

The LDS Temple Ceremony: Historical Origins and Religious Value

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HISTORICAL ORIGINS

CHRISTIANITY IS FIRMLY ROOTED in a commitment that certain key doctrines and claims are anchored in history. For example, the resurrection of Jesus is a cornerstone of Christianity; therefore, "the empty tomb *must be* a historical fact."¹ As a Christian denomination, Mormonism not only shares that commitment,² it adds some of its own doctrines and claims. For example, the Book of Mormon *must be* an actual history of ancient inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere that "has been revealed anew in modern times"³; the Book of Abraham *must be* an actual translation of "a papyrus record taken from the catacombs of Egypt," and like the Book of Mormon must be "a record preserved by the Lord to come forth in this day of restoration."⁴

Indeed the cornerstone of Mormonism's claim to be "the True church" is "restoration": the conviction that Joseph Smith restored "many plain and precious things" that had been taken from the true gospel and scriptures

1. Daniel Patte, *What Is Structural Exegesis? New Testament Series*, ed. Dan O. Via, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 7, emphasis added.

2. See Edward H. Ashment, "Making the Scriptures 'Indeed One in Our Hands,'" in *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 251f.

3. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 98.

4. *Ibid.*, 564. See Edward H. Ashment, "A Response to 'Ancient Sources of Masonic Ritual,' by David Ellis," 1989, privately circulated.

throughout history; that he restored the "same organization that existed in the Primitive Church" of Jesus Christ (A of F 6) because the rest of Christianity had become "corrupt" (JS-H 1:19).⁵

The LDS temple endowment is likewise regarded as a restoration of ancient temple ordinances that "have been the same in all dispensations," according to Elder Bruce R. McConkie. The Mormon ritual was restored "in modern times to the Prophet Joseph Smith by revelation, many things connected with them being translated by the Prophet from the papyrus on which the Book of Abraham was recorded."⁶ LDS writer Hyrum Andrus concurs, citing Smith's explanations of figures 3 and 8 of Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham as evidence that "Joseph Smith obtained the essential covenants, keywords, etc. of the temple ceremony from the writings of Abraham."⁷ Hugh Nibley elaborated on this in his book *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (1975), in which he went to great lengths to read the Mormon temple ceremony into the Papyrus-Joseph-Smith Book of Breathings and other ancient Egyptian papyri.⁸ Thus the consensus of these Mormon scholars about the temple ceremony is that it *must* be rooted firmly in Egyptian antiquity, and that Smith restored it by means of a revelatory translation of papyri. Since the temple ceremony *must* be a restoration of historically ancient rites, it is therefore True.

It is true that Smith's explanations for two of his "figures" on Facsimile 2, the hypocephalus, which he thought was part of Abraham's writings, use such Mormon temple-like terms as the "grand Key-words of the Holy Priesthood" (3 and 7). It is also true that figure 8 refers opaquely to secret writings that are "to be had in the holy temple of God." However, neither of these in any way establishes that the hypocephalus was the origin of the signs, tokens, key words, etc., of the contemporary LDS temple ceremony. The fact is that Smith had been formally initiated into Masonry on 15 March

5. See McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 634ff.

6. *Ibid.*, 779, see p. 637.

7. Hyrum L. Andrus, *God, Man, and the Universe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 334n11.

8. See Hugh W. Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1975). Note how Nibley organizes the second half of his book, his "Commentary," to parallel the Mormon temple endowment:

"Part I: Nature and Purpose of the Book of Breathing(s)"

"Part IIa: Purification Rites" = Washings and Anointings

"Part IIb: Entering the Temple"

"Part III: The Creation of Man" = The Creation

"Part IV: The Garden Story" = The Garden of Eden

"Part V: The Long Road Back" and "Part VI: The Fearful Passage" = The Fall and the Lone and Dreary World

"Part VII: Culmination and Conclusion" (including "Ritual Embraces"; "the temple veils"; and "'Seeing the god', the culmination of the mysteries") = The Veil Ceremony.

1842—the very day he composed his note to readers for the late-to-press 1 March edition of the *Times and Seasons*, which published his translation of the writings of Abraham—and he may have produced his explanations of the figures of the facsimile after that date, resulting in the moot importance of Facsimile 2.⁹ Moreover, contrary to Andrus, the fact is that Smith never claimed any causal connection between the temple ceremony and his interpretation of the the Book of Breathing, and for a good reason: the evidence indicates that Smith treated this papyrus as the original text of the Book of Abraham.

In actuality, these efforts, arguing for the antiquity of the origins of the temple ceremony through the Egyptian papyri, ignore important evidence contemporary with Joseph Smith and his close associates. For Smith taught that the temple endowment ceremony, taught in Solomon's temple, had been corrupted through the millennia, and that Freemasonry was the surviving, albeit degenerate, "apostate endowment," just as "sectarian religion was the apostate religion."¹⁰ In a letter of 17 June 1842 Heber C. Kimball wrote that "Bro. Joseph Ses Masonry was taken from the preasthood but has become degenerated. But menny things are perfect."¹¹ In a later speech, Kimball elaborated: "We have the true Masonry. The Masonry of today is received from the apostasy which took place in the days of

9. As of 4 March 1842, the facsimile illustrations to be printed with the Book of Abraham in the *Times and Seasons* still had not been made, for on that date Smith noted that he showed the papyri to the engraver, "so that he might take the size of the several plates or cuts, and prepare the blocks for the Times and Seasons" (Joseph Smith, Jr., et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1949], 4:543 [hereafter HC]). On 19 March, several days after Smith had been inducted into the masonic mysteries, Wilford Woodruff noted in his journal that the 15 March edition of the *Times and Seasons* was in press, which included Facsimile 2 (Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal* [Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983], 2:155).

10. Benjamin F. Johnson statement, in Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co., 1982), 490. Smith gave a revelation on 19 January 1841, in which he outlined how the temple was to be used: for washings, anointings, baptisms for the dead, solemn assemblies, Levitical sacrifices, and divine oracles; that God would reveal unspecified ordinances there; and that things that were never before known would be revealed there (i.e., "things which have been kept hid from before the foundation of the world" [DC 124:38-42]). In the latter regard, it is important to consider how the Kirtland temple was used (DC 110). It is also significant that the original drawings of the Nauvoo temple did not include an area in which to perform the endowment ceremony, suggesting that no endowment ceremony was contemplated. Later drawings of the temple were altered to include a rectangular section in the attic story at the front where the endowment was to be performed (see Laurel B. Andrew, *The Early Temples of the Mormons: The Architecture of the Millennial Kingdom in the American West* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977], 85).

11. In Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Evolution of the Mormon Temple Ceremony: 1842-1990* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1990), 28.

Solomon and David."¹² Reflecting these teachings, Brigham Young enthused years later that "Our Temple [in St. George, Utah] is the first completed Temple built to the name of the Most High, in which the ordinances for the living and the dead can be performed, since the one built by Solomon."¹³ Finally, Apostle Melvin J. Ballard declared that, while "Modern Masonry is a fragmentary presentation of the ancient order established by King Solomon, the ordinances and rites revealed to Joseph Smith constituted a reintroduction upon the earth of the divine plan inaugurated in the Temple of Solomon in ancient days."¹⁴

In addition, the chronology of events indicates that Smith was familiar with Freemasonry before he revealed the temple endowment. Weeks after he was initiated into Freemasonry and "rose to [its] sublime degree" on 15 and 16 March 1842,¹⁵ Smith performed his first endowment ceremony, initiating his closest associates as "brethren of the secret priesthood" in the Masonic Lodge over his store, and introduced what he termed "the ancient order of things for the first time in these last days."¹⁶ Part of that ancient order included secret "key-words, signs, tokens, and penalties,"¹⁷ as well as celestial marriage, which sanctioned the polygamous relationships that Smith and his closest associates had already entered into.¹⁸

Smith's involvement in both Freemasonry and his introduction of the secret temple ceremony represent a reversal of his earlier teachings. At the beginning of his career, he inveighed strongly against secret societies, attributing to them the downfall of both the Jaredite and Nephite civilizations in the Book of Mormon (Alma 37:24-31; Hel. 2:13), and warning readers of the Book of Mormon to steer clear of them (Ether 8:23ff.). He declared that secret societies were begun by Adam's wicked son Cain in league with the devil, who reintroduced them to humankind from time to time to "keep them in darkness" (Ether 8:15f.; Hel. 6:26-30; Moses 5:29f.).

Smith warned unequivocally that "the Lord worketh not in secret combinations" (Ether 8:19). Consequently, to help readers make no mistake about how to recognize secret societies, he identified their characteristics: secret "oaths," "covenants," "signs," and "wonders" (Alma

12. In *ibid.*, 28.

13. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, Eng.: William Budge, 1878), 19:220.

14. In Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism*, 490. See Andrew, *The Early Temples of the Mormons*, 84f.

15. HC, 4:550ff.

16. *Ibid.*, 5:1f.

17. Brigham Young, in Andrus, *God, Man, and the Universe*, 334n11.

18. See Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1984), 140.

37:27), adding that “their secret signs, and their secret words” enabled them to “distinguish a brother who had entered into the covenant” from the uninitiated (Hel. 6:22). Finally, he noted that they swore oaths that they would suffer their lives to be taken should they divulge any secrets (Ether 8:14). There seems little doubt that in all this Smith had the Freemasons in mind.¹⁹

As time went on, however, Smith’s attitude toward Freemasonry softened, until he finally embraced it. Perhaps that was because many of his closest associates and family members had been Freemasons for years, such as his brother Hyrum Smith, Heber C. Kimball, and Newell K. Whitney. In October 1841, he allowed masonic members of the church “to hold lodge meetings” in the upper room of his store in Nauvoo.²⁰

Another important factor in his change of attitude seems to have been related to his efforts to keep secret his already deep involvement in polygamous relationships with his closest associates’ wives and daughters—which represented another reversal of his earliest teachings against polygamy (Jacob 2:25, 27-28). In time he initiated some of his most trusted followers into this practice, which he assured them was a requirement from heaven. Rumors of these activities were beginning to spread, and he was in danger of being exposed and disgraced.

Already in late 1841 Smith reprimanded Ebenezer Robinson’s wife for spying on his activities and reporting on them to Emma. He then demanded that Robinson reprove his wife. When Robinson did not, Smith fired him as editor of the *Times and Seasons*, giving a revelation to that effect on 28 January 1842.²¹

In February 1842 Smith married Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, already the wife of Adam Lightner, “in the Masonic Hall, over the old brick store”—according to one count, his eighth concurrent wife. On the morning of 9 March he married Patty Bartlett Sessions, already wife of David Sessions—Smith’s ninth.²² One week later, on 17 March, he inaugurated the women’s Relief Society, which in part was dedicated to opposing polygamy by correcting “the morals of the community.”²³ The secret oaths and penalties were not entirely effective, however, and news soon leaked out among the church that there was “a secret group of Saints, including

19. See Andrew, *The Early Temples of the Mormons*, 83f.

20. Widtsoe, in Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism*, 535; see Andrew, *The Early Temples of the Mormons*, 84.

21. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 61n2.

22. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 2d ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 467f.

23. Newell and Avery, *Mormon Engima*, 108; Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 20.

women, called the 'Holy Order' whose private rites included symbolic reenactment of the Garden of Eden."²⁴

Thus began the rift that was to result in the death of Smith, in a permanently-divided Mormon congregation, and in the emigration of the temple/polygamy faction of that congregation from the borders of the United States.²⁵ Just a few days after Smith introduced his restored temple endowment, which included restoration of the polygamous practices of ancient Solomon as well as his temple ceremony, his older brother Hyrum strongly condemned those very things, relying on the authority of the Book of Mormon (Jacob 2:25ff.). Hyrum reportedly said: "there were many that had a great deal to say about the ancient order of things Solomon & David having many wives & Concubines—but its an abomination in the sight of God . . . If an angel from heaven should come and preach such doctrine, [you] would be sure to see his cloven foot and cloud of blackness over his head."²⁶

Hyrum had joined the early efforts of William Marks, the Nauvoo Stake president, and William Law, one of Joseph Smith's counselors in the First Presidency, to "'expose' Joseph and bring a stop to the practice," unless Smith "had a revelation on the subject," in which case Hyrum "would believe it."²⁷ Joseph Smith's subsequent revelation (D&C 132), complete with its reversal of the Book of Mormon condemnation of polygamy, converted his brother to its practice. Law remained unconvinced, even though the revelation was read to him, and ultimately helped to found the *Nauvoo Expositor* to expose and consequently bring about the demise of Smith, whom he considered to be an adulterous, fallen prophet. When Smith ordered the destruction of the *Expositor's* press, he was arrested and murdered, his last words reportedly being a masonic distress signal.

To summarize thus far: Joseph Smith's perceived mission was to restore the ancient truths—of God's original gospel, rites, and ordinances—to earth for the last time before the Second Coming. In order for these restorations to be True, they must be anchored in ancient history. Regarding the temple ordinances, Smith gave no indication that he obtained them from his interpretation of Egyptian papyri, although he mentioned parallels in his interpretations of Facsimile 2. Recent attempts to find them in the papyri

24. Robert Flanders, quoted in Andrew, *The Early Temples of the Mormons*, 84.

25. Andrew presents a fascinating study of continuity and discontinuity in temple architecture that mirrored the change of the Mormon temple from being a meetinghouse, "a congregational center of town activity," to "a place set apart, like a Masonic lodge, to be used only by those whom church authorities had initiated into something great and mysterious" (*The Early Temples of the Mormons*, 85).

26. In Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 54.

27. Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 141.

do not square with the evidence—ancient or modern. Joseph Smith himself indicated that he restored the ancient priesthood “signs, tokens, penalties, and keywords” of Solomon’s temple from corrupt, apostate Masonry, which accounts for several parallels between the two rituals. Unfortunately, the ultimate origin of masonic ritual is medieval Europe—not the ancient temple of Solomon, as Freemasonry asserts.²⁸ Freemasonry is not old enough to be a corrupt, apostate endowment from which a modern, inspired restoration could be made.

RELIGIOUS VALUE

If the LDS temple ceremony is not authentically ancient, how can it be True? Especially, how can it be True when its core elements have undergone the most drastic changes, some of them being eliminated from the ceremony altogether? In fact, how can those changes even be justified?

The church’s answer lies in an appeal to another cornerstone of Mormonism: the doctrine of ongoing revelation. As articulated in the ninth Article of Faith, God “will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.” Regarding changes made in the church, Apostle Boyd K. Packer reminds members of this doctrine: “Changes in organization or procedures are a testimony that revelation is ongoing. There will be changes made in the future as in the past. Whether the Brethren make changes or resist them depends entirely upon the instructions they receive through the channels of revelation which were established in the beginning.”²⁹

However, regarding changes in the temple ceremony, the problem is not that simple. For church officials put Article of Faith 6 at cross purposes with Article of Faith 9: through revelation Joseph Smith restores signs, tokens, penalties, and other elements of the primitive temple ordinances, but through revelation those very signs, tokens, penalties, etc., are either drastically altered or eliminated. Cognitive dissonance results, because a restoration through revelation is later altered by on-going revelation, meaning Smith did not restore primitive ordinances, because God later determined they were in need of revision, or God inspired Smith to restore the original ordinances but did not inspire their revisions.

Some members of the church are concerned about the recent changes in the temple ceremony, because the signs, tokens, penalties, etc., are supposed to be found in ancient times as Joseph Smith claimed, and their existence in the temple ceremony objectifies the reality of the

28. See Ashment, “A Response to ‘Ancient Sources of Masonic Ritual,’” 5.

29. In the *Ensign* 19 (Nov. 1989): 15f.

antiquity that restorationism requires: those same ordinances were first administered to Adam and Eve at the beginning of time.³⁰ To those members, the Truth of of Mormonism depends on the historicity of its restorationist claims. Their faith is informed by “a historically correct and rational understanding of the word of God.”³¹ Consequently, the recent changes in the temple ceremony constitute an erosion of a cornerstone of Mormonism—that it is God’s restoration through Joseph Smith of many plain and precious truths, doctrines, and ordinances intended for the salvation of humanity.

This dilemma about the temple ceremony—as well as about the historicity of the books of Mormon, Moses, and Abraham; about changes in the Doctrine and Covenants; and about the early doctrine and history of Mormonism—has resulted in denunciations by church apologists of members of the church who seek to have their faith informed by methodologically-correct historiography. To apologists, mythical Truths are more important than historical accuracy, with the result that the myths themselves become “history,” and events must be “narrated [in such a way as] to bring out their significance for faith.”³² Accordingly, “the only acceptable historical methodology for writing Mormon history is that it must be ‘faith-promoting.’”³³ Mormon apologists want writers of Mormon history to have the same goals as the writers of the four gospels, who were “ready to sacrifice accuracy in reporting for the sake of theological interpretation.”³⁴ In other words, if the facts are not in accordance with the myth, the facts are revised.

For most members of the LDS church, however, a methodologically-correct historiography is of little importance, because their faith informs them as to what is historical. Theirs is an emotional religion that stresses “the validity of inner religious experience,” and they have “little need” for

30. See Norman Perrin and Dennis C. Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction*, 2d ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1982), 57.

31. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 70.

32. Perrin and Duling, *The New Testament*, 60.

33. Boyd K. Packer, in Ashment, “Making the Scriptures ‘Indeed One in Our Hands,’” 249.

34. James Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 79. C. J. Bleeker, *The Rainbow: A Collection of Studies in the Science of Religion. Studies in the History of Religions (Supplements to Numen), Volume 30* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), disagrees with such “apologetic history”: “History of religions is a historical study. Any attempt to give a theological appraisal of historic facts means a transgression from historic study to theology. Naturally theologians have the liberty to evaluate the historic course of events. However, this is a matter of their own concern and responsibility and is not any longer the business of historians or historians of religions” (23).

an "intellectual foundation for religious conviction."³⁵ For them, when general authorities speak, "the thinking has been done. When they propose a plan, it is God's plan. When they point the way, there is no other which is safe. When they give direction, it should mark the end of controversy."³⁶

As a result, the changes in the temple ceremony are not disturbing to them. In fact, they probably will find the revised ceremony more enjoyable, because many things to which members objected in a recent churchwide survey were removed or revised.³⁷ Among these are the putatively ancient elements that Smith restored in their pure form from Freemasonry. But because their faith is not hampered by a need for historical correctness, they will easily agree with the assertion that the "changes do not affect the substance of the teachings of the Endowment, nor the covenants associated therewith."³⁸

These members may try to resolve the contradictory propositions about the temple ordinance being divinely restored and yet in need of divine revision by asserting that God was behind both; that Joseph Smith's "restored" temple ordinances represent what God thought was appropriate for the church at that time; that the changes through the years reflect how God has kept the temple ceremony relevant. But since restoration usually refers to "The action or process of restoring something to an unimpaired or perfect condition,"³⁹ it precludes revision. The net effect is that God did not restore ancient ordinances to Smith. Rather, he inspired him with certain core ideas that would be revised as times changed.

This argues for the primacy of Article of Faith 9 over Article of Faith 6 and for the fact that Mormonism is not a restoration of primitive Christianity. Instead, it consists of divine revisions. Moreover, the argument for revisionism opens a Pandora's box of relativism in church doctrine: there can be no commandments carved in stone, because God may have only intended them for that people at that time and may have something else entirely in mind for us today. Scriptures would not be binding because they represent what God told other people in other times; they would be in constant need of revision. In addition, if a general authority tells us something, it may be that God only wants us to think that way for the time being.⁴⁰

Finally, with the changes to the temple ceremony announced in April 1990, the church completed a decades-long odyssey from violence and

35. Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism*, 56.

36. In the *Improvement Era*, June 1945, 354.

37. Tanner and Tanner, *Evolution of the Mormon Temple Ceremony*, 52f.

38. First Presidency statement, in *ibid.*, 109.

39. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 8:552, s.v. "restoration."

40. See Barr, 82.

Masonry by excising the ceremony's bloody oaths and penalties and deleting the five points of fellowship. That not only put some distance between the Mormon temple ceremony and Freemasonry, it resulted in the ceremony being a little more uplifting.

Perhaps the most sociologically-significant change was granting women greater responsibility rather than having them live with bowed heads in the shadows of their husbands. Perhaps because of her opposition to polygamy, Emma Smith was not allowed to receive the newly-revealed priesthood endowments. She would not submit to her husband the prophet, who taught that "a wife must obey a righteous husband to merit the same reward."⁴¹ Today, however, women promise to obey the Lord and hearken to their husband, and Eve receives greater consideration in the narration sequences. In a church that possesses a rich patriarchal tradition, the greatest religious value of the recent changes in the temple ceremony may be those courageous steps towards recognizing the equality of women.

41. Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 140.