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Masonry and Mormonism

by [Chad Nielsen](#) • August 1, 2022 • [13 Comments](#)

The relationship between Freemasonry and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a subject of controversy for members of the Church. In the near future, two important studies of that relationship are slated to be published – [Method Infinite: Freemasonry and the Mormon Restoration](#) by Cheryl L. Bruno, Joe Steve Swick III, and Nicholas S. Literski, which will be available on 9 August from Greg Kofford Books (which discusses possible influences of Freemasonry on Joseph Smith’s ministry throughout his life) and [Freemasonry and the Origins of Latter-day Saint Temple Ordinances](#) by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, which is anticipated to be released the same day by the Interpreter Foundation (and which analyzes the relationship of Freemason rituals and Latter Day Saint temple rituals). Last week, two interviews related to these books (one with [Cheryl L. Bruno](#) and one with [Jeffrey M. Bradshaw](#)) were published on the Latter-day Saint history and theology blog *From the Desk*. What follows here is a co-post to the two interviews.

Jeffrey Bradshaw summed up the crux of the concern that members of the Church have when approaching Freemasonry. He wrote:

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.

The same applies to the Restoration in a broader context.

Yet, each author approached the idea open to the possibility that the Prophet Joseph Smith was indeed influenced by Masonry, and each is okay with that to one degree or another. Cheryl L. Bruno, for example, wrote that:

Masonic ritual was created very purposefully to illuminate Christian ideas and to symbolically bring a human being into the presence of God. Joseph Smith used many of these same techniques in both the Latter-day Saint priesthood structure and in our most sacred rituals.

The knowledge of Masonic use of symbol and ritual gives Latter-day Saints a key to understanding what is happening in our most sacred ordinances. Members of the church often don't have the same kind of preparation that Latter-day Saint Masons had before they experienced the endowment, and thus it can be very disorienting. I found that learning the Masonic meanings behind certain symbols or rituals made my temple experience more understandable and enjoyable.

But even further than this, a more complete understanding of Masonry's effect on Mormonism can help us comprehend an early version of our history that may seem strange and foreign to the modern Latter-day Saint. I find the beauty of the esoteric side of Mormonism shines strongly when illuminated by the light of its Masonic antecedent.

Jeffrey Bradshaw likewise expressed his opinion 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. ...

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.

...

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.

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.

There are ways to approach the subject of Masonic influences on the Prophet's

ministry and, by extension, our religion without rejecting the divinity of that religion.

Now, one thing that has part of the discussion about that influence over the years is that Joseph Smith officially became a Freemason in 1842, but many of the ideas that show potential Masonic influence came earlier than that time period. There are logical explanations for that, however. As Bruno explained:

In modern times, we just don't realize what a cultural influence Freemasonry had in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Virtually everyone would have had some experience with Masonry, whether it was through having a close relative or friend who was a Freemason, reading the newspapers, or attending public lectures.

Many of the important men in town—doctors, lawyers, clergymen, and political figures—were Masons. Joseph Smith's uncles, cousin, brothers, most likely his father, and many associates were Masons.

Bradshaw also noted that:

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.

Thus, there are ways in which Joseph Smith could have come to know about Masonry prior to becoming a Freemason himself.

As far as the extent of Masonic influences on Joseph Smith, the different authors do disagree on the extent of that influence. Jeffrey Bradshaw, for example, wrote that “evidence of Masonic language and ideas in the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses is generally unconvincing” and that:

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. ...

I described thirty-one elements of the temple ordinances one by one in light of precedents in the Bible, ancient sources, and Freemasonry. ...

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

With respect to most of these elements, there is very little overlap. ...

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.

Cheryl Bruno, on the other hand, leans more on the idea that Masonic influence was pervasive throughout Joseph Smith's life:

Midrash is a Jewish form of Biblical interpretation that explains or fills in gaps in the scriptural record. Often, Joseph Smith used this technique, adding Masonic legend and ideas to expand the Bible and to create new texts.

Our book comments on each form of Latter-day Saint scripture (Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Egyptian papers) and gives examples of Masonic midrash found therein. It's quite fascinating to see so many Masonic ideas within our familiar religious texts. ...

Some authors have portrayed Joseph Smith as anti-Masonic early in his life, while changing his mind later when he joined the Lodge in the 1840s. We reject the idea that Joseph was ever anti-Masonic. Rather, he spoke against what he considered "apostate" or "spurious" Masonry.

He believed Masonry had degenerated and he had been called to restore it to its pure form. Joseph Smith as a Masonic restorer provides astonishing insights into what Joseph was trying to accomplish with Latter-day Saint institutions such as the Danites, the Relief Society, the Anointed Quorum, and the Council of Fifty, as well as non-Mormon institutions such as the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge.

It also shows that Joseph’s remarks, behaviors, and perspective on Masonry were consistent and fundamentally unchanged throughout his prophetic ministry.

The extent of the influence will likely continue to be a matter of controversy and discussion, since it’s difficult to pick apart Joseph Smith’s thoughts and understand where precisely every idea that he expressed came from.

For more on Freemasonry and its relationship with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, head on over to the Latter-day Saint blog *From the Desk* and read the interviews by [Cheryl L. Bruno](#) and [Jeffrey M. Bradshaw](#).

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13 comments for “Masonry and Mormonism”

John Melonakos says:

August 1, 2022 at 10:04 pm

The same God that restored the temple ordinances inspired the minds of the Freemasons.

Jack says:

August 1, 2022 at 11:17 pm

I believe some elements of Freemasonry to be very old—much older than the its “official” beginnings in the early 1700’s. It may have had its beginning—as an order—at a certain time and place. But that doesn’t mean that many of the particulars having to do with its rituals and whatnot could not have had earlier beginnings—or could not be vestiges of older orders and traditions.

Travis says:

August 2, 2022 at 1:43 am

Most Masons are not privy to the link between “worshipful light-bringer” and Lucifer. The Babylonian context of Masonic ritual outlined in Albert Pike’s “Morals and Dogma” says as much. The Masonic liturgy derives from the corrupt priesthood at the Herodian temple. The lore about Solomon’s temple is an overlay. John’s Revelation is a polemic against the Babylonian “Harlot” associated with the temple (Masonic) priesthood at Jerusalem. Qumran texts unanimously reject the (Masonic) Jerusalem temple priesthood. The heritage of Masonry is a heritage of “builders who reject the cornerstone,” both in Christ’s time, and at the Restoration (the Masons who conspired to kill Joseph and Hyrum).

Masonry is an abomination. It’s symbols are empty. It’s oaths are corrupt. Joseph entered Masonry to usurp its authority, nothing more. Brigham appropriated too much Masonry to the temple. If we could abolish every Masonic shadow from the temple, the Lord’s work would progress considerably.

When the endowment is cleansed from the Masonic dross and the gaudy ascension motif, what we will see is a beautiful representation of Creation, Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot—all depicted by the emblems associated with the Garden and the Wedding Feast.

Jack says:

August 2, 2022 at 3:46 am

As much as I enjoy reading your comments, Travis, I have to disagree with you on this one. Those vestiges of the masonic tradition that overlap with our current temple worship—along with everything else that completes the rituals as presently constituted—lead the initiate on a perfect course to redemption. In other words, there is an analogical

perfection in the symbols that—when understood—illuminate the mysteries of ascension.

As to how certain vestiges have been transmitted through the ages: you may be right that much of it became empty and degenerate over time. Even so, that doesn't necessarily prove that all of the forms were altered beyond recognition. Apparently, there were still enough intact that Joseph Smith was able to recognize masonry as a priesthood of sorts—albeit, one that had lost its original purpose, power, and meaning.

Travis says:

August 2, 2022 at 4:52 am

@Jack, those Masonic vestiges you speak of have been, and will continue to erode away in a slow generational process, so as to not offend the well-meaning sensitivities of good dudes like yourself. Time will tell. Two things are certain: (1) the endowment is supposed to be an instruction that unifies the central ordinances of the Restored temple (baptism, preparatory washing and anointing, sealing, and enthronement); (2) the temple will accommodate the Jews.

Masonry, with all its goofy fraternity, has no authority in Creation. Spacious buildings and men who feel important have no power to determine optimal seed germination, mammalian gestation, nor do they understand the sacred rhythms of the cosmos that govern Life. Such knowledge is Patriarchal, not fraternal. Masonry's axioms are as propositional as Catholicism's Trinity: both amount to golden calf belief systems.

Jack says:

August 2, 2022 at 6:02 am

Yes—the whole thing could be overhauled over the next while—such that only the basic covenants remain. And if that's what the living prophets

feel inspired to do I'll support them 100%. Even so, I don't think that kind of radical shift would have so much to do with throwing off ancient forms (so as not to offend) as it would with those forms being less necessary (for instructional purposes) as we move toward a higher collective understanding of heavenly things.

Re: Masonry's Axioms: I realize that they bear little resemblance to our own temple theology and worship. I'm only suggesting that certain (few really) vestiges of an ancient order — that looked very different from what Freemasonry is today — have survived through the ages—and that Joseph Smith caught hold of them and (in his mind at least) restored them to their proper religious context.

Terry H says:

August 2, 2022 at 3:44 pm

I did a brief report on the two books here:

<https://latterdaysaintmag.com/do-the-temple-rituals-resemble-freemasonry/>

Certainly, a lot more can and will be said.

Terry H says:

August 2, 2022 at 5:42 pm

@ Jack and @ Travis,

I recommend both of you to Jeff Bradshaw's book to clarify each of your positions. While Method Infinite is extremely thorough about possible influences of Masonry in early Latter Day Saint history (including the endowment), Jeff's book breaks down the endowment to show how there are connections between Biblical sources, other ancient sources, Masonry AND Joseph's inspiration on its own. The identification shows where there are Masonic connections between each of the other three

and where it stands on its own. I'd also encourage you to go to the Interpreter Foundation website and get the July 31, 2022 program with an interview between myself, Martin Tanner and Jeff Bradshaw for more detail from his findings. The program isn't posted yet, but will be soon. Perhaps, we'll have Cheryl Bruno on soon. I appreciated having the two interviews with On The Desk so close together.

Jack says:

August 2, 2022 at 9:46 pm

Terry H,

Oh yes, I've read most of the interview about Bradshaw's book at Interpreter. It's wonderful.

Some of my interest in this conversation has to do with the near impossibility of knowing the provenance of the forms with any kind of certainty. Maybe Bradshaw — and I love every article of his that I've read or heard — has some good answers to that question. But still—how can we know we've drilled down far enough when we're dealing with elements that have been kept by secret societies?

Travis says:

August 3, 2022 at 3:59 pm

I enjoy Bradshaw's work, and I've paid criminally high prices for his books. But his audience isn't the general congregation and he basically recycles texts for a narrow, institutional LDS audience. When it comes to sacred things, a DARPA man is likely to do to the temple what Bill Gates hopes to do with agriculture. Both serve a DC interest and neither has a green thumb.

Terry H says:

August 3, 2022 at 4:37 pm

The interview you read was the one Chad cites above in the original post. Our Interpreter interview isn't transcribed, and will be posted on the Interpreter website sometime in the near future. You point out a valid concern about the information we have, not just from Masonry, but also from ancient sources. We would not very little about Qumran (assumed to be the Essenes) if it wasn't for the accidental discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Michael E. Stone has written on this topic (as have others). His book is *Secret Groups in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford, 2017). We have the same challenge with early Christians, since most of what we know comes from their inclusion on a list of heretics. Now, of course, we have the Nag Hammadi texts, but they present questions of their own, particularly with regard to rituals that were secret (or sacred, if you prefer).

Jack says:

August 4, 2022 at 2:57 am

Thanks for your response, Terry. In your article at Meridian — nicely done by the way — you say that Bradshaw “focused on the parallels which exist between the ancient world and the current temple practices.” I’m assuming (and hoping) that somewhere in his approach there might at least be an incidental word or two about parallels that exist (or not) between the ancient world and masonic forms.

Jeff Bradshaw says:

August 6, 2022 at 6:15 pm

Sorry to be joining the dialogue so late. I've been traveling and just returned last night.

Jack, I think you'll find that I've tried to include as many Masonic parallels to the temple ordinances as possible in the book, including some that are not mentioned in Method Infinite. Rather than referring to these resemblances in general terms, I've usually included texts from Masonic sources that specifically describe them so readers can make the comparisons themselves.

In past conversations with Joe Steve Swick III as well as in more recent conversations with Bruno and Literski, they have been kind to read previous drafts of my book and to advise me on what can be appropriately cited from these texts and other matters. Though not agreeing on every detail, we've found a significant meeting of minds of many issues.

I hope you will find the work something more than something recycled from a "narrow, institutional LDS audience."

Please see the synopsis, table of contents, pointers to reviews so far (including Terry Hutchison's and Kurt Manwaring's), and comments by Richard E. Turley, Jr., Don Bradley, and William S. Kranz, a longtime Freemason who has served as an officer of the fraternity at the state level in Florida.

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