Why Are Ordinances So Important?

"Now these ordinances were given ... that they might look forward to [Christ] for a remission of their sins, that they might enter into the rest of the Lord."
Alma 13:16

Principle

References to ordinances, as well as meaningful examples of them, can be found in numerous Book of Mormon passages. These passages help demonstrate how essential ordinances are to Christ’s Gospel and Heavenly Father’s Plan of Salvation.

Webster’s 1828 dictionary, published just before the Book of Mormon was translated, defines an ordinance as “a law” or a “rule established by authority.”¹ For example, in American law, a resolution passed by a city council is often called an “ordinance.” The word “ordinance” or “ordinances” appears 11 times in the Book of Mormon, and these verses show that an ordinance is indeed something firmly established by God, like a law.² It is related to the word “order” and suggests the idea of making things orderly, like how laws make society “orderly.”³ The word can also be used to refer to actions, ceremonies, or religious rituals that solemnize vows or agreements.⁴

Pahoran, for example, “was appointed chief judge and governor over the people, with an oath and sacred ordinance to judge righteously” (Alma 50:39). In this case it seems that “ordinance” refers to a sacred law, laid down by God, which stated that Pahoran had to judge righteously, a law that Pahoran likely covenant-ed to obey.⁵ Sometimes, the Book of Mormon uses the phrase “a law of performances and ordinances” to talk about the Law of Moses.⁶ This phrase describes the sort of “outward performances” (Alma 25:15) that would eventually become unnecessary because of the Atonement (4 Nephi 1:12).⁷ These examples show that the word “ordinance” can be understood as a law “ordered” or decreed by God, laws that people covenant to obey.⁸

Because the Book of Mormon was originally written in a language related to Hebrew, a careful look at two possible Hebrew words translated as “ordinance” can help to make sense of the concept. The Hebrew words ḥuqqah and ḥoq have basically the same meanings:
“custom, manner, decree, portion, order, prescription, or limit,” and are often translated as “statute” or “ordinance.” The words seem to be similarly used in the Book of Mormon by God. This is likely because they are designed by God to teach spiritual truths, often through symbolism. Therefore, in order for them to teach what God wants them to teach, they need to be done in precisely the way He has spelled out.

Certain ordinances are essential to exaltation, and today these are called saving ordinances. The Book of Mormon’s depiction of ordinances as immutable laws from God reminds the reader of the essential nature of these ordinances. They are not simply optional rituals a person can perform if they wish. They are an essential part of God’s divine order. Without receiving these saving ordinances as instructed, and without accepting the laws of order and organization connected with those ordinances, no one can become like Heavenly Father or return to live in His presence.

Elder Dennis B. Neuenschwander stated, “The sacred ordinances of the gospel as requirements for salvation and exaltation were ‘instituted from before the foundation of the world.’ They have always been an immutable part of the gospel.” Ultimately, “Through the sacred ordinances of the gospel, we learn of His kingdom and learn of Him, we enter into holy and eternal covenants, and we receive an endowment of divine power in our lives. All of these things bring us to Christ that we may be perfected in Him.”

### Further Reading


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**Application**

The Book of Mormon’s uses of the word “ordinance” can help to explain the importance of ordinances today. Ordinances are sacred acts performed by the authority of the priesthood. According to the Book of Mormon, God has firmly decreed that these ordinances should be performed, and so it would make sense that they would need to be performed in the prescribed manner by God’s authorized representatives who hold the priesthood.

The Book of Mormon shows that God’s laws are connected with ordinances and that ordinances are performed according to laws established by God. As such, they need to be performed in the exact manner decreed...
Notes


5. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain this usage as well. See Hugh Nibley, Teachings of the Book of Mormon, 4 vols. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 1:151. 2 Kings 23:3 is one good example of someone covenanting to keep a law, showing the connection between ordinances and covenants.


8. Alma 30:3 and 3 Nephi 24:7, 14 directly or indirectly connect the word “ordinance” to “law” as well.

9. See John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, Charting the Book of Mormon: Visual Aids for Personal Study and Teaching (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), chart 119.

10. Because these Hebrew words are basically the same, they don’t appear next to each other in lists. The same is true of the words “ordinance” and “statute” in the Book of Mormon. This suggests that these words are probably very close to the words translated as “ordinance” and “statute” in the Book of Mormon. See John W. Welch, “Statutes, Judgements, Ordinances, and Commandments,” in Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 64–65.


16. See “Ordinances and Covenants,” in Doctrinal Mastery: Core Document (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 9–10, online at lds.org.


