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*Method Infinite: Freemasonry and the Mormon Restoration.* Cheryl L. Bruno, Joe Steve Swick III, and Nicholas S. Leterski. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2022. Pp. 546.

Reviewed by William Perez, *Florida State University*.

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In *America's God* (2002), Mark Noll reasoned that “Explaining changes of theological conviction by reference to political and intellectual events does not necessarily entail a reduction of religion to more basic secular realities. Rather, attempting to comprehend religion and society in the same narrative allows for a story with flesh and blood instead of a bloodless ballet of abstract dogmas” (6). In this spirit, Cheryl Bruno, Joe Swick, and Nicholas Leterski have brought to life a “flesh and blood” story on the pages of *Method Infinite: Freemasonry and the Mormon Restoration*. Carefully toeing the line between reducing Mormonism to its cultural contexts and highlighting the secular realities in which it developed, the authors have produced the most comprehensive work to date on the interconnections between Joseph Smith's Mormonism and the prolific culture of Masonry that existed in nineteenth century America. It is the culmination of two decades of academic research and a lifetime of lived experience (all three authors have personal ties to Mormonism, and two are also Masons).

The book's enigmatic title is inspired by Eliza R. Snow, an influential early Mormon leader and a plural wife of Joseph Smith, who said: “There is method in Mormonism – method infinite. Mormonism is Masonic.” Snow's clear articulation of Mormonism's Masonic roots encapsulates Bruno, Swick, and Leterski's argument: “Joseph Smith's firsthand knowledge of and experience with both Masonry and anti-Masonic currents contributed to the theology, structure, culture, tradition, history, literature, and ritual of the church he founded. There is a Masonic thread in Mormonism from

its earliest days” (ix). The book demonstrates this argument by analyzing Masonry’s influence on Mormonism during Smith’s lifetime as well as on the various splinter groups that emerged after his death. According to the authors, not only were Smith and his followers influenced by Masonry, but they were also seeking to rescue it from corruption.

*Method Infinite* commences by introducing readers to the philosophic system of Freemasonry and detailing its entrenchment within American society, especially during the years 1790 to 1826. This timeframe incidentally coincides with Joseph Smith’s adolescent years and with his “First Vision” experience. Joseph Smith’s father became a Freemason as did his older brother Hyrum. There is also evidence indicating that his eldest brother Alvin – whom Smith looked up to as a hero and who passed away in 1823 – was also initiated. The Smiths lived in a time and area where folk magic was commonplace, and treasure lay buried in the earth awaiting discovery. This “enchantment of the imagination” (48) meshed well with Masonic folklore. Indeed, “With so many Masonic connections, and with relatively ample access to libraries, bookstores, and newspapers, the Smith family was surrounded by opportunities to be exposed to Masonic ritual, literature, and thought” (36).

However, the Smith family’s relationship with Masonry was not always a positive one. On the contrary, the authors argue that the Smith family viewed Masonry as apostate in the wake of the so-called Morgan affair. The Morgan affair was an anti-Masonic outcry that gripped the country after William Morgan’s disappearance in 1826. Morgan was a disaffected Mason who upon threatening to write an exposé on Masonry was apparently kidnapped and murdered by members of the fraternity. The incident foregrounded internal Masonic disputes between true Masonry and spurious, or corrupted Masonry. Although several of Joseph Smith’s family members and a

substantial number of early Mormon converts had wholeheartedly embraced Freemasonry in the past, Bruno, Swick, and Leterski contend that the sympathy that they expressed for William Morgan (alongside their literal interpretation of Masonic lore) is evidence of their belief that the ancient fraternity had become degenerate and murderous.

This conviction set the stage for an anticipated restoration of Masonry and “It was within this charged atmosphere that Joseph Smith Jr. matured from diviner to prophet” (60). In this sense, “Smith’s Mormonism was one of the last great flowerings inspired by pre-Morgan style American Freemasonry” (353). Encouraged by his own family as well as a community that was sympathetic to the need for a new dispensation of the “universal brotherhood” (251), Smith embraced the Masonic “model that something vital had been lost, and he stepped in to restore the missing knowledge” (252). Such a rapprochement between Masonry and Mormonism had surprising consequences on the people most intimately involved in the Morgan affair. The authors further trace how William Morgan’s widow, Lucinda, would remarry and embrace Mormonism, eventually receiving a blessing at the hands of Joseph Smith Sr. declaring that her deceased husband had been saved in the paradise of God. In fact, when Smith revealed the practice of baptism for the dead, Morgan was among the first to receive the salvific ordinance vicariously.

The lengthy *Method Infinite*, with copious footnotes helpfully included on every page, walks readers through Smith’s restoration process as framed within a Masonic worldview. Throughout the narrative, the authors emphasize that “Joseph Smith’s prophetic charisma and magnetic personality allowed him to use many different avenues to animate Mormonism. Freemasonry was not the only ingredient that went into the mix, but it was a vital one” (318). Notwithstanding this disclaimer, Bruno, Swick, and Leterski manage

to highlight Masonic themes in just about every aspect of Smith's ventures. These themes, at times more overt than others, dot the Mormon landscape. They include myths about restoring lost knowledge that had been preserved by ancient prophets on plates, the use of specific clothing, code names, and knocks during ritual ceremonies, and the swearing of oaths whose violation could necessitate retributive violence. *Method Infinite* explores Masonic influences on Joseph Smith's visionary accounts in New York, his emphasis on temple building in Ohio, his endorsement of military might in Missouri, and his development of ritual worship in Illinois. In a twist on traditional narratives, they even explain how Joseph and Hyrum Smith's assassinations may have been part of a Masonic conspiracy.

Bruno, Swick, and Literski offer several interventions in Mormon historical scholarship. Primarily, they rebut mainstream notions that downplay Joseph Smith's theological and physical involvement with Masonry. They challenge notions that Smith's participation in Masonry served only to further political and social networks, stating that such assumptions are defamatory. Instead of, as some have proposed, explaining Smith's key scriptural production, *The Book of Mormon*, as an anti-Masonic work, they position it as a story that dives into tensions between true and spurious Masonry. Lastly, they counter Mormon apologists who have "pointed to similarities between the LDS temple endowment and ancient rituals in order to reject the Masonic context of many crucial elements," by asserting that "when disconnected from traditional Masonic interpretations, many features of the endowment could not stand on their own and were eliminated from the ceremony, sometimes at the expense of what their Masonic origins might reveal to the thoughtful Latter-day Saint" (447).

*Method Infinite* did leave me with some lingering questions. While the authors were clear to note when their connections were speculative, at times the presentation of some Mormon tenets as Masonically-derived felt more imposed or coincidental than directly related. Some examples include the Mormon reasoning behind communitarian living, or the framing of Joseph Smith's theophany as a "literal manifestation of the Masonic initiation ritual" (86). Were all such linkages imitations of Masonry, or did Masonic and Mormon ideas overlap as part of larger trends in the antebellum United States? Further, while the scope of *Method Infinite* is one of its assets, at times its strongest arguments are diluted within its many details. One is left wondering why, if Joseph Smith was so heavily impacted by Freemasonry throughout his life, did he not formally join a lodge until 1842 at 37 years-old? Lastly, were there deeper Masonic undercurrents behind the institution of plural marriage or as factors in Smith's fateful destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*? Such major issues were briefly touched upon but might have been more fully developed.

Despite these queries, *Method Infinite* provides a foundational text for research into the relationship between Freemasonry and the Mormon Restoration. Harkening back to Noll's observation, the authors' ability to explain Mormon theological convictions and practices by reference to political, intellectual, and Masonic cultural events allows for a "flesh and blood" narrative. It makes a valuable contribution not only to Mormon studies, but also to United States' social and religious history. Illustrating how "Believing himself to be a Masonic restorer, Smith called upon God to inspire him to create ritual in Masonic mold" (xx), *Method Infinite* is a work to be grappled with for years to come.