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The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology 1644-1844
by John L. Brooke

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This ambitious treatment of Mormon origins and Mormon history will likely win plaudits. After all, how can you lose by combining two subjects of interest—hermeticism and Mormonism—both tinged with controversy? Add magic and folk culture, mix in a bit of quantification, get advance recommendations from scholars who should know their subject, land a respected press to publish your work, and then have it reviewed by people whose mastery of the whole range of subject matter is lacking, and a prize should be in sight. But is this fire, or only smoke?

With a range of apparent erudition that will overwhelm the general reader, Brooke weaves a fascinating tale of influences that allegedly converged and combined in the fertile, megalomaniacal mind of Joseph Smith to produce a vicious religious system. The person who reads only this book on the subject of Mormonism will conclude that Mormonism is rotten at the core, combining superstition and pseudoscience in an unholy synthesis and that its early followers were, quite simply, dunces. In fact, in an audacious final summary of the history of the past century, Brooke tars modern Mormons with the same brush: only a dimwit, ignorant and devoid of character, could believe this religion. That The Refiner's Fire has serious methodological flaws—that its central thesis remains unproved—will predictably be overlooked by those who have neither the time nor the ability to do a close reading or by those whose predisposition assures a welcome to any book that disparages Mormons.

It is important to understand clearly what is at issue. No informed Mormon would deny similarities between Mormonism and other religions or other thinkers. The explanation for these has been twofold: (1) on repeated occasions in the past when apostasy from the true gospel occurred, individual practices or teachings remained as fragments, and (2) the gospel includes all truth and is therefore receptive to true statements or principles from any source. In general, therefore, the discovery of similarities or parallels
does not threaten Mormonism, for it is in the restored gospel that these are all fully integrated and properly understood. But this comfortable recognition hardly requires Mormons to accept any and all assertions of similarity, especially when coupled with a charge or claim of influence that precludes revelation.

Mormonism has of course been the subject of examination from its inception. What, we ask, has Brooke contributed? What new explanations of Joseph Smith and Mormonism does he advance? That some notions from the world of popular magic and divining were believed by members of the Smith family and some other early converts? Not new. That ideas of a graded system of salvation might have been derived from writings such as those of Thomas Dick? Old hat. That Smith ever read Dick remains unproven, but the similarity, such as it is, is there for all to consider and has been well known to any serious student since at least 1945.

What about the similarities between Masonic rituals and the temple ceremonies? Excited anti-Mormons raised that charge in the 1840s, and it has recurred as a predictable refrain ever since. Mervin Hogan¹ and others familiar with both have calmly explained their basic differences. More importantly, early Mormons who had been Masons experienced no cognitive dissonance when they participated in the temple ceremonies. External or superficial similarities did not mean that the holy endowment, a Christ-centered ordinance, was merely warmed-over Masonry. We could go on and on. John Brooke has pulled into his work many stale allegations that have been around for a long time.

With the dizzying pace of Brooke’s study (names and terms are thrown around furiously and chronological grounding is made difficult by repeated jumps across time) and its ponderous scholarly apparatus (at the back of the book, in numbered endnotes, each usually containing several references), the general reader, will be swept away, understanding or retaining few of the details. But Brooke’s large, simple, distorted conclusions will stick: Joseph Smith, a moronic, superstitious knave, a lecher, a would-be dictator, was somehow the outlet for mysterious influences from the past that reached him, not exactly through subterranean channels, but through a process of dilution and cultural transmission that eventuated in the folk beliefs of his progenitors. Never mind
that Brooke’s approach fails to consider or account for dozens of the most basic claims and teachings of the restored gospel.

What, then, is the Brooke thesis? First of all, it is thoroughly naturalistic. No openings for any divine influences here. One requires little imagination to realize what the same approach would do with the New Testament gospels and early Christianity. But instead of merely rehashing the old charges (although there is rehashing aplenty), the author lumps them together into a large interpretation on which he places his signature: the primary shaping influence on Joseph Smith and Mormonism was—here it comes—hermeticism.

The body of ancient writings collectively termed hermetic was revived in Renaissance Florence at the instigation of Cosimo de Medici. He funded and encouraged Marsilio Ficino to complete and publish the Corpus Hermeticum, a compilation of some nineteen treatises. This project was completed even before his massive edition of Plato’s dialogues and the subsequent Theologia Platonica. These works are heavy going, to say the least. They provide a basis for mysticism (using the word in its narrow sense) and stimulated a series of intellectuals in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. Along with revived Platonism, the hermetical teachings have been credited with influencing even early modern science.

Brooke’s theory is that hermeticism was also the looming presence behind Mormonism. However, after all of the hoopla, Brooke concedes that Joseph Smith did not consult the Corpus Hermeticum. In fact, the total number of alleged parallels between Mormonism and hermeticism is only two: divinization and the conjunctio. (On occasion he adds the preexistence and materiality of spirit.)

How, then, does Brooke make a book out of this? How does he try to make his case? Answer: he creates a new entity. This construct is fabricated out of hermeticism, or selected particles thereof, but it is also much more. It is hermeticism—radical Protestant restorationism—millennialism—Rosicrucianism—Freemasonry—witchcraft—popular religion—divining—counterfeiting—communitarianism. Brooke’s mind breezily glides from one to another of these, but instead of making proper distinctions, he treats them as
a single coherent, concrete phenomenon. Over and over again, whatever the specific topic, the adjective “hermetrical” will crop up. In a magical act of which the illusionist David Copperfield would be proud, the author reifies into a single entity the variety of “influences” that for him explain the otherwise “unique and inexplicable” (279) aspects of Mormonism.

The hermetic presence is amorphous, shifting, and wonderfully adaptable. With a wave of the wand, Brooke has performed an alchemical trick of his own. I do not accuse him of creating this loaf ex nihilo but of mixing together a variety of ingredients, tossing it into the oven, overbaking, and then assuming that the resulting crust actually once existed in historical time.

It is unbelievable to me that other scholars of early national America would find this methodology acceptable. One wonders how often this explanatory principle—hermetic subculture as a unified, if ill-defined, concept, not unlike the once-fashionable Zeitgeist—will be applied to other historical problems in the early national period. After all, count the mystical symbols on the back of a one-dollar bill or the number of early United States presidents who were Masons. Does this justify a hermetical theory for the origins of the U.S. Constitution? I think I now understand one criticism of Brooke’s earlier book: “His model postulates a dichotomy that forces him to strap his complex arguments to a rather procrustean intellectual bed.”

It is child’s play to point out inaccuracies in this pretentious work. “Thomsonian” medicine is consistently misspelled as “Thompsonian” (32, 73). Joseph Smith did not claim “ritual identity” with ancient Enoch (198). Mormons do not consider Peter, James, and John to be “archangels” (192). References to the Firstborn and the Only Begotten as the same person do not mean a melding of Adam and Christ (199); both terms refer to Jesus Christ, who was the Firstborn in the spirit and the Only Begotten in the flesh. Are these minor details to be shrugged off? Perhaps, but a scholar so careless of such details might be suspected of playing fast and loose with other matters, including his general interpretation.

The adequacy of the hermeticism-Mormonism interpretation—the Brooke thesis—depends on establishing the connection. It is not enough, in other words, to find bits and pieces here and there
or to advance a series of could haves or might haves. To be conclusive, the interpretation must demonstrate the connections and prove them by providing specific documentation. Alert to this question, anxious to see precisely what Brooke claims, I have recreated the thesaurus from which he selected his key terminology. In hermeticism he claims to find parallels, analogues, antecedents, affinities, anticipations, and resonances. Hermeticism, in one or another of its disguises, provided the predisposition, precondition, framework, and groundwork for Mormonism. But for Brooke, these are not just interesting similarities; causal influence is repeatedly suggested if not stated. Mormonism rested on, was rooted in, and was shaped by none other than the omnipresent, amorphous hermeticism. Brooke is cagey. He sometimes chooses verbs that claim less in its popular persona, as popularized and diluted in backwoods New England, for example, his hermeticism was "much entangled with the formative origins of Mormonism" (58).

But where are the connections? Let the historian show us the transmission. "Exactly how [Joseph Smith] arrived there, the central problem of this study, is not quite so clear," we read (204). Indeed. But this honest admission does not prevent our sleuth from immediately explaining just how the Prophet did it. Although Joseph Smith did not have a copy of the Corpus Hermeticum at hand, he "arrived at an approximation [?] of many [?] of its fundamental [?] points by a process of reassembling [?] scattered doctrines available in dissenting [?] and hermetic sources [?], fused and extended [?] by what Mormons would call revelation—and by what others would call a very powerful imagination" (204). Some might suggest that John Brooke is not lacking in imagination. Are intelligent readers and reviewers really going to let Brooke get away with such slovenliness? In their delight at a general interpretation that disposes of Mormonism while regaling the reader with everything from a dizzy tour of the intellectual history of early modern Europe to the varieties of counterfeiting in the backwoods of early national America to a partridge in a pear tree, will readers forget the elementary canons of logic and proof?

"Groundwork" and "framework," if I am not mistaken, usually refer to a set of conditions that provide the basis or the matrix for
something. At one point, in Brooke’s usage, these become active forces. Perhaps, he writes, “fused with a comprehensive command of the biblical Scriptures, this groundwork in popular hermeticism provided a sufficient framework to shape the new theology as conceived in May 1833” (205). Notice the term “sufficient.” No multiple causation for Brooke.

“Fused with a comprehensive command of the biblical Scriptures”—this recognition seems to come grudgingly. At one point (72), after Jan Shipps called it to his attention, Brooke admits the Bible as a possible source. At another point (159), the Bible is mentioned as an afterthought. Which raises a general question: Are any of the major doctrines and practices of Mormonism found in the Bible? Faith? Repentance? A church organization with twelve Apostles? If this is too easy and obvious, let us try Enoch and Melchizedek. Or how about the return of Elijah? Or baptism for the dead? Having no poor among them for they had all things in common—could this be found somewhere in the book of Acts? The “restitution of all things”—was this made up out of whole cloth by the wily Joseph Smith, or did he find it in a secret manual during a nocturnal treasure hunt?

To find that plural marriage might be divinely authorized under certain circumstances, Joseph Smith had no need to run around looking for contemporary communities whose gender relationships were nontraditional. And seventeenth-century sexual manuals, reprinted in early America, which Joseph Smith might have read because he and Emma might have been experiencing fertility problems, are unneeded as an explanation for the introduction of polygyny. The Bible itself provides ample precedent, and the Book of Mormon, which Brooke must have read hurriedly, suggests that under certain circumstances the Lord would command it. If we are looking for a single major shaping influence on Joseph Smith, if we have ruled out multiple influences and divine revelation, then assuredly it must be, not hermeticism, but the Bible.

Two related Mormon doctrines are particularly hard for Brooke to countenance. The first of these is divinization and the second is having one’s calling and election made sure through a second anointing. Mormons of course have never heard of divinization; they never use the term. They do think that all humans
have the potential of becoming divine during the eons ahead. Most may not make it, for “strait is the gate and narrow the way.” But the potential is there. Humans, children of God, are of a divine race; they are gods in embryo. It is this scandalous doctrine that, for Brooke, “must have” come from the hermetic literature. Having read quite extensively in the hermetic literature, I find this ridiculous. To be sure, passages in the writings of both Ficino and Pico, as of their ancient predecessors, speak of the divine potential of humans granted to them by their Creator. But if historians want to find a groundwork for such a doctrine, all they have to do is open the Bible. Is God holy and perfect? Are humans commanded to be holy and perfect? Is Jesus divine? Are Christians asked to follow him? Is “the imitation of Christ” a concept that modern secular professors have never heard of? What reward did Jesus Christ hold out for his faithful disciples? Did Brooke consider the implications of their being “joint-heirs” (Rom. 8:17)? Of course such ideas were foolishness to the Jews and a scandal to the Gentiles. And they may evoke embarrassed giggles from modern intellectuals. But when Joseph Smith restored the ancient understanding, he did not have to pore over hermetic lore.

With reference to second anointings, Brooke seems to think of Mormons, or at least some of them, as insufferable prigs who strut around thinking of themselves as gods. Brooke draws here from the work of other scholars. A little fieldwork among living, breathing Mormons would lead to the surprising discovery that they are much like anyone else. Second anointings are not part of their usual vocabulary. Those who are regular temple goers are the least likely to be self-satisfied or pompous; instead they tend to be humble disciples engaged in unselfish Christian service. Of course that is a judgment, but it is based on more extensive field work on this particular population than I think Brooke performed.

Having read the anti-Mormon literature, Brooke is anxious to expel Mormons from the ranks of Christians. No ecumenical welcome mats here. But having also read the Book of Mormon, or at least parts of it, he must be aware of its powerful message that Jesus is the Christ, a message that thumps like a refrain through page after page, chapter after chapter. To counter that inescapable fact, he selectively points his historian’s camera to sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and
eighteenth-century thinkers and movements; to popular beliefs and possible family connections in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and finally to episodes in Mormon history that, seen through the eyes of the enemies and persecutors, proved mendacity, immorality, lawlessness, and imperial ambitions. Those beliefs that he considers decidedly outside the pale—divinization, eternal marriage, the temple ceremonies—are presented in the most negative possible light. This is not neutral exposition. Not much chance that people thus portrayed could be taken for Christians.

On a more serious theological level, Brooke, following earlier writers, sees the Mormons as modern Pelagians who deny divine grace, which of course is consistent with the portrayal of Mormons as people who on their own claim to become gods and goddesses. The subject of Pelagianism and its surrounding concepts is a complex one, and theologians are not in agreement on all of the specifics. Not all Christians have joined the magisterial reformers in denying free will to humans, and more than a few, especially among Catholic theologians, allow for individual responsibility and repentance, all of course through the grace of God. Rather than acknowledging this complexity and the substantial agreement between Mormons and many other Christians on such issues, Brooke wishes to brand Mormons with the mark of a classical heresy. But Mormons believe more about Christ than many late-twentieth-century individuals and groups whose Christianity is never called into question.

One of the most interesting sections of The Refiner's Fire explores the background of those who embraced Mormonism. Brooke inventively employs a methodology that, I suspect, will be praised. I praise the effort but must point out the meager results. In fact, the argument is fundamentally flawed. He (or his researcher) used genealogical records to trace fifty-three early Mormon families to their "point of immigration." In quite a few cases, it was discovered that ancestors were engaged in divining, witchcraft, Masonry, anti-Masonry, or some kind of popular religion; or, alternatively, that they lived in localities where these kinds of things were known to exist. Brooke's search also uncovered some instances of treasure seeking and counterfeiting. The reader staggers away from the catalogue of horrors thoroughly convinced of
a nefarious conspiracy or at least an intricate spider web of dark practices that converged on Joseph Smith and predisposed certain people to accept his message.

Why object to such an analysis? Consider the mathematics. Each person has many ancestors. We go back geometrically: 2 parents, 4 grandparents, 8 great-grandparents, 16, 32, 64, 128, and so on. At each generation one can add uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, and neighbors. A fishing expedition into anyone’s ancestry is likely to turn up examples of superstition or eccentricity. Looking at the Brooke ancestral analysis in this light, I am impressed by the paucity of hard data and the virtual absence of demonstrated connection across time. Other readers may find his argument convincing, but let his approach be used on the ancestors of a Lutheran congregation or a ladies literary guild as a control group, and if the results are not about the same, we shall better know how to assess this methodology.

In a way, the ancestral analysis catches Brooke in a trap. If it was their superstition and heterodoxy that predisposed early converts to accept the Mormon preaching, how do we explain the fact that the missionaries had continued success in many locations among various peoples? For the dramatic conversions in England, Brooke has a ready explanation: they came from the Midlands and were part of the dissenting subculture. There is some truth to this statement, of course, as we have long known in the case of Wilford Woodruff and the Irvingites. But I do not see a serious quantitative study here (such as Malcolm R. Thorp has produced) or one that thoroughly explores motives decade by decade in different geographical locations, such as Prussia, Tonga, or Mexico. That there was some predisposition on the part of some converts is an unhelpful truism.

The statement most often repeated by the early converts themselves was that they were unhappy with contemporary Christianity and were looking for something better, something purer, something closer to the New Testament pattern. They were “seekers.” If I have read him correctly, Brooke quite conveniently buries this fact in that large ball of wax that he labels “popular hermeticism.” I also have to wonder how current conversions fit into his framework. Are converts in Brazil and Thailand, in New York and Haiti, in Nigeria and the Czech Republic predisposed by hermeticism?
One would think, if Brooke’s interpretation is sound, that somewhere a Mormon convert would say something like this: “I used to enjoy that money digging. And alchemy—oh, it was fun to get together with the boys and talk about making gold and silver and even trying experiments. And we used to think much about divinization, how we poor folks were really gods. And, oh, that coniunctio really turned us on. How we wished to find a religion that had all this stuff! When the Mormon missionaries came and proclaimed these as doctrines the new religion offered—why, who could resist such a pitch? Now that we are in the true faith, how thankful we are to carry on our belief in and practice of all these things we considered precious.” All right, all right; I exaggerate. But while many converts spoke of seeking the primitive Church and the “restitution of all things,” why did no one ever say anything remotely like this?

At times, Brooke seems to know that his book is wildly out of control, that he is not methodically establishing anything. All of these points, he concedes in chapter 3, are “perforce speculative in places” (87)—the understatement of the century that should stand as a disclaimer at the head of every chapter. He may claim that he is just exploring (278), but he wishes to leave the impression he is proving and demonstrating. His cries of “Fire” are false alarms.

I wish I could give The Refiner’s Fire high marks, for it would be a pleasure to welcome another researcher into the inexhaustible and rich fields of Mormon history. But Brooke, for all his bravado, fails to make his case, fails to prove the nexus between his ill-defined hermeticism and Mormonism, fails to preclude other possible sources, fails to demonstrate that his hermetic underworld impinged significantly on the restored gospel or on the religious experience of Latter-day Saints. For the general reader wishing to learn about Mormons and their history, his book creates an interpretation that is unduly dark and fundamentally misleading. It will of course be greeted enthusiastically by anti-Mormons—now there’s a “prepared” audience for you. But if the author meant to describe real Latter-day Saints and what it was that led thousands of them to sacrifice their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor, he misses the target.
NOTES

1See Mervin B. Hogan, Documenting and Publishing the Historical Relationship of Mormonism and Freemasonry (Salt Lake City: M. B. Hogan, 1982).