

The Divine Transmutation

The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844. By John L. Brooke (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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JOSEPH SMITH'S PLACE IN WESTERN religious history is on the verge of creative reevaluation. Two years ago American literary critic Harold Bloom's casting of Smith as a Gnostic prophet linked by vision to the occult tradition of Jewish Kabbalah gave wide notice that Mormon history was ripe for a rereading. *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844*, by Tufts University historian John L. Brooke, offers just that, opening another startling perspective on Joseph Smith and his restoration.

Exploring historical data untouched by Bloom, Brooke argues from intricately marshaled evidence that Mormon doctrine and cosmology took origin not in Puritan New England, nor in the social stresses fostering the Second Great Awakening, but in the much less studied and understood intersection of the Radical Reformation with the hermetic occult. Hermeticism, the intimate companion of Kabbalah in the evolution of alternative Western religious aspirations from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, was the precursor of Mormon theology and a central refining force in Joseph Smith's prophetic

vision.

Joseph Smith's and his disciples' associations with magic and the occult traditions were well catalogued by D. Michael Quinn in his pioneering study, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Signature Books, 1988). In this present work, Brooke augments and amplifies material introduced by Quinn and adds an intricate contextual framework missing in the former study. By so doing, he attempts to move Mormonism's intellectual origins backwards two centuries. Departing from the strictly functionalist analysis of Mormon origins popular in recent decades, Brooke contends that to comprehend Mormon theology in historical context, we need shift attention from "milieu to memory, to the diffuse and divergent trails of cultural continuity that prepared certain peoples—and a particular young man—for the building of a religious tradition that drew deeply from the most radical doctrines of early modern Europe's religious crucible."

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there developed within that crucible a complex alloy of hermeticism and alchemical mysticism with radical aspirations for Christian reformation. *The Refiner's Fire* opens with a well constructed summary of this little understood intersection. From that basic review of history—history which the author understands may be largely unfamiliar

to readers—Brooke moves towards even less charted territory, tracing vectors of this evolving hermetic tradition into early American culture and religion: among the Quakers, Pietists, and Perfectionists coming to Pennsylvania and New Jersey between about 1650 and 1730, a movement which reached its hermetic pinnacle in the Ephrata cloister; through the “culture of print” conveyed by alchemical and hermetic texts brought from Europe; and in the development of late-eighteenth-century esoteric Masonry with its rich foundations in Kabbalistic, hermetic, and alchemical mythology.

Brooke’s summary of hermeticism’s cultural geography in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America stands on its own as a valuable contribution. In the last three decades historians—Francis A. Yates ranking principal among them—have pioneered a broad new understanding of hermeticism’s profound importance in Renaissance and Reformation culture. There are yet relatively few studies, however, that attempt to track the interplay of this hermetic heritage in currents molding succeeding periods. This is the dauntingly difficult historical topography into which Brooke ventures. Working not as a Mormon historian but as an historian of early American religious ideas, he stalks the faint trails hermeticism traveled across two centuries of American history, following them tenaciously into the environs of the young Mormon prophet. In the sum of his evidence, Brooke documents well that Joseph Smith and other early Mormons were touched in many particulars by legacies of hermeticism.

The religion revealed by Joseph Smith clearly shared with hermeticism—or, better stated, a seventeenth-

century alchemical amalgamation of the hermetic tradition—important central themes. Brooke emphasizes both “celebrated the mutuality of spiritual and material worlds, precreated intelligences, free will, a divine Adam, a fortunate, sinless Fall, and the symbolism and religious efficacy of marriage and sexuality.” Each too affirmed a process of human transformation and divinization. One must object that this particular recension of hermeticism is somewhat pre-focused in emphasis, entirely ignoring the less world-affirmative elements of both classical and Renaissance hermeticism, while accenting themes embellished in the tradition’s later Paracelsian, Rosicrucian, and alchemical interpretations—particularly in regard to the *increatedum*, the concept of co-eternal matter. But with that qualification the tradition’s parallels in Mormonism are many and striking.

Of course the crux of Brooke’s study is to show how hermeticism re-emerged in Joseph Smith’s Mormonism. While allowing their possible relevance, Brooke is not inclined to attribute Smith’s religious vision entirely to revelation, reinvention, or (using the Jungian term which surfaces several times in this work) re-emergent archetypal patterns. There are too many lines of hermetic culture leading to Smith; an historical method must evaluate these as the first impetus behind his ideas. Nonetheless, Brooke frankly confronts the unavoidable “prophet puzzle”—the conundrum of Joseph Smith unifying many weak currents of an old tradition into the strong force of a vibrant, new religion—and ponders whether finally much of Smith’s doctrine “must be ascribed to a personal predisposition toward hermetic interpretations of the

'mysteries.'"

This issue stirs deep waters. The precise role historical transmissions of hermeticism played in Joseph Smith's creativity will probably elude any consensus judgment. But a creative exploration of this issue has the potential of opening important new contexts for understanding the Mormon restoration. One cannot avoid juxtaposing Harold Bloom's broadly poetic vision of Smith—a creative genius who "reinvented Kabbalah" in his attempt to restore "the true religion"—with Brooke's detailed historical enumeration of the hermetic-Kabbalistic and alchemical currents flowing out of seventeenth-century Europe, and thence into the milieu and teachings of the prophet. While opposing viewpoints may favor one of these versions of Smith's history over the other, both have a place in the telling of his story. Indeed, the paradoxical interplay of historical tradition with independent visionary creativity penetrates to the core of hermeticism and introduces yet another layer of complexity in understanding Smith's interaction with the tradition.

Brooke, writing as a professional historian, understandably skirts entanglement with the more complex psychological issues raised by any evaluation of Smith's "prophetic experience." It must, however, be suggested that Smith's attempt to reclaim the prophetic experience—granting there was some experiential core to his claims—provides another unique tie to hermeticism, albeit one perhaps beyond the proper limits of historical analysis. Touching at these limits, Brooke cautiously points to the psychological methodology developed by C. G. Jung (itself amplified by a detailed exploration of alchemy and her-

meticism) as offering further perspectives for interpreting Smith's apparent hermetic inclinations and religious development.

The Refiner's Fire explores several fascinating ramifications to an evaluation of Mormonism within the contextual scope of hermeticism. I find most intriguing Brooke's examination of the dual forces he has coined "hermetic purity" and "hermetic danger"—dialectic tendencies in the hermetic tradition that influenced early Mormonism, and are manifest in its subsequent development. Brooke's hermeticism is, again, more specifically the alchemical philosophy of the seventeenth century, and at the core of that tradition there resided a transmutational mystery. Above and below, matter and spirit were in intimate relationship. Through the force of a creative conjunction of these opposites, earth itself could be changed. By reaching to the celestial realm of Divine knowing, seeking the intelligence conveyed by God's angels, invoking Elijah's return, the tradition claimed that both matter's baseness and humankind's imperfection would undergo a transmutation. Regenerated through this divine intercourse, a new Enochian Zion might emerge from earth's refining fires and ascend as the perfected work, the great and final alchemical opus.

This dream, however, walked hand in hand with the danger of its perversion. Human greed, hermetic danger, turned towards baser aspirations: not the transformation of Man into God but the turning of lead into gold. With the secret priestly powers of transmutation guarded in hermetic mystery, hermeticism's charlatans—the puffers and conning men—claimed they too could forge from

dark earth a golden lucre. In these and many less obvious ways, the hermetic dream perpetually dealt with the danger of the great work's failure, debasement, and falsification.

Among the treasure seekers and conning men he met in his early years, Brooke suggests, Joseph Smith encountered both hermetic danger and purity. The mining and metallurgical cultures, and the counterfeiting culture of early America, were deeply infused by the legacy of alchemical transmutation. Brooke documents how thrusts of these specific hermetic cultures might have influenced Smith's and many other early Mormon converts' families. Brooke builds his most unusual, and perhaps weakest, argument pursuing the trail of counterfeiting in early Mormonism—an hermetic danger manifest at Kirtland, Nauvoo, and again in the 1849-50 minting of gold coin at Salt Lake City. But certainly in Masonry, as he emphasizes, Joseph Smith and Mormonism struck old and important veins of hermetic purity.

In Nauvoo dangers and purities coalesced. "In effect," notes Brooke, "the greater Mormon emergence can be visualized as meta-alchemical experience running from opposition to union, an experience shaped and driven by the personality of Joseph Smith." Did the prophet Joseph—as Enoch come anew—realize in Nauvoo the two centuries-old dream of building an hermetic Zion on the American continent? And in the temple raised at the center of this new Zion did Smith consummate the opus by revealing rituals embodying the most ancient and sacred hermetic mystery: the *mysterium coniunctionis*, a divine transformation of humankind mirrored in the eternal union of woman and man? If

so, in the realization of that aspiration history witnesses that deep hermetic dangers were inextricably present.

From a psychological perspective, Jung emphasized that within the hermetic-alchemical tradition (and perhaps by extension in Mormonism as well) neither the profane nor divine was ever entirely free from the shadow of its brother: heaven and earth, purity and danger, were linked. Hermes, the mythological messenger of the gods, paradoxically became also the reputed patron of merchants and thieves. It was the great hubris of a late alchemical tradition that proclaimed earth could finally be transmuted and raised to heaven. Yet in this hubris there resided a strong caution: despite pious, long-suffering devotion and pure intention, the great work of transmuting earth's darkness usually failed. The Philosophers' Stone—that final product of the alchemical opus—was a most elusive treasure. And if a man fell into the great danger of proclaiming the work's failure to be a success, the heavenly gold he proffered became just another counterfeit coin, debased.

John Brooke's *The Refiner's Fire* is a seminal work, a study that will be considered by every scholar who henceforth attempts to retell the story of Joseph Smith or understand his place in religious history. Brooke's arguments linking hermeticism and Mormonism will attract considerable acceptance, though perhaps chiefly outside orthodox Mormon circles. Working from a vastly divergent perspective, Brooke nonetheless joins Harold Bloom in introducing themes that seemingly link Mormon religious thought to its precursors in Western culture—whether one finally judges such "antecedents" to be "sources."