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Abstract Review of *Equal Rites: The Book of Mormon, Masonry, Gender, and American Culture* (2004), by Clyde R. Forsberg Jr.

MORMONISM, MASONRY, AND MISCHIEF: CLYDE FORSBERG'S *EQUAL RITES*

Nicholas S. Literski

Nicholas S. Literski holds a JD from Northern Illinois University, as well as a BS in sociology from Utah State University. Currently, he manages a bookstore in Nauvoo, Illinois. He was the first Latter-day Saint to become a Freemason in Hancock County since 1846 and has continued to progress in the fraternity, receiving the degrees of Royal Arch Masonry, the Cryptic Rite, the Scottish Rite, and the orders of Knights Templar. He has addressed issues of Mormonism and Freemasonry at the annual conferences of the Mormon History Association and is the author of Method Infinite: Freemasonry and the Mormon Restoration, forthcoming from Greg Kofford Books.

When I first saw an advertisement for Clyde Forsberg's *Equal Rites: The Book of Mormon, Masonry, Gender, and American Culture*, I must admit I was somewhat alarmed. Since I fully intend to explore Forsberg's background and apparent motives, it is only fair that I do the same with my own. For some time now, I have been researching and writing a history of the impact of Freemasonry on early Mormonism, due to be published in late 2005 or early 2006. When I learned that *Equal Rites* would be published well before my book was completed, I wondered if my work would be wasted. Would Forsberg, a scholar published by the Columbia University Press, beat me to the punch, steal my thunder, and otherwise tell "my" fascinating story to the world?

When Forsberg's book was released, I began to hear from my friends in the Mormon historical community. Reluctant to trust their lackluster appraisals, I purchased my own copy of Forsberg's work. Surely, I thought, Dr. Forsberg will have made important contributions that I must not ignore. At the very least, the book would point me to sources that I had missed. When I began to read his preface, I

Review of Clyde R. Forsberg Jr. *Equal Rites: The Book of Mormon, Masonry, Gender, and American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. xxiv + 326 pp., with index and bibliography. \$35.00.

learned that Forsberg claimed the blessing of such prominent historians of Mormonism as Jan Shippo and Klaus Hansen.¹ I thought I was in for what must be a serious and insightful work!

In the end, however, *Equal Rites* was *not* the thoughtful analysis that I had expected. If anything, I found myself utterly perplexed that such a book was published at all. I decided that I should learn what I could about Forsberg's background to ascertain his experience with the subject matter at hand. Oddly enough, it was not Forsberg's religious studies that came to my attention but his evident skill as a jazz musician! It seems that Forsberg was born into a Latter-day Saint family with no less than thirteen children, where jazz rescued him from what he considered "an abusive, patriarchal home and racist, social vision for the future."² His previously published book, reflecting this perspective, was titled *All the King's Horses and All the King's Men: Love, Alienation, and "Reconciliation" in a Big, BIG Mormon Family*.³

Forsberg's low esteem for his family and religious background seems not to have changed. In *Equal Rites* he glowingly acknowledges "all the Mormon and non-Mormon friends over the years with whom I have sat down around a kitchen table of one kind or another to discuss the 'Gospel' and badmouth the church" (p. xxiv). Forsberg does not save his distrust of religion for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints alone. At least twice, Forsberg authoritatively declares that Moses was the "figment of Hebrew imagination" (p. 2; see p. 83).

To his credit, Forsberg promptly lays out his thesis: The Book of Mormon was "a well-crafted defense of Christian Masonry" through which Joseph Smith "hoped to outflank the Evangelical opposition by making the secret ritual world of manhood available to women, first in book form and subsequently in an androgynous Masonic raising

1. In a conversation with Klaus Hansen subsequent to drafting this review, I learned that he specifically forbade Forsberg from using his name to promote this book. Jan Shippo, e-mail communication, 20 July 2005, neither gave Forsberg permission to use her name nor had she read the manuscript.

2. Robert D. MacKenzie, review of *Not Black and White: The Lost Recordings*, by Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., at www.communication.ca/soundbytes/archives/clydeforsberg.html (accessed 1 May 2005).

3. Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., *All the King's Horses and All the King's Men: Love, Alienation, and "Reconciliation" in a Big, BIG Mormon Family* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2000).

ceremony indoors” (p. xxii, emphasis removed). Presumably, such an ambitious undertaking should require a firm understanding of both Mormonism and Freemasonry. I therefore examined Forsberg’s text for clues that would demonstrate his expertise in each of these fields.

Forsberg on Mormonism

As any reader might expect, Forsberg is careful to inform his readers of what he believes to be the historical and theological underpinnings of Mormonism. After all, without such a foundation, how can one evaluate the relationship between Latter-day Saint scripture, Mormon history, and Freemasonry? Despite his having been raised in a “big, BIG Mormon family,” however, Forsberg’s mistakes in this area are legion.

As for Joseph Smith, Forsberg claims that the Prophet was “of Royal Arch stock” (p. 17), referring to the fourth through seventh degrees of York Rite Masonry, in which initiates are taught concerning legends of a lost sacred word. I would have been delighted if Forsberg was able to support this claim, yet he provides no citation whatsoever. I have spent years researching early Masonic sources in every state in which the Smith family lived and have been unable to find a single shred of evidence that any of the Smiths were Royal Arch Masons. Of course, not all Masonic records from the early nineteenth century have survived. However, the Smith family may have been exposed to the legends of Royal Arch Masonry through sources such as their local newspaper, *The Weekly Wanderer*, which in 1804 published a poem based on the legend of the lost “Mystic Word.”⁴

Notwithstanding this supposed “Royal Arch stock,” Forsberg suggests that Joseph Smith was unable to join a Masonic lodge because of a slight limp sustained in his boyhood leg surgery (pp. 17, 22). Forsberg fails to identify, however, what sources suggest that a rule excluding someone so afflicted existed in New York Freemasonry. Instead, he states Joseph’s “risk of rejection” as a universal truism, ignoring the fact that Joseph was later raised to the sublime degree of a Master

4. “Royal Arch,” *Weekly Wanderer* (Randolph, VT), 25 June 1804.

Mason in Nauvoo. This “limping Joseph” theory becomes critical because Forsberg argues that, being unable to join a Masonic lodge, Joseph invented his own version of Freemasonry, with *The Book of Mormon* being a thinly veiled Masonic “monitor” (p. 22)—that is, a book of Masonic ritual instruction.

In spite of his “limping Joseph” theory, Forsberg subsequently argues that Smith may have become a Freemason in 1830 “and kept it a secret” (p. 45). In order to bolster this paradoxical suggestion, Forsberg relies upon an 1860 source of “Masonic law,” which in his mind “states categorically” that one month must intervene between the taking of Masonic degrees. According to Forsberg, Joseph’s receipt of three degrees in two days must have been a sham initiation, staged to fool those who did not know Joseph was already a Mason. In doing so, Forsberg incorrectly relies upon an 1860 source in an effort to determine “Masonic law” in Illinois in the 1840s (p. 45). Forsberg ignores the well-established fact that Joseph was made a mason “on sight” under the direct supervision of the Grand Master of Illinois—hardly an occasion for a “sham” initiation.

In short, Forsberg wishes his readers to believe that Joseph was rejected as a Mason for physical imperfections but was secretly initiated without any record being made so that, twelve years later, another state’s grand lodge could *pretend* to make him a Mason. This argument is dizzying, at best.

Similar questionable historical claims ensue throughout the book. In describing Joseph’s employment by Josiah Stowell, Forsberg claims that it was Josiah himself, rather than relatives, who had Joseph brought before a justice of the peace (p. 52). Forsberg further states that on the “precise day, month, and year when Smith should have become a Mason, he discovered the golden plates” instead (p. 53). As with most American jurisdictions, the Grand Lodge of New York required a young man to be twenty-one years of age at the time of initiation,⁵ which for Joseph would have been 23 December 1826. By his own account, Joseph first discovered the gold plates on 22 September 1823 (Joseph Smith—History 1:29–52). He actually acquired the plates

5. Tom Savini (director of the Chancellor Robert R. Livingston Library of the Grand Lodge of New York), in correspondence with author, 27 January 2005.

four years later, on 22 September 1827 (Joseph Smith—History 1:59). Forsberg’s allegation is simply incorrect. Forsberg could have accurately claimed that Smith obtained the plates during the same time period that he could have become a Freemason, but he inexplicably rejects this approach.

Forsberg seems unable to report even Smith’s death correctly. Unlike the Joseph Smith who was jailed on a charge of treason, Forsberg’s Smith was in the Carthage Jail awaiting “trial proceedings for his part in the attempted murder of Lilburn W. Boggs, the governor of Missouri” (p. 78). Even more bizarre, those familiar with the Prophet’s death would be shocked to find that, according to Forsberg, Joseph’s “executioners then erected a scaffold from which to hang the lifeless body of the Mormon leader” (p. 78). Forsberg’s fanciful version of the Carthage mob, in fact, describes them as being dressed “in Indian costume” (p. 22). It is significant that Forsberg backs none of these erroneous claims with any sources. It appears that he makes up history as he goes.

Forsberg on the Book of Mormon

If Forsberg’s grasp of Mormon history is lacking, his reading of the Book of Mormon is even more so. Forsberg’s history of the Book of Mormon includes a number of never-before-published “facts,” such as that it was given “through an angelic dictation, like the Qur’an” (p. 25) and that its golden plates were discovered “in a hill behind [Smith’s] home in Palmyra” (p. 26). Using Mark Hofmann’s forgery of the Anthon transcript as a primary source, Forsberg diagnoses Joseph as having a “severe reading and writing disorder” as exhibited by his arrangement of the copied characters (see p. 28).

In an effort to promote his theory of the Book of Mormon as a super-secret Masonic monitor, Forsberg proceeds to interpret the entire narrative accordingly. Lehi becomes “the first Grand Master of this ancient American Grand Lodge” (p. 67). When Lehi speaks to his sons, specifically Laman and Lemuel, his words are “more Masonic analogue” and “Masonic hellfire” (p. 72). Laman and Lemuel’s plotting against Nephi is inexplicably interpreted as a recasting of the Masonic

legend of Hiram Abiff's murder (p. 94). Abish, a Lamanite servant in the Book of Mormon, becomes the "female incarnation" of Freemasonry's Hiram Abiff, "in name and deed," presumably because the names share three letters (p. 95). The appearance of Christ to the Nephites, with the tempests and earthquakes, is transformed by Forsberg into "a Masonic raising of the American continent herself," complete with the resurrected Jesus making "Knights Templar of his devoted followers" (p. 131), apparently based solely on the fact that Christ wears a white robe at the time.

All these interpretations of the Book of Mormon would be intriguing, particularly if Forsberg bothered to bolster them with an actual demonstration of *how* the narrative events reflect Masonic legend and practice rather than by making bald assertions. There is a reason Forsberg does not do this—a reason that perhaps only Freemasons would immediately recognize: Forsberg knows even less about Freemasonry than he does about Mormonism.

Forsberg on Freemasonry

Forsberg actually did grow up in a "big, BIG Mormon family," but he makes no similar claim to have experienced Masonic ritual. The first lesson in which Forsberg fails is the basic structure of Freemasonry. An ordinary Masonic lodge, often called a "craft lodge" or "blue lodge," confers the first three degrees of Freemasonry, being Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason. After one has become a Master Mason, he is free to receive additional degrees through the Scottish Rite, York Rite, or both. While Forsberg makes reference to the Scottish Rite, the majority of his allusions are to York Rite degrees. Within the York Rite, a chapter confers the fourth through seventh degrees of Royal Arch Masonry, including Mark Master, Past Master, Most Excellent Master, and Royal Arch. A council, composed of Royal and Select Masters, confers the eighth and ninth degrees of "Cryptic Masonry." A "commandery" confers the three additional "orders" through which one is created a Knight Templar.

Sadly, nobody seems to have explained this to Forsberg, leaving him unable to master the most basic Masonic terminology. When he

quotes from the “Olive Branch Council of Select Masters,” he misinforms his readers that this was “a Royal Arch lodge” (p. 16). He was apparently unaware that not only is a “council” a body of Cryptic Masons, but that there are no “lodges” of Royal Arch Masons. Forsberg makes this sort of error repeatedly. Then, as if his lack of research has yet to be adequately demonstrated, he attributes the symbolic use of blue for craft lodges and red for Royal Arch chapters as demonstrative of competing Revolutionary War loyalties! Of course, not a citation is in sight.

Forsberg further makes truly bizarre claims regarding the basic nature of Freemasonry. At one point, he claims that orthodox Masonry “considers itself a Jewish faith” (p. 128), despite the fact that Freemasonry is a fraternal organization and emphatically not a religion. Later, however, he contradicts his assertion by suggesting that it “seems obvious” that Freemasons would “worship stone” (p. 114). I suppose I should now be confused—does Forsberg think I, as an active Latter-day Saint and a Freemason, worship Jewish stones? One thing is certain—his understanding of the role of Freemasonry in early America rises only to the level of contempt. Referring to the Founding Fathers of America, many of whom were Freemasons, Forsberg speaks of “patriots who liked to play dress-up” (p. 7). As if this is not sufficiently insulting, he attributes Freemasonry to “the tradition of boys’ night out” and men “dancing half naked, beating their chests, and howling at the moon with impunity” (p. 7). Where was I on the night my Masonic brethren were doing *that*? What would my wife say if I were involved in such antics?

Forsberg also demonstrates his ignorance of the supporting legends cited in Masonic rituals. With regard to the Royal Arch ceremonies, he first confuses the setting of these degrees by inserting destructive “Romans” into the ritual (p. 3) and then tells readers that the rite centers on “the [Israelite] flight from Egypt” (p. 102). Both are wrong—the Royal Arch degree is actually set during the reign of King Cyrus of Persia and centers on the building of the Second Temple. Similarly, Forsberg confuses the Master Mason degree with that of the Royal Arch, resulting in a hopelessly garbled account of supposed Masonic ritual (p. 58).

Given his source material, Forsberg's frequent factual errors should not be surprising. The use of anachronistic sources, ranging upward to 1970, plagues Forsberg's entire work. In one case, Forsberg refers to "the reigning Masonic monitor of [Joseph's] day," while the endnote actually cites an 1860 volume (pp. 51, 256 n. 36). While it is true that Masonic legend and practice is highly resistant to "innovations," Forsberg evidently fails to understand that different jurisdictions (that is, different states in the United States) often differ in both their rituals and regulations. As a result, he seems to assume that any text claiming to be Masonic will be an accurate reflection of Freemasonry, across all time and space.

In addition to his repeated factual errors, Forsberg demonstrates a consistent determination to apply the "Masonic" label without textual support. When George Washington dedicated the Capitol building as a "temple dedicated to the sovereignty of the people," Forsberg advises readers that Washington *really* meant that the Capitol was a *Masonic lodge* (pp. 8–9). To Forsberg, Joseph's role as a so-called "money digger" is a "masonic apprenticeship," despite a complete lack of such activity in the rituals of Freemasonry (p. 46). Zion's Camp must be Masonic because Forsberg sees the word *camp* used in the thirty-second degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (p. 47). With regard to Joseph's first vision, Forsberg claims "the Deity's response[s] all have a masonic tone" (p. 60). Joseph's praying in his bedroom prior to the appearance of Moroni becomes Forsberg's "Masonic 'Chamber of Reflection' scenario" (p. 61). Joseph Smith Sr.'s much later recorded dreams "come straight from the lodge" (p. 68). Again, one craves the sort of analysis that would show *why* Forsberg finds these features to be "masonic," but in the vast majority of cases, this hope goes unrewarded. Forsberg simply applies the "Masonic" label to all things Mormon, expecting his readers to follow his lead.

Conclusion

Forsberg's *Equal Rites* serves only to demonstrate the author's ignorance of both Mormonism and Freemasonry. The author promises much but delivers little other than unsupported, unreasoned

assertions. Time after time, he tells his readers that Mormonism, in virtually every feature of its history and doctrine, is Masonic, yet he fails to demonstrate *how* he reaches this conclusion. Despite his lack of understanding regarding Freemasonry, Forsberg makes repeated, desultory comments about the fraternity's members. Even if he had bothered to argue his assertions, he neglects to enlighten the reader as to why a link between Freemasonry and Mormonism matters.

As I prepared this review, I worried that in detailing the book's shortcomings, I would come across as a bully—maybe even one who liked to “dance half naked” and “howl at the moon with impunity.” I wish that I could have found more to praise in Forsberg's book, given my own interest in this topic. In the end, however, I find that Robert D. MacKenzie, reviewer of Forsberg's jazz trumpet efforts, inadvertently gave the best summation of *this* work. Accordingly, I echo MacKenzie: “If we get lucky, maybe Clyde Forsberg will take a break from his academic career and make another recording. *That* will be worth the wait.”⁶

Editor's Note: We think that readers of Nicholas Literski's review of Forsberg's *Equal Rights* will appreciate the following brief review, written by Arturo de Hoyos, the Grand Archivist and Grand Historian of the Southern Jurisdiction of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. The following review was published in the *Scottish Rite Journal* 112/5 (September–October 2004): 30–31 and is used by permission.

Every now and then you hear about a book you just have to read. My traditional Latter-day Saint upbringing fostered an abiding interest in Mormon history. Thus, I gratefully accepted an offer to review a prepublication copy.

My excitement turned to disappointment. Dr. Forsberg's confused views of Mormonism (founded 1830) and Freemasonry do disservice to both. For example, he asserted that the Scottish Rite's philosophy was “the inspiration for the Book of Mormon and the rationale of the Mormon faith.” He supported this view by referencing *Morals and*

6. MacKenzie, review of *Not Black and White*.

Dogma (which actually expresses the post-1857 philosophical meanderings of Albert Pike).

Dr. Forsberg's errors were rampant. He claimed that Mormon founder Joseph Smith Jr. was a 33° Mason (he was not), that there is no reference to Hiram Abiff in the Hebrew Bible . . . (there is: 2 Chronicles 4:16), that there were three Degrees in Masonry in 1717 (there were two), that the Chevalier Ramsey invented a system which included the Royal Arch Degree and a "fanciful tale of Enoch's Golden plates." All this is wrong.

He also claims Benjamin Franklin abandoned Freemasonry and its "macabre business of secret suicide pacts" (he didn't, and there are none), he calls the Scottish Rite "a decidedly Christian application" (it isn't), and [he] asserts there are "religious tests" in Freemasonry, which include a belief in the "resurrection . . . of Hiram Abiff" (both are untrue). In a prepublication conversation, Dr. Forsberg admitted to me that he didn't have any authentic pre-1830 Scottish Rite documents or rituals to support his opinions.

After receiving a copy of the published book, I was disappointed to discover that he simply revised the book point-by-point to omit the errors I observed. This was inadequate, and the book remains fundamentally flawed; it cannot be fixed with a masking-tape approach. Save your money.