

Cheryl L. Bruno, Joe Steve Swick III, Nicholas S. Literski, *Method Infinite: Freemasonry and the Mormon Restoration*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2022. 531 pp. Foreword, bibliography, index. Hardcover: \$44.95. ISBN: 978-1-58958-753-3

Reviewed by Jason R. Smith

For far too many years, the available materials on the subject of Mormonism and Freemasonry have been mostly relegated to two camps. There have been those works, like Samuel H. Goodwin's 1921 *Mormonism and Masonry*, which claim that Joseph Smith plagiarized Masonry to create the Mormon Temple Endowment. Then there are apologetic works, such as E. Cecil McGavin's 1935 book by the same name, which attempts to dismiss any similarities as coincidental or because Smith saw that the Masonic ritual contained vestiges of truth. More recently, some historians have begun a more thorough and nuanced examination of this relationship, such as Michael W. Homer's 2014 *Joseph's Temples: The Dynamic Relationship Between Freemasonry and Mormonism*. As Homer writes in a previous article in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*:

Those who deny any relationship, or argue that similarities between the two are superficial, are concerned that Joseph Smith's use of Masonic rites is inconsistent with his prophetic claims. Others concentrate on similarities to buttress claims that Smith borrowed heavily from Freemasonry without the benefit of inspiration. This "all-or-nothing" approach combines with the secrecy associated with the rituals to create a reluctance to discuss the subject in any meaningful detail.¹

In *Method Infinite: Freemasonry and the Mormon Restoration* by Cheryl L. Bruno, Joe Steve Swick III, and Nicholas S. Literski, the authors have achieved perhaps the most thorough and well-researched book to date. In fact, I do not think it an overstatement to declare this new book to be the definitive work on the subject. It is obviously the product of both years of research and the personal Masonic and Mormon experience of the authors, and I believe that those attuned to both Freemasonry and Mormon history and practice will undoubtedly see it as seminal.

In their introduction, the authors provide a brief, yet valuable, historiographical survey of the subject, citing the works named above, among many others. As has been the case with many authors who have touched on the topic, much of their work has strived either to minimize the Masonic influences on Joseph Smith or to make arguments that such influences were superficial. The thesis of Bruno, Swick, and Literski—which sets them soundly apart from the "all or nothing" approach described by Homer—portrays Joseph Smith not merely as someone who pragmatically bor-

1. Michael W. Homer, "Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry": The Relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1994).

rowed from Masonry as he did from other sources but as someone who actually believed he was doing something wonderful—truly restoring that which was lost. Their approach is artfully stated:

Throughout his life, Smith developed groups and associations within his new Church organization modeled upon the Fraternity. Masonry would thus influence the Mormon restoration from Vermont to New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Believing himself to be a Masonic restorer, Smith called upon God to inspire him to create ritual in the Masonic mold. In doing so, he sought to know the true name of Deity—which in Masonic tradition had been “long lost”—and to bring his followers into the presence of the Divine. (xx)

From the beginning of their book, the authors lay out a masterful case for their thesis. In their first two chapters, the authors describe Freemasonry’s history and the extent to which its influence permeated the world in which Smith came of age. Their portrayal of the William Morgan Affair, an 1826 event which reshaped American perceptions of Freemasonry, is artfully told in chapter three. This event, which happened so close to the geography of Smith’s formative years as to be impossible to escape, along with the magical milieu of Smith’s familial world undoubtedly impacted young Joseph years before he would be officially initiated into Masonry in 1842.

It is in chapter four where the authors begin to describe Masonry’s influence on the Mormon founder’s religious career as elements of his First Vision are placed in parallel to Masonic tradition and practice. In the fifth chapter, the authors make a strong case that “the story of Joseph Smith and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon is archetypally Masonic.” (91) Here, they cite many examples of congruency between the birth of the keystone of the religion and Freemasonry, highlighting the Masonic myth of Enoch’s buried golden plate buried under a keystone. As in other parallels drawn throughout the book, one or two aspects that appear to be influences might be written off as coincidental; when multiple elements are shown to coincide, however, a beautiful pattern begins to emerge.

It is perhaps chapter six, Mormonism’s Masonic Midrash, which presents one of the authors’ strongest cases. Here, a litany of Masonic parallels is presented to the reader—from Smith’s translation of the Bible and Doctrine and Covenants to degrees of glory, Adam-on-di-Ahman, and the uniting of persons through eternal bonds.

Chapter seven, which covers the Book of Abraham, presents Smith as a student attempting to piece together fragments of history in order to restore a lost masterpiece. Through this process, he is shown learning of a true priesthood in need of restoration, one with signs, tokens, and penalties. He also begins here to formulate a rudimentary temple ritual which he will continue to adapt and expand as presented

in later chapters. In the eighth chapter, Smith is found designing and building the Kirtland Temple—a place wherein to house the endowment of power he discovered in the previous chapter. Utilizing Masonic design and accommodating quasi-Masonic rituals, this beautiful edifice was to exhibit a step forward in Smith's restoration, they argue:

Features of the Kirtland temple ritual and structural design were as stones piled one upon the other. As they accumulated, they began more and more to resemble a Mason's arch. Each of the Masonic allegorical associations used gave meaning to the temple's construction and purpose to the ritual that Joseph Smith was inaugurating. (197)

The ninth chapter features the story of Smith's vigilantes and enforcers known as the Brother of Gideon, or Danites, as they are more commonly known. The reasoning behind their creation, their fraternal structure, and even their oaths of secrecy are described as quasi-Masonic. Chapter ten focuses on the move to Nauvoo and the building up of a new city dedicated to Masonic ideals about politics, economics, and social structure. Chapter eleven describes the formation of Nauvoo Freemasonry, with its hundreds of members as well as scores of Masonic irregularities. It also speaks to the understanding of many of these Nauvoo Masons that there was something special about Masonry, something that needed to be enhanced and restored in the latter days. The twelfth chapter tells the story of the Female Relief Society and the ways it was influenced by Masonic practice, as well as the importance of bringing women into a restored version of Freemasonry.

Perhaps no part of the book is as packed full of statistical information as is chapter thirteen, which details the Mormon lodges which sprang up not only in Nauvoo but in all of the nearby areas where Mormon men established them. It speaks to the vast number of Mormon Masons compared to non-Mormons in the vicinity of Nauvoo and the conflicts which arose with the governing Grand Lodge. For a data lover like me (and someone who has served as a lodge secretary), I found this chapter to be a love letter to Masonic recordkeeping and research.

Those readers who are somewhat familiar with the subject of Mormonism and Masonry would certainly expect a chapter which describes the creation and dissemination of the Temple Endowment ceremony to its first recipients, and the authors do not disappoint in the least. The authors handle the topic respectfully, yet thoroughly, and portray Smith as they believe he saw himself—a restorer of true Masonry and true religion, which he saw as intimately intertwined. Some Mormon historians and apologists have argued that, while some superficial elements of the temple ceremony might have been borrowed from Masonry, Smith did not view Masonry as ultimately spiritual in the sense he intended for the Endowment. One aspect I found fascinating about the authors' discussion of the Endowment is how Smith viewed Masonry

as being intimately spiritual and saw the two ceremonies as both bridging the human and divine.

The fifteenth chapter highlights Smith's political ambitions, including his presidential campaign and the Council of Fifty—and the Masonic influences behind his desire to see a kingdom of God on earth. Chapter sixteen deals with Smith's theological innovations perhaps more than anywhere else in the book. It begins with his sermon given to commemorate the death of fellow Mason King Follett and delves into Joseph's teachings about the nature of God, man, and the material universe—all of which were influenced by Masonry. In chapter seventeen, the death of Joseph Smith is reviewed in light of Masonic involvement—including his supposed last words, the Masonic connections of the mob who killed him, and his several interments.

In the penultimate chapter eighteen, the Masonic influences and practices of the various expressions of Mormonism after the death of Smith are outlined. Focusing on several proposed successors, this chapter tells of Brigham Young downplaying Masonry yet continuing to wear his Masonic lapel pin, Sidney Rigdon being a committed Mason until his death, and Joseph Strang's and Charles Thompson's new Masonically inspired fraternal orders—all giving validity to the special place Smith held for Masonry. As the authors write:

Masonry was a part of the calculus of many of the Restoration groups that formed after the death of Joseph Smith. This widespread continuation of esoteric and Masonic tendencies confirms their existence in the early church. Those who claimed the right to Mormon succession continued along the path laid out by Joseph Smith. (440)

In their brief final chapter, the authors restate their case that while Masonry was not the sole inspiration for much of what Smith accomplished, it was a central motivator:

As the founder and builder of one of the most American of religions, Joseph Smith chose stones from many quarries to create the institution of Mormonism. By itself, Freemasonry cannot stand as a suitable explanation for every aspect of the Mormon restoration, nor can it impart meaning to every important development within the faith. However, its explanatory power is significant and may be acknowledged as a substantial contributing factor to many of its aspects. (441)

In addition to a well written narrative, the authors include thorough footnotes and many helpful illustrations and tables. They end the book with an extensive bibliography and index.

As an active Freemason and as someone involved in Mormon Studies for more than 25 years, I was doubly interested in the subject matter of this book. Also, as someone who has known the authors for several years, I have impatiently anticipated its completion. This book does not disappoint on either account. I think both Free-

masons and students of Mormon History will find this book well researched and its thesis persuasive. The authors go to great lengths to make sure that both the Masonic and Mormon aspects of their arguments are accessible to all readers. Moreover, for those of us who approach the book with both sets of eyes, we will find that the narratives are woven together to produce a highly satisfying read.

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