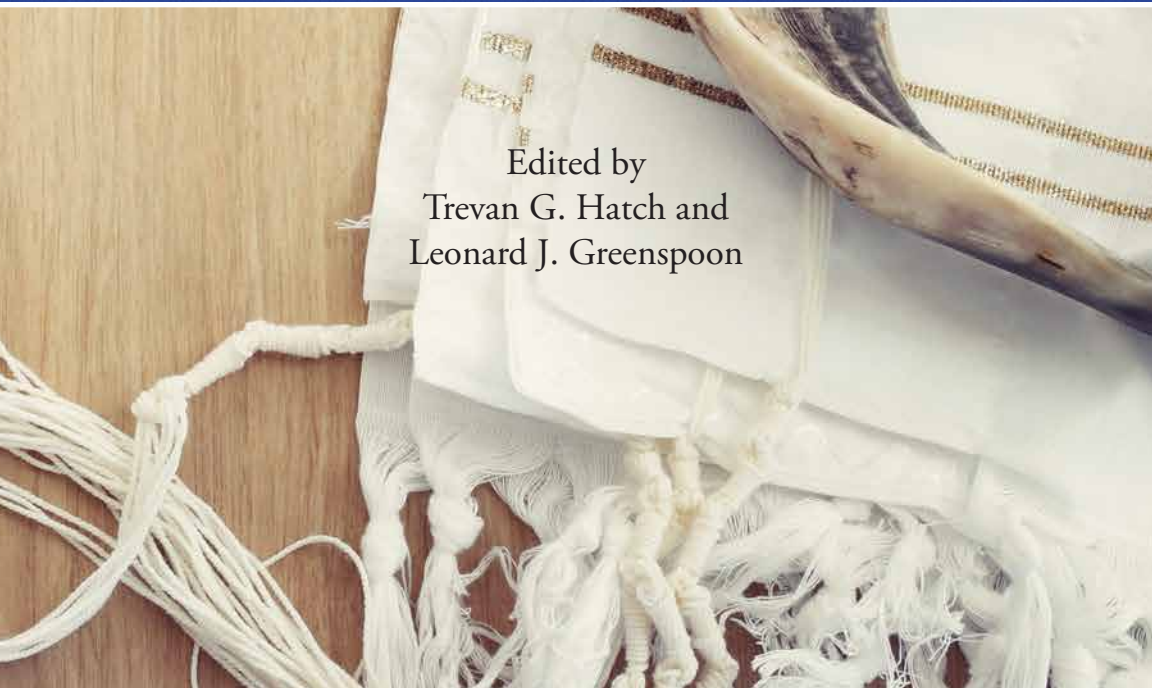




“The Learning of the Jews”

What Latter-day Saints Can Learn from
Jewish Religious Experience



Edited by
Trevan G. Hatch and
Leonard J. Greenspoon

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In memory of two contributors
Rabbi Byron Sherwin and Rabbi Peter Knobel
Rest in peace

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Introduction

Treva G. Hatch and Leonard J. Greenspoon

The title of this book is taken from the opening passage in Latter-day Saints' foundational sacred text, the Book of Mormon. The author of this passage, a seventh-century BCE Manassehite living in Jerusalem, states that the record of his family consists in part of "the learning of the Jews" (1 Ne. 1:2). This book is about Latter-day Saints learning from Jews and the Jewish experience. Many Latter-day Saints seem to have approached their faith and their scriptures from a conservative Protestant perspective (which may be valuable in several aspects); however, what would the Latter-day Saint religious experience look like if they approached it from a Jewish perspective? We wonder what the Jewish experience can teach Latter-day Saints that may enhance their lived religious experience. After all, many Christians (including Latter-day Saints) have taught that during the Israelite period (what Christians call the "Old Testament" period), Jews struggled mightily at observing the Law, rejected and killed the prophets, and obsessively accepted and followed the "Letter of the Law" (the legal minutiae) over the "Spirit of the Law," and that they then rejected Jesus wholesale, killed Jesus, and have been punished by God ever since. Given that depressing interpretation, why would Latter-day Saints want to learn from the religious and lived experiences of Jews?

Why the Jews?

Today, the estimated global Jewish population is fifteen to twenty million, with about two-thirds living in the United States or Israel. Like Latter-day Saints, Jews seem to be overrepresented in certain key professions, such as academics, politics, technology, and entertainment. Regarding religious influence, which is most relevant for this volume, Jews produced what is arguably the most published book of all time—the Bible—which has been translated, in whole or in part, into 3,400 languages and dialects. Jews preserved the Hebrew Bible from their Hebrew and Israelite ancestors, and most of the New Testament is attributed to first-century Jewish writers.¹

1. For a broad discussion, not only on the Jewish legacy of writing the books of the Bible but also on the Jewish legacy of preserving and translating the Bible,

The Book of Mormon, a volume of Latter-day Saint scripture, claims to be an ancient religious record written by sixth-century Jews and their descendants (2 Ne. 30:4, 33:8; Omni 1:14). Christianity, the religion of over two billion people worldwide,² was largely founded by Jews, regardless of whether the credit is given to Jesus of Nazareth, Paul of Tarsus, or Jesus’s closest followers who headed the Jerusalem Church. Islam, the religion of 1.6 billion people,³ was also heavily influenced by Hebrew thought. Islam’s founder, Muhammad, claimed that his revelations were congruous with the teachings of the Hebrew prophets, who the Quran invites all believers to honor.⁴ In short, half or more of the world’s population identify with a religion that has Hebraic or Judaic foundations.

That the Jewish population has been so influential is remarkable considering the amount of persecution that they have experienced. They were persecuted and scattered by the Romans, were slaughtered by Christians during the Crusades, were expelled from multiple Christian countries in Europe, and faced extinction by Hitler’s Nazi regime. Jews have also experienced and continue to experience anti-Semitism in the United States. Henry Ford, a beloved American icon, published multiple anti-Semitic writings that spanned an entire decade, beginning in the 1920s. His newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, contained articles about Jews and their alleged involvement in corrupting the financial system. A series of his articles were compiled into an anti-Semitic booklet titled, *The International Jew*, which accused Jews of conspiring to take over the world. By 1940, Henry Ford had claimed that Jews led the Bolshevik Revolution and accused Jews of starting World War II. Ford was eventually awarded a medal from Adolf Hitler and was praised in *Mein Kampf*.⁵

see Leonard Greenspoon, *Jewish Bible Translations: Personalities, Passions, Politics, Progress* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2020).

2. “Global Christianity—A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population. Pew Research Center,” Pew Research Center, December 19, 2011, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

3. “World’s Muslim Population More Widespread than You Might Think,” Pew Research Center, January 31, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/07/worlds-muslim-population-more-widespread-than-you-might-think/>.

4. Quran 2:135-136; 3:84; 4:163; see also Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur’ān and Muslim Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

5. See Spencer Blakeslee, *The Death of American Anti-Semitism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000); William D. Rubinstein, “Anti-Semitism in the English-speaking world,” in *Anti-Semitism: A History*, ed. A. S. Lindemann and R. S. Levy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 150–65.

In the late 1930s, public polling revealed that anti-Semitism was as at its highest point in American history. *Fortune* magazine, for example, found that 50 percent of the respondents to their survey agreed that Nazi policies toward Jews were helping Germany's economy.⁶ Another poll in 1938 asked, "Should we allow a larger number of Jewish exiles to come to the United States to live?" Seventy-seven percent of respondents answered "no."⁷

Despite such anti-Semitism, Jews are a highly influential cultural and religious minority that have experienced many complexities and paradoxes. Christians, and especially Latter-day Saints, have become increasingly interested in learning about Jews and Judaism because of their foundational influence in western civilization, their history of oppression, their rich religious and cultural heritage, and of course the Jewish connection to Jesus and early Christianity. This unprecedented experience can surely inform, inspire, and enlighten Latter-day Saints in relation to their own religious experience.

Origins of the Term "Jew"

The term "Jew" (*Yehudi* in Hebrew) is derived from the patriarch Abraham's great-grandson Judah (*Yehudah* in Hebrew), who migrated to Egypt with his eleven brothers approximately 1,600 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. While it is commonly believed that Jews are descendants of the ancient Israelite tribe of Judah, this is not the case.

According to the book of Exodus, the descendants of Judah and his eleven brothers were enslaved and oppressed a generation or two after they had settled in Egypt. This enslavement continued for several hundred years until around 1250 BCE,⁸ when God through Moses freed them by a series of miracles. The ancient text states that an entire nation called "Hebrews"—or Israelites because they were descendants of the twelve sons of Israel—fled Egypt and eventually settled to the northeast in the land of Canaan, which is in modern-day Israel and Palestine.

6. Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America, Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1998).

7. Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 127.

8. Biblical and ancient history scholars have replaced BC ("before Christ") and AD (*Anno Domini*, a Latin phrase for "year of our Lord") with BCE (Before the Common Era or Before the Christian Era) and CE (Common Era or Christian Era). A couple reasons for this are: 1) Jesus was born anywhere from 5 BCE to 2 BCE, so BC and AD would not be accurate (Jesus was born two years before Christ?); and 2) to be more inclusive for non-Christian subjects and scholars.

The Israelites divided the land of Canaan into regions where descendants of each of the twelve sons of Israel lived together. The family of Judah, or tribe of Judah, settled in the southern portion of the land near the tribes of Simeon and Benjamin. The other nine tribal territories were located in the north and in the east across the Jordan River. Around 928 BCE, the Israelite nation divided into two kingdoms following the death of King Solomon. The southern kingdom was called Judah after the dominant tribe, and the northern kingdom was called Israel.

During the eighth century BCE, the Assyrians to the northeast of the two Israelite kingdoms had gained enormous power and sought to annex territories of neighboring kingdoms. In 732 BCE, the Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser III (commonly called “TP3” among biblical studies graduate students), annexed part of the northern kingdom of Israel and deported some of the population (2 Kgs. 15:29; 16:9). Over the next twelve years, Assyrian kings Shalmaneser V and Sargon II deported more people from neighboring territories, including the northern kingdom of Israel (17:3-6). Jews and Christians today speak of the “ten lost tribes” of Israel and often assume that all members of these northern tribes were exiled, never to be heard of again. However, the Bible states that Assyria did not deport every individual; rather, a portion of the population in the northern kingdom of Israel fled south into the kingdom of Judah (2 Chr. 15:9; 30:1-11; 34:3-9). Thus, by 720 BCE, only *some* members of all the northern tribes were exiled and became “lost” to their larger Israelite family who remained in the southern kingdom of Judah. Others from each tribe in the north were preserved when they escaped to the southern kingdom.

Roughly twenty years later, Assyria, under the leadership of King Sennacherib, invaded the southern kingdom of Judah. Five chapters in the biblical record describe Assyria capturing the walled cities of Judah and deporting much of the population (2 Kgs. 18-19; 2 Chron. 32; Isa. 36-37). Sennacherib’s own account—recorded on two clay prisms now located in the Oriental Institute of Chicago and the British Museum—claim that Assyria took “46 . . . strong walled cities” and many “of the smaller towns which were scattered about . . . and plundered a countless number.” Sennacherib boasted about expatriating “200,156 persons, old and young, male and female, together with horses and mules, asses and camels, oxen and sheep, a countless multitude.”⁹ Assyrian troops eventually surrounded Jerusalem, a city that had swelled to a population of perhaps 25,000 after Assyria’s inva-

9. Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge* (Carta Jerusalem: Jerusalem, 2006), 243.

sion of the northern kingdom of Israel. Fortunately for those within, Assyria could not penetrate the fortified walls despite numerous attempts.

What, then, does this all mean for the origin of the term “Jew”? It means that by 700 BCE, after Assyria’s invasion of both the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, members of *all* twelve tribes of the once-unified nation of Israel were deported, and members of *all* twelve tribes were spared and retained their identity. Therefore, technically, Christians and Jews should speak of “twelve *partially* lost tribes” instead of “ten lost tribes.” In fact, the Bible never mentions “ten lost tribes.” Instead, it indicates that the northern kingdom of Israel only contained nine of the twelve tribes—namely, Asher, Dan, Ephraim, Gad, Issachar, Manasseh, Naphtali, Reuben, and Zebulun. The southern kingdom included Benjamin, Judah, and Simeon.

The confusion, however, is related to the tribe of Simeon and whether it was included in the northern kingdom or southern kingdom. The book of Joshua places the tribe of Simeon directly within the land of Judah (19:1). Another passage, however, claims that five hundred men from the tribe of Simeon left their tribal territory and settled east of the Jordan River that was later controlled by the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Chr. 4:38–43). That the tribe of Simeon had been scattered among all the tribes of Israel (similar to the tribe of Levi) by the Assyria invasions is also possible. Evidence for this is found in Genesis, which states that the God of Israel will scatter the descendants of Levi and Simeon throughout all the tribes (49:5–7) because they took up a sword and murdered Canaanite men (34:25–31).

The support for “ten tribes” in the northern kingdom is located in the Book of Kings, which suggests that the God of Israel would split the kingdom into two separate entities, with Solomon’s son Jeroboam being given “ten tribes” to rule over as king (1 Kgs. 11:31, 35). It is possible, however, that the tribe of Manasseh was counted twice, as it was divided in half by the Jordan River. Regardless of how many tribes comprised each kingdom, the fact remains that members of *all twelve tribes* were deported and members of *all twelve tribes* were spared. This is what James of the New Testament understood when he wrote his epistle to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (James 1:1).

The Israelites from *all twelve tribes* who survived the invasions and deportations of Assyria began to call themselves “Jews” (*yehudim*) after the name of the southern kingdom and its dominant tribe, Judah. (It is even possible that the inhabitants of the southern kingdom called themselves Jews before the Assyrian invasions.) The Book of Esther, which postdates the Assyrian deportations, provides a perfect example. Mordecai, a prin-

cipal character in the Esther story, is the first person called a “Jew” in the Bible—even though he was from the tribe of Benjamin: “Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite” (Esth. 2:5). An authoritative Jewish text that postdates the Esther story by as much as nine hundred years comments on this passage as follows:

Rabbi Yochanan said, As a matter of fact, Mordechai *descended from the* tribe of Benjamin. So why is *he called a Yehudi*, Jew, a man from *the* tribe of *Judah*? Because he repudiated idolatry “for whoever renounces idolatry is called a Jew, *Yehudi*.”¹⁰

In other words, according to Rabbi Yochanan, any individual who is a descendant of Israel and who observes Jewish law is a Jew—not just people who were literal descendants of the tribe of Judah.

Not only does the New Testament also affirm that tribal affiliation was retained for over seven hundred years after the Assyrian invasions, it also points out that all descendants of the ancient Israelites were considered “Jews” regardless of tribal descent. For example, Paul called himself a Jew even though he was also from the tribe of Benjamin (Acts 21:39; Rom. 11:1). Likewise, the Gospel of Luke describes the prophet Anna as a Jew who descended from the tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36), which was part of the northern kingdom of Israel during the Assyrian invasions.

In sum, despite what many may assume, contemporary Jews are not exclusively descendants of the ancient Israelite tribe of Judah—and not even primarily from the tribe of Judah. They descend from all thirteen tribes of Israel (including the landless, ubiquitous tribe of Levi), and many Jews may also descend from people outside of the House of Israel who converted to Judaism. The “ten lost tribes” (a term that does not appear in the Bible) was invented by later Christians and Jews to refer to *some* (not all) of the population from *all* twelve tribes that were deported by the Assyrians seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus.

We emphasize this point because too often Latter-day Saints talk about Jews as if they are descendants from one tribe of Israel. In addition, it is not uncommon for Latter-day Saints to claim that they are “Jewish” because their patriarchal blessing pronounces their lineage as being from the tribe of Judah. This misconception comes from a long-held belief that patriarchal blessings

10. Megillah 12b (Talmud), as quoted in Rabbi Yaakov Ibn Chaviv, comp. *Ein Yakov: The Ethical and Inspirational Teachings of the Talmud*. Translated by Avraham Yaakov Finkel (Jason Aronson Inc.: Lanham, MD., 1999), 266; emphasis added.

provide pronouncements of literal blood lineage. Given our knowledge of DNA science and population genetics in recent decades, patriarchal blessings cannot be pronouncements of literal biological heritage. They are spiritual pronouncements of the tribe into which one is adopted. It is nearly impossible for people from the Gentile nations of Europe, for example, to have a dominant DNA of an ancient Semitic people from over 3,000 years ago.¹¹

Based on our more advanced knowledge of DNA and genetics, some in the Church have deemphasized claims of literal blood lineage and emphasized the spiritual blessings associated with tribal affiliation.¹² For example, Patriarch Eldred G. Smith, the last Church Patriarch before becoming an emeritus General Authority, explained, “Patriarchs . . . [are] giving blessings, [they’re] not declaring lineage by terms of just genealogy. [They’re] declaring lineage by terms of blessing. You go to a Patriarch to get a blessing.”¹³ Thus, a patriarchal blessing pronouncement from the tribe of Judah does not make one Jewish, and a person who is Jewish by ethnicity does not necessarily descend from the ancient tribe of Judah.

It also behooves Latter-day Saints to understand that one can be “Jewish” by conversion to the Jewish religion. The Jewish people are unique in that they have both a birth heritage and a religion. Not all ethnic Jews are adherents of the Jewish religion, and not all Jews by religious persuasion are ethnically Jewish. Some ethnic Jews may be Catholic, Protestant, Latter-day Saint, Buddhist, or even atheist. Moreover, some Jews by religion (not by ethnicity) may be Asian, African, Hispanic, or even Persian or Arab. Broadly speaking, an individual’s claim of being “Jewish” usually refers to lineage and not necessarily religious traditions or beliefs.

11. This claim is based on personal correspondence with Latter-day Saint scientist and population geneticist Ugo Perego. See his presentation on this topic, “All Abraham’s Children: A Genetic Perspective,” at the 2016 Science & Mormonism Symposium: Body, Brain, Mind & Spirit, which took place on March 12, 2016 in Orem, Utah, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/vid-ugo-a-perego-all-abrahams-children-a-genetic-perspective-2/>. See also the Gospel Topics Essay, one of the authors of which was Ugo Perego, “Book of Mormon and DNA Studies,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, updated April 2017, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-and-dna-studies>.

12. See Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 34–35.

13. See the speech quoted in Irene M. Bates, “Patriarchal Blessings and the Routinization of Charisma,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 5.

We should note here that as we have referred to "Jews" and "Judaism" in this introduction, we are not referring to all Jews everywhere. Like with most religious traditions and ethnicities, Jews are not a monolithic group. They are instead made up of diverse beliefs, traditions, and practices. Thus, we try to state clearly what aspects of Judaism we are discussing in a particular chapter and which Jewish group we are highlighting.

What this Book Is and Isn't

In the introduction to his *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints*, Stephen Webb, a Catholic scholar, writes that Christianity may be "on the verge of potentially radical transformations." According to Webb, "The rise of a truly global Christian community is breaking down not only geographical barriers but also doctrinal walls that have kept churches divided for centuries."¹⁴ He posited that perhaps the best way to envision the future of Christianity in light of these transformations is to examine the Latter-day Saint religion, "one of the youngest branches on the Christian tree."¹⁵

Like Webb, we too seek additional inspiration from another religious tradition; however, unlike Webb we do not look to one of the "youngest branches" on the Christian tree; rather, we turn to the oldest branch on the western religious tree. Jews and Judaism have continued and stayed relevant through many centuries, periods of persecution, and wars. Like Jews who are the majority in Israel but a religious and ethnic minority in nearly all other countries, Latter-day Saints are the dominant group in Utah but a minority in almost every other state and country. As articulated by Harold Bloom, "The Mormons, like the Jews before them, are a religion that became a people."¹⁶ Latter-day Saints have developed a unique identity and culture within the broader American culture (just visit Provo, Utah, as Exhibit A). It is only a minor surprise, then, to learn that the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* included an entry on Mormons. Jews and Judaism, as both a "people" and religion, are ancient, and the Jewish experience is arguably unprecedented; therefore, we turn to the wisdom of Jews and Judaism to inform, inspire, and en-

14. Stephen Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints*, 1.

15. Webb, 2.

16. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 83.

hance the lived religious experience of Latter-day Saints. As the prominent twentieth-century Jewish thinker, Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote, “‘To be or not to be’ is not the question. Of course, we are all anxious to be. How to be and how not to be is the question.”¹⁷ Likewise, the question for Latter-day Saints should not be whether they *are* or *are not* a Latter-day Saint; the question is, *what* do they do, *how* do they do it, and *why* do they do it precisely *because* they are a Latter-day Saint.

We emphasize that we do not seek inspiration and enlightenment for Latter-day Saint leadership on matters of Church administration and governance. Rather, our focus here is at the grassroots level in seeking to enhance the religious experience of individuals, families, and communities.

The nature of this book—one religious group inspiring and influencing another religious group—requires that we also explain what it is not. First, this book is not intended to be a type of “guide to Judaism” for Latter-day Saints. Books, blogs, and podcasts that serve the purpose of educating one group about another religious group’s practices, beliefs, and history, particularly to increase religious tolerance, are numerous. Note, however, that a strong component of this book will incidentally serve the purpose of educating some readers about Judaism, but that is not our primary objective.

This book is also not meant to be an interfaith dialogue between Latter-day Saints and Jews—at least not in the traditional sense. Although this volume does have a kind of “back-and-forth” approach to each chapter, Jewish and Latter-day Saint contributors are not necessarily focused on establishing religious and cultural commonalities. Such an approach is usually employed between multiple groups to increase acceptance and understanding among its leadership and adherents. This book *is* one-sided in that Latter-day Saints *are* focused on commonalities with Jews and Judaism—not for increasing acceptance and tolerance, but rather to enhance their own religious experience. Jewish contributors, on the other hand, are not writing primarily in relation to the Latter-day Saint experience, and several may know very little about the Latter-day Saint tradition.

Furthermore, this book is not meant to be an exercise in religious appropriation. In other words, Latter-day Saints associated with this work do not seek to appropriate or adopt Jewish beliefs, religious practices, or cultural customs and repackage them for a Latter-day Saint audience. Some Christians who love Judaism and the Jewish people seem to do so for either theological reasons or because of Jesus’s Jewishness; therefore, some

17. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996), 30.

have observed Christianized versions of various Jewish rituals. For instance, many Christian families have developed and observed a Christian version of the Jewish bar mitzvah ritual, and even renamed it using the Hebrew *Bar Barakah* (“Son of the Blessing”). Similarly, numerous Christian groups annually observe a Passover meal, and they turn the Passover meal into a discussion of symbols of Jesus, and so forth. Many Jews become suspicious of Christians who are zealous to adopt Jewish customs.

We are not interested in producing this volume because of the Hebrew roots of Christianity, nor because Jesus was Jewish. Although Jesus of Nazareth is mentioned in a few chapters, this volume does not contain a single chapter dedicated to the Jewishness of Jesus or the Jewish roots of Christianity. Our intent is to discuss and examine Jews and Judaism on Jews’ terms (as best we can) and subsequently wrestle with how Latter-day Saints might benefit from 3,000 years of the Jewish experience. Again, our purpose here is not to suggest that Latter-day Saints must adopt various Jewish practices and beliefs. Rather, we hope that the discussions here may assist readers in adopting strategies, mentalities, and approaches to religious and cultural living as exemplified by Jews and Judaism.

Finally, this book is not meant to propose a definitive way that Latter-day Saints must learn from these Jewish approaches; rather, it is to show how Latter-day Saints might embrace, benefit, and learn from them. These chapters are meant to serve as catalysts for further introspection and learning, not as the end-all-be-all for how Latter-day Saints might learn from Jewish religious experience.

Why This Book?

Some may question the utility of this book and ask why they themselves should look for inspiration from another religious group. After all, the Latter-day Saint ideal is that living prophets guide the Church based on inspiration from God, so why should they look to Jews for additional inspiration? Before responding to this potential criticism, we acknowledge its legitimacy as a fair question. We also point out that it may be human nature to adopt a triumphalist approach to one’s own religion. If, the argument goes, I have the “true” religion, then no other (“false”) religion can possibly teach me anything of use that I don’t already have.

As one anecdotal example, a Muslim—a friend of one of the editors of this volume—from Saudi Arabia conveyed that some members of her family in Saudi Arabia were perplexed that she chose to study religion and

family life in America. The United States, they told her, is a godless, sexually promiscuous society, and so it seems counterproductive to learn about religion and family from them. Everything we need to know to have a good and spiritually fulfilling life, they argued, can be found in Islam and not in secular American academies. The response is that not all Americans are “godless and sexually promiscuous” and that “truth” and inspiration can be found in many faiths and cultures. This current volume was cited as an example of how Jews and Judaism may help inspire Latter-day Saints in certain aspects of their religion. After hearing about this project, the Muslim friend slowly shook her head and said, “That book and that approach to religion, or Islam, would never fly in Saudi Arabia. That kind of open-mindedness is remarkable.”

Another brief example of this triumphalist attitude among many religious people is found in the comments section of an online article, “What Jews Can Learn from Mormons: Insights from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”¹⁸ The article discussed many similarities between Latter-day Saint religion and Judaism and what Jews can learn from Latter-day Saints on various topics. Note the first entry in the article’s comments thread that appeared just after the article was posted online. Written by an Orthodox Jew, it said,

I believe that OT stands for Only Testament :-)?

Addressing the main theme of this article:

How do you think I feel when it seems that Reform Jews are eager to learn from Mormons, but not from Orthodox Jews?¹⁹

Our response to these types of criticisms is that religious influence need not be a zero-sum game. In other words, looking to Jews and Judaism for inspiration and guidance for Latter-day Saint living does not diminish the role of prophets nor reduce the importance of their prophetic guidance. Inspiration does not *only* come from heaven in an ironclad fashion, and truth is found in every religion. In a July 1843 sermon, Joseph Smith taught: “One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to

18. Steven Windmueller and Mark S. Diamond, “What Jews Can Learn from Mormons: Insights from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Jewish Philanthropy*, July 6, 2015, <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/what-jews-can-learn-from-mormons-insights-from-the-church-of-jesus-christ-of-latter-day-saints/>.

19. This comment was from a Mr. Cohen on July 6, 2015, at 8:02 p.m.

receive truth. Let it come from whence it may.”²⁰ In another sermon two weeks later, he expanded on this idea by declaring:

Have the Presbyterians any truth? Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, etc., any truth? Yes. . . . We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true “Mormons.”²¹

Likewise, the last line of the thirteenth Article of Faith instructs, “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things” (A of F 13). Smith’s successor, Brigham Young, similarly maintained that being a Latter-day Saint means that “we believe in all good. If you can find a truth in heaven, earth, or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe it; it is ours; we claim it.”²² Young’s colleague in the Latter-day Saint Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and later successor, John Taylor, preached similar sentiments in an 1853 sermon:

I was going to say I am not a Universalist, but I am, and I am also a Presbyterian, and a Roman Catholic, and a Methodist, in short, I believe in every true principle that is imbibed by any person or sect, and reject the false. If there is any truth in heaven, earth, or hell, I want to embrace it, I care not what shape it comes in to me, who brings it, or who believes in it, whether it is popular or unpopular. Truth, eternal truth, I wish to float in and enjoy.²³

In the later twentieth century, President Spencer W. Kimball and his counselors reiterated this teaching by declaring:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.²⁴

That Latter-day Saints have taken this to heart is evidenced by the popularity of several course sections every semester in both World Religions and Judaism & Islam offered by the Religious Education Department at

20. Joseph Smith et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948 printing), 5:499.

21. Smith et al., *History of the Church*, 5:517.

22. Brigham Young, April 24, 1870, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1854–86), 13:335.

23. John Taylor, June 12, 1853, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:155.

24. Spencer W. Kimball, N. Eldon Tanner, and Marion G. Romney, “Statement of the First Presidency Regarding Love for All Mankind,” February 15, 1978.

Brigham Young University. One would expect these types of courses to be offered by academic religious studies departments, but the Religious Education Department at Brigham Young University is not a traditional academic department—it advocates for a more devotional and applicative religious educational experience for students.

More pertinent to this volume, in recent years Latter-day Saint leaders have specifically pointed to Judaism as an example of where religious insight may be gained. In a sermon on the challenges facing the Latter-day Saints, Elder M. Russell Ballard mentioned Jews as an illustration of his point and concluded, “I think we could be more like this faithful Jewish family.”²⁵ Three weeks later, in the biannual worldwide general conference for Latter-day Saints, Elder Quentin L. Cook shared his experience with Jews on the Sabbath as an illustration of meaningful Sabbath ritual.²⁶ Perhaps the most well-known sermon on Judaism from a Latter-day Saint prophet was Ezra Taft Benson’s “A Message to Judah from Joseph,” wherein he said (to an audience of both Jews and Latter-day Saints),

We need to know more about the Jews, and the Jews ought to know more about the Mormons. When we understand one another, then perhaps you will understand *why* Ben-Gurion said, “There are no people in the world who understand the Jews like the Mormons.”²⁷

In this address, Benson not only articulated the importance of a relationship between Jews and Latter-day Saints, he emphasized that this relationship requires a more than superficial knowledge of Latter-day Saints about Jews and Judaism, and vice versa. This volume transcends the usual call to understand each other and seeks to gather truths from Jews and Judaism that inspire and motivate action on the part of Latter-day Saints in relation to their religious observance. Jews and the Jewish experience are the schoolmasters here.

25. M. Russell Ballard, “To the Saints in the Utah South Area,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, September 13, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/prophets-and-apostles/unto-all-the-world/to-the-saints-in-the-utah-south-area>.

26. Quentin L. Cook, “Shipsshape and Bristol Fashion: Be Temple Worthy—in Good Times and Bad Times,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 4, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/10/shipsshape-and-bristol-fashion-be-temple-worthy-in-good-times-and-bad-times>.

27. Ezra Taft Benson, “A Message to Judah from Joseph,” *Ensign*, December 1976, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1976/12/a-message-to-judah-from-joseph>.

Content and Structure

This volume brings together fifteen scholars, seven Jewish and eight Latter-day Saint, with a combined academic experience of over four hundred years. We have structured the volume around seven major topics with two chapters on each topic. A Jewish scholar first discusses the topic broadly vis-à-vis Judaism, followed by a response from a Latter-day Saint scholar. It must be noted that these Latter-day Saint scholars are trained in various fields of study and disciplines including history, sociology, family studies, religious studies, biblical studies, and literature. This wide array of experience and training illustrates the various approaches and perspectives of learning from another group. With the primary purpose of this volume being for Latter-day Saints to learn from Jewish religious perspectives and experiences, the essays are generally different from what you might normally expect in an interreligious dialogue. For the most part, the Jewish essays were not written with Latter-day Saints in mind but are simply broad overviews that could be helpful for any non-Jewish readership. Likewise, the Latter-day Saint responses are not trying to find commonalities as the primary goal; rather, their purpose is to explore any strategies, mentalities, motives, and so forth of Jews that might serve as a catalyst for Latter-day Saints to look introspectively and enhance their own lived religious experience. The seven topics include scripture, authority, prayer, women and modernity, remembrance, particularity, and humor. We hope that the reader will not only learn a great deal about Judaism and the Jewish experience while reading this volume but also use what they learn to enhance their own cultural and religious experience.

Acknowledgments

As editors, we are most grateful for all the contributors—for their enthusiasm regarding the project and for their time in writing and revising their essays. We also acknowledge the efforts of Greg Kofford Books, especially Loyd Isao Ericson, for their help along the way. We also thank our various colleagues who have encouraged us.

Approaching Scripture: Insights from Judaism

Gary A. Rendsburg

This essay divides into two parts. The first part treats the manner in which the regular Jewish attender of Shabbat services in the synagogue approaches scripture, while the second part addresses the question of how professional Jewish scholars of the Bible read the text and pursue their research.

The Regular Jewish Attender of Shabbat Services in the Synagogue¹

The centerpiece of the Shabbat morning service in synagogues around the world is the weekly reading of the Torah. Let me begin, accordingly, with a survey of the history of this practice. Moreover, throughout this essay I will focus almost exclusively on the Torah, or Pentateuch, since it is so central to the Jewish experience, with nary a word about the other two main sections of the Jewish canon, Prophets and Writings.²

As is well known, in the biblical period the worship of God centered around the Temple cult. The book of Leviticus ordains the sacrifices that are to occur on a daily basis and on unique occasions (see especially chapters 1–7). The book of Numbers provides details for the additional sacrifices that are to be offered on the Sabbath, New Moon, and festivals (see especially chapters 28–29).

1. That is, “the Jew in the pew,” as he or she is affectionately known in contemporary parlance.

2. After deciding on this approach, I read a very similar estimation by my colleague Benjamin Sommer of the Jewish Theological Seminary. See Benjamin D. Sommer, “Introduction,” in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Benjamin D. Sommer (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 2–3. There is much of value in this edited volume, even if I will cite only one more item below (see fn. 22). The Torah, or Pentateuch, consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The original locus of the sacrificial cult was the Tabernacle, a large portable tent structure described in great detail in Exodus 25–31 and 35–40. While many scholars have doubted the historicity of this cultic center, there is no reason for such skepticism, especially in light of ancient Near Eastern parallels ranging from Mari to Egypt.³ We cannot say with certainty when the Tabernacle first arose in ancient Israel, but I would argue for its central role in earliest Israel—say, the twelfth century BCE.⁴ The Tabernacle would serve the people for about two centuries until it was replaced by the permanent structure built by Solomon in Jerusalem around 960 BCE—that is, the Temple (1 Kgs. 6–7). From that point on, for more than one thousand years (save for the seventy-year period between 586 BCE, when the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, and 516 BCE, when the Second Temple was rededicated under Persian Rule), the Temple cult remained the center of Jewish religious life until the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. During that time, the flow of rams, goats, and bulls (or under some circumstances, doves and pigeons), along with the accompanying grains, olive oil, and wine offered to the God of Israel, was unceasing for more than one millennium.

Remarkably, however, in time a parallel stream of Jewish religious life developed, especially during the Second Temple period, wherein the Torah was elevated to a new status in early Judaism.⁵ We may call this process the textualization of Judaism, with the concomitant canonization of the

3. See the second section of this essay.

4. Gary A. Rendsburg, "The Date of the Exodus and the Conquest/Settlement: The Case for the 1100s," *Vetus Testamentum* 42, no. 4 (1992): 510–27.

5. I leave open the question of whether the Torah as we have it, from Genesis through Deuteronomy, existed as a unified composition or a unified literary work before 586 BCE, or whether the various sources were melded during the Exile or early in the Persian period. That point aside, the linguistic profile of the text, including all its sources, is clearly Standard Biblical Hebrew of the monarchic period (1000–586 BCE). On this point, see the relevant essays in *Hebrew Studies*, vols. 46–47 (2005–2006). My own contribution in the latter volume is Gary A. Rendsburg, "Aramaic-like Features in the Pentateuch," *Hebrew Studies* 47 (2006): 163–76.

When I refer to sources in the first two sentences above, I do not intend the usual source-critical analysis which divides the Torah into J-E-D-P, but rather to "sources" more generally, which we may or may not be able to identify. For my basic statement, both on dating and on the sources, see Gary A. Rendsburg, *How the Bible Is Written* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019), 443–90.

Torah.⁶ The seeds of this development are to be seen in Nehemiah 8:1–8, where the religious leader Ezra conducts a ceremony at the piazza near one of the city gates of Jerusalem (c. 450 BCE), with a focus on the public reading of the Torah. Strikingly, numerous elements of the ceremony accord with the later synagogue service, and yet they are present already in the description of Nehemiah 8:⁷ (a) the congregation consists of men, women, and children; (b) the Torah is read from a bespoke platform; (c) Ezra holds the scroll aloft for all to see; (d) Ezra blesses God; (e) the people respond “Amen, Amen”; and (f) the text is explained to the people.⁸

At least several centuries would pass before we would gain further evidence of the reading of the Torah from sources of the Greco-Roman period. Moreover, anyone who has attended a synagogue service in the twenty-first century CE will recognize the fact that all of these features are still present. Such is the historical depth of Jewish tradition, with what I have described here as but one illustrative feature within *la longue durée* of Jewish law, culture, liturgy, and religion that could be identified.

While the text of Nehemiah 8 does not refer to canonization per se, scholars associate that process, for the Torah at least, with the central figure of Ezra, as the Torah was on its way to becoming “the book of the

6. For a very readable survey, see William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

7. As pointed out by Moshe Weinfeld, “Israelite Religion,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan: 1993), 7:494.

8. The Hebrew word *məvinim* in v. 7 means “cause to understand,” hence “explain.” The text of v. 8 provides further details, using the words *məforaš*, “clearly,” *šom sekel*, “gave sense,” and *yavinu*, either “explained” again (transitive) or “understood” (intransitive). Some scholars infer, based especially on the first word *məforaš*, that the Hebrew reading was accompanied by an Aramaic translation, based on the ever-increasing use of the latter language amongst the Jews of the Persian period. To my mind, however, the community of Jews in Jerusalem during the fifth century BCE would have been perfectly at home in the Hebrew language so as not to require a rendering into a foreign language. Explanation would have been required to elucidate some of the more archaic language, some of the technical language, and so on—no different than in the United States today, in which an average American may require help in understanding the precise meaning of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, or the Federalist Papers.



“Ezra holding a scroll of Torah,” as depicted on the Dura Europos synagogue wall frescoes, to the upper right of the Torah shrine. Yale University Art Gallery, Dura Europos Collection.

people.”⁹ Later, Jews would recognize this point well, as demonstrated by the crucial placement of a panel portraying Ezra holding the scroll of the Torah in the magnificent artwork adorning the walls of the Dura Europos synagogue (Syria, third century CE).¹⁰

9. To use the felicitous term coined by William W. Hallo, *The Book of the People* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991). The term has been re-used more recently by A. N. Wilson, *The Book of the People: How to Read the Bible* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015).

10. For the color image, see the front cover of Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). The black-and-white version appears on page 180. Carl Kraeling, the original excavator of Dura Europos, debated whether the image of the man holding the scroll depicts Ezra (on the basis of Nehemiah 8) or Moses (based on Exodus 20, or at least its later interpretations). He elected the former,

Our earliest evidence for the synagogue comes from Hellenistic Egypt (c. 240 BCE), though at this point the institution was known by the Greek word *proseuche*, “prayer house.” As the name indicates, the main function of the building was a place for prayer, as the Jews of Hellenistic Egypt (who comprised a large and thriving community away from Jerusalem) developed an alternative liturgical system, to wit, communal prayer. The synagogue inscriptions from this period do not refer to the reading of Torah *per se*,¹¹ but one may assume that such was practiced in the *proseuche*. Around 20 CE, Philo of Alexandria described this practice explicitly:

Now these laws they are taught at other times, indeed, but most especially on the seventh day, for the seventh day is accounted sacred, on which they abstain from all other employments, and frequent the sacred places which are called synagogues,¹² and there they sit according to their age in classes, the younger sitting under the elder, and listening with eager attention in becoming order. (82) Then one, indeed, takes up the holy volume and reads it,¹³ and another of the men of the greatest experience comes forward and explains what is not very intelligible, for a great many precepts are delivered in enigmatical modes of expression, and allegorically, as the old fashion was.¹⁴

Additional evidence for the reading of the Torah in the first century CE synagogue comes from the Theodotus inscription (Jerusalem) and the book of Acts (Diaspora). The former reads as follows:

Theodotus, (son) of Vettenuus, priest and *archisynagogos*, son of an *archisynagogos*, grandson of an *archisynagogos*, built the synagogue for the reading of the

and I agree—though Fine (p. 181) believes that the man should be identified with Moses.

11. For images of the dedicatory inscriptions and English translations, see a segment of the website created and organized by Donald D. Binder, “Egypt,” Second Temple Synagogues, accessed April 13, 2020, <http://www.pohick.org/sts/egypt.html>. Note, however, that Binder uses “synagogue” in his translations of these inscriptions, though in all cases the Greek word is *proseuche*. While we are grateful to have these dedicatory inscriptions, not a single one was discovered in its original archaeological context, but rather all were found in secondary use (e.g., incorporated into the wall of a later structure). Which is to say, we have the dedicatory inscriptions, but we do not know what these *proseuche* buildings in Egypt looked like.

12. Note that Philo uses the word *synagogue*.

13. Almost undoubtedly the reading took place in Greek (by use of the Septuagint, which was produced c. 250 BCE in Alexandria), as opposed to in the Hebrew original.

14. Philo of Alexandria, *Every Good Man is Free*, book 12, para. 81–82.

law and the teaching of the commandments, and the guest-chamber and the rooms and the water installations for lodging for those needing them from abroad, which his fathers, the elders and Simonides founded.¹⁵

Several points are notable. First, the institution of the synagogue, which began in the Diaspora, reached the Land of Israel (including Jerusalem) by the first century CE, if not the preceding century. While the inscription dates to the first century CE, the text refers to Theodotus's grandfather already serving in the role of *archisynagogos*, that is, "head of the synagogue," which likely means he was active several decades earlier. Second, the reading of the Torah is mentioned explicitly as one of the activities that took place in the building. And third, prayer is conspicuously absent from the list of such activities. If people in Jerusalem wished to worship God, they visited the Temple. However, the reading of the Torah and other activities were already present in a different locus, to wit, the synagogue.

The book of Acts also refers to the reading of the Torah in the synagogue, providing additional evidence for this practice in first-century Judaism. Acts 13:15 refers to this custom in Antioch in Pisidia (Anatolia), while Acts 15:21 implies that the practice was well-nigh universal: "For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

The origins of the reading of a section of the Prophets are obscure,¹⁶ but again we may note the apparently widespread nature of this practice already by the first century CE. The key texts are again from the New Testament. The aforementioned verse, Acts 13:15, actually refers to "the reading from the Law and the Prophets" (see also v. 27), and perhaps more famously, Luke 4:17–20 describes Jesus himself reading from a scroll of Isaiah (with specific citation of Isaiah 61:1–2 and Isaiah 58:6) in the synagogue at Nazareth.

15. See Donald D. Binder, "Jerusalem," Second Temple Synagogues, accessed April 13, 2020, <http://www.pohick.org/sts/jerusalem.html>.

16. Two proposals have been made by scholars. The first one holds that in order to distinguish themselves from the Samaritans (who canonized the Torah only), the Jews introduced the reading of a section of the Prophets to accompany the selection from the Torah, thereby demonstrating the centrality of Jerusalem, which dominates books such as Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The second suggestion proposes that during the persecutions of Antiochus IV, which included the prohibition of reading the Torah, the Jews introduced a portion of the Prophets which would evoke the theme of a particular section of the Torah, thereby retaining the centrality of scripture in liturgical practice without violating the prohibition explicitly. The truth is we simply do not know.



Reverse image of the virtually unrolled Leviticus scroll from Ein Gedi, Israel, c. 300 CE. Published in Segal, “An Early Leviticus Scroll from En-Gedi: Preliminary Publication,” 33. Image courtesy of Seth Parker, Digital Restoration Initiative, University of Kentucky. (CC BY NC 4.0 attribution. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.)

Eventually we gain more information on the reading of scripture in Jewish tradition from the Mishna (c. 200 CE), with the major portion of an entire tractate, *Megilla* (“scroll”), devoted to the practice.¹⁷ Among the points we learn are the following: the scrolls were kept in an ark (*Mishna Megilla* 3:1); the Torah was read according to a set order (*Mishna Megilla* 3:4, 3:6); and both the Torah and the Prophets were read (*Mishna Megilla* 4:1–5).

Fortunately, we have an archaeological discovery that speaks to the notion of Torah scrolls kept in an ark. A burnt scroll was found in the Ein Gedi synagogue during the excavations in 1970, in the niche that no doubt housed the ark, presumably made of wood. Due to its fragile nature, the scroll could not be opened—and indeed it still has not been opened. However, advances in technology, specifically micro-CT scanning, has made it possible for the text to be “virtually unwrapped” and shown to contain the beginning of the book of Leviticus.¹⁸

17. The tractate begins with the laws and traditions concerning the reading of the Scroll of Esther, but then segues into the laws and traditions concerning the reading of the Torah.

18. For the exemplary teamwork of archaeologists, biblical scholars, and technology experts, see Michael Segal et al., “An Early Leviticus Scroll from En-Gedi: Preliminary Publication,” *Textus* 26 (2016): 29–58.

We gain no details in Mishna tractate *Megilla* about the set order (Heb. *sefer*), but we know from later Jewish sources, starting with the Babylonian Talmud (*B. Megilla* 29a), that some communities (such as those in Babylonia) completed the lectionary cycle of reading Torah in one year, with the Torah divided into 54 *parashot* ("portions");¹⁹ others in the Land of Israel took three to three and a half years to do so, with the Torah divided into somewhere between 141 and 175 *sedarim*, or "segments." These two systems coexisted into the Middle Ages, until eventually the former system ousted the latter, so that the annual cycle became the norm for all of world Jewry, as is the case until the present day.²⁰

The foregoing may provide more historical detail than is necessary,²¹ but to my mind it is important to understand this background as we now move to a discussion of how Jews today approach scripture.

Before proceeding, I provide here a word about the very word "scripture," derived from Latin *scriptura*, "writing," in turn derived from the verb *scribere*, "to write."²² This term comes from Christian usage,²³ in which the Bible is (at least for the last 450 years) the printed book, an artifact in writing, and something that is often read silently, especially in devotion.²⁴ This is not to deny the fact that biblical texts serve as the basis for lectionary cycles within Christian liturgy, but the term "scripture" remains very telling.

This stands in contrast to the Jewish experience, in which the sacred

Maturing Latter-day Saint Approaches to Scripture

Ben Spackman

I am pleased to offer a brief response of sorts to Professor Rendsburg's historical exposition of Jewish approaches to scripture. My own academic and personal studies have profited greatly from exposure to Judaic approaches, including those of Rendsburg's mentor Cyrus Gordon¹ and of Rendsburg himself.² Herein, I provide a parallel but shorter overview, followed by reflections on how my own exposure to Jewish professors, scholarship, and sources has benefited me. My positive experiences with Jewish approaches—an outsider's narrow exposure to the whole of the tradition—inform this essay.³

Founded in 1830, Mormonism⁴ is a young religion and remains underdeveloped in many ways. On the one hand, it means many of our traditions are not deeply rooted or refined by the passing of centuries, though the inertia of tradition develops very quickly. On the other hand, it means that when confronting the complexity of scripture, we do not have to reinvent the wheel. Our Jewish (and Christian) cousins have wrestled

1. I read Gordon's autobiography during the first semester of my graduate work in Semitics: *A Scholar's Odyssey* (Biblical Scholarship in North America, 2000).

2. See, for example, Gary A. Rendsburg and Cyrus H. Gordon, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (New York City: W. W. Norton, 1998); Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2017); various technical papers, and Rendsburg, "The Book of Genesis," *The Great Courses*, audio lecture series, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/book-of-genesis.html>.

3. I have had a variety of Jewish professors, studied in Israel, attended Torah study for sixteen months, have read Jewish texts in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Judeo-Arabic, and read broadly both from Jewish scholars and about Jewish approaches to scripture.

4. I use the term deliberately and inclusively here to include all denominations that descend from the Church founded in 1830. Hereafter, I use "Latter-day Saints" to refer more narrowly to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

productively with many scriptural issues that also confront Latter-day Saints. Indeed, borrowing Krister Stendahl’s phrase, I have “holy envy” for the mature tradition of Jewish approaches to scripture, which has shaped my own scholarship and faith in positive ways. Consequently, this essay will reflect my personal (and therefore idiosyncratic) experiences and views on what Latter-day Saints can learn from Judaism about scripture and scripture study, with some historical notes on LDS tradition.

Within Christianity, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a unique ecclesiological authority structure, which, combined with some inherited historical attitudes, strongly influences how its members read scripture. It may be useful to make explicit what some of these are and the role they have played in shaping approaches to scripture. In looking for core differences between Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals, Richard Mouw has insightfully identified several of these structures, characterizing them as Israelite patterns:

It is important to underscore here the way in which the Mormon restoration of these ancient offices and practices resulted in a very significant departure from the classical Protestant understanding of religious *authority*. . . . [Evangelicals] often proceed as if the central authority issue to debate with Mormons has to do with the question of which authoritative *texts* ought to guide us. . . . We Evangelicals accept the Bible alone as our infallible guide while, we point out, the Latter-day Saints add another set of writings, those that comprise the Book of Mormon, along with the records of additional Church teachings to the canon—thus we classic Protestants are people of the Book while Mormons are people of the Books. . . . What we also need to see is that in restoring some features of Old Testament Israel, Mormonism has also restored the kinds of *authority patterns* that guided the life of Israel. The Old Testament people of God were not a people of the Book as such—mainly because for most of their history, there was no completed Book. Ancient Israel was guided by an open canon and the leadership of the prophets. And it is precisely this pattern of communal authority that Mormonism restored. Evangelicals may insist that Mormonism has too many books. But the proper Mormon response is that even these Books are not enough to give authoritative guidance to the present-day community of the faithful. The books themselves are products of a prophetic office, an office that has been reinstated in these latter days. People fail to discern the full will of God if they do not live their lives in the anticipation that they will receive new revealed teachings under the authority of the living prophets.⁵

5. Richard Mouw, “What Does God Think about America? Some Challenges for Evangelicals and Mormons,” *BYU Studies* 43, no. 4 (2004): 10–11.

Thus these Latter-day Saint structures and attitudes would include, among others, an open canon, an expanded canon, continuing prophetic status of Church leadership, and as a central hierarchy and populism or anti-elitism. How they interact to affect Latter-day Saint approaches to scripture is complex.

Like Catholicism, the Church operates with a central hierarchy charged with interpreting and determining the official teachings and doctrine of the Church (i.e., a *magisterium* charged with providing authoritative policies and interpretations of past revelation)—though the analogy is not perfect. However, unlike the Catholic Church, the Latter-day Saint hierarchy is imbued with prophetic status, which raises another Christian comparison. Seventh-day Adventists hold their founder Ellen White to be a prophet, just as Latter-day Saints hold their founder Joseph Smith to be a prophet. However, for Adventists, Ellen White’s prophethood is limited to providing proper understanding of past scripture, not bringing forth new scripture. Moreover, her prophetic status was charismatic, not sacerdotal. In other words, Seventh-day Adventists present Ellen White as a founding prophet who used her prophetic gift to provide the correct understanding of the Bible, but that gift and authority ceased with her. By contrast, while Joseph Smith interpreted the Bible, he also brought forth new scripture and embedded the prophetic gift and authority within a sacerdotal hierarchy. Consequently, subsequent Latter-day Saint prophetic leadership has sometimes added new revelations to the already-expanded canon, which remains open.⁶ (This all constitutes, of course, a robust rejection of *sola scriptura*.)

Since in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the authoritative meaning of scripture⁷ as it applies to and binds believers is mediated through living prophetic interpreters, the focus shifted primarily to those living interpreters, not to what they interpret. (This had an unintended effect on Latter-day Saint reading, which I enumerate below.) That is, since *sola scriptura* Protestants hold the Bible to be the ultimate authority, determining exactly what it means is of the utmost importance, which in turn motivates the study of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic; classics, ancient history, exegetical methods, and systematic theology. Since canonized scripture is not the highest authority in the Church, the necessity of adopting

6. These additions are rare. While the canon is officially open, in practice it is open merely a crack.

7. Since Mormonism has an expanded canon, I will speak more generally of “scripture” rather than “the Bible.”

or developing such methods of interpretation was never felt. Differing ecclesiological structures incentivize different relationships to scripture, and Latter-day Saints were effectively discouraged from pursuing formal or informal exegetical education because the message of scripture did not belong to educated elites but to God’s prophets. The received tradition of the Church, then, is distinctly non-exegetical.

Although it hews closer to Catholicism in its ecclesiological structure and accompanying implications for interpretation, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints retains a strong nineteenth-century Protestant inheritance in several ways, surviving through tradition, continuing cultural osmosis (at least in North America), and the lack of exegetically trained members who might call attention to and refine inherited assumptions. For example, the primacy and centrality of scripture is preached frequently, although with some unresolved tensions.⁸ Children today are taught a song called “Scripture Power” in which they brandish their leather-bound scriptures while singing, “Scripture power keeps me safe from sin. Scripture power is the power to win.” A 2001 Barna study revealed that “Mormons are *more* likely to read the Bible during a week than Protestants.”⁹ Daily reading, Sunday School lessons, and sermons typically disregard context in favor of utilizing scripture pragmatically toward personal application and building Christlike attributes, morals, and ethics.

Another inherited characteristic of Latter-day Saint approaches to scripture is populism. In this sense, populism means that scripture was conceived of as belonging to laypeople, not experts or clergy, and its meaning required no specialized training to understand. Philip Barlow writes that “the Saints were not anxious to replace a professional clergy, which they had earlier banished, with bookish academics.”¹⁰ Combined with the

8. That is, the tension between canonized scripture and living authority is not always hammered out clearly. See David Frank Holland, “The Triangle and the Sovereign: Logics, History, and an Open Canon,” in *The Expanded Canon: Perspectives on Mormonism and Sacred Texts*, ed. Blaire G. Van Dyke, Brian D. Birch, and Boyd J. Peterson (Greg Kofford Books, 2018), 21–24. Brian Birch, “Beyond the Canon: Authoritative Discourse in Comparative Perspective,” in *ibid.*, 26–46.

9. “Protestants, Catholics and Mormons Reflect Diverse Levels of Religious Activity,” *Barna Group*, July 9, 2001, <https://www.barna.com/research/protestants-catholics-and-mormons-reflect-diverse-levels-of-religious-activity/>. I suspect this poll was taken during one of the two years in which the Bible was the focus of Gospel Doctrine study, and the results would differ during the other two.

10. *Mormons and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 151.

prophet-centric nature of Latter-day Saint authority, this inherited populism means that Latter-day Saints have traditionally been suspicious of Bible scholars and their interpretations, particularly when they run against tradition. This suspicion manifested itself in liturgy, formal preaching, educational pursuits, the record of publications, and the tensions about creation and evolution at Brigham Young University. I illustrate these last three below.

Educational Pursuits

Sidney B. Sperry was one of the first Latter-day Saints to receive graduate degrees in fields related to Hebrew Bible. Little more than one hundred years passed between the organization of the Church and this first in its history, Sperry's reception of his PhD (University of Chicago, 1931). The first PhD related to New Testament—Russel B. Swensen, University of Chicago in 1934—came out of the same short-lived push for religious education, the so-called “Chicago Experiment”; not until several decades later did a practicing Latter-day Saint with such a degree—Stephen Robinson, a New Testament PhD from Duke in 1978—achieve tenure at a non-LDS school. Latter-day Saint understandings of scripture thus developed for a century without the influence of those trained in examining scripture and hermeneutical assumptions. This allowed the unconscious adoption of culturally popular interpretations, sometimes harmlessly incorrect but other times terribly damaging (e.g., the idea that Africans were cursed descendants of Cain).¹¹

Record of Publications

Lack of expertise has never restrained Latter-day Saints from writing about scripture, because such expertise wasn't seen as necessary. In my own area of interest, the book of Genesis, I am aware of nearly ninety Latter-day Saint treatments of Genesis, creation, evolution, and reconciling science with scripture. The vast majority are written by intelligent non-specialists,

11. See “Race and the Priesthood,” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood>; and Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also “The Curse of Cain,” in David M. Goldberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

often lawyers, dentists, and accountants. As such, however well-meaning, they tend to commit the errors and perpetuate the assumptions of non-specialists; they, thus, often unknowingly express quasi-fundamentalist views. For example, they suppose that *they* are not interpreting the text and are instead just providing the plain and obvious meaning of scripture (although read in English and without full attention to historical, textual, or text-critical context). In doing so, they presume that scripture presents divinely revealed (and therefore accurate) historical and scientific information—although perhaps in symbolic or metaphorical terms—all of which is harmonious and consistent from beginning to end.

Creation and Evolution at Brigham Young University

The strength of this non-exegetical tradition carried over to the Church’s flagship Brigham Young University (BYU), where formal scriptural expertise was lacking. During a tumultuous period from 1970 to 1992, some faculty in the Religious Education Department warred with science faculty in biology, zoology, and paleontology over biological evolution.¹² However, there was a relative imbalance of expertise between these departments. Whereas the science faculty had earned respectable PhDs in their respective fields, the Religious Education faculty who argued against them did not. One vocal anti-evolution Religious Education faculty member earned an EdD from BYU, with a dissertation on the subject of homeschooling; another earned a BS in Civil Engineering and compiled an anti-evolution pamphlet that he distributed to thousands of students each year, even after BYU administration warned him to stop. Non-Latter-day Saint scholars since the 1950s had been using recently discovered ancient Near Eastern texts to argue that Genesis was never intended as a natural history of the earth and thus had little to say about evolution. Since few BYU Religious Education faculty were getting any-

12. I pull here from numerous interviews, archival work, and other dissertation research. My dissertation treats the hermeneutical roots of post-1950 creation and evolution conflict in the LDS Church. I presented some of this data at the 2021 Mormon History Association, with my paper titled “The Fundamentalist Enthronement of Science: Seventh-day Adventist Influence on LDS Creationism, from Joseph Fielding Smith to Ezra Taft Benson.” Some relevant history through 1986 can be found in Thomas W. Simpson, *American Universities and the Birth of Modern Mormonism, 1867–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); and Gary James Bergera and Ronald Priddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985).

thing like this training, the most vocal anti-evolution faculty at BYU had little knowledge of these materials, and their arguments relied primarily on selective authoritarianism, face-value interpretations of scripture, and fundamentalist Christian literature like John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris's *The Genesis Flood*.

The status quo among Latter-day Saints appears to be changing quickly in some respects. Various Church leaders and publications have begun to acknowledge, for example, both the existence of different kinds of scriptural interpretation¹³ and the religious utility of expertise granted by “advanced degrees in ancient history, biblical studies, and other fields.”¹⁴ English-speaking Latter-day Saints are beginning to read translations other than the King James Version, encouraged both by Church leadership citations of other translations¹⁵ and study Bibles,¹⁶ and even by the publication of a New Testament Study Bible by the Church-owned Deseret Book.¹⁷ Moreover, the number of Latter-day Saint scholars trained in Hebrew Bible, Biblical studies, theology, philosophy, and related fields (among whom I find myself) is greatly increasing. As we collectively teach, write, speak about, and model the way formal training in these fields can enhance Latter-day Saint encounters with scripture, the enthusiastic reception has sometimes surprised me.

For example, I have spoken in various formal Latter-day Saint settings on the existence of different genres in scripture and have been interviewed on a Latter-day Saint podcast about that topic. For many Latter-day Saints,

13. For example, see the comments by Gaye Strathearn on contextual interpretation in “2 BYU religion professors weigh in on why ‘Come, Follow Me’ should be just the beginning of your gospel study,” *Church News*, February, 25, 2019, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/living-faith/2019-02-25/new-testament-come-follow-me-2-byu-religion-professors-october-2018-general-conference-weigh-in-on-personal-gospel-study-49036>.

14. Elder M. Russell Ballard, “Questions and Answers,” BYU Devotional, November 14, 2017, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/m-russell-ballard/questions-and-answers/>.

15. See the examples and discussion in Ben Spackman, “Why Bible Translations Differ: A Guide for the Perplexed,” *Religious Educator* 15, no. 1 (2014): 30–65.

16. See Elder D. Todd Christofferson, “Saving Your Life,” fn. 25, CES Devotional Broadcast of September 14, 2014; and Joshua M. Sears, “Study Bibles: An Introduction for Latter-day Saints,” *Religious Educator* 20, no. 3 (2019): 26–57.

17. See Daniel O. McClellan, “‘As Far as It Is Translated Correctly’: Bible Translation and the Church,” *Religious Educator* 20, no. 2 (2019): 53–83.

the idea that scripture might consist of different genres—including non-historical ones—proves novel, disconcerting, logical, liberating, and finally edifying, as it opens scriptures to their eyes and frees them from the false and confusing “literal versus figurative” dichotomy. One friend, a Harvard-trained lawyer, shared this insightful response to my podcast with friends on social media:

Imagine how different your experience with Latter-day Saint Scripture would’ve been growing up if someone had explained this to you early on, if it had been integrated into the curriculum in a formal way—in seminary, in church, at BYU, wherever. It seems tragic to me that this has never happened. That generations of Latter-day Saint students—even very smart and educated ones—[thus] fixate on the wrong questions and the wrong preoccupations about the text because they’ve never been taught to do differently.

However, for one such presentation, I received a brief note from a relatively high Church authority, strongly implying that assigning certain parts of the Old Testament to non-historical genres was tantamount to undermining scripture’s validity and causing doubt; I had presented the genre markers of Jonah which point to “satirical parable,” along with both LDS tradition and the reasons, why committed Christians like C.S. Lewis and Raymond E. Brown, S.S. saw Jonah as non-historical. This small incident served as a reminder that many of the tensions involving scripture, authority, and interpretation arise because Latter-day Saint law-