

# The Use and Abuse of Anti-Semitism in the Scriptures

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IS IT NOT WONDERFUL how modern discoveries confirm previously known gospel principles? A recent, in-depth, scientific study of high school students solemnly concluded that teenagers are not morning people. Latter-day Saints have known this ever since early morning seminary was invented. During the 1998–99 school year, I was the early morning seminary teacher in the Solon Ward of the Kirtland, Ohio, Stake and consequently, I have greatly strengthened my own testimony of this principle. We started at six a.m. to accommodate the schedules of students from four different high schools. This time of day was properly known as “O-dark-thirty” when I was in the Army. Some days, with the snow swirling in the darkness outside, it has been difficult to detect life in the forms huddled around the tables set up in the Relief Society Room. Yet there they were, at least in body. Early morning seminary attendance represents the triumph of conscientiousness over consciousness.

That time of day, however, with its attendant stupor of thought, gives a certain advantage to the teacher. The normal teen instinct to resist or challenge instruction lies dormant at that hour. Neither rowdiness nor nit-picking was a problem with my students that year. Moreover, visits from CES coordinators are quite rare. Basically, you can get away with saying just about anything in early morning seminary. Even if one of the students somehow picks up some heretical statement and reports it at home, the parents will likely dismiss it as the confusion of a befogged brain. They know their adolescent posterity is mentally prostrate at that time of day. Consequently, I made it through the whole school year without getting released or excommunicated.

Thus we endured to the end in obscurity and receding darkness. By late April, the snow had receded and dawn’s early light illuminated our drive to seminary. Things were looking brighter all around. But suddenly our optimism was shattered by events in Littleton, Colorado.

High school students nationwide were shaken from their comfort zone. A week later devastating tornadoes ripped through Oklahoma, Kansas, and Texas. Gaunt refugees from Kosovo arrived on American shores, looking bewildered and beaten. And scarcely a week before Littleton, a deranged immigrant had walked into the Family Research Center in Salt Lake City and started shooting. The world had turned suddenly sinister.

We were just finishing our course of study, the Doctrine & Covenants, and had been discussing the nature of God as revealed to Joseph Smith, particularly during the Nauvoo period. Coincidentally, one of the surviving students from Columbine High was interviewed on TV about how the tragedy had affected his belief in God. "If there is a God," he said, "I can't begin to tell you how angry I am at him for allowing this to happen." A witness of the Oklahoma tornado told a reporter, "This was not a tornado, this was God taking a giant baseball bat to our homes." I reminded students of the Holocaust, perhaps the *most* faith-provoking tragedy of our times, and how so many people, including most philosophers and even theologians, were at a loss to explain why God would allow six million plus innocent people to be slaughtered like that. I pointed out that if you view God as the only self-existent being who brings everything else into being out of nothing, the Creator *ex nihilo* of traditional Christianity, you must then see him as ultimately in control of, or at least responsible for, everything, evil as well as good. An all-powerful and infinitely good God should have done a better job of it. Why does he create or allow evil? This insoluble paradox is the legacy of traditional theology and perhaps the major cause of atheism in our day, especially among thoughtful Jews.

At the mention of the Holocaust, I noticed one of my students, among the brightest and probably the most indoctrinated in Mormon thinking, come to life. She raised her hand and said, "Well, I've always heard that the Holocaust was part of the punishment of the Jews for rejecting the Savior and crucifying him." I must have given her a look, because then she stuttered, "Or something like that, I think."

I said, "So you mean, it was like God had to hit them over the head really hard to get their attention before they would repent and recognize what they had done wrong in rejecting Jesus?"

"Yeah, something like that, I guess." She sensed I was ready to pounce. "But I haven't heard that since I was little," she added hastily. I was glad, I suppose, to hear we are confining anti-Semitism to Primary children now.

"Well," as Aunt Pearl Farley would say, "What would *you* 'a done?" How would you respond to the implication that the Jews had been justly slaughtered for rejecting and killing their God, that this is the Lord's way of bringing them, so to speak, to their knees? This seems to be what

Nephi prophesied concerning the future of those who remained in Jerusalem. After they reject and crucify him,

the Jews shall be scattered by other nations. And, after they have been scattered, and the Lord God hath scourged them by other nations for the space of many generations . . . until they shall be persuaded to believe in Christ, . . . and worship the Father in his name, with pure hearts and clean hands, and look not forward any more for another Messiah. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Taken at face value, Nephi attributed to God the role of instigator of the persecution of the Jews.

Such a view would not have surprised anyone in nineteenth-century Christian America, heir to a long history of blaming contemporary Jews for their ancestors' presumed deicide. Europe's shameful record in this regard—highlighted by the Inquisition, various pogroms, and the Holocaust—is fairly well known. But Europe did not invent anti-Semitism, and a fair case can be made for tracing it back to the New Testament. Of course, that is precisely what the persecutors of Jews have done over the years. The Book of Mormon only added scriptural fuel to this fire, at least when read superficially. I propose to review the biblical basis for anti-Semitism, highlight some of the historical consequences of that interpretation, and then examine what the Book of Mormon adds to the equation. After noting the non-traditional way Joseph Smith and some of his early followers approached these scriptures, I will argue for a more balanced and charitable way to read them.

All of the Gospels exhibit to some degree an anti-Jewish bias in their portrayal of Jesus' ministry, and all of them emphasize Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion, downplaying the role of the Roman overseers who actually carried out the execution. Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as the new Moses contrasts with that of the Pharisees, who challenged Jesus' actions at every turn. "*Truly I say to you,*" Jesus excoriated the Pharisees, "*the tax collectors and harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you.*"<sup>2</sup> Modern scholars attribute this adversarial tone to the situation the Christian community faced at the time the Gospels were being written, some 40–60 years after the death of Christ. Just as the "Jesus movement" was establishing a separate identity from—and increasingly in opposition to—Judaism, the Pharisees were emerging as the leading Jewish religious party after the destruction of Jerusalem. But whereas Matthew and the other Synoptics (Mark and Luke) focused blame on the Jewish na-

1. 2 Nephi 25: 12–16; cf. 10:6, and 1 Nephi 13:39.

2. Matthew 21:31; cf. 8:11–12, which asserts that the Gentiles will oust the Jews, and 15:6–9, where Jesus applies Isaiah's castigation of apostasy to the current Jewish leaders. Cf. also Matthew 15:11, 17–20, 21:33–46 (=Luke 20:9–19), 22:1–4 (=Luke 14:16–24), 23:1–4, 27, 29–33; Mark 12:12, 38–40, 15:39; Luke 11:42 et pas.

tional leaders for the death of Christ, by the time John was written, probably in the last decade of the First Century, it was simply “the Jews” who opposed Jesus and caused his execution.<sup>3</sup> John repeatedly contrasts the temporal, fallen aspects of Judaism with the eternal, spiritual realm of Christ. In John 8, the Jews are characterized as children of the devil, which is why they won’t hear God’s Word.<sup>4</sup>

This attitude is hard to attribute to Jesus, whom even John quotes as saying “*salvation is of the Jews.*”<sup>5</sup> Certainly the first Christians had no thoughts of establishing a separate religion from Judaism. They started out as one Jewish sect among many. However, a major theme in Acts is the developing separation of the incipient Christian church from its Jewish roots. According to Acts 1, the early disciples asked the resurrected Lord if he was now going to restore the Kingdom of Israel to its former Davidic glory, but this expectation of Messianic Judaism did not last long in the church. Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7 on why the Law of Moses and the temple were superseded implied they were false idols, a blasphemy that got him stoned by his Jewish audience. Acts 15 recounts how Jewish-Christian leaders in Jerusalem acceded to Paul in allowing gentiles to be baptized without becoming fully observant Jews. It was not long before gentile Christians outnumbered their Jewish counterparts. This new majority was too preoccupied with working out their faith within their Hellenistic culture to be concerned with preserving the Old Covenant.

But the earliest preserved writings from the new Christian movement were Paul’s epistles. Preceding the Gospels by at least two decades, they provide a unique window into the situation. Paul blamed “the princes of the world” for crucifying the Lord, by which he may have meant demonic powers as well as Roman and Jewish political ones.<sup>6</sup> This relative restraint regarding the culpability of the Jews is all the more remarkable because, despite his background as a Pharisee, Paul was clearly estranged from his Jewish, religious roots, albeit conflicted by that estrangement. He describes the era of the Torah as a “dispensation of Death,” which became a curse due to Israel hardening its heart under the old covenant.<sup>7</sup> He angrily rebuked the Jewish Christian leaders who resisted his de-Judification of the church.<sup>8</sup> But Paul was a complex man who pondered and agonized over God’s failed promises to his chosen

3. Cf., e.g., Mark 11:18 with John 5:16. Cf. also the alternate blame within Acts where Peter charges the “men of Israel” with slaying Jesus in 21:22–23, but in 5:30 he lays the deed at the feet of the high priest and (Sanhedrin) council.

4. John 8:44, 47. Although this is attributed to Jesus, it more accurately reflects John’s view.

5. John 4:22.

6. I Corinthians 2:8; cf. Ephesians 6:12.

7. 2 Corinthians 3:7–18; cf. Galatians 4:8–10, 28–30; Colossians 2:16–17.

8. Galatians 2:1–14; I Corinthians 9:1–7.

people, and cannot be simply dismissed as an anti-Semite who poisoned the church forever against the Jews. As we will see, he points to a more subtle view which found room for them in God's overall plan.

Nevertheless, Paul unquestionably pushed the church in the direction of separation from Judaism, and external events contributed to that process. In 132 C.E. radical Jewish political aspirations centered on Simon Bar-Kochba, proclaimed as the Messiah in many quarters. After he executed a number of Jewish Christians as traitors for their refusal to support his unsuccessful revolt against Rome, mutual enmity and polemics reached a new level, which has scarcely abated since.

Second-century Christian apologists developed the theme of Jewish apostasy and unfaithfulness to their own covenant in rejecting the true Messiah. Jews were blamed en masse for their culpability in the death of the Savior,<sup>9</sup> a theme which only gained strength over the years in the writings of the Church Fathers.

Through the entire Patristic period, the Church Fathers created a whole genre of anti-Jewish literature in which Jews were portrayed not just as having rejected Christ, but as apostates from the time of Moses: idolaters, depraved drunkards, gluttons and debauchees, even infant killers and cannibals. In interpreting the Old Testament, the Fathers tended to apply the prophetic denunciations to the Jews, and the promises of future vindication and divine favor to Christians. St. John Chrysostom, the fourth-century Bishop of Damascus renowned for his oratory, sounded a common theme when he excoriated the Jews as beastly sub-humans:

The synagogue is not only a whorehouse and a theater, it is also a den of thieves and a haunt of wild animals. The Jews . . . [are] no better disposed than pigs or goats, they live by the rule of debauchery and inordinate gluttony."<sup>10</sup>

Many of the Church Fathers took satisfaction from the exile and persecution of the Jews as evidence of God's wrath for their rejection of his Son. Their only hope was to convert.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, church officials did not limit themselves to the pen in their war against Judaism. The ascension of Constantine as Emperor of Rome in the early fourth century marked the beginning of a long period of leg-

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9. See, e.g., Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho XVI," in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1973), vol. I, p. 202; and Tertullian, "An Answer to the Jews VIII," in *Ibid.*, p. 160.

10. Quoted in Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Crucified Jew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), 27–28. Much of the following history of anti-Semitism is summarized from this book.

11. An example of Patristic attitudes to Jews include Cyprian, "Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V, 507–557.

islative and judicial suppression, including civil and legal rights, confiscation of property, and restrictions on worship. By the time of the Crusades, zealous Christians en route to the Holy Land massacred thousands of Jews for refusing baptism. Those crusaders who actually reached their destination were surprised to learn that Moslems had the wherewithal to resist similar treatment. In the fourteenth century, Jews were popularly blamed for the Black Death. Conversion of the Jews was a major goal of the original Inquisition established in 1233 by Pope Gregory IX, which led to further persecution, fines, and imprisonment. The Spanish Inquisition of the fifteenth century went a step further: suspecting that many Jewish converts were insincere, its charge was to torture former Jews, get them to confess that they were still practicing Judaism, then burn them as a penance.

Martin Luther, at first hopeful that reform of Christianity would lead to Jewish acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah, became bitterly disillusioned when they failed to respond to his call to baptism. He characterized the Jews as anti-Christ, worse than devils, and advocated their expulsion from Germany and torching of their synagogues. In fact, at various times Jews were expelled *en masse* from Germany, France, England, and Spain. Only with the Enlightenment did the almost universal Christian anti-Semitism abate somewhat, as skeptical rationalism diluted the religious zealotry that underpinned Jewish repressions. Traditional Christian assumptions about Jewish guilt and divine retribution persisted, however, particularly among the general populace, and leading intellectuals such as Kant, Fichte, and Hegel continued to attack the Jews in print.

Despite such nineteenth-century champions of Jewish emancipation as Disraeli, the Prime Minister of England, the general movement toward nationalism intensified racial and ethnic conflict. The myth of the Wandering Jew, driven from his home in punishment for killing Christ, became a staple of French literature. German nationalism's standard of racial purity was exacerbated by composer Richard Wagner, whose obsessive hatred of the Jews was perhaps not exceeded until Hitler, who idolized the composer. "I regard the Jewish race as the born enemy of humanity and everything that is noble in it," Wagner wrote, adding that they were "getting control of everything."<sup>12</sup>

Anti-Semitism was equally strong in Russia, where pogroms in 1881 decimated the Jewish population. Ironically, Jews were condemned by the Bolsheviks following the Russian Revolution for their presumed anti-revolutionary resistance, while outside Russia they were widely charged with fomenting the revolution. After World War I, the publication of the forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* reinforced ideas about an

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12. Quoted in Cohn-Sherbock, 164.

international Jewish conspiracy to take over the world. Nazism arose and flourished in a world well prepared for its anti-Semitic sentiments.

Despite the cursory nature of this survey of the development of anti-Semitism, it is clear that such sentiments have been nurtured primarily among Christians, whose sacred texts provide the fodder for this shameful history. How does Mormonism, which arose in a culture saturated with biblical thought, fit into this milieu? And particularly, what does the Book of Mormon, which in many ways serves as a commentary on New Testament ideas, have to add on this sensitive subject?

First of all, let me state that I am not concerned in this paper with the issue of the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Whether you consider it to be a genuine text from pre-Columbian America or a production from the fertile or inspired mind of Joseph Smith, its contribution to the anti-Semitic tradition of Western Christianity is crucial to Latter-day Saints. As a self-proclaimed additional witness for Christ, it has plenty to say about the character and place of Israel in general and Jews in particular in God's overall plan, as well as their role concerning the death of Jesus.

The declaration on the title page of the Book of Mormon, translated from the plates, that it is written "to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD," is itself problematic in terms of anti-Semitism. Christianity's record of proselytizing Jews with the sword on numerous occasions was reduced to "baptism or death." Having resisted threats ranging from cultural assimilation to extermination for millennia, Jews are understandably suspicious of any attempt to convert them. This should not be news to Mormons, whose notorious missionary zeal raised stringent opposition to the construction of the BYU Jerusalem Center. Even more recently, the church found itself accused of an onslaught against Jewish identity in the afterlife by its proxy baptisms for the dead. On the surface it would seem to be an innocuous, even silly, ceremony from the point of view of a non-believer, until you consider that many of the "recipients" of these vicarious ordinances to Christianize them died in the Holocaust. To be seen as going after these victims of anti-Semitism, even after death, was the ultimate insult to many of their survivors who have vowed that these martyrs to Judaism shall not have died in vain. Christians, Mormons included, do not endeavor themselves to Jews cognizant of their heritage by trying to "save" them, since this would require them to abandon the faith for which their people have suffered so much.

But the proselytizing stance of the Book of Mormon is only the beginning. In a number of crucial passages, it echoes the attitude of the gospel writers that the Jews had incurred God's disfavor by their rebellious attitude. This is particularly true of Nephi, and his views are intermittently reflected in later passages. "The Jews" in I Nephi who mock Lehi and then try to kill him remind the reader of "Jews" as described by

John in the New Testament: the religious establishment in Jerusalem seems to be in the background manipulating the populace.<sup>13</sup> Nephi prophesies that the Jews will dwindle in unbelief and will reject and slay the Messiah.<sup>14</sup> Much later Mormon insists that the Lamanites in the latter days will need to acknowledge that Jesus Christ “was slain by the Jews.”<sup>15</sup>

In some cases the Book of Mormon goes even further than the New Testament in its apparent anti-Semitism. 2 Nephi 10:3 asserts that the reason God would come down among the Jews is that they are “*the more wicked part of the world . . . there is none other nation on earth that would crucify their God.*” Their destruction and scattering would be the consequence.<sup>16</sup> This negative portrayal is most blatant in 2 Nephi 25, which we referred to earlier. Nephi explains that he avoided teaching his people much about the Jews, “for their works were the works of darkness, and their doings the doings of abominations.” They will reject and crucify the Only Begotten because of their iniquities, hard hearts, and stiff necks, resulting in their scattering. Subsequently, the Lord would “scourge” the Jews by other nations for many generations until they stop looking for another Messiah and accept the one rejected by them, Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Whatever one may think about the accuracy of Nephi’s prophecy, one can scarcely characterize it as a shining example of religious or ethnic tolerance. When I was a missionary and encountered someone of the Jewish faith, I naively brought out the Book of Mormon, thinking it would be the perfect tool to establish a bridge of understanding. I guess I had not read it very carefully.

Nevertheless, I have painted a very one-sided picture here. The first thing to be said in amelioration of Nephi’s anti-Semitism is that he considered himself and his own people to be “descendants of the Jews” in the larger sense of being members of the House of Israel.<sup>18</sup> For him, it was a family quarrel. Secondly, having experienced first-hand persecution due to his father’s outspoken prophecies against the establishment and *status quo* in Jerusalem, and then having had to flee the city to avoid imminent destruction, his outraged attitude toward his ethnic kinsmen should be somewhat understandable. It should also be noted that the

13. I Nephi 1:19–20, 2:13, and 17:44; cf. 4 Nephi 31. Cf. also 10:2–3 where the destruction of the Jews refers to Jerusalem, and 2 Nephi 10:5, which attributes the crucifixion to “priestcrafts and iniquities” and the stiff-neckedness of the Jews.

14. I Nephi 10:11, 15:17.

15. Mormon 7:5.

16. 2 Nephi 10:6.

17. 2 Nephi 25:2, 12–18 et pas. Cf. Jacob 4:14–15, which characterizes the Jews as a stiff-necked people, blinded by “looking beyond the mark” [presumably this refers to Jesus Christ], who killed the prophets and would reject the stone upon which they would build a “safe foundation.”

18. 2 Nephi 30:4; cf. I Nephi 15:17–18.



Hebrew view of God's providence in general tended to be considerably more fatalistic than that of modern Mormonism. Whereas we might see a divine role in bringing good out of the evil done to God's chosen people by their persecutors, an Old Testament Israelite would likely see God as the causal agent of evil as well as good, and look for overall outcomes for the group rather than focus on individual casualties. Perhaps Nephi, when he says the Lord will scourge the Jews through generations to bring them to the true Messiah, is imposing this limited viewpoint on the vision he relates.<sup>19</sup> He sees the end result as good, and so assumes that God must be the means.

But more importantly, Nephi is anything but one-sided in his attitude toward the Jews. He points out that the Bible, containing the covenants of the Lord, came from the Jews in purity, and was only later corrupted by gentiles.<sup>20</sup> Later he accuses the gentiles of giving no thanks or acknowledgment to the Jews, the Lord's ancient covenant people, for their "travails, labors, pains and diligence" in bringing salvation to the gentiles.<sup>21</sup> Then Nephi, speaking prophetically in the voice of God, blasts the gentiles for their anti-Semitism:

O ye Gentiles, have ye remembered the Jews, mine ancient covenant people? Nay, but ye have cursed them, and have hated them, and have not sought to recover them. But behold, I will return all these things upon your own heads; for I the Lord have not forgotten my people.<sup>22</sup>

The gentiles who reject the Book of Mormon are hypocrites for claiming they don't need another Bible because they despise the Jews who gave them the original one.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Nephi insists, in words reminiscent of the Sacramental prayer, that the Lord really did covenant with the House of Israel, including the Jews, and will always remember them.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Mormon warns that we, the future readers of his compilation, "need not any longer hiss, nor spurn, nor make game of the Jews" because the Lord will fulfill his promises to them.<sup>25</sup>

19. Contrast, however, 1 Nephi 13:39, which indicates the Lord will bring good out of the dispersion of the Jews, but is silent about the Lord's hand in causing it. See also 2 Nephi 26:19, which foretells that "those who have dwindled in unbelief [in this case the latter-day Lamanites] shall be smitten by the hand of the Gentiles."

20. 1 Nephi 13:23–30; 2 Nephi 29:6.

21. 2 Nephi 29:4.

22. 2 Nephi 29:5. Cf. Mormon 5:10: the Gentiles should care for the House of Israel, "whence their blessings come."

23. 2 Nephi 29:4, 6. Cf. 2 Nephi 33:14: the words of the Jews will condemn those who reject them.

24. 2 Nephi 29:14. Steven Epperson, in *Mormons and Jews: Early Mormon Theologies of Israel* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 31, asserts that Nephi's extensive Isaiah quotations are meant to "affirm Israel's covenant."

25. 3 Nephi 29:8.

But for Nephi, ultimately, God stands ready to accept and bless whoever will give heed to his words. The covenant people are those who repent and believe.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, “all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.”<sup>27</sup> This phrase, of course, echoes Paul’s famous dictum in Galatians 3:28 that “there is neither Jew nor Greek in Christ.”<sup>28</sup>

Both Nephi and Paul, despite their belief that God does not play favorites based on race or national origin, retain a special place for the Jews or Israelites as the chosen people. The gospel is the power of salvation *first* to the Jews, then to the Greeks, Paul maintains.<sup>29</sup> In a classic rumination on God’s apparently failed covenant with the Patriarchs (Romans 9–11) Paul agonizes over the refusal of his people to accept Christ. Asserting that God’s promises have not failed, Paul has three answers to this puzzle, not necessarily consistent with one another. First, he argues, the children of the promise—the chosen or covenant people—are those who obtain righteousness through their faith, not those who are descended through the flesh. Outsiders can be adopted in.<sup>30</sup> Second, although Israel as a whole has stumbled by its reliance on works over faith, a remnant will be saved. This remnant is like leaven, which will eventually make the whole batch of dough holy.<sup>31</sup> Finally, and most importantly, Israel’s current stumbling over the rock of salvation is only temporary and is part of God’s plan to open up election into the people of God to the gentiles. By seizing on this opportunity for salvation, the gentiles will make Israel jealous and provoke it to return to even greater glory.<sup>32</sup>

Paul attributes the hardening which has come upon Israel to God’s providence towards the outside converts, “*until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.*” Then “*all Israel will be saved.*” Jews may temporarily be enemies of God vis-à-vis the gospel, but they are still beloved as regards election because of their ancestors. The gifts and callings of God are irrevocable. Thus, gentiles have no cause to boast; they are only branches grafted in. Israel remains the root.<sup>33</sup>

Paul seems to conclude that, because of the promises to the Fathers, Jews will be saved without giving up Judaism. At least they are not required to accept Christ just yet. Similarly, Nephi suggests that Jews can

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26. 2 Nephi 30:2.

27. 2 Nephi 26:33.

28. Cf. Romans 10:12, 2:11.

29. Romans 1:16.

30. Romans 9:6–26, 10:20–21.

31. Romans 9:27–31, 11:5–7, 16.

32. Romans 11:11–13.

33. Romans 11:17–30. Similarly, Epperson points out that gentiles become beholden and beneficiaries of Israel’s blessings, and not vice-versa. *Mormon and Jews*, 31.

remain Jews and still attain salvation through Christ. In a passage of remarkably similar context, Nephi predicts that his branch of Israel (“the seed of my brethren”) will dwindle in unbelief, followed by the day of the Gentiles, who will be instruments in bringing them back to God. None are denied, he insists. “Behold, doth he command any that they should depart out of the synagogues?” he asks pointedly. “Behold, I say unto you, Nay.”<sup>34</sup> Of course, conversion to Christianity entails just that: leaving the synagogue.

I live near an area of a large concentration of Amish, a people whose simplicity of life, exemplary faith and community attract almost universal curiosity and admiration. When the Mormons were headquartered in nearby Kirtland, Joseph Smith reportedly instructed the missionaries not to proselytize them. Whether he believed they should be left alone because they had suffered enough persecution or had too much of value to sacrifice, or just because they had a special dispensation is not known. But perhaps something similar applies to the Jews, whose scriptural credentials as the people of the Lord are impeccable. And if, as Paul says, the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable,<sup>35</sup> then the elect cannot unilaterally cancel their covenant by neglect or misunderstanding. This refusal of God to divorce or disown wayward Israel is a familiar theme among Old Testament prophets.<sup>36</sup>

Does this mean that Israelites are ultimately excused from coming unto Christ because of their ancestry? While neither Paul nor Nephi would go this far, they share a distinction from other scriptural authors on this point. Their vision of the eventual reconciliation of the Jews with the true Messiah nullifies the efforts of the gentile believers. Rather, it will come to pass through the actions of God.<sup>37</sup> One recent study points out that when the Book of Mormon speaks of restoring Israel to its full covenant status, it sets the essential precondition as “territorial”—return to the Promised Land—rather than conversion to Christianity.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the Jews remain beloved of the Lord, to be redeemed in His own due time. There is simply no room for anti-Semitism in this scheme, no matter how benign.

The pioneering study on Mormon attitudes toward the Jews is Steven Epperson’s *Mormons and Jews: Early Mormon Theologies of Israel*, published in 1992. He notes that, although nineteenth-century American Christians were grimly determined to overcome Jewish resistance to con-

34. 2 Nephi 26:26. Strictly speaking, the reference to synagogues is anachronistic for Nephi’s time. Perhaps Joseph Smith recognized that he was taking liberty as a translator when he added the clarifying phrase “or out of the houses of worship.”

35. Romans 11:30.

36. E.g., Hosea 3:1, 11:8–9; Isaiah 44:22; Jeremiah 24:7.

37. Romans 10:21, 11:23; 1 Nephi 13:42; cf. D&C 77:15.

38. Epperson, p. 30.

version, Joseph Smith and some of his most devout followers took a remarkably enlightened outlook toward Judaism.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the most notable was Orson Hyde, who, compelled by the Spirit and commissioned by the Prophet Joseph, traveled to Jerusalem in 1841 to dedicate the Holy Land, not for the preaching of the gospel of Christianity, but “for the gathering of ‘Judah’s scattered remnants,’ for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its Temple, and for the restoration of a distinct, independent Jewish nation.”<sup>40</sup>

Both Paul and the Book of Mormon support the contention that we, the gentile church, are secondary appendages to Israel, and Joseph Smith’s program of gathering, temple building, priesthood rituals and theocracy indicates that he was building the Kingdom of God on a Hebrew model. Nineteenth-century Mormon converts saw themselves as transformed into literal Israelites,<sup>41</sup> a view echoed in the continuing practice of assigning patriarchal blessing recipients to a tribe of Israel.

So, returning to my far-off somnolent high schoolers, reciting their received prejudices about how the Holocaust and other persecutions were the Lord’s way of bringing the recalcitrant Jews around to accept Jesus as the Christ, what *would* you ‘a done? Keep in mind that it was getting late, and the first rule of early morning seminary is *Let Out on Time*. Besides which, I hadn’t yet done the research for this paper. I had to wing it—and fast. Well, here’s what I done.

I said, “I think there are some problems with that way of thinking from a gospel point of view. First of all, it does not quite fit with the principle that we will be punished for our own sins and not for our ancestors’ transgressions. I think you’ll agree that those Jews who died in the Holocaust were pretty far removed from those who were around for Jesus’ crucifixion.” They agreed. “Furthermore, I don’t know of a single Jew who, in contemplating the Holocaust, has come to the realization that Jesus was the Christ after all. So if God was indeed trying to get them to accept Christianity by imposing genocide on them, not only was it a pretty crude and cruel way to accomplish that goal, but it failed dismally.” They seemed to realize the logic of this as well. “And finally,” I added, “it can be very dangerous to think that way, because that kind of reasoning has led to countless anti-Semitic persecutions over the last 2000 years, culminating in the atrocity of the Holocaust.”

Okay, I probably didn’t say “culminating” that early in the morning, but you get the gist. Latter-day Saints identify themselves as “the new Israel,” meaning the heirs of the covenant to be God’s people, just as did

39. *Ibid.*, 10–13; viif.

40. *Ibid.*, vii.

41. Melodie Moench, “Nineteenth-Century Mormons: The New Israel,” *Dialogue* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 42–54. Cited in Epperson, p. 59.

the early Christians even as they became overwhelmingly non-Jewish. But we remain Israel only by adoption; the original heirs have not been disinherited. Reading the scriptures in isolation and without the Urim and Thummim of the whole gospel, taken in context, is liable to abuse. We who lay claim to greater light and knowledge should show forth the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."<sup>42</sup> I think all this implies, not just that we need to guard against anti-Semitic attitudes and actively oppose expressions of such prejudice, but that we need to give our spiritual kin, the Jews, space to nurture and preserve their heritage. Our mission now is to our fellow gentiles, not the Jews. God will speak to them now and in times to come, just as he has in the past. Surely we can exercise *that* much faith in his promises.

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42. Galatians 5:22.