardner as “Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University” (2019, 31), explicitly leveraging her academic credentials to lend weight to her assertions. In my reading, this was significant. Within the LDS hierarchy, female general officers do exist, but their authority is tied to administering some organizations and programs; they do not hold priesthood keys and therefore cannot make sweeping doctrinal claims about women’s place within the priesthood. Only general authorities have that capacity, and they are all men. Thus, for a woman to address the subject in an authoritative way, the *Ensign* turned to Gardner, whose scholarly credentials could function as a substitute for the kind of institutional authority no woman holds. In doing so, the magazine simultaneously framed her contribution as authoritative but also exposed the structural absence of any female general authority who could have spoken to the matter.

For some LDS feminists, this reformulation of priesthood power versus priesthood keys is insufficient since, even in this formulation, the priesthood power exercised by women is always secondary to the men who mediate its administration. But for others, like the woman who brought this special issue of the *Ensign* to my attention, it is plain that women do, in fact, exercise priesthood authority. Critiques to the contrary simply reflect a misunderstanding of the principles at work.

I draw attention to this disparity because the boundaries between priesthood keys, priesthood authority, and what it means to preside are not always clearly articulated, and these ambiguities carry specific implications for how Latter-day Saints understand the administration

of the family. In her article, Gardner quoted Apostle Dallin H. Oaks, who taught that there are “some differences in the way priesthood authority functions in the family and in the Church,” but the details about this are left relatively unaddressed. By contrast, the prophet Russell M. Nelson, in the General Conference talk my interlocutor urged me to read, spoke more directly about women’s priesthood authority in the family:

I’m inspired by each husband who demonstrates that his most important priesthood responsibility is to care for his wife. *I praise that man who deeply respects his wife’s ability to receive revelation* and treasures her as an equal partner in their marriage ...

Now, may I clarify several additional points with respect to women and priesthood. When you are set apart to serve in a calling under the direction of one who holds priesthood keys—such as your bishop or stake president—you are given priesthood authority to function in that calling.

Similarly, in the holy temple you are authorized to perform and officiate in priesthood ordinances *every time* you attend. Your temple endowment prepares you to do so.

If you are endowed but not currently married to a man who bears the priesthood and someone says to you, “I am sorry you don’t have the priesthood in your home,” please understand that that statement is incorrect. You may not have a priesthood *bearer* in your home, but you have received and made sacred covenants with God in His temple. From those covenants flows an endowment of His priesthood power upon you. And remember, if your husband should die, you would preside in your home. (Nelson 2019, 78-79, emphasis mine)

While acknowledging that the Church now seeks to emphasize greater equality between men and women than it has in the past, there are nonetheless some structural obstacles evident in these explanations of female access to the priesthood authority. Women are entitled to personal revelation by virtue of baptism and confirmation. Women also receive priesthood authority when set apart for callings or when participating in temple ordinance. But the expansion of their revelatory purview in those specific circumstances are all mediated by men (and, I should note, are revokable by men, too, since male leaders release women from their calling).

In the family, women are taught that they may receive revelation for their household, but they “preside” only in the absence of a male priesthood holder. This distinction does not negate women’s revelatory capacity, but it introduces a structural asymmetry into how authority is understood. Although presiding and key-holding are not doctrinally identical, in most Church contexts those who preside are the same individuals who hold keys. This habitual association makes it understandable when Latter-day Saints map the logic of presiding onto their family life and assume that a husband’s presiding responsibility carries a corresponding priority in guiding the family through revelation. Under this interpretation, spouses may see themselves as equal partners while still understanding their roles as complementary rather than interchangeable, with the husband’s role oriented toward presiding and the wife’s toward sustaining that presiding role.

This helps explain why the woman described earlier deferred to her husband when they faced an unresolved economic decision. Both spouses had sought revelation, and both were operating within their shared stewardship. But when they could not come to a consensus, her “default answer” was “for him to go and pray about it” because “he holds the priesthood keys and presides over our family in righteousness.” Her statement included a slippage between presiding and keys, but both index authority, and her reasoning was premised on an understanding of the divine nature of sexed roles, in which a husband’s presiding responsibility

makes his revelation the appropriate default source of direction for the family when consensus could not be achieved.

At this point it is necessary to clarify what “presiding” means in Latter-day Saint teaching. In contemporary LDS usage, to preside in the family refers not to unilateral decision making or exclusive access to revelation, but to a husband’s responsibility to initiate, maintain, and coordinate the family’s spiritual life, including leading family prayer, directing home gospel study, and ensuring that ordinances and commitments are kept. Presiding does not grant priesthood keys, nor does it authorize a man to override his wife’s revelation; rather, it is a sex-specific stewardship that assigns him a distinct form of spiritual accountability within the home. Crucially, because women preside only when no male priesthood holder is present, their opportunity to preside is structurally contingent on male absence, which introduces an asymmetry even amid rhetoric of partnership.

By contrast, in formal Church settings such as wards, stakes, and quorums, those who preside are precisely those who hold priesthood keys. A bishop presides because he holds the keys for the ward; a stake president presides because he holds the keys for the stake; the president of the Church presides because he holds all restored priesthood keys. In these settings, presiding and key-holding coincide.

This habitual pairing makes the slippage understandable: when Latter-day Saints use the term “preside,” they often draw—consciously or not—on ecclesiastical patterns in which the presider is also the key-holder with heightened revelatory responsibility. Thus, it is unsurprising that the woman in the sacrament meeting framed her husband’s family stewardship in key-like terms, even though, technically, no keys are conferred in the home.

* * *

Throughout this chapter, we have seen women participate in practices of economic discernment that unfold within a sexed distribution of roles. Their access to priesthood authority is mediated through men, their opportunity to preside arises only in male absence, and the

shared work of revelation in the household remains shaped by an asymmetrical distribution of responsibility. Read through the analytic frame of contemporary social justice and liberal feminism, these arrangements would seem to be something women ought to be striving to overturn. Some do, and public critiques of the Church's sex-based priesthood restrictions certainly exist. The Ordain Women movement, initially led by Kate Kelly and continuing in a quieter form since her excommunication in 2014, is a prominent example. Yet treating all instances of sexed asymmetry as indicators of resistance misreads what I am drawing attention to in this chapter.

In Cardston, feminist activism is not salient, which may reflect not only concerns about potential disciplinary action, as in the case of Kate Kelly, but also sincere conviction. Many Latter-day Saint women affirm the very conceptualizations of sex-based complementarity that limit their access to priesthood offices and keys. As LeBaron-Black and colleagues (2024) argue, LDS women often endorse these theological gender roles because they align with their assumptions about divine complementarity. In this view, sexed differentiation is not a structural problem but a sacred truth, an eternal distinction that reflects the divine identities of men and women. What appears as inequality to outside observers is, for many insiders, an affirmation of the cosmic order.

Revelation helps explain this pattern. For revelation to function as a tool of economic discernment, it must draw upon the divine nature Latter-day Saints understand themselves already to possess and, through practice, increment the individual toward a more complete realization of that nature. Many Latter-day Saint women are not seeking revelation in order to challenge their divinely ordered identity as women or to renegotiate the sexed distribution of roles that follows from that identity. They understand themselves as beings who existed as women before the creation of the earth, and who are on earth to learn how to become divine women. Revelation presumes this sexed identity, organizes it, and shapes how women interpret

which choices are prudent, including the economic activities they undertake, the supportive roles they embrace, and the ways they navigate shared decision making within the family.

These patterns point to something integral for our understanding of LDS practices of economic discernment. They not only help Latter-day Saints determine which economic decisions are prudent but are also premised on and oriented toward the divine nature of the individual. Sexed hierarchies of revelatory authority are not merely structural features of LDS life but formative. They guide Latter-day Saints toward becoming the kind of divine beings their theology teaches they already are “in embryo,” as Spencer W. Kimball articulated (as quoted in *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* 2006, 1, 96), eternally male or female gods. Economic participation, whether through home-based labour or household decision making, is shaped and authorised through sex-specific practices of seeking revelation because sex is treated as essential to divine identity.

Within this framework, acting in accordance with one’s sexed revelatory role is not only obedience to institutional order but also a way of aligning with and revealing one’s eternal divine-human nature. Both spouses are taught that they may receive revelation for their family, yet the husband’s presiding responsibility means he is accountable for guiding the household in ways that his wife is not. The man who exercises this responsibility is not merely fulfilling an administrative role but cultivating a divine-human attribute associated with exalted masculinity: skillful spiritual leadership in concert with a wife. The woman who engages in domestic or supplemental labour is not simply supporting but refining her skills as a divine feminine god-in-the-making whose ultimate destiny is to be an effective, complimentary divine being. In this way, practices of economic discernment serve not only to guide economic action but to shape Latter-day Saints into their eternal, sexed selves—to become like Heavenly Father or Heavenly Mother.

Part 3
Conclusion

10.0 Revelatory Economics

I introduced this dissertation with a focus on questions; questions Latter-day Saint missionaries ask would-be investigators, questions they ask themselves, questions about Latter-day Saints and capitalism, and questions about the study of religion, economics, terminology, and ethics. Beginning any research project with questions is not only routine scholarly practice but also foundational, since research itself is always about epistemology. Through research, we are striving to know something that we do not already know. We begin with questions, then turn to a set of methods, techniques of discovery and reasoning that, if applied with sufficient care, can lead to a conclusion strong enough that both the researcher and the reader are left with a sense of confidence that something new has been understood.

This focus on questions was not only a stylistic choice, on my part, but a strategic one. The whole of this dissertation has been concerned with how Latter-day Saints come to know. Not only in relation to the tenets of their faith, but how they come to know across the full range of matters that face them in daily life. This has included, in particular, a focus on what we might conventionally describe as economic questions: matters of social-material concern, such as how one family decided whether and under what conditions to allocate a space in their home to a researcher; questions of budgeting and saving, as in the Self-Reliance Initiative classes where participants learned to track expenses, pay down debts, and set aside funds for education or emergencies; questions of business management, such as whether to close a newly established restaurant for the weekend when competing obligations and community expectations pressed in; and questions about whether goods like alcohol should be allowed to enter the marketplace. These are material matters, but they are also social ones, and specific techniques for discerning what would be prudent to do in such social-material matters are the core of what we call economics. When we study such techniques, we call it a study of economics. When people practice these techniques as a profession, we call them economists.

But economics operates at a lower level, too, at the level of the *oikos*—in the everyday decisions people make about social-material matters. Wherever specific, consciously chosen techniques for discerning prudence in social-material matters are deployed, there economics are being practiced.

By focusing on prudence, I draw attention to the myriad ways a given course of action is determined to be the correct one. What makes an action prudent may rest on market efficiency or income optimisation, but it may just as well involve negotiating competing social obligations, working within institutional constraints, or, as we have seen, adherence to religious commitments or following affective experiences. Prudence, in my usage, does not presume in advance what should be the grounds for such a judgement, but leaves open the range of possibilities by which rightness may be discerned.

I have consistently used the term discernment to describe the practices through which prudence is arrived at because it can apply equally well to both rational, calculative evaluation as well as moral and social reflection or affect. While still firmly focused on techniques of knowledge—what scholars would call epistemological practices—discernment stands in contrast to Michel Foucault's (1970) account of epistemes as large-scale and largely unconscious structures that determine what counts as knowledge in a given era. My concern is with the conscious and practical acts through which discernment is enacted.

In the case of my fieldwork amongst Latter-day Saints, such discernment often included the interpretation of scripture, the deployment of budgeting and calculation, careful consideration for prophetic authority and the limits of individual stewardship, thinking through social obligations, understandings of the nature of the human sexes, and the interpretation of affective sensations like those that follow from prayer.

These elements and more, applied unequally and in varying degrees of strength, are brought together in an epistemological practice known emically as revelation, and in particular *personal* revelation. In the LDS context, revelation is not an isolated event. It is not a sudden,

unbidden eruption of divine communication. Revelation is, rather, a cultivated capacity. It is a series of steps, each contributing in unequal and indeterministic ways, in a technique through which knowledge can be discerned.

The kinds of knowledge Latter-day Saints can apply revelation to are myriad. The baseline use-case for revelation is the pursuit of a testimony—a sensed confidence, interpreted as knowledge, about the truthfulness of the gospel as taught by the LDS Church. However, Latter-day Saints encourage and teach each other to apply revelation to all sorts of other matters. In this dissertation, my concern has been with when revelation is applied to gain knowledge about what to do in social-material matters. That is when revelation becomes economics.

Revelation's Epistemological Characteristics

As outlined in chapter three, revelation is a structured technique for deliberating and arriving at a preliminary decision that is then confirmed, or corrected, or discarded, following an affective experience perceived as coming from the Holy Ghost. The basic structure of this technique is as follows:

1. The individual beings with a clearly identified question or problem that needs to be resolved. It is best posed as a question that can be responded to by a yes or no because the ultimate confirmation will arrive as a sensed positive or negative experience, rather than as an explanation. If it is not thus formulated at this stage, it likely will become so in step three.
2. Deliberate study of relevant considerations and various sources of information. This can and should take the form of religious sources of information, but it can also include consulting secular sources and deliberating with a spouse or mentor. While the lengths to which this “study it out” step can be conducted does not equate in any

- easy way to the strength or certainty of the ultimate result, what is well established amongst Latter-day Saints I spoke to is that simply asking God is insufficient.
3. Following study and deliberation, the individual needs to arrive at a preliminary decision or plan—a rationalized and actionable proposal for how to proceed or resolve the social-material problem.
 4. Prayer, or perhaps fasting and prayer, accompanied even by other kinds of supplicative activity wherein the proposal is communicated to God.
 5. And then awaiting a response that will come as a sensed confidence that the elected course of action is the indicated one to follow through on (often communicated by Latter-day Saints using the idiom “I knew what to do” or “I know what I need to do now”). Or, if the plan is insufficient, a sense of lingering unease indicating that revisions are required (in which case the process can be repeated). Or, if the plan is entirely misguided, a “stupor of thought” is experienced where the proposal no longer makes sense or is forgotten.

As we can see, revelation as a practice is a whole strategy for figuring out what to do in a given situation. It is an epistemological technique where what one ought to do is consciously and actively reasoned through, a preliminary decision is made, and its veridiction as the right or indicated way to proceed is discerned through an affective experience. This—all of this—is what revelation names in the LDS context, though it is often indexed in LDS speech by simple phrases like “I prayed about it” that obscure the broader processes that make praying about something an effective epistemological tool.

If this covers the basic structure, there are some integral and important additional elements still obscured by this 5-step outline. First, Latter-day Saints were clear that the ability to receive confirmation via the Holy Ghost is understood as a right granted to them through the gift of the Holy Ghost. But this right is sustained through a contingent, ongoing, covenantal

relationship with God. Much like a contract, the covenant that marks the first of LDS ritual milestones (baptism and confirmation) commits Latter-day Saints to a set of ongoing obligations: to take upon themselves the name of Christ, to bear one another's burdens, to stand as a witness of God at all times and in all places, to serve God, and to keep his commandments. When they fall short, repentance is expected, and the covenant is regularly renewed through the practice of partaking of the sacrament. In return, God commits to provide guidance to them, through the gift of the Holy Ghost. Thus, what I have referred to as covenantal alignment becomes a contingent requirement for the technique of revelation to function effectively. Part of what one must study and consider when determining a preliminary decision is how well it aligns with one's covenants. Which, in turn, requires reflecting on the whole gamut of commandments and moral imperatives that comprises the gospel of Jesus Christ as understood by each Latter-day Saint.

Second, confirmation is not always sensed unambiguously. Communication on the part of the Holy Ghost comes in degrees of strength or recognizability, and it requires certain personal characteristics and orientations to be "heard." These include cultivating environmental settings conducive to divine communication, like peaceful homes, quiet minds, and other daily habits that "invite the spirit," as described in chapter three. It also includes characteristics or traits that are gradated in nature, such as faith and humility before God's will. Having more or less faith, much like having a more or less peaceful home, will have an indeterministic effect on the effectivity of the revelatory process.

To illustrate the above, when confirmation does not arrive, arrives weakly, or arrives ambiguously, this is typically not interpreted as a failure of the revelatory technique. Rather, it is understood as evidence of an incomplete commitment to the covenantal relationship on which revelation is predicated, or other forms of inadequate preparations. The strength, clarity, and recognizability of Holy Ghost-given confirmation is understood by Latter-day Saints to vary in a loosely proportional relationship to one's spiritual condition, reinforcing the sense that revelation

is an ability that can be cultivated and enhanced through practice. The current sitting prophets and apostles who lead the Church are asserted to be the ones most adept at doing this. They are not only chosen leaders, but skilled revelators. However, they, the leaders, have one more element that enables them to be especially powerful revelators: they have the purview to receive revelation on behalf of the whole Church or all of humanity, granted to them by “priesthood keys,” covered in chapter nine. Learning how to recognize the limits of, and effectively operate within, one’s purview is a third key element to the effective application of revelation to problem solving, and it is predicated on knowing one’s responsibilities, understanding one’s appropriate relationship to others, as well as understanding one’s nature as a male or female being because these correlate to different purviews.

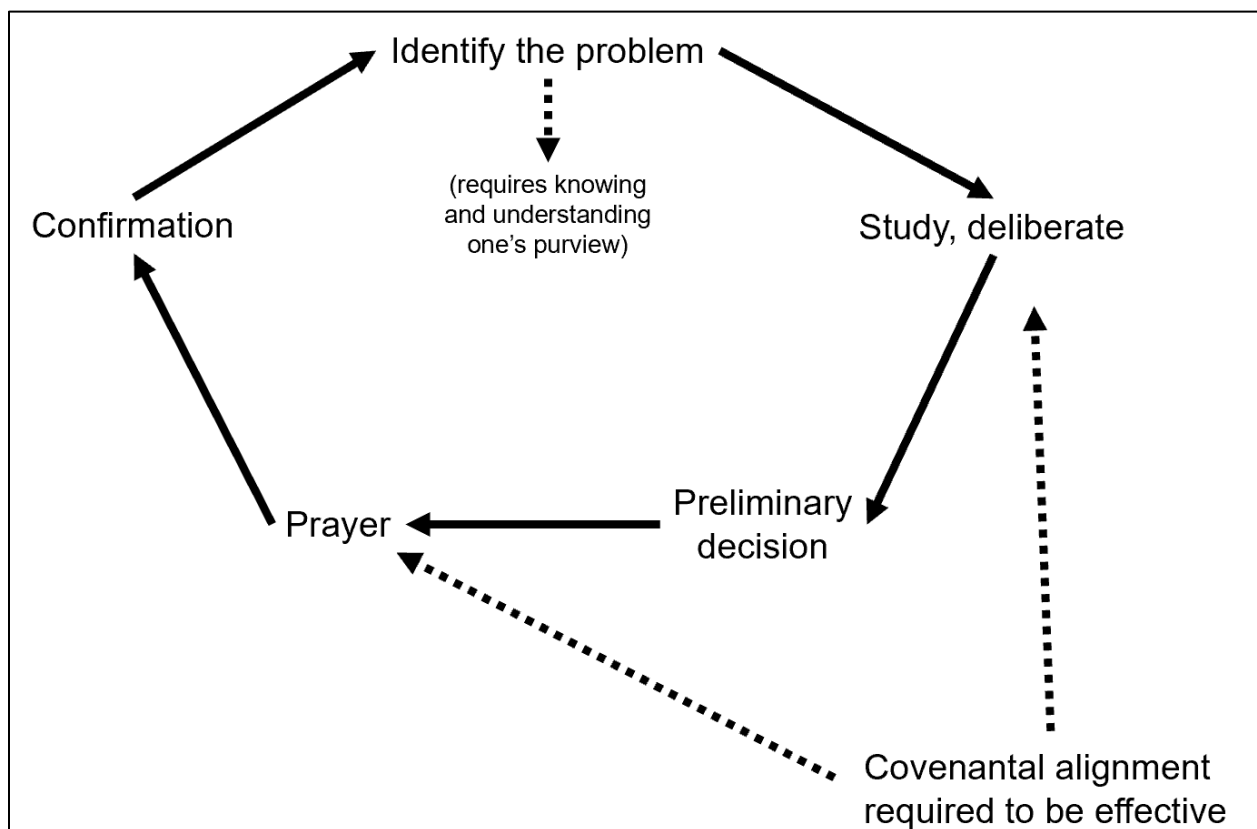


Figure 20: A simple schematic diagram of the structure of revelation as an epistemological technique

Through all of this, revelation appears as a structured technique for discerning prudence. It is a way of arriving at a decision, of testing it, of revising it, and of eventually moving forward with a “knowledge,” as Latter-day Saints would put it, that one is making a prudent decision. But, what my interactions in the field kept impressing on me is that choosing to use this technique is never only about arriving at the right answer. It is also about what kind of person one is trying to become by figuring things out in this way.

Revelation’s Ontological Characteristics

This ontological element is what I initially failed to recognize in the Elders Quorum discussions related at the outset of chapter three. Recall that the group had gathered that day to discuss ways to align all elements of life, including and especially the supposedly non-religious aspects of life like work-life, to Christ. Throughout that discussion I was expecting participants to provide concrete advice about how to make work-life more Christ-centred, and while some such concrete advice was provided, it was always couched in terms of “this is what worked for me, but you should figure it out for yourself via revelation.” Meaning, this specific thing someone did was not the answer, but pursuing an answer through revelation *was* the answer—through the pursuit of revelation as a problem-solving technique (the specific results of which would vary when applied to individualized problems and circumstances), alignment with Christ would unfold.

Something similar happened in the context of the Self-Reliance Initiative. That program explicitly promises that participants will become Christlike through participating in workshops that are about how to write résumés, networking, managing small businesses, and personal finance—which initially struck me as quite odd. What about managing a retirement savings account is Christlike? But, what I eventually came to understand was that the Self-Reliance Initiative was teaching these otherwise secular economic practices as lessons correlating to the

“study it out” element in the revelatory process, while the revelatory process’s whole structure was what was being taught by the Initiative cumulatively.

In each case, the Christlikeness was not located in the content of any particular choice. It was located in the process of the pursuit of revelation as an epistemological technique itself, thus illuminating the ontological characteristics of revelatory reasoning.

These ontological characteristics are found in the ways pursuing revelation trains and disciplines the individual in obedience to commandments; the development of those traits that make revelation more or less effective like faith, humility, and submission to God’s will; problem-solving within systems of constraint; self-scrutiny, in the form of evaluating one’s purview, one’s correct relationship to those within one’s purview, and acting on the responsibilities asserted to pertain to each sex; developing an ever-deepening knowledge about and alignment to one’s covenants with God, the very mechanism upon which revelation is predicated; and practice sensing and discerning the affective experiences following prayer as divine communication via the Holy Ghost. Through repeated use, these traits ideally become enhanced, deepened, and more thoroughly embedded into the individual’s being. This serves a recursive purpose, inasmuch as these traits become more integral to the individual’s being, each successive pursuit of revelation will become easier and more effective. However, these are not just instrumental traits that service revelation itself. They are also the traits that define what it means to be Christlike, even Godlike, in a literal, non-metaphorical sense. Since, becoming Christlike in a literal sense is the stated end of LDS religious life—exaltation.

In settings like Elders Quorum meetings, the Self-Reliance Initiative, or the liquor prohibition debate, Latter-day Saints encouraged one another to use revelation to figure out what to do. But it was not just about finding answers. These were invitations to invest in a particular form of becoming by cultivating the human capacities that are divine.

I use the word “invest” here deliberately. Not simply as a piece of thematic financial wordplay, but because the process is understood to be incremental and iterative. A little bit

here, a little bit there. From capacity to capacity, “from a small degree to a greater degree,” to use an emic phrase. Repeated acts of obedience, study, discernment, and correction that accumulate over time into a gradually more Christlike nature.

The ontological element to revelation reflects what Foucault (1988) called “technologies of the self.” Emerging out of a seminar hosted with other faculty at the University of Vermont in 1982, Foucault and colleagues wrestled with the interaction between “knowing oneself” and “care for oneself.” Beginning with Greco-Roman and early Christian practices, Foucault argued that knowing oneself was once embedded as an element within the broader imperative to care for oneself. But, that this relationship was inverted as later forms of Christianity prioritized knowing oneself, letting self-care play second fiddle or even dissipate into the background as unimportant. Unlike Foucault’s earlier work wherein he focused heavily on the ways subjectivity is imposed from without by external institutional and governmental systems, in this work, the emphasis was on how the individual produces their own subjectivity. He argued that the subject that was produced through self-care (within which self-knowing was but one constitutive component of such care) was fundamentally different than the self produced through self-knowing as a primary obligation. In the former, the self was something to be actively formed through practices of ethical cultivation. Whereas in the latter, the self becomes an object to be revealed or discerned. In the simplest terms, technologies of the self names a set of learned, repeatable practices through which a person actively works on themselves to become a particular kind of subject, and this plays out in different ways that are historically, culturally, and locally specific.

Do the ontological elements of revelation then mean revelation is a Foucauldian technology of the self? My answer to this is both yes and no. Foucault’s analysis reflected on the historical interactions between knowing and becoming, where knowing the self stands in some relationship to becoming a particular kind of self. This is certainly reflected in my description of revelation. Knowing who one is as a nascent god with an eternally designated sex

correlating to specific sexed responsibilities, knowing one's proper and appropriate relationship to others, and knowing the limits of one's purview are all key elements to revelation. These clearly reflect the imperative to "know thyself." Additionally, the explicit effort to become a Christlike—nay, godlike—being via the cultivation of the Christlike attributes (obedience, faith, humility, etc.) which are required for revelation to be effective, this is an act of intentional becoming and self-formation. It clearly reflects Foucault's argument that people act towards their own self-making. But revelation is not just about the self. It is simultaneously about discerning what to do in the practical, concrete, social-material decisions of daily life.

The distinction I am drawing is not that Foucault's technologies of the self lack an epistemic dimension. They clearly include practices of self-examination and the cultivation of practical wisdom. But consider Foucault's own definition: technologies of the self permit individuals to effect operations on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being "so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state" (Foucault 1988, 18). The end point named in that definition is a condition of the self. Whatever epistemic work is involved, it is instrumental to that end. The subject works on themselves directly, and self-formation is the proximate end of the practice. In LDS revelation, self-formation is the ultimate end, exaltation, but that end is distant. The immediate focus is a practical problem: a budget, a business decision, a municipal vote. The proximate end of any given act of revelation is epistemological: what should I do here? The distant end is ontological: exaltation. But the path to the distant end runs through the proximate one. This is what makes revelation, when applied to social-material matters, something related to, but distinct from a Foucauldian technology of the self. Revelation is a practical space wherein technologies of the self become economics.

Revelation's Social Characteristics

Recall that Foucault began developing his idea of the technologies of the self as a sort of correction to his earlier work. He had spent years heavily foregrounding the ways external and

institutional social forces produced subjectivity, and this move reflected a turn to foregrounding the individual; from the government of others to the government of the self. It is not without irony, then, that Asad would later critique Foucault's concept for failing to recognize the social aspect of technologies of the self. In chapter four of his book *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad (1993) reads Foucault's account of monastic self-formation as too focused on solitude, as though a monk's work on himself were an essentially individual project. Asad's correction is that the technology of the self Foucault describes is only possible inside a structured community. The monk cannot produce humility alone, for example, but must do so through relationships with the abbot, with senior monks, with the community as a whole. While the trait of humility may be developed in the individual, and that self-formation may be the goal, it is impossible without the social element.

This integral social dimension is especially visible in my analysis of LDS economics. Remember that the Self-Reliance Initiative courses teach participants myriad secular economic techniques, and it does so by framing these elements as part of "study it out" element required for revelation, alongside lessons aimed at developing the other "Christlike" characteristics required for revelation to function. Among them is a required social disposition: that selves properly formed would also go out and teach others. To do otherwise would signal that the self-formation has not yet taken hold. One cannot be the kind of person who can pursue revelation effectively without also trying to build a community wherein revelation as a technique is shared. The Elders Quorum participants all encouraging each other to use revelation to figure out how to manage work-life balance in ways aligned with their covenants, responsibilities, and Christ were encouraging the use of revelation as an epistemological tool that can help achieve the desired ontological ends, yes. But they were doing so because part of those ontological ends included the social transmission of the technique. That is one of the things the technique is supposed to produce, and the elders, in reinforcing it amongst themselves, were demonstrating that it already had.

What Comparison Reveals

Of course, Latter-day Saints are not the only ones whose economic practices simultaneously produce knowledge and form subjects within a social context that reproduces it. Julia Elyachar's (2005) ethnography of development programs in Cairo shows something structurally similar: NGOs and international financial institutions took the existing social networks and cultural practices of Cairo's poor, reframed them as "social capital," and financialized them through debt. The poor were taught to understand their own social relationships as capital to be leveraged for market productivity. But where the programs Elyachar examined in Cairo took practices that already had their own moral and social logic and recast them in market terms, the LDS case runs in the opposite direction. Secular economic techniques like budgeting, networking, and business management are taken up as part of the study required for revelation to function and thus become recast within the covenantal framework upon which revelation is predicated. The measure of success is not whether the participant became a more effective market actor, even if this is desired. It is whether they studied matters out, sought confirmation, and followed through in obedience, regardless of what happened to their income.

This also distinguishes LDS economics from what Simon Coleman (2000) has described in prosperity gospel movements. In those movements, wealth and material success function as visible signs of divine favour. The LDS case does not equate wealth and material success to divine favour in any clear-cut way, and not only as a matter of theological preference. The mechanics of revelation do not permit it. One cannot use revelation to claim an outcome. The technique only permits you to ask whether a proposed course of action is the correct one to pursue. God may confirm that, following your own study and deliberation, you should take the job or buy a house or adhere to a more austere budget. But that confirmation says nothing about what the outcomes of the decision will be. A decision confirmed through revelation can be simultaneously correct and financially ruinous because prudence in this framework is not

defined by outcome. It is defined by process. If you studied the matter out, cultivated the right attributes, prayed, received confirmation, and followed through in obedience and covenantal alignment, you were prudent, whatever the outcome. The measure of prudence is the process, not the outcome, because the process is still doing what it is supposed to do: incrementally cultivating the Christlike attributes that constitute divine-human capital, regardless of what happens to one's finances.

What LDS economics do, then, is distinct. When Latter-day Saints face social-material decisions, revelation is the technique they reach for. It is the structured process through which prudence is discerned. But it does more than just discern. Pursuing revelation requires taking account of who one already is and who one is trying to become. To study matters out is not only to gather relevant information, it is to weigh that information against one's covenantal obligations, one's purview, one's relationships, and one's understanding of oneself as a nascent divine being whose godlike capacities are extant, but not yet fully realized. Every act of discernment draws on that self-understanding, and in drawing on it, cultivates it further. One pursues revelation to get an answer. But in pursuing it one also becomes, by degrees, more fully the person one already understood oneself to be. That is what makes LDS revelation not just an epistemological technique but an ontological one.

What Revelatory Economics Reveals

Couched in terms like divine revelation, becoming gods, and covenants, this all seems very specific to the LDS case. However, there is an underlying structure to this technique for discerning prudence that, I think, is not LDS-specific. Stripping out all of the emic terminology, what I am describing here is a tripartite process:

1. the utilization of specific, situated techniques for discerning prudence in social-material matters, which
2. draw on a self-understanding as an incomplete subject-in-potentia, and which

3. cultivate, by degrees, an aspirational subjectivity presumed to be latent but not yet fully realized.

This structure is what I am calling revelatory economics. The modifier “revelatory” certainly reflects the LDS practice where I identified this structure, but the modifier is doing more than simply nodding to that origin. It refers to the ways in which certain economics reveal subjectivities as simultaneously incomplete and aspirational—it makes visible to the observer what might otherwise remain hidden beneath the surface of seemingly ordinary economic decisions. Where others might only see a career choice, a budget, or a business decision, revelatory economics asks: what self-understanding is being drawn on here, and how is this act of discernment incrementally realizing a fuller version of that same self? Allow me to illustrate with some hypothetical cases.

Consider, for instance, a young entrepreneur in Silicon Valley building a tech company. She understands herself to be driven, ambitious, a visionary thinker, a shrewd and decisive business manager, innovative, and socially connected—someone who already possesses the core traits of an entrepreneur. But she also knows that she is not yet what she is poised to be: a consummate innovator, a figure who transforms industries through decisive and disruptive innovation. That fuller identity is an aspirational state, the more complete expression of who she takes herself to already be. To reach it, she must cultivate in ever-increasing degrees the qualities she already has: her drive, ambition, precision, decisiveness, and connections. She is not aiming to acquire a new self, but to bring into fuller expression the one she already inhabits. In this sense, her long hours, her attention to pitch events, her refinement of strategy, her use of “fast fail” models, and her deliberate cultivation of networks are not just pragmatic business practices. They are techniques that presume an entrepreneurial subjectivity and simultaneously help cultivate it, allowing her to become, by degrees, the innovator she knows herself to be.

Or imagine a health-care worker who has spent decades in elder care. He is already a skilled, empathetic, and technically capable caregiver. But when his own mother suffers a catastrophic injury and requires full-time care, his relationship to caregiving changes. He leaves his job and moves home. Though he brings professional expertise, the shift from caring for patients to caring for his mother transforms the stakes of his work. The moral importance of being her caregiver—not just as a competent professional, but as her son—introduces a new demand: to fully inhabit the caregiver identity he has long possessed but now must realize in its most intimate form. Each day, he makes countless small economic and practical decisions that are both emblematic of the caregiver ethos already part of him, but which also strive towards their fullest achievement in this context. He manages his mother's time with rationalized precision, juggling doctor's appointments, hygiene routines, and rest. He manages and budgets his mother's medication, insurance claims, pension, and mortgage in her stead. He reconfigures the home to be more accessible, more efficient to clean, and yet still familiar to his mother. These decisions are more than logistically prudent. They draw on a subjectivity he already inhabits and is actively deepening, that of a caring, reliable, professionally capable son, and they are economic: conscious, deliberate techniques for discerning what is prudent in a situation saturated with social and material stakes. By aligning his practical actions with this latent self-understanding, he becomes that caregiver more fully.

Or consider, if you will, a PhD graduate, looking for work in the post-graduation landscape. Scanning the job boards he will see numerous positions that offer more or less lucrative options. However, only some will fit the sense of self he already inhabits: an anthropologist, with a PhD, and thus a scholar. That being said, he also is *not* a scholar, because without a permanent full-time position at a credible post-secondary institution, is he *really* a scholar? Of course an argument could be made either way, but for this hypothetical individual, a fuller, more aspirational version of being a scholar requires such employment, and that will factor into the jobs he chooses to pass over, and which to spend valuable resources like

time and headspace on. He would not even be looking at such positions if he did not already consider himself a serious scholar. But he also would not be looking at such positions if he already were the aspirational form of scholar he is striving to be. The decisions being made here are economic, but examining them in this way reveals something that a purely market-based analysis would miss. The decision is not only about salary, job security, or career advancement. It is about which opportunities are legible to this person as opportunities at all, given who he already understands himself to be. And it is about how the act of pursuing those opportunities, the careful reading of job descriptions, the crafting of applications, the bit-by-bit addition of scholarly line items on a CV through conference presentations and publications—these things incrementally realize the fuller version of that scholarly self he already inhabits in nascent form. Revelatory economics makes this visible. It asks not only what he is choosing, but what self-understanding he is drawing on in choosing it, and how the very act of choosing brings him closer to an aspirational form of scholar, even though a scholar he already is.

These examples are hypothetical, but they are not arbitrary. They are intended to show that the structure I identified in the LDS case—a technique for discerning prudence that simultaneously draws on and cultivates a nascent, aspirational subjectivity—is not confined to religious contexts. A stronger case would rest on empirical comparisons, and I am aware that hypotheticals are not a substitute for ethnographic observation. However, concepts need names before they can be taken into the field, and the work of this dissertation has been to identify and name this structure in one context with sufficient precision that it can be recognized, tested, and refined elsewhere. I invite future research to do exactly that: to identify where revelatory economics emerge in other contexts, and to examine how the distinctive qualities of those instances, the specific subjectivities drawn on, the techniques deployed, the aspirational forms pursued, shape the kinds of people those economics help produce.

Glossary

Apostate	A person who has left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In LDS discourse this often implies not only disaffiliation, but active rejection of teachings and, often, active opposition to the Church.
Area seventy	A relatively high-level Church leader called to one of the Quorums of the Seventy, with responsibility for administering the Church across a designated geographic area. Area seventies are not general authorities, but their leadership purview exceeds that of a stake-level leaders. Area Seventies are not full-time general authorities and typically serve for a limited term. They serve under an Area Presidency to assist the Twelve in their areas.
Atonement	The central LDS doctrine that through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ humanity can return to and be reconciled with God. It undergirds practices of repentance and forgiveness, and ordinances such as baptism.
Baptism for the dead	A temple ordinance in which living members are baptized on behalf of deceased persons, extending the possibility of salvation to those who did not receive this saving ordinance in life.
Bishop	The lay leader of a ward (congregation). Bishops preside over Sunday meetings, administer welfare locally, oversee tithing and fast offerings, and serve as the primary pastoral authority for ward members.
Book of Mormon	One of the standard works of LDS scripture, translated by Joseph Smith from what he described as ancient plates. It narrates the history, wars, prophecies, and religious life of peoples in the ancient America(s). Where, precisely, is debated.
Book of Mormon geography	Debates and discussions among Latter-day Saints over the real-world location(s) of events described in the Book of Mormon. Some propose a North American setting, others Mesoamerican, and yet others a setting that straddles North and South America; the Church itself does not specify.
Branch	A small LDS congregation, typically found where there are too few members to organize a ward. Branches are presided over by a branch president rather than a bishop.
Calling	The practice by which members are asked (called) to serve in a Church role, such as teaching, leadership, or administration. A “calling” is understood as divinely inspired and members generally accept them as part of covenantal duty, but they are not compelled to. Those called to most positions are set apart by laying on of hands, which authorizes them to act in the calling.
Clerk	A ward or stake officer who assists leaders by maintaining records, managing finances, and ensuring accurate membership information.
Confirmation	An ordinance, performed by laying on of hands after baptism, in which a person is confirmed a member of the Church of

	Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and receives the gift of the Holy Ghost.
Covenant path	The metaphorical trajectory of life shaped by making and keeping sacred covenants with God, especially through ordinances. Members describe staying “on the covenant path” as essential to exaltation.
Covenants	Sacred, binding promises made between an individual and God, often entered into through ordinances such as baptism or temple rites.
Elder	A priesthood office in the Melchizedek Priesthood, often held by adult male members. The term is also used more broadly as a title for missionaries (“Elder Smith”) and for the most senior priesthood leaders in the Church.
Elders Quorum	The body of Melchizedek Priesthood holders within a ward, led by a quorum president. It organizes ministering, service, social activities, and instruction.
<i>Ensign</i>	A monthly magazine published by the LDS Church from 1971 to 2020 that provided sermons, doctrinal instruction, institutional news, and articles for adult members. It was one of the Church’s official English-language periodicals before being replaced by the unified global magazine <i>Liahona</i> .
Family History Consultant/Specialist	Members called to assist others in genealogical research, often helping prepare names for temple ordinances.
FARMS (The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies)	A research institute formerly based at BYU, dedicated to scholarly elucidation and defence of the Book of Mormon and LDS scripture. It was later absorbed into the Neal A. Maxwell Institute.
Fast	The practice of abstaining from food and drink, usually for 24 hours, as a spiritual discipline and to accompany prayer.
Fast offering	A voluntary donation, usually at least equivalent to the value of meals not eaten during fasting. Funds are used by bishops to support those in need at the local level, or forwarded to higher levels of the Church if not all used locally.
Fifth Sunday lesson	A special teaching Sunday that occurs when a month has five Sundays. Typically, the bishopric or other leaders use this time to address ward-wide issues.
First Presidency	The highest governing body of the Church, consisting of the Prophet (President of the Church) and his two counsellors. Together with the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, they provide direction for the global Church.
General authority	A leader with worldwide jurisdiction in the Church. This category includes members of the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and the senior Quorums of the Seventy. There are multiple Quorums of the Seventy, but only the senior ones are considered general authorities.
General Conference	A semi-annual meeting held in Salt Lake City and broadcast worldwide where Church leaders deliver talks and announcements. General Conference is a key moment for the dissemination of prophetic guidance.

General Handbook	The official manual of Church policies and procedures used by leaders worldwide to administer wards, stakes, and Church programs.
Giving Machine	A large vending machine set up during the Christmas season in public spaces (e.g., shopping malls) through which donors can “purchase” charitable donations such as meals, livestock, services, or supplies for people in need.
<i>Gospel Library App</i>	The official Church app that provides access to scripture, manuals, General Conference talks, and other Church materials.
High Council	A governing body of twelve high priests in a stake who assist the stake presidency in administration, discipline, and oversight.
Impression	A subtle spiritual prompting or feeling believed to come from the Holy Ghost, guiding decision-making or confirming revelation.
Investigator	A person who is studying or considering joining the Church, often taught by missionaries.
<i>Liahona</i>	A free, monthly Church publication that provides spiritual messages, lessons, and stories for members. Formerly called the Ensign Magazine in English-speaking countries.
Membership number	A unique identifier assigned to each member of the Church, used in records and for accessing official systems.
Ministering	The program by which members are assigned to care for one another through visits, service, and spiritual support, replacing the older “home teaching” and “visiting teaching” programs.
Ministering companion	The partner assigned to a member for ministering visits and service. Companions usually work in pairs to care for assigned households or specific individuals.
Mormonism	A term historically used to describe the religious tradition founded by Joseph Smith, and which now includes multiple denominations. In this dissertation, I focus on members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints specifically and avoid the term “Mormonism” except when referring to the broader tradition.
Moroni’s Quest	A youth-oriented pageant and camping activity that dramatizes stories from the Book of Mormon, designed as an immersive teaching experience.
Ordinance	A sacred ritual act performed by priesthood authority, often accompanied by covenants (e.g., baptism, confirmation, temple ordinances). Some ordinances are considered necessary for salvation.
Priest	An office in the Aaronic Priesthood, generally held by young men ages 16–18. Priests can bless the sacrament, perform baptisms, and preach.
Priesthood blessing	A prayer pronounced by laying on of hands, invoking God’s power for healing, comfort, or counsel. Such blessings are performed by those who hold priesthood authority.
Priesthood keys	The right of presidency or authority to direct the use of the priesthood within a given jurisdiction. For example, bishops

	hold keys over their ward; the prophet holds all priesthood keys.
Primary	The Church program for children from 18-months up to about age 11, including weekly classes and singing time.
Quad	A single volume containing all four LDS standard works: Bible (KJV), Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price.
Quorum of the Twelve Apostles	The second-highest governing body in the Church, consisting of twelve men sustained as “prophets, seers, and revelators.” They hold authority next to the First Presidency.
Relief Society	The Church’s organization for women, focusing on spiritual instruction, service, socializing, and welfare.
Returned missionary	A person who has completed full-time missionary service (typically 18–24 months). Returned missionaries often carry social prestige within LDS culture.
Saving ordinance	The kind of ordinance that Latter-day Saints understand as necessary for full participation in God’s plan of salvation, including baptism, confirmation, the temple endowment, and sealing.
Scriptures	In LDS usage, this refers to the four standard works: the Bible (KJV), Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price.
Self-reliance specialist	A Church calling in which a member helps others engage with the Self-Reliance Initiative: workshops on employment, education, entrepreneurship, and personal or household financial management, framed as spiritual transformation.
Set apart	The act of conferring spiritual authority and blessing on a member to serve in a specific calling, performed by laying on of hands.
Singles ward	A ward organized for unmarried young adults (often 18–35). It provides fellowship, leadership opportunities, social activities, and worship tailored to single members.
Stake	An administrative unit of the Church made up of multiple wards and branches, presided over by a stake president and his counsellors.
Stand	The space at the head of the sacrament meeting hall where speakers, ward leaders, the choir, and the organist sit.
Temple district	Geographic areas assigned to a temple. Members within a district normally attend that temple for ordinances.
Testimony	A declaration of belief in God, Christ, and the restored gospel, often shared publicly in Fast and Testimony meetings.
<i>The Interpreter</i>	An independent publication (<i>Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship</i>) that continues the scholarly and apologetic tradition of FARMS, producing research on LDS scripture and thought.
The Restoration	A mythological narrative that recounts the establishment of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
Tithing	The practice of contributing 10 percent of one’s income to the Church. According to Church statements, these funds are used to support operations, buildings, temples, and global activities.

Tithing declaration	An annual meeting between a member and the bishop in which the member states whether they consider themselves to have paid a full tithe.
Tithing slip	The form used to record tithing and other donations, now often digital.
Ward	The standard local congregation of the Church, typically comprising a few hundred members within defined geographic boundaries. Each ward is presided over by a bishop and his counsellors.
Youth temple trip	Group trips organized for youth to attend a temple, usually to perform baptisms for the dead. These trips are an important means of involving youth in temple worship and reinforcing commitment to the covenant path.

LDS Scriptural Books and Common Abbreviations

Book of Mormon

First Nephi (1 Ne.)

Second Nephi (2 Ne.)

Jacob (Jacob)

Enos (Enos)

Jarom (Jarom)

Omni (Omni)

Words of Mormon (W of M)

Mosiah (Mosiah)

Alma (Alma)

Helaman (Hel.)

Third Nephi (3 Ne.)

Fourth Nephi (4 Ne.)

Mormon (Morm.)

Ether (Ether)

Moroni (Moro.)

Doctrine and Covenants

Doctrine and Covenants (D&C)

Pearl of Great Price

Book of Moses (Moses)

Book of Abraham (Abr.)

Joseph Smith—Matthew (JS—M)

Joseph Smith—History (JS—H)

Articles of Faith (A of F)

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