

# A New American Esoteric Discourse: Mormon Esotericism

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The popular dialogue of revisionist history in America has marginalized and ignored Western esotericism in the early American religious identity, and scholars of American religions have only just begun to uncover the esoteric influence in America's history. For this essay, I define esotericism as alternative religious or philosophical discourses that seek transformation of the individual; these discourses are often supplemented by initiation, a magical cosmology, ritual practice, and a goal of gnosis. Using this definition, my study analyzes esotericism in early Mormonism. While promulgating a detailed historical exegesis of Joseph Smith, Jr.'s encounters with esoteric thought, I utilize the theories of Kocku Von Stuckrad and Jorge N. Ferrer to interpret the formation of Mormonism. Stuckrad's theory of discourses forms a model of collective esoteric dialogue that is relevant to the formation of early Mormonism. The Western esoteric influences upon the Mormon prophet's worldview resulted from the intersection of multiple religious discourses. These interactions with esoteric discourse are evident through the historical context of Smith's life and through the revelation of texts that he formed into Mormon scripture. Though Stuckrad's theory of religious discourse forms a working model for the evidence of esotericism's influence on Joseph Smith, it does not shed light on why Mormonism was so successful in early America. Jorge Ferrer's participatory enaction theory illuminates the success of the development of esoteric Mormon thought. The legacy of Joseph Smith was not only a result of his interaction with Western esotericism but also a product of participatory enaction through prophetic revelation. The grounding of Mormonism in early occult America and the participatory enaction of Mormon cosmology through Joseph Smith are themes that run through the evolving structure of early Mormon doctrine. This esoteric influence and enaction of Mormon cosmology can be evidenced through the social inter-

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action of the esoterically influenced Mormon founders and their collective influence on Joseph Smith's encounter with the metaphysical, which was filtered into his revelatory experiences. The discourses of *Western Esotericism* surrounding Mormonism, created a new *American Esotericism* whose success is due in part to the collective participatory revelations of the Mormon founder, Joseph Smith.

The revelations of Joseph Smith, Jr. during the Second Great Awakening in the early 19th century led to a set of doctrines and practices that defined the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or Mormonism. This new religious movement's history is characterized by intense controversy and persecution in reaction to some of the association's doctrines and practices and their relationship to mainstream Christianity. The beginning of Mormonism centers on a number of early charismatic experiences with the "heavenly" or the spiritual by Joseph Smith, Jr. and his associates. Smith, who was raised in the Burned-Over District of upstate New York, claimed that, in response to prayer, he saw God the Father and Jesus Christ, as well as angels and other visions. This eventually led him to a restoration of Christian doctrine that, he said, was lost after the early Christian apostles were killed. Mormonism is couched in Biblicism and Christianity. However, the intellectual and social contexts of Smith's visions were influenced by more than a simply biblical worldview. This extra-biblical discussion surrounding early Mormonism is characterized by a field of discourses known as Western Esotericism.

### **Fields of Discourse**

Kocku Von Stuckrad, a professor of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Groningen, theorizes that religious discourses describe the dialogues within religions. These dialogues are divided into adverse historical contexts by adherents of divergent religious traditions.<sup>1</sup> Discourses are not identical with religious traditions, but instead represent the social organization of tradition, opinion, and knowledge that spans across contemporary cultures.<sup>2</sup> Like metanarratives, religious discourses represent grand conversations common to large groups across culture. The cross cultural intersection of religious discourses, their discussion in the public sphere, and their social and political implications Stuckrad calls, "fields of discourse."<sup>3</sup> Fields of discourse are not restricted to specific religions. They develop from contemporary interests within societies. Fields of discourse change religious identities, and Stuckrad states that they "lead to astonishing alliances and parallels between separate religious systems."<sup>4</sup> Western Esotericism in early America represents a field of discourse made up of multiple esoteric traditions that played a

pivotal role in the formation of the Mormon religion. Using my earlier definition of esotericism, my paper analyzes the esoteric dialogue whose field of discourse shaped early Mormonism. A detailed explanation of this definition of esotericism is necessary before moving into a broad analysis of esoteric discourse in Mormon history.

I define esotericism broadly as alternative religious or philosophical discourses. Religious identities such as Mormonism arise through processes of communication. Religious alternatives or esoteric discourses play a critical role in this social process. What makes a discourse *esoteric* is the rhetoric of a hidden truth that can be unveiled in a specific way and established contrary to other interpretations of the universe and history.<sup>5</sup> These other interpretations in contrast to esotericism are often mainstream religion. In relationship to the esoteric field of discourse in America and its influences upon Mormon thought, one cannot represent esotericism as an independent tradition divorced from early American Christianity. Rather, Western Esotericism is an alternative field of discourse in the American history of religion that was influential on the Mormon founders and was a formative influence in the foundation of Mormonism.<sup>6</sup>

These discourses seek transformation of the individual. Antoine Faivre has developed an interpretive model of the esoteric that systematically combines several traditions and disciplines.<sup>7</sup> Among these belong the occult sciences of astrology, alchemy, and magic, as well as Platonic and Hermetic thought, and the philosophies of Kabbalah. The links between these traditions were recognized in the early modern period and were known as the eternal or perennial philosophies. Though I do not agree with Faivre's systematic model, which characterizes Western Esotericism as a single pattern of perennialist thought, I do want to use his connection of these ancient esoteric discourses to show a common theme. These various "perennial" philosophies were characterized by a goal to transform the individual. The claim of esotericism to special knowledge is often combined with an emphasis on individual experience wherein a seeker attains higher knowledge through extraordinary means. I assert that this transformation theme is a central characteristic of the esoteric. Esotericism seeks to refine the human being upon a spiritual path and so enable an inner metamorphosis.<sup>8</sup>

These esoteric discourses often include initiation. Transmission of the higher knowledge exclusive to esoteric thoughts is promulgated by initiation through leaders or adepts. This initiation is a sociological element of esotericism because the teaching is frequently handed down by spiritual authorities and the transfor-

mation of the believer becomes externally visible through rituals of initiation.<sup>9</sup> The initiation theme is evident across many esoteric discourses. In some circles the revelation of knowledge or initiation is transmitted through hidden masters and in other traditions it is simply a laying on of hands by insiders. The alternative nature of esotericism sets it apart in such a way that initiation becomes a means of delineating the tradition from the mainstream in order to pass on the higher knowledge of the order to insiders.

Esoteric discourses also often include a magical cosmology. Antoine Faivre states, "Thinking in a theory of correspondences is a basic component of all esotericism."<sup>10</sup> The assumption that the various levels of reality or the visible and invisible parts of the universe are linked through a series of correspondences forms a magical theosophical worldview. The extent of this metaphysical correspondence varies within esoteric traditions. However, the result, an interactive magical cosmology, is ubiquitous with many esoteric discourses.

Esoteric discourses often include ritual practice. Frequently characterized by imagination, meditations, or symbolic interactions, ritual practices in esotericism are directly linked to the correspondence of the spiritual and physical world. These practices indicate that esoteric knowledge is often received and enacted through the great power of symbolic imagination. Higher knowledge is revealed by spiritual authorities through ritual and is necessary for spiritual growth.

Esoteric discourses often include a goal of gnosis. A pivotal point of esoteric traditions are claims to real or absolute knowledge and the means of making this knowledge attainable.<sup>11</sup> Spiritual or absolute knowledge, in the sense of mystical enlightenment or insight is known as gnosis. Gnosis is a transformation of man through the attainment of knowledge in order to gain insight into the nature of being or interaction with an inner world. This concept can take many forms, and I do not imply that gnosis is a perennial or universal experience but rather that esoteric discourses often seek transformation of the individual through the attainment of knowledge that leads to an experience of gnosis.

In order to show the connection of Mormonism to esoteric discourses in early America, I am building upon the assumption that scholars of Western Esotericism such as Antoine Favre, Kocku von Stuckrad, and others agree that the occult sciences of astrology, alchemy, and magic, as well as the philosophies of hermitic lore and rituals of the orders of freemasons, are all esoteric in nature. By showing the influence of these esoteric traditions on Joseph Smith and his closest associates, I can demonstrate how the field of discourse surrounding these traditions had an

influence on the formation of early Mormonism.

### **Esoteric Magic and Joseph Smith, Jr.**

From folk magic to masonic orders, esoteric rhetoric and communication was widespread in early America. This pervasive theme of esoteric discourse formed and shaped Joseph Smith's worldview. John L. Brooke's *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* lays out a detailed synopsis of the esoteric influences upon Mormon cosmology.<sup>12</sup> The influence of this esoteric discourse in the American folk magic tradition was handed down to the prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. and continued to evidence itself throughout his life. There are many accounts of Joseph Jr.'s gift with the seer-stone, and he describes himself as, "possessing one of the attributes of Deity, an All-Seeing Eye."<sup>13</sup> Following this line of thought according to John L. Brooke, Smith, at this time, pursued and enacted the powers of a divine hermetic *magus*.

The esoteric influence of American folk magic on the formation of Mormonism, is also explored in D. Michael Quinn's book *Early Mormonism and the Magic Worldview*.<sup>14</sup> The foundation of Mormonism within the discourse of esoteric magic culture is a theme that informed the beliefs of Joseph Smith and helped shape the evolving structure of early Mormon thought. The esoteric peculiarities in the story of Smith's revelation, discovery, and translation of the *Book of Mormon* begin with Smith's second set of visions in 1823. Quinn states, "Within traditional magic lore, details of Smith's 1823 visitation were consistent with ritual magic's requirements for successful encounters with otherworldly beings." Published local guides specified that the hour and day of Smith's prayer were ideal for the invocation of spirits.<sup>15</sup>

Much of the evidence for the family's beliefs in magic is circumstantial. However, the Smiths did own implements of ritual magic. These parchments testify further evidence to occult alignment in Joseph Smith, Jr.'s 1823 vision. Moreover, for those who shared a magic worldview, the times and seasons of Smith's September 1823 visitation fulfilled instructions for spirit incantation given by multiple magic practitioners such as Agrippa and Barrett.<sup>16</sup>

The seer stones used in the translation of the plates into the *Book of Mormon* give further correlation to the esoteric discourse of Smith's time. LDS leaders have acknowledged that Smith used a seer stone.<sup>17</sup> The actual process of translation was similar to the way Smith used the same stone for treasure-hunting. Emma Smith, Martin Harris, David Whitmer, and other believing observers affirmed that the use of a seer stone for translation occurred through the "gift and power of God."<sup>18</sup> These

witnesses shared a magic worldview that regarded success with such instruments of occult magic as a divine gift. This occult or folk magic was not outside of the norm for these practitioners. Furthermore, the discourse of esotericism was an integral part of the formation story of early Mormonism, from the revelation of the golden plates, to their discovery and eventual attainment, to their inevitable translation.

### Textual Evidence

Mormon apologists insist that all of the above correlations to occult magic in Mormon history are irrelevant because Smith could not have been so learned as to know all these occult beliefs.<sup>19</sup> However, Michael Quinn shows that not only did Smith have access to rare occult books from which to draw his occult knowledge but that many of them were in his personal library. The texts represent the prevalent dissemination of the magic worldview at the time of Joseph Smith's life.

Advertisements from Palmyra newspapers show that bookstores in Palmyra, whose patrons were farmers and unskilled laborers, carried occult handbooks and intellectual literature.<sup>20</sup> This is evidence for the discourse of esotericism in America. In the area in which Smith grew up, in 1815 there was a more than three-to-one ratio of books to people.<sup>21</sup> Nine years later, in 1824, the ratio was far greater, but still more bookstores were opened in the area.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the refutation of Mormon apologists, the people of the Palmyra region were consuming esoteric literature of folk magic. Quinn states that "to support the myth that Joseph Smith was barely literate, with no intellectual curiosity, BYU's Department of Church History and Doctrine downgraded the intellectual life of everyone in Palmyra."<sup>23</sup> Yet, there was a high demand for sophisticated literature in the Palmyra area.<sup>24</sup> The people of the Palmyra area *were* purchasing and reading intellectual literature.

Mormon apologists have also attempted to show that Smith had no access to esoteric or Hermetic works during his life.<sup>25</sup> Hamblin states, "Joseph Smith lived in the period of *least* influence of the Hermetica on Western intellectual and religious thought since the Renaissance."<sup>26</sup> In refutation, Quinn states, "Hermetic texts were part of the occult revival happening in Europe and the United States"<sup>27</sup> that began in the 1780s. Additionally, texts on astrology, alchemy, the Kabbalah, and ritual magic were in circulation and use at this time.<sup>28</sup> The field of discourse that was esotericism in early America is evidenced through these texts.

Smith's personal library of books is also a clear case for his having read texts of the discourse of esotericism that were outside of Biblical literature. The evidence

points toward Joseph Smith not only being interested in books as a boy but as purchasing books in his local area and being well read as a young adult. Michael Quinn states, “At the least, parallels between Mormon texts and previously published literature suggest that the conceptual viewpoint and language of a Mormon text sometimes reflected the religious, intellectual, and cultural perspectives of its intended audience. This included nineteenth-century folk culture.”<sup>29</sup> The rhetorical frame of the Mormon texts represents the reflection of the esoteric discourse in America.

### **The Enactive Paradigm**

The esoteric origins of the Mormon prophet’s worldview as well as the men who were around him during the prophetic period of his life were brought together through a social participatory religious interaction. Jorge N. Ferrer asserts in *Spiritual Knowing: A Participatory Understanding* that human spirituality emerges from co-creative participation in an always dynamic and undetermined Mystery.<sup>30</sup> He states that spiritual knowing is an enaction or the “bringing forth” of a world of distinctions co-created by the different elements involved in participatory events.<sup>31</sup> Joseph Smith, had a transpersonal encounter with God in a wooded grove in the spring of 1820 that was informed by the well-trod horizon of traditional Protestant Christianity. The eventual changes to Smith’s ontological reality concerning the nature of his spiritual world demonstrate a creative, enactive method of revelation in which the evolution of spiritual principles that he taught were inseparable from his participation with transpersonal encounters in his life.

This changing metaphysical reality was informed by the discourse of esotericism in America. The development of Smith’s teachings on the nature of his religion show how esotericism shaped a changing ontology that was brought forth by Smith’s interaction with what Ferrer calls “the great ocean of being,” in which he encounters new and innovative religious doctrines through the co-creative participatory knowing of his experience. Following Smith’s first encounter with God in the grove we can trace major changes in the development of Joseph Smith’s emergent doctrine of Deity. Smith encountered new and innovative religious doctrines through co-creative participation. This changing metaphysical reality was informed by the discourse of esotericism in America. The relevance of Mormonism to the spiritual culture of early America and the success of Mormonism as a new esoteric tradition that moved into discourse with other religious beliefs in the United States were due in part to Smith’s encounter with participatory ontological experiences.

I would like to note that my interpretation of Joseph Smith's ontology is not that of a traditional Mormon worldview. Mormon practitioners would maintain that Smith's beliefs on God did not change but were in fact consistent throughout his life. Furthermore, Smith himself would later deny many of his own words in order to affirm that his evolved spiritual knowledge had been consistent throughout his life. Rather than adhere to an insider lens on Mormonism, my analysis is based upon chronological interpretation of texts written by Smith over the course of his life and changes made by himself and the church to texts written by Smith. After a summary of the changes that occurred in Smith's ontology over time, I will return to my analysis and development of Ferrer's participatory theory.

Before his eventual arrival at a pluralist doctrine of deity, Smith was a monotheist. LDS historian Dean C. Jessee has documented the earliest known story of Joseph Smith's first vision account.<sup>32</sup> The document from 1831 describes the appearance of only a single divine personage.<sup>33</sup> Smith writes, "The lord heard my cry in the wilderness and in the 16th year of my age while in the attitude of calling upon the lord a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above ... I saw the lord and he spake unto me saying my son Joseph thy sins are forgiven ... behold I am the lord of glory I was crucified for the world."<sup>34</sup> The Book of Mormon, written in 1830, represents this early monotheistic stage in Smith's ontology. In Alma 11:26-28 there is a definitive "no" to the question of multiple Gods.<sup>35</sup> Also of note is the Book of Moses, written from 1830-31. In chapter two, starting with verse three, the Book of Moses tells the creation story from the perspective of an individual monotheistic God.<sup>36</sup> In addition to the evidence from the early Mormon scriptures, there are also historical evidences for believing that Joseph Smith was at first a monotheist. The church made changes to the Book of Mormon to reflect Smith's evolving ontological views. In the 1830 text of the Book of Mormon we find instances of a unified monotheistic God, where Christ and Father are one in the same, whereas in the revision that occurred in 1837 and in the modern edition today, we see a change to a father and son dichotomy reflecting Joseph Smith's changing doctrine of Deity.<sup>37</sup> Smith originally taught that Jesus and the Father were the same person.

His personal belief in absolute monotheism did not last, and Smith soon came to believe in a two-person deity. In 1834-35, during the Kirtland, Ohio period, Joseph Smith made a major departure from the Book of Mormon's emphasis that the Father and Son were the same person. While still apparently maintaining that there is only one God, he began to teach that there are two persons within the Godhead,



the Father *and* the Son. This second stage in Smith's teaching regarding Deity is spelled out in the "Lectures on Faith." Lecture Five plainly teaches that there are two persons in the Godhead.<sup>38</sup> Smith says, "There are two personages who constitute the...supreme power over all things."<sup>39</sup> This new, dual Godhead would be a transition into the plural ontology of gods that was to follow.

As Smith continued to receive revelation, his perception of the nature of God changed. We can see his revelatory transition in the church doctrine and covenants. Smith speaks of a time to come "in which nothing shall be withheld, whether there be one God or many gods, they shall be manifest."<sup>40</sup> Smith began in 1839 to speak of the possibility of an unknown number of Gods. In Chapters 4-5 of the Book of Abraham, first published in 1842, Smith presents the final stage of his developing doctrine of Deity.<sup>41</sup> Here, for the first time, he spells out the doctrine of the plurality of Gods.<sup>42</sup> The creation story that was enacted by one entity in the Book of Moses is changed in the Book of Abraham to represent multiple beings or Gods. Smith goes on to describe his new understanding that there are many Gods and that the Heavenly Father is Himself the offspring of a more ancient Deity, who, in turn, is the offspring of a still more ancient Deity.<sup>43</sup> Hence Smith teaches that the Heavenly Father is but one link in this infinite ancestral chain of Gods stretching back through eternity and is, thus, only one of countless Gods. This revelation leads to the Smith teaching that human beings are the literal offspring of this Heavenly Father and that we, thus, have the potential to achieve exaltation to divine status.<sup>44</sup>

Rather than assert that Joseph Smith was simply changing his view and rewriting his ontological text on the nature of God, I would like to conjecture that Smith's ontological reality was actually changing. Joseph Smith demonstrates a creative, enactive revelation in which the evolution of spiritual principles he teaches is inseparable from the experiential encounters with the Great Mystery in his life. The development of Smith's teachings on the nature of God and the blending of his own multiple belief structures concerning Gods show a changing ontology that is brought forth by his interaction with the "great ocean of being," in which he encounters new and innovative religious doctrines through the co-creative participatory knowing of his experience.

Jorge Ferrer's participatory theory offers us an interpretive lens for Joseph Smith, Jr.'s prophetic revelations. Ferrer states that spiritual knowing engages us in a participatory activity in which our individual consciousness plays a role during transpersonal events.<sup>45</sup> He goes on to assert that we make co-creative contributions to the "Mystery of Being."<sup>46</sup> Smith participated with at least fifteen different divine

beings in transpersonal events that shaped and changed his revelations and understandings of God.<sup>47</sup> Because Smith was interacting with these transpersonal entities, he was co-creatively altering his own reality. Smith's ontological world changed in ways that he did not foresee. Therefore, as his revelatory history unfolded, the texts that he produced displayed an ontological shift.

### **A Socially Enactive Participation**

Building on the theoretical framework of Ferrer's theory, I assert that human spirituality in regards to prophetic revelation comes, not simply from co-creative participation between an individual and an undetermined Mystery, but also from the interaction of multiple individuals, which results in a socially-driven prophetic revelation. Though Smith likely interacted in a metaphysical revelation, prophetic visions like those of Joseph Smith are not developed in a bubble. Instead they are born out of the interaction of multiple discourses and are filtered through the mouthpiece of prophetic figures like Joseph Smith, Jr. His participatory enaction of prophetic revelation is likely a factor in the success of the Mormon religion as a new American esoteric discourse. However, Joseph Smith's prophetic revelations were informed by a socially religious field of discourse among a circle of men who were drawn to him, not just Smith alone. Subsequently, the combination of these men's experiences, Joseph Smith's own esoteric knowledge and metaphysical encounters, and the multiple religious worldviews of the founders of Mormonism resulted in a collective prophetic legacy.

Couching Jorge N. Ferrer's participatory enaction theory within the discourse theory of Kocku Von Stuckrad, I will move to connect the esoteric discourses of early America that shaped Mormonism to the collective prophetic legacy of the Mormon prophet. Esoteric discourses stemming from multiple figures, which were filtered through the prophetic legacy of Joseph Smith's revelations, show how the Mormon religion, through collective participatory enaction, resulted in a new American esotericism.

One of the earliest social influences of esoteric discourse upon Smith came from the Cowdery family. William Cowdery Jr., the father of Oliver Cowdery, who would be Joseph Smith, Jr.'s closest associate in the early years of Mormonism, was connected to the New Israelites when he lived in Wells, Vermont.<sup>48</sup> William Cowdery apparently learned to divine during these years, and his son Oliver Cowdery carried with him to Palmyra and Harmony the power of the divining rod, which Joseph Smith spoke of in revelation as Oliver's gift of working the rod.<sup>49</sup>

On April 5, 1829, Oliver Cowdery presented himself to Joseph Smith in Harmony, Pennsylvania, and two days later replaced Martin Harris as the scribe for the translation of the Book of Mormon.<sup>50</sup> In the Cowdery family, we find the first historical stream of Masonic influence in the prophet's story. The records of the Grand Lodge and the Grand Chapter in Royalton, Vermont indicate that Freemasonry was very important to the Cowdery family.<sup>51</sup> Freemasonry and its higher degrees constituted a fertile field reinforcing the connection between divining impulses, millenarianism, and perfectionism. All of these themes would play critical roles in the emergence of Mormonism.<sup>52</sup>

Two other influential figures on Smith were Parley Pratt, one of the 1830 missionaries for Mormonism, and Pratt's former mentor, Sidney Rigdon. Pratt would be one of the formative voices in the dialogue that formed the interactive revelations of Mormon cosmology. In a tradition that ran back to the perennialist philosophies of ancient esotericism, Pratt insisted that matter and spirit were eternal and uncreated.<sup>53</sup> He spent many years in search of the true primitive gospel.<sup>54</sup> Before coming to Mormonism, however, Parley Pratt found his gospel in the summer of 1829 in the preaching of Sidney Rigdon. Rigdon, once a Baptist preacher and then a Campbellite restorationist, broke with the Campbellite movement on the charge that a restoration of the church involved not only the apostolic church, but also supernatural gifts and miracles.<sup>55</sup> When Parley Pratt converted to Mormonism in August of 1830, he led missionaries back to see Rigdon. Impressed by their announcement of the miracles of the Mormon emergence, Rigdon converted to Mormonism in December of that year.<sup>56</sup> Rigdon would bring a mythology of a pure primitive Freemasonry to Smith's worldview.<sup>57</sup> Also, elements of the other esoteric discourses found in various aspects of the literature of the era that worked their way into Mormon cosmology would have likely come from Sidney Rigdon.<sup>58</sup> Both Parley Pratt and Sidney Rigdon would be major influences on Smith in the formation of key aspects of the Mormon cosmology.

Following Pratt and Rigdon, a man named John C. Bennett would step into the social participatory interaction of Smith's revelations. In the 1840s, Bennett would come to play a primary role in influencing Smith and would replace Sidney Rigdon as the prophet's personal advisor. Bennett's early life weaved together doctoring, Freemasonry, and restorationist religion.<sup>59</sup> In 1831, Bennett was elected Grand Chaplain of the Ohio Grand Lodge of Freemasons. Long before Bennett, the Smith family had seen in Masonic mythology a way to the ancient order of things. The culture of a magic worldview and a Masonic millenarianism and resto-

rationism in the American culture shaped the story of the discovery of the Golden Plates, the narrative of the Book of Mormon, and the formative revelations of the early 1830s.<sup>60</sup> The influence of John C. Bennett, however, brought Mormonism to reach behind the impurities of contemporary Freemasonry to recover what Mormonism saw as the pure original rituals.

The accounts of the discovery of the plates, the language and narrative structure of the Book of Mormon itself, and contemporary dialogue in Ontario County all point to a wider esoteric influence on the social enactment of Joseph Smith's Mormonism.<sup>61</sup> Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were together when they were baptized into the Priesthood of Aaron by John the Baptist who appeared in a vision to them both.<sup>62</sup> Moving north to Whitmer farm in Fayette, Seneca County, in June, Joseph and Oliver wrote the first two books of the Book of Mormon.<sup>63</sup> While the book was at the printers in Palmyra, Smith, informed by his family's restorationist legacy, began to take on the role of a religious prophet.<sup>64</sup>

Through social enactment and esoteric discourse, Smith began revealing a new esoteric religion. This is exemplified by the revelation of a theory of correspondences. The assumption that the various levels of reality or the visible and invisible parts of the universe are linked is ubiquitous within the magical worldview. In June of 1829, Smith revealed the Book of Moses, which presented new extra-biblical doctrines to traditional Christianity. These new doctrines fit comfortably within the American religious field of discourse that encompassed various esoteric traditions. By acting on the folk magic tradition of his father and the revivalist heritage of his mother, Smith began receiving visions and revelations that laid out an esoteric cosmology, and he began ritually baptizing his key followers into the order.<sup>65</sup> In April 1830, the church was formally established in Fayette, and the institutional history of Mormonism began. The new Mormon cosmology touched on magic traditions about the creation of the earth and the nature of the unseen world.<sup>66</sup> Resolving the contradictory accounts of the Creation in Genesis one and Genesis two, the Book of Moses explained that there were two creations.<sup>67</sup> The first creation was spiritual, and the second was physical. Not only was man spiritually pre-existent before the physical creation of the earth, but also all non-living objects including the earth itself were created as rational, spiritual beings.<sup>68</sup> This dually spiritual and physical world is a portion of the magic cosmology of an esoteric discourse.

The social influence of esoteric discourse on Smith's revelations went further by establishing a spiritually living world. Mormons *today* might interpret the talking earth in the Book of Moses as poetry, but early LDS leaders took a literal view

of an animate earth. In 1832, Smith announced a revelation in which God said the earth would die and be reborn.<sup>69</sup> Twenty years later, Apostle Orson Pratt stated that if the earth were not alive, then it could not die as quoted in Mormon scriptures.<sup>70</sup> In 1854, church president Brigham Young affirmed that, “the Earth is a living creature and breathes as much as you and I do.”<sup>71</sup> The breathing earth caused the movement of the tides. In 1857, Herbert C. Kimball stated, “Some say the earth exists without spirit; I do not believe any such thing; it has a spirit as much as any body has a spirit.”<sup>72</sup> This belief in an animate world, expressed by Mormonism’s first two prophets and two senior apostles, is tied to the esoteric dialogues of early America. Henry Cornelius Agrippa’s *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* declared, in its 1651 edition: “The world, the heavens, the stars, and the Elements have a soul ... The soul of the world, and the Celestial souls are rational, and partake of Divine understanding.”<sup>73</sup> The Mormon concept of the materiality of spirit affirmed in the *Doctrine and Covenants*, “All spirit is matter,”<sup>74</sup> was studied in Richard F. Burton’s occult research. After visiting Mecca to study Near East occultism, Burton passed through Salt Lake City to read LDS texts. Concerning “Mormon materialism,” Burton wrote: “Mind and spirit, therefore, are real, objective, positive substances, which, like the astral spirit of the old alchemists, exists in close connection with the component parts of the porous, material body.”<sup>75</sup>

Freemasonry, as we have seen, provides another esoteric discourse that was influencing this very complex story. The Masonic fraternity was a dominant feature of the cultural landscape in Joseph Smith’s Ontario County.<sup>76</sup> The thirty-six towns of old Ontario County contained twenty-six lodges and seven Royal Arch chapters. This dense network of lodges and chapters helps explain the Masonic symbolism that runs through the magic story of the discovery of the Golden Plates.<sup>77</sup> On April 5, 1829, when Oliver Cowdery presented himself to Joseph Smith in Harmony, Pennsylvania, and became the scribe for the translation of the Book of Mormon he was stepping in and reaffirming Smith’s ritual worldview by adding his own Masonic background.<sup>78</sup> As the history of the church pushed forward, and further discourses were added to the field through the auspices of new followers, the complexity and esoteric nature of Mormon cosmology heightened.

The influence of social enactment upon Smith’s prophetic revelations is evident in his relationship with Sidney Rigdon, as well. With the conversion of Rigdon, Smith added themes to the Genesis story in the Book of Moses that were directly analogous to Masonic myths describing priestly genealogies running back to Adam.<sup>79</sup> This discourse of a pure primitive Freemasonry, which came from Rigdon,

introduced Smith to the concept of a primal language.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, by the spring of 1833, while Joseph Smith was in communication with Rigdon, Smith arrived at one of the most critical themes of esoteric theology asserting that all things were dually spiritual and material.<sup>81</sup> Coming very close to some of the ideals of other esoteric discourses in America, Smith revealed that God had not created the world and humanity from nothing, *ex nihilo*, but from preexisting substances *creatio ex materia*.<sup>82</sup> Through interaction with Sidney Rigdon, a sophisticated biblical scholar who had a wide experience in theological questions and who would have had access to scattered doctrines available in dissenting and hermetic sources, Joseph Smith fused and extended an approximation of many of the fundamental points of the ancient esoteric philosophies.<sup>83</sup> Smith went far beyond the universalism of the revolutionary sects to announce an invisible world structured by three heavens, the potential for divinity, the pre-Creation existence of eternal spirits, and their material nature based in intelligence.<sup>84</sup>

Another key example of this socially enactive revelation can be seen in the Mormon prophet's imprisonment in 1839. Over the course of the 1830s Smith occasionally mentioned the doctrines of divinization and plurality of gods, but his ideas about spirit and matter lay untilled.<sup>85</sup> During his imprisonment, Smith's ideas about divinization were reinvigorated. This period is a key example of the social enaction model of collective revelation through esoteric discourse. Whatever occurred between the Mormon prisoners, including Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Parley Pratt, worked to reinforce and clarify their beliefs.<sup>86</sup> Echoing a long tradition of esoteric themes, Parley Pratt now was insistent that matter and spirit were eternal. In a letter to the church from prison in March 1839, Smith referred again to his belief in a plurality of gods. The definitive announcement of Mormon divinization would come in April 1844, in Smith's funeral sermon for one of his fellow prisoners, King Follett. But on his release from prison, Smith preached on spirit and matter on a number of occasions.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, following the period of imprisonment, Smith, in a funeral sermon on August 15, 1840, announced the doctrine of the ritual baptism for the dead. Smith made baptism for the dead a ritual, binding together the visible and the invisible, the temporal and the eternal, matter and spirit.<sup>88</sup>

As the socially enactive stimuli surrounding the prophetic revelations of Smith continued to grow, so too did the aspects of esotericism within his new church. In 1831, Smith gave Mormon high priests the authority to grant salvation through a ritual.<sup>89</sup> Smith announced, "The order of the High-Priesthood is that they have

the power given them to seal up the Saints unto Eternal Life.<sup>90</sup> This power was an authority that orthodox Christians reserved to God, working through grace.<sup>91</sup> The experience of magic discourse clearly inspired this shift, which was a fundamental theological departure. The Mormon high priests would in effect be *Magi*, with powers extending up from the visible world on earth to the invisible world of the heavens, controlling and limiting the power of a God whom the Calvinist tradition made omnipotent.<sup>92</sup> This priesthood system essentially equated to the Mormon faithful being endowed with power from on high.<sup>93</sup> Smith first laid out the central statements of this cosmology in his Book of Moses and in revelations on the priesthood and temples.<sup>94</sup> The key passages of this book were written and Smith's crucial revelations on this cosmology occurred beginning in December of 1830, while Smith worked closely with Sidney Rigdon.<sup>95</sup> Mormonism would be structured around an institutionally shared charisma of an evolving system of inclusive priesthoods.<sup>96</sup> The high priests were to administer in spiritual things in a specific sharing of spiritual power with the prophet.<sup>97</sup> This esoteric theocracy was a new American Esotericism.<sup>98</sup>

Other elements of esoteric influence in Mormonism can be connected to Smith's social enactment. A concern for a primal language was a principal underpinning of the Mormon cosmic system. The references to Adamic language were important in the faith, pointing to another critical link with the intellectual world of seventeenth-century esoteric discourse.<sup>99</sup> This theme of primal language ran throughout Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon. Rigdon was again a central player in this addition to Mormon thought, as well as John C Bennet.<sup>100</sup> At the core of the magic beliefs about correspondences lay the dream of a universal language, capturing the signature or inner essence of all things, understandable to all people if the key to its grammar could be discovered.<sup>101</sup> Eighteenth century Freemasonry was reputed to be hiding the secrets of this universal language. Therefore, when John C. Bennett, the Grand Chaplain of the Ohio Grand Lodge, converted to Mormonism in the 1840s, the council highly favored him.<sup>102</sup> Subsequently, he was, in 1841, made the Assistant President of the church and Joseph Smith's closest advisor.<sup>103</sup> With the induction of Bennett, a new core of Mormonism came to Nauvoo. According to Mormon theology, Freemasonry and Mormon temple ritual shared a common ancestry in the secret or esoteric keys to the mysteries handed down in priestly genealogies from the beginning of time. But the pure primitive Masonry of Adam had been corrupted and would be restored by Joseph Smith's revelations of the Adamic keys or ritual practice.<sup>104</sup>

Although Smith couched his theology in terms of Christian restoration, his promise of divinity in advanced temple rituals restated the central tenets of the discourses within alternative esoteric traditions.<sup>105</sup> The priesthood seal was the crucial element to godhood accessed through the keys of Mormon temple ritual.<sup>106</sup> The reward of the second anointing of the high priesthood was a virtually unconditional guarantee of godhood or divinization.<sup>107</sup> The Mormon doctrine of celestial marriage leading to exaltation and then to divinity, recaptured the esoteric concept of alchemical marriage.<sup>108</sup> Through the enactive inspiration of the esoterically-influenced founding members who were in close contact with Joseph Smith, Jr., Mormonism, from its origins to its controversial growth, became a unique esoteric discourse. This Mormon discourse was a part of the dialogue in the field of discourses that was Western Esotericism in early America.

### **Conclusion**

The parallels with Western esoteric discourse do not imply that Mormonism equates to a carbon copy of Western Esoteric thought. This difference between Mormonism and previous esoteric traditions is due in part to the participatory enaction of Joseph Smith's spirituality. Smith's prophetic revelations through his participation with spiritual entities in an "ocean of being," exemplify Jorge N. Ferrer's participatory model. However, I take this theory one step further. This participatory enaction of belief was not bound to Smith alone. Human spirituality and prophetic revelation come not simply from co-creative participation between an individual and an undetermined Mystery, but also from the interaction of multiple individuals, which results in a socially-driven prophetic revelation. Though Smith interacted in a metaphysical revelation, prophetic visions like those of Joseph Smith are not developed in a social bubble. Instead, prophetic visions are filtered through the interaction of discourses and are articulated through the mouthpiece of prophetic figures like Joseph Smith, Jr. The combination of the religious discourses of the men who were drawn to the prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. resulted in the enaction of a new esoteric tradition. The social enaction or prophetic revelations of new esoteric knowledge in Mormonism formed a religion of American esoteric thought. The founding circle around Smith created an esoteric theocracy. The model of social participatory enaction is exemplified in the evolution of Mormon cosmology during Joseph Smith's lifetime. The origins of Mormon cosmology, ritual, and belief stemming from multiple religious discourses shaped the prophetic legacy of Joseph Smith's Mormonism.



In addition to demonstrating this model of social participatory enactment, Mormonism is also an example of my definition of esotericism. I define esotericism as alternative religious or philosophical discourses that seek transformation of the individual; these discourses are often supplemented by initiation, a magical cosmology, ritual practice, and a goal of gnosis. Mormonism is an alternative discourse in American religion in opposition to protestant Biblicism. Furthermore, Mormonism claims to contain the true unadulterated knowledge of the Christian tradition. The religion sought to transform and elevate man to divinity in the celestial kingdom. Mormon beliefs are characterized and informed by the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods of the church. The requirement of initiation into these orders keeps the pure esoteric knowledge of Mormonism safe within the church body. The early Mormon worldview, of the dually spiritual and physical aspects of reality, is exemplary of a magical cosmology. The belief in the correspondence of the spiritual and physical world was prevalent in the early church. The Mormon Temple ordinances are the keys to Mormon ascension. The ritual performance of these ordinances is the enactment of Mormon esoteric knowledge. Without the ritual practice of the Mormon Temple ordinances, practitioners are not able to reconnect with their eternal family, step into the presence of God, or obtain their own divinity in the afterlife. Lastly, the objective of Mormonism is a form of gnosis through a pursuit of knowledge and perfectionism. By coming to earth, being tested in this life, and obtaining esoteric knowledge, Mormon spirits grow and are transformed so that they may interact directly with God and one day become divine themselves.

My research sheds light on the importance of studying esoteric religion in America. This exploration of collective religious interaction shows how a field of esoteric discourse brought about the formation of Mormonism. The social participatory enactment of esoteric belief resulted in a distinctly new American religion. Unfortunately, the popular dialogue of revisionist history in America has marginalized and ignored Western esotericism in the American religious identity. Scholars of American religions need to further investigate the esoteric influence in America's history. The grounding of Mormonism in early occult America and the participatory enactment of Mormon cosmology through Joseph Smith are themes that show that Western esotericism was formative and influential in the identity of this religion. The formation of Mormonism reflects the wider dialogue of the American religious landscape. I am confident that further study and research into esotericism within America will show that the influence and impact of esoteric thought is a prevalent theme that informs religious identity across American culture.

## Notes

John Caleb Wise, from Pittsburg, Texas, is a Religious Studies major who will graduate from the College of Charleston in the Spring of 2014. “A New American Esoteric Discourse: Mormon Esotericism” was written as an independent study term paper for Professor Lee Irwin. John is interested in eventually seeking his PhD in Religious Studies, which, fueled by his experience with personal ethnographic research on Mormon practitioners and his study of Western Esotericism under Dr. Irwin, will focus on American Religions, with an emphasis on Esotericism.

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