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EXAMINING THE ORIGINS OF TEMPLE WORSHIP

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Abstract: *With the precision of a renowned surgeon, the finesse of a master politician, the insights of an eminent theologian, and the artistic skill of an eloquent poet, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw masterfully examines the influence of Masonic rituals and symbolism on the most sacred rites of Latter-day Saints as found in our holy temples.*

Critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as temple-going members familiar with Masonic symbolism, find it impossible to dismiss the many parallels that exist between temple rites and the rituals and symbolism found in Freemasonry. Those critical of the Church point to such parallels and decry the similarities as evidence that Joseph Smith simply copied the Masonic symbolism to create the temple rites familiar to millions of Latter-day Saints. Temple-going members, of course, faithfully believing the divine origins of what is considered the restoration of the original Church of Jesus Christ, recognize ancient origins in the rich symbolism found in temple worship. For the past few decades at least, these two views have competed to explain the similarities recognized by many between Masonry and “Mormon” temple worship. Proponents of each approach have, at times, become dogmatic in their dismissal of arguments that appear to contradict their favored view and have simultaneously become potentially blind to their own shortsightedness in recognizing the evidences supporting the opposing view. More recently, arguments favoring a mostly revelatory

source for key elements of temple rites have gained favor, apparently dismissing some or all arguments from both aforementioned camps.

What is one to do when faced with three competing and often compelling explanations? Some say that Joseph copied from Masonry, others say that Joseph restored ancient temple practices, while still others say the temple rites are based in modern revelation. There is much to consider in these three approaches, and it is understandable if the lay member feels caught in the crossfire, so to speak.

In the midst of this occasional “war of words and tumult of opinions,” Jeffrey Bradshaw takes an analytical approach that breaks down the similarities and differences between these two richly symbolic systems of rites, Masonic and temple, and offers an intricately insightful and sometimes nuanced explanation that carefully threads a woven link between all three explanatory approaches. He meticulously examines the key symbolism found in Latter-day Saint temple rites in light of the verifiable history of Masonic influences on Joseph Smith and carefully dissects the various parallels and differences between the two. He considers areas that appear to clearly indicate direct Masonic influence, those that indicate clear or likely connections to ancient Israelite practices and teachings, and those that appear to be new elements of worship.

My first initiation to the parallels between Masonry and temple worship came as a young missionary in Panama in early 1986. I was with another missionary walking the streets of a suburb outside Panama City when a man approached me. I put out my hand to greet him, and as he took hold, he said “No, that is not correct. Let me show you!” and he then proceeded to rearrange the grip of our handshake until it formed a gesture I knew only from the temple, one which I had promised through covenant to keep sacred. I was taken aback, and as I removed my hand from his, I asked, “Are you a Latter-day Saint?”

“No,” he replied, “I am a Mason.”

I was astonished to experience what was, for me, something so sacred being shared outside of a temple setting. What was the reason this man knew what had been revealed to me in the temple where its sacred nature demanded the greatest discretion?

Upon returning from my mission, I inquired with a good friend about what might be the reason for what I had experienced. His explanation was simple: Masonry had an apostate form of temple worship, and some elements I knew of from the temple were retained in the mostly secular Masonic rites. This satisfied me for a time until I met Nick Literski, a fellow ward member in a married student ward at BYU.

He and I struck up a quick friendship, and he introduced me to a host of material regarding temple worship that was new and foreign to me. We shared information, documents, photocopies of books, and we discussed insights that broadened my horizons regarding the significance and sacredness of temple rites. Years later, after helping to establish and form FAIR,¹ I began to familiarize myself with the arguments of the likes of Matt Brown and others who held to a mostly “ancient origins” view for temple rituals and symbolism. These arguments held sway for me but often felt somehow lacking.

Some years ago I acquired a large collection of Masonic titles from Nick, including several books dating back to the early 1800s and one from the late 1700s. At this point, my interest in Masonry and temple parallels took a dramatic leap forward.

My personal views at that time favored the ancient origins hypothesis, but I recognized that Masonic rites did not readily have verifiable connections to the ancient past as some claimed (the argument that Masons actually were of an ancient order maintained since the building of Solomon’s temple). This created questions in my mind until Jeff Bradshaw contacted me, requesting access to the collection of Masonic titles I had acquired.

As we arranged for Bradshaw to access my collection, and as he began to share chapters from his soon-to-be published book on the topic,² I began to reconcile what I knew, believed, and yet still did not have answers for. I found his analysis to have a degree of careful precision that I found refreshingly necessary. I was delighted to discover that he artfully finesses the sensitive nature of discussing sacred temple topics with a reverent openness that allows the initiated temple worshipper to easily recognize the points he discusses, without violating the norms of sacred decorum his temple covenants demand. As he does so, he poetically weaves in insights to temple worship that further broaden my understanding of temple symbolism and its meaning, and he further opens my understanding of the connections the temple has to the distant past. In all of this he reconciles, at least for me, the three predominant

1. FAIR is the original name for the organization now known as FAIR Latter-day Saints. It is apologetic in nature, focused on defending The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. See <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/> for more information.

2. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Freemasonry and the Origins of Latter-day Saint Temple Ordinances* (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2022).

claims of temple symbolism origins in relation to Masonic rites, ancient practices, and new revelation.

His approach is one that, as discussed, assimilates the three explanatory approaches mentioned. Borrowing from Joe Steve Swick III, a Mason, historian, and endowed member of the Church, Bradshaw applies the old Victorian wedding gift custom of giving brides something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue, but changes it for his discussion to “something old, something new, something borrowed, but all true!” For faithful Latter-day Saints, this approach provides a thematic backdrop that recognizes the significance of the three approaches and puts it all within the context of the temple rites having validity and divine influence in terms of our covenant progress and the role of the temple in that “covenant path.” It allows for connections to ancient practices and rites (something old), modern revelation (something new), and Masonic influence (something borrowed), within that faithful context of prophetic inspiration in the origins of Latter-day Saint temple rites.

Bradshaw’s book, like his analysis, is thorough and well organized. After providing proper context for Masonry in general, giving more specific relevance to its influence in the United States and its role in the lives of founding members of the Church, he provides a brief tutorial on the origins of temple worship and some of its recognized evolutions. Then he delves systematically into several areas of potential parallels between the temple and Masonic rites and explores also where they diverge. In doing so, he helps the reader see where the temple rites have strong Masonic connections, where they have stronger ties to ancient origins, and also where new revelation likely served as the source.

Beginning with broad comparisons between temple worship and Masonic systems, he compares Masonic symbolisms to key elements of temple initiatory ordinances, then examines ritual gestures and language patterns, which is where my first introduction to Masonry began as a young missionary in Panama. He then examines what is often referred to as “the endowment” and seeming similarities found in those rites. From there he examines the sealing power and discusses the highest ordinances in the temple referred to as “the fullness of the priesthood.” He concludes his analysis by looking at the architecture, layout, and furnishings of the Nauvoo Temple and two of the crowning adornments found on that historically significant temple.

Throughout his analysis, Bradshaw examines the specific rites of the temple—as much as can be done without stepping beyond propriety

in terms of his temple covenants to hold such things as sacred—and looks carefully at the ancient connections and parallels that exist. He then looks at the same analysis from the perspective of Freemasonry to determine where connections and influence may exist from that source. At the end of each section, he clearly outlines in table form where parallels exist between, for example, the Bible, ancient sources, Freemasonry, and inspiration to Joseph Smith. It is then left largely to the readers to draw their own conclusions about the origins.

Within this analytical context, Bradshaw offers tremendous insights into the many ancient connections our temple rites have with Israelite practices and stories. He demonstrates various connections to ancient traditions and biblical stories and research that connect modern temple practices with ancient ones, and carefully illustrates uncanny parallels that, for me at least, either makes Joseph Smith a genius or a prophet.

I’ve already intimated the biggest limitation to this wonderfully insightful book several times. As a faithful Latter-day Saint, Bradshaw is precluded from openly discussing some connections and areas of divergence simply because his temple covenants make doing so impossible.³ However, Bradshaw draws on ancient traditions and stories to contextualize comparisons that otherwise are inaccessible due to covenant restrictions. That said, his illustrations and examples are immediately recognizable to temple-endowed Latter-day Saints who can draw upon their own temple experiences to “fill in the blanks” and gain richer insights into his observations and analysis. For this reason, this work is likely to be most useful to faithful Saints who have frequented the temple. Those who are yet to be endowed or are less familiar will still find fascinating connections and insights but may miss some of the more nuanced arguments presented.

Overall, this is a book to read, re-read, then pore over again and again after repeated visits to the temple and expanded readings on temple subjects. It is rich with connections and insights that should be contemplated and studied carefully. Despite all this, Bradshaw’s book left me wanting more. The depth and breadth of analysis and comparisons

3. “Impossible” may be the incorrect word here. Bradshaw obviously *could* openly discuss anything related to the temple. However, temple-going members make covenants to not discuss some aspects of temple worship outside of a temple. Bradshaw rightly feels that openly discussing *every* aspect of temple worship would violate those covenants. Some may see that as being academically (and conveniently) selective, but I see such an authorial choice as evidence that Bradshaw takes his temple covenants seriously.

will no doubt continue, and I fervently hope that he will follow this publication with updates and additions.

This book is a must read for anyone interested in the intersection of ancient practice, modern revelation, and Masonic traditions. My final thought after reading this book is that Joseph Smith, in connecting to old practices with new revelation and the influence of Masonic rites, has demonstrated his prophetic mantle, providing a covenant path that leads Latter-day Saints upward in their faithfulness to God through covenants and symbolism to help prepare them to become joint heirs with Christ. Bradshaw makes clear that Masonry provided Joseph Smith a framework and backdrop for integrating ancient, restoration practices with modern revelations held in reserve for this dispensation of the fullness of times. He artfully shares inspiring insights with finesse and precision to enrich our personal understanding of sacred temple rites and the influence of Masonry on the rich tapestry of the temple liturgy.

John Lynch is a founding board member of FAIR Latter-day Saints (FAIR) and a convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For more than 20 years he served as Chairman of FAIR and has served in various Church callings including nursery leader, ward mission leader, stake mission president, elders quorum president, and bishop. He is currently deacons quorum advisor of the Los Banos Ward in the Merced California Stake and holds a bachelor's degree in International Relations from Brigham Young University. He is married to Krista Lynch and they have five children: Brandy, Rachel, Michael, Jared, and Elizabeth.