

What is the Relationship Between Freemasonry and the Temple Endowment?

Divine revelation and Joseph Smith's participation in Freemasonry are complementary explanations for the origins of temple ordinances.

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The nature of Joseph Smith's revelatory experiences has become a subject of **intense academic focus**. Some scholars have looked at what the Prophet meant by *translation*, while others have mused about the **purpose of the gold plates**. In this interview, Jeffrey Bradshaw talks about the relationship between Freemasonry and the Latter-day Saint temple endowment.

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***Read Jeff Bradshaw's forthcoming book <
<https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/>> about the
relationship between Joseph Smith and Freemasonry.***

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How is your book different from Method Infinite, the new book by Cheryl Bruno, Joe Steve Swick III, and Nicolas S. Literski?

First, I want to say that I owe these three authors my personal thanks for their kindness and collegiality in discussing many issues during the writing of my book, though of course they bear no responsibility for its final contents.

While they have written a broad and well-researched history touching on many aspects of **Freemasonry in the early days of the Church**, my interest is much narrower: how Freemasonry relates to the origins of the Latter-day Saint temple ordinances.

That seems to be the central question about Freemasonry for most Church members, but it has never received a thorough and systematic treatment.



Joseph Smith’s knowledge of temple matters was the result of early revelations, not late inventions.

When did Joseph Smith first encounter Freemasonry?

Given where Joseph Smith grew up, it would have been impossible for him not to be aware of it from a young age. His brother Hyrum and probably **his father** were both Freemasons. That said, exactly what Joseph Smith knew about the specifics of the rituals of Freemasonry and when he came to know these details is a debated question.

A ready source of information about Masonry for the young Prophet would have been the exposés of the anti-Masonic movement, whose epicenter was not far from the Smith home. He must have discussed Masonic ideas and controversies with his contemporaries—including the sudden, suspicious disappearance of anti-Mason William Morgan in 1826.

Though evidence of Masonic language and ideas in the Book of

Mormon and the Book of Moses is generally unconvincing, descriptions of some practices from the Kirtland **School of the Prophets** seem to recall Masonic ritual language patterns (see, for example, Doctrine and Covenants 88:128ff.).

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When did Joseph Smith become interested in Masonry as an institution?

Apart from whatever attraction the Prophet may have had to the rituals of Freemasonry, he doesn't display any obvious interest in Masonry as an institution until the Illinois period.

Joseph Smith's efforts to establish a Masonic Lodge in Nauvoo seem to have begun in November 1839, when he became personally acquainted with Judge James Adams. The judge was a prominent citizen of Springfield, Worshipful Master of the Springfield Lodge when it was founded in October 1839, and Right Worshipful Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Illinois when it was established—not coincidentally—on April 6, 1840.

By at least the fall of 1840, he had been baptized a member of the restored Church of Jesus Christ. Adams was one of the select group of Latter-day Saint Masons who received the endowment when it was first introduced on May 4, 1842.

Jeffrey M. Bradshaw: Freemasonry and the Origins of Modern...



Jeff Bradshaw discusses the relationship between freemasonry and origins of the Latter-day Saint temple endowment in this Interpreter Foundation virtual fireside series.

What do we know about the restoration of temple ordinances?

Joseph Smith's understanding of the temple developed over decades. But it is almost as if he had a vision of the whole before

him from the very beginning of his ministry.

Indeed, Don Bradley has argued that the First Vision was Joseph Smith's initiation as a seer and constituted a kind of heavenly endowment. His first encounters with Moroni mentioned the coming of Elijah and the turning of hearts, and the timeline of events throughout his ministry is replete with priesthood- and temple-related events, teachings, and revelations.

And teachings about the temple are throughout the Book of Mormon if you know where to look for them.

In judging the evidence, it may be useful to keep the following in mind:

- Joseph Smith's long acquaintance with the Bible, including the years he spent working on the **Joseph Smith Translation**, was the most likely catalyst for aspects of the endowment having to do with the temple-rich stories of Genesis and Exodus.
- Early revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants and events surrounding the dedication of the Kirtland Temple were very significant as tutorials in temple matters for the Prophet. Some of Joseph Smith's associates claimed that he received visits from heavenly messengers during this period that revealed details about the temple ordinances to him.

The point of all this is that a detailed understanding of the

covenants and sequences of blessings associated with temple worship may have been revealed to Joseph Smith more than a decade before he began to teach them in plainness to the Saints in Nauvoo.

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It has been generally supposed that in Kirtland the Prophet knew only a little about temple ordinances and taught all of what he then knew to the Saints; and that when he got to Nauvoo the rest was revealed to him, and so he taught them something more.

However, I think such a conclusion is mistaken. **My study of the Book of Moses** and others of the initial revelations and teachings of Joseph Smith have convinced me that he knew early on much more about these matters than he taught publicly. It is evidence that Joseph Smith's extensive knowledge of temple matters was the result of early revelations, not late inventions.

So, what's at issue here?

There are elements of the Nauvoo temple ordinances—for example, some of the signs and tokens and related language—that are almost identical in form to those used in Masonic rites. Since Freemasonry is an 18th century creation, similarities like these seem to undermine Joseph Smith's claims that the temple ordinances are ancient.

How do you explain it?

I was talking about this the other day with Latter-day Saint scholar Don Bradley, and he insightfully suggested that revelation is something like Creation. God doesn't create things or ideas in the minds of prophets *ex nihilo*, but rather tends to make use of pre-existing materials—organizing and shaping unorganized matter until “it is good” in His sight.

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What are the “pre-existing materials” in the case of the Latter-day Saint temple ceremony?

Well, Freemasonry, of course, is one of these. But we shouldn't forget both the Bible and Joseph Smith's own mental and spiritual capacities.

Does Joseph Smith's connection with Freemasonry rule out revelation in the creation of temple ordinances?

No, in fact, divine revelation is precisely the means by which God helps to shape and organize our understandings of these pre-existing materials into a more correct result. And, along the way, God intends us to be active collaborators with Him in the process.

Hugh Nibley and *maximum participation*

Hugh Nibley called this the “principle of maximum participation.” This is the idea that God consults with us in such matters, “not because he needs [our] advice, but because the plan concerns [us] and requires [our] maximum participation in it.”¹

From this perspective, divine revelation and Joseph Smith’s participation in Freemasonry are not competing explanations for the origins of temple ordinances. Rather they are, along with other important elements such as the revelations he received during his Bible translation project, complementary parts of the same interwoven process.

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He seems to have used his prophetic gifts to bring them closer in line with ancient precedents.

On the one hand, the Prophet's awareness of temple- and priesthood-related matters spurred his interest in learning more about certain aspects of the Bible and Freemasonry and his encounters with Freemasonry and the Bible served as a catalyst to prayerful inquiries about temple-related topics. I believe that through revelation prophets can come to know ancient things that would otherwise be unknown to them.

Like other aspects of the Restoration, temple ordinances came to the Prophet through a combination of active study, unswerving faith, and confirming revelation.

Something old, something new, something borrowed, but all true.

The best summary of the eclectic nature of temple ordinances I've seen was told to me by Joe Steve Swick III, a longtime student of the history and ideas of Freemasonry and an endowed member of the Church. His formulation is a wordplay on the Victorian gift-giving custom wherein, for good luck, brides received "Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue." Varying the traditional wording, he suggested that modern temple ordinances are "something old, something new, something borrowed, but all true."

What evidence points to the truthfulness of Latter-day Saint temple ordinances?

Faith, of course, is ultimately dependent on something more than tangible evidence. But Richard E. Turley, Jr., former Assistant Church Historian, has suggested where we might look for evidence of revelation in the restoration of the temple ordinances:

Over the years, many researchers have asked me about similarities between the endowment introduced by the Prophet Joseph Smith and Freemasonry, often pointing out similarities to me.

I explain that Joseph adopted and adapted the then-popular pedagogical system of Freemasonry to teach eternal principles and that therefore they should look for the differences between the endowment and Masonic rituals if they want to find the essence of what the Lord revealed to Joseph.

Richard E. Turley Jr.

[The Biography of Dallin H. Oaks by Richard Turley <https://www.fromthedesk.org/dallin-oaks-biography/>](https://www.fromthedesk.org/dallin-oaks-biography/)

How can we look for the similarities and differences between Masonic rituals and the temple endowment?

It is not very complicated. What is needed is to look systematically at each of the elements of the temple ordinances one-by-one in light of precedents in the Bible, ancient sources, and Freemasonry. Then, at the end, we can see what we've learned from the exercise.

Were you able to determine how much of the temple ceremony can be attributed to Freemasonry?

No. I think it's futile to try to determine the source that provided the initial spark of inspiration for a given element of the temple ordinances.

For example, did the original idea for special temple clothing come from Freemasonry?

Or did it come from the Bible?

Or was it due to Joseph Smith's creative genius?

Or was it pure revelation?

Though we sometimes have pretty good hints about such things, it is ultimately a dead-end approach because we simply don't have the complete set of data we would need to answer these questions reliably.

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How did you research the relationship between Freemasonry and the Latter-day Saint temple endowment?

First, I described thirty-one elements of the temple ordinances one by one in light of precedents in the Bible, ancient sources, and Freemasonry. In the case of Freemasonry, I tried to include every resemblance to the temple I was able to find (though I'm sure I've inadvertently missed some things).

I've also included selected examples from biblical and ancient sources, because, in contrast to the smaller corpus of Freemasonry, it was impossible to aim for anything resembling completeness. Out of respect for the temple ordinances and

Masonic ritual, I avoided detailed descriptions and the revealing of information that is considered confidential.

Then, instead of attempting the impossible task of determining origins, I looked at end results. For example, I compared relevant ritual and scriptural texts in Freemasonry, the Bible, and other ancient sources to elements of the rites performed in the Nauvoo Temple.

For each element, I determined whether it better resembled something from Freemasonry or from antiquity.

What did you learn?

With respect to most of these elements, there is very little overlap. In regard to general characteristics of the rites of Freemasonry, they differ in several ways:

- They are not claimed to be essential for salvation.
- There is no requirement for priesthood authority.
- The general sequence is much different.
- They neither promise nor require joint exaltation of men and women
- They cannot be performed by proxy.

- In comparison to Exodus, there is nothing resembling washing or anointing in the rites of Freemasonry.
- There is no ladder-like progression of covenants.
- Names, priesthoods, and changes of clothing are not emphasized in the same way.
- There is nothing comparable to the true order of prayer.
- There is nothing comparable to the sealing ordinances—or to the conception of the more sure word of prophecy.
- Both the external building features and the interior layout and furnishings of the Lodge are very different than the Nauvoo Temple.

Do any Masonic rites have a stronger relationship to Latter-day Saint temple ordinances?

There were other elements of the Masonic rites where I was able to find some kind of relationship to the temple ordinances. More will surely be found as time goes on. In three instances, it was my judgment that the rites of Freemasonry had a stronger relationship to the element of the Nauvoo temple ordinances in question than did the Bible and ancient sources: ritual gestures, ritual language patterns, and the sacred embrace.

These three elements provide support for President Heber C. Kimball's statement that the Masons "have now and then a thing that is correct"—some things that the Prophet could, under inspiration, adopt and adapt for use in the Nauvoo Temple.

What about other elements in the Masonic rites that had some relationship to the temple ordinances?

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that Freemasonry provided the first spark of inspiration to Joseph Smith for all of these. Since, in my estimation, all these items ended up in the Prophet's Nauvoo formulation as being closer to the Bible and ancient sources, the difference between what these elements are like in Freemasonry and what they are like in the context of the temple ordinances becomes evidence of, as Richard Turley described it, "what the Lord revealed to Joseph."

In short, it is striking that whatever elements Joseph Smith may have borrowed from Freemasonry, he seems to have used his prophetic gifts to bring them closer in line with ancient precedents. And there is relatively little in the ordinances that does not have a plausible counterpart in antiquity. And more will surely be found as times goes on.

Going further, the fact that nearly all of the elements more closely resembled the Bible and other ancient sources than Freemasonry provides (plausible but always fallible) evidence that the temple ordinances are largely ancient and biblical in nature.

And it's also possible, of course, that the three other elements of the Nauvoo temple ordinances that more closely resembled Masonic rites than anything in the Bible or other known ancient sources, were also rooted in ancient practices, no longer extant.

Indeed, some of Joseph Smith's associates stated that gaining knowledge about these elements was an important motivation for the Prophet's having formed the Nauvoo Lodge in the first place.

How much stock should we put in your analysis of the connection between Freemasonry and the temple endowment?

Though the thirty-one elements I've used to make these judgments are rough and preliminary, I have found them useful as a starting point for a natural, common-sense breakdown of the topic.

By way of contrast to the elements themselves, the relative strength of a relationship for given text in the Bible, ancient

sources, or Freemasonry to the temple ordinances is bound to be a longer discussion among readers. However, I've tried to provide enough data so that readers can examine these relationships for themselves and come to their own conclusions.

When evaluating similarities, one should also remember the following:

- Most of the content of temple ordinances, by page count, has no counterpart in Masonic ritual.
- Most of the content of the Masonic rites, by page count, has no counterpart in the temple ordinances.

Limitations to remember

Sadly, we should also remember that there are two inevitable downsides with this kind of analysis:

1. The beauty and coherence of a given ritual or system of rituals as a whole is easily lost when it is examined in piecemeal fashion; and
2. Even when the words or actions of ritual are described accurately, we should be aware of Nicolas S. Literski's observation that this "does not mean it conveys the actual experience [of the ceremonies of Freemasonry] in a meaningful way. The same is true for the [temple] endowment."²

What do you most want people to know about the relationship between Freemasonry and the temple endowment?

Regardless of where the first spark of inspiration to the Prophet came from place and of what future data may change in our views of particular similarities and differences, I think it's safe to say that new evidence will continue to emerge demonstrating that temple ordinances possess several qualities:

1. They are rich in ancient precedents.
2. They were understood as an integral whole very early in Joseph Smith's ministry.
3. They will always be a source of fascination and inspiration for all who have come to love and appreciate their power, coherence, and beauty.

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About Jeffrey Bradshaw

Jeffrey M. Bradshaw is a Senior Research Scientist at the Florida Institute for Human and Machine Cognition. He holds a PhD in Cognitive Science from the University of Washington, and has published dozens of articles in scholarly journals.

Bradshaw also serves as a vice president for the Interpreter Foundation. In addition to *Freemasonry and the Origins of Latter-day Saint Temple Ordinances*, Dr. Bradshaw has published several books and articles with relevance to Latter-day Saint audiences, including *Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses*, *The First Days and the Last Days: A Verse-By-Verse Commentary on the Book of Moses and JS—Matthew in Light of the Temple*, and *Sacred Time, Sacred Space, & Sacred Meaning*.

Further reading

- [How Did Freemasonry Influence Joseph Smith?](#)
- [Did the Kinderhook Plates Really Fool Joseph Smith?](#)
- [Let's Talk about the Book of Abraham](#)
- [Yet to Be Revealed: A Landmark Issue of BYU Studies](#)
- [Daniel Peterson: Meet the Latter-day Saint Apologist](#) < <http://10-questions-daniel-c-peterson/> >

Freemasonry and the temple endowment resources

- [Freemasonry and the Origins of Latter-day Saint Temple Ordinances](#) < <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/> > (Jeffrey M. Bradshaw)
- [Gospel Topics Essay: Masonry](#) < <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/masonry?lang=eng> > (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)
- [Freemasonry and the Latter-day Saint Temple Endowment Ceremony](#) < <https://rsc.byu.edu/book/reason-faith> > (Steven C. Harper)
- [Church History Topics: Temple Endowment](#) < <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/top> >

[ics/temple-endowment?lang=eng](#) (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)

- [Similarities Between Masonic and Latter-day Saint Temple Ritual](#) <
<https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/archive/publications/ask-the-apologist-similarities-between-masonic-and-mormon-temple-ritual>> (FAIR)

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1. “Treasures in the Heavens: Some Early Christian Insights into the Organizing of Worlds,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8:3/4 (Autumn/Winter 1974): 77.
2. Nicolas S. Literski, personal communication with Jeffrey M. Bradshaw.

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