

Masonry

Freemasonry is a fraternal organization that grew out of centuries-old European trade guilds. Freemasons (or Masons) meet in lodges, where they ritually reenact a story based on the brief biblical account of a man named Hiram, whom Solomon commissioned to work on the temple in Jerusalem.¹ During the reenactment, Masons advance by degrees, using handgrips, key words, and special clothing. In Masonic rituals, Masons commit to be worthy of trust and to be loyal to their Masonic brothers. In addition to participating in these rituals, Masons meet socially, participate in community-building activities, and make charitable contributions to various causes.

Some early Latter-day Saints were Masons. Heber C. Kimball, Hyrum Smith, and others belonged to Masonic lodges in the 1820s, and Joseph Smith joined the fraternity in March 1842 in Nauvoo, Illinois.² Soon after he became a Mason, Joseph introduced the temple endowment. There are some similarities between Masonic ceremonies and the endowment, but there are also stark differences in their content and intent.

History of Masonry

There are no known Masonic documents before about 1400. The earliest records tell a story of Masonry originating during Old Testament times. The oldest surviving minutes of Masonic lodges date to about 1600 and indicate that the organization was primarily concerned with regulating the trade of stonemasonry. Later minutes show that the lodges were gradually overtaken by men who were not stonemasons. These members transformed the organization from a trade guild into a fraternity.

Masons told a story about how their ancient forebears had learned stonemasonry, used it to build Solomon's temple, protected the temple site, and held knowledge about their craft as a closely guarded secret.³ By Joseph Smith's day, the boundaries between Masonry's early European history and its founding myths and traditions had long since been blurred. The rituals of Freemasonry appear to have originated in early modern Europe.⁴ Aspects of these ceremonies bear resemblance to religious rites in many cultures, ancient and modern.⁵

The popularity of Freemasonry peaked in the United States between 1790 and 1826. Prominent American founders George Washington and Benjamin Franklin were Masons, and well-known politicians such as Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay later participated in the fraternity.⁶ Even so, some Americans in Joseph Smith's day were concerned by the secretive and exclusive nature of Masonry.⁷ These "anti-Masons" formed societies, published newspapers, and, for a time, organized as a national political party.⁸ In spite of this movement, secret societies like the Masons flourished in the United States, and Masonic lodges were established in most large communities.⁹

Masonry in Nauvoo

In December 1841, 18 Mormon Masons organized a lodge in Nauvoo. Joseph Smith and 40 others applied for membership the following day. On March 15, 1842, Illinois Grand Master Mason Abraham Jonas granted a dispensation for the organization of the Nauvoo Lodge, installed its officers, and initiated Joseph and Sidney Rigdon to the degree of “Entered Apprentice” in the upper-floor space above Joseph’s Red Brick Store. The next day, Jonas passed Joseph and Sidney as “Fellow Craft” and raised them as “Master Masons.”¹⁰ Historical sources do not explain Joseph Smith’s motives for joining the Freemasons. In many localities in early America, the most important elected officials were also Masons. In joining, Joseph may have assumed he would gain a network of allies who could give him access to political influence and protection against persecution. After being betrayed by some of his closest associates in Missouri, Joseph may have found Masonry’s emphasis on confidentiality and loyalty appealing. Mormon Masons also likely encouraged Joseph to apply for membership. In any event, Joseph, like all Masons, would have avowed that his purpose for joining was strictly to gain knowledge and be of service to others.¹¹

Many Latter-day Saints joined the Nauvoo Lodge, which soon became the largest in the state. This rapid growth made many Masons suspicious that Mormons would dominate the organization in Illinois. At first, the state’s Grand Lodge continued the Nauvoo Lodge’s dispensation, giving it time to correct irregularities in its admission of new members, but in October 1843, it withdrew the dispensation.¹² Then, when Joseph and Hyrum Smith were murdered in Carthage in June 1844, Mormon Masons felt outraged and betrayed when witnesses noted that there were Masons in the mob. Upon hearing the account of his death, some Church members believed Joseph may have been invoking a Masonic call of distress in his last moments, adding to the Saints’ sense of betrayal.¹³ Tensions between Latter-day Saints and Masons in Illinois and the surrounding area continued to escalate, and in October 1844, the Grand Lodge severed all ties with the Nauvoo Lodge and its members. Nauvoo Masons, however, continued to operate their lodge independently until 1846, when the Saints left Illinois en masse.¹⁴ After arriving in Utah, Latter-day Saints did not establish new Masonic lodges.

Masonry and the Endowment

On May 3, 1842, Joseph Smith enlisted a few men to prepare the space in his Red Brick Store in which the Nauvoo Masons met, “preparatory to giving endowments to a few Elders.”¹⁵ The next day, Joseph introduced the temple endowment for the first time to nine men, all of whom were also Masons.¹⁶ One of these men, Heber C. Kimball, wrote of this experience to fellow Apostle Parley P. Pratt, who was on a mission in England. “We have received some precious things through the Prophet on the priesthood,” Kimball wrote of the endowment, noting that “there is a similarity of priesthood in masonry.” He told Pratt that Joseph believed Masonry was “taken from priesthood but has become degenerated.”¹⁷ Joseph Fielding, another endowed Latter-day Saint and a Mason, noted similarly in his journal that Masonry “seems to have been a Stepping Stone or Preparation for something else,” referring to the endowment.¹⁸

Mormons in Nauvoo who experienced both Masonic rites and the endowment acknowledged similarities between some elements of the two ceremonies, but they also testified that the

endowment was the result of revelation. Willard Richards, writing Joseph Smith's history, taught that the introduction of the endowment in Nauvoo was "governed by the principle of Revelation."¹⁹ Joseph and his associates understood Masonry as an institution that preserved vestiges of ancient truth.²⁰ They acknowledged parallels between Masonic rituals and the endowment but concluded, based on their experience with both, that the ordinance was divinely restored.²¹

Emphasis on the similarities between the teaching styles and outward forms of Masonry and the temple endowment obscures significant differences in their substance. Masonic ceremonies promote self-improvement, brotherhood, charity, and fidelity to truth for the purpose of making better men, who in turn make a better society.²² During temple ordinances, men and women covenant with God to obey His laws for the purpose of gaining exaltation through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.²³ Masonic rituals deliver stage-by-stage instruction using dramatization and symbolic gestures and clothing, with content based on Masonic legends. The endowment employs similar teaching devices, but it draws primarily upon the revelations and inspired translations given to Joseph Smith for its content.

Another significant difference between Masonic rituals and the endowment was access. While Masons had strict guidelines about who could join the fraternity, Joseph Smith hoped to give the endowment "even to the weakest of the Saints" just as "soon as they are prepared to receive, and a proper place is prepared to communicate [it]."²⁴ Accordingly, Brigham Young and other men and women whom Joseph endowed before his death administered the ordinance to thousands of Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo. Moreover, most Masonic groups excluded women.²⁵ Joseph, on the other hand, taught that it was essential that Latter-day Saint women receive the endowment. Many women in Nauvoo were prepared for this ordinance through their involvement in the Relief Society.²⁶

There are different ways of understanding the relationship between Masonry and the temple. Some Latter-day Saints point to similarities between the format and symbols of both the endowment and Masonic rituals and those of many ancient religious ceremonies as evidence that the endowment was a restoration of an ancient ordinance.²⁷ Others note that the ideas and institutions in the culture that surrounded Joseph Smith frequently contributed to the process by which he obtained revelation.²⁸ In any event, the endowment did not simply imitate the rituals of Freemasonry. Rather, Joseph's encounter with Masonry evidently served as a catalyst for revelation. The Lord restored the temple ordinances through Joseph Smith to teach profound truths about the plan of salvation and introduce covenants that would allow God's children to enter His presence.

Bibliography

The following publication provides further information about this topic. By referring or linking you to this resource, we do not endorse or guarantee the content or the views of the author.

Steven C. Harper, "Freemasonry and the Latter-day Saint Temple Endowment Ceremony," in Laura Harris Hales, ed., *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016).

Related Topics: Temple Endowment, Deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith

1. According to 1 Kings 7:13–45, “king Solomon sent and fetched Hiram out of Tyre. He was a widow’s son of the tribe of Naphtali” and skilled in working with brass. In Masonic legend, he is known as Hiram Abiff and is not to be confused with Hiram king of Tyre, who also evidently helped support the construction of Solomon’s temple (see 2 Samuel 5:11).
2. Joseph Smith journal, Mar. 15, 1842, in Journal, December 1841–December 1842, 91, josephsmithpapers.org.
3. *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons, Containing the History, Charges, Regulations, &c. of That Most Ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1734).
4. Margaret C. Jacob, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Facts and Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland’s Century, 1590–1710* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Arturo de Hoyos, ed., *Albert Pike’s Esoterika: The Symbolism of the Blue Degrees of Freemasonry* (Washington, DC: Scottish Rite Research Society, 2005).
5. See Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present*, edited by Don E. Norton (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 419–23; William H. Stemper Jr. and Guy L. Beck, “Freemasons,” in Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), 3193–99.
6. Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
7. Joseph Smith’s close friends Martin Harris and William W. Phelps were anti-Masons. Harris reportedly thought the Book of Mormon was anti-Masonic in character, as did some early critics of the book. See “Antimasonic Religion,” *Geauga Gazette* (Painesville, OH), Mar. 15, 1831; Alexander Campbell, *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon with an Examination of Its Internal and External Evidences, and a Refutation of Its Pretenses to Divine Authority* (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1832), 9–10. This misunderstanding was likely based on the Book of Mormon’s mention of the commonly used phrase “secret combinations.” See Paul Mouritsen, “Secret Combinations and Flaxen Cords: Anti-Masonic Rhetoric and the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2003), 64–77, 116–18.
8. David G. Hackett, *That Religion in Which All Men Agree: Freemasonry in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 111–24.
9. Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Mary Ann Clawson, *Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).
10. See Glen M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 313–21.

11. David Bernard, *Light on Masonry: A Collection of All the Most Important Documents on the Subject of Speculative Free Masonry ...* (Utica, NY: William Williams, 1829), 16.
12. See Brady G. Winslow, “Irregularities in the Work of Nauvoo Lodge: Mormonism, Freemasonry, and Conflicting Interests on the Illinois Frontier,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, vol. 34, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2014), 58–79.
13. “The Murder,” *Times and Seasons*, vol. 5, no. 13 (July 15, 1844), 585. See also Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball, an Apostle: The Father and Founder of the British Mission* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1888), 26–27.
14. Kenneth W. Godfrey, “Freemasonry in Nauvoo,” in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: MacMillan, 1992), 2:527–28.
15. Lucius N. Scovil, “The Higher Ordinances,” *Deseret Evening News*, Feb. 11, 1884, 2.
16. Joseph Smith, “History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842],” 1328, josephsmithpapers.org. The men were Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, Willard Richards, Heber C. Kimball, William Law, William Marks, James Adams, George Miller, and Newell K. Whitney (Joseph Smith journal, May 4, 1842, in Journal, December 1841–December 1842, 94, josephsmithpapers.org). Nine was also the minimum number of members required to establish a chapter of Royal Arch Masons. Royal Arch Masonry involved a series of higher Masonic degrees practiced by some Masons. Those who receive Royal Arch degrees pass through a veil into a Holy of Holies and enter the “Holy Order of High Priesthood.” It is unknown what Joseph Smith knew of Royal Arch Masonry. There was a Royal Arch chapter in Springfield in 1841 and Joseph’s close associate Newel K. Whitney was a Royal Arch Mason. See Michael W. Homer, *Joseph’s Temples: The Dynamic Relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2014), 245–49.
17. Heber C. Kimball letter to Parley P. and Mary Ann Frost Pratt, June 17, 1842, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; spelling standardized. Kimball had been a Mason for nearly two decades. See Steven C. Harper, “Freemasonry and the Latter-day Saint Temple Endowment Ceremony,” in Laura Harris Hales, ed., *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 143–57.
18. Andrew F. Ehat, ed., ““They Might Have Known That He Was Not a Fallen Prophet’—The Nauvoo Journal of Joseph Fielding,” *BYU Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2 (Winter 1979), 145.

19. Joseph Smith “History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842],” 1328–29; see also Andrew F. Ehat, ““Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord?” Sesquicentennial Reflections of a Sacred Day: 4 May 1842,” in Donald W. Parry, ed., *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 51. A revelation to Joseph Smith on January 19, 1841, urged the Saints to build a temple, that “I may reveal mine ordinances therein unto my people” (“Revelation, 19 January 1841 [D&C 124],” in *Book of the Law of the Lord*, 6, josephsmithpapers.org; punctuation standardized).
20. See Benjamin F. Johnson, *My Life’s Review* (Independence, MO: Zion’s Printing and Publishing Co., 1947), 93.
21. Heber C. Kimball letter to Parley P. and Mary Ann Frost Pratt, June 17, 1842. The early Latter-day Saints’ understanding of the relationship between Masonry and temple worship is reflected in the appearance of symbols commonly associated with Masonry in architect William Weeks’s designs for the Nauvoo Temple and some Latter-day Saint buildings in early Utah.
22. See William Hutchinson, *The Spirit of Masonry: In Moral and Elucidatory Lectures* (New York: Isaac Collins, 1800), 125–34; see also Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
23. See James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord: A Study of Holy Sanctuaries Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1912), 99–100; Russell M. Nelson, “Personal Preparation for Temple Blessings,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 32.
24. Joseph Smith, “History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842],” 1328; see also Joseph Smith journal, May 4–5, 1842, in *Journal*, December 1841–December 1842, 94; see also 94, note 198. While almost all Masonic lodges were fraternal, there were a few female lodges in 18th-century Europe. See Jan A. M. Snoek, *Initiating Women in Freemasonry: The Adoptive Rite* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2012).
25. Margaret C. Jacob, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Facts and Fictions*, 92–129.
26. Two days after Joseph Smith became a Mason, he organized the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo in the same room in his store where the Nauvoo Lodge met. Joseph sometimes used Masonic terms when addressing the Relief Society. For example, he urged them to “go into a close examination of every candidate,” explained that “the Society should grow up by degrees,” and admonished them to keep the contents of one of his letters confidential like “good masons.” He and others also frequently referred to the promised temple endowment. Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, Mar. 17, 1842; Mar. 31, 1842; and “Copied Documents, March 31 and April 2, 1842,” churchhistorianspress.org; see also introduction to “1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” in Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, Matthew J. Grow, eds., *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women’s History* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2016), 24–25.

27. For example, Latter-day Saint researchers noted similarities between ritual clothing used in parts of ancient Egypt and the sacred clothing Latter-day Saints use in conjunction with the endowment. See C. Wilfred Griggs and others, “Evidences of a Christian Population in the Egyptian Fayum and Genetic and Textile Studies of the Akhmim Noble Mummies,” *BYU Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2 (1993), 214–43. For a review of other ancient religious initiation ceremonies, see Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005).
28. See Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 185; Harper, “Freemasonry and the Latter-day Saint Temple Endowment Ceremony,” 149–53.