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# Donald Harman Akenson. Some Family: The Mormons and How Humanity Keeps Track of Itself

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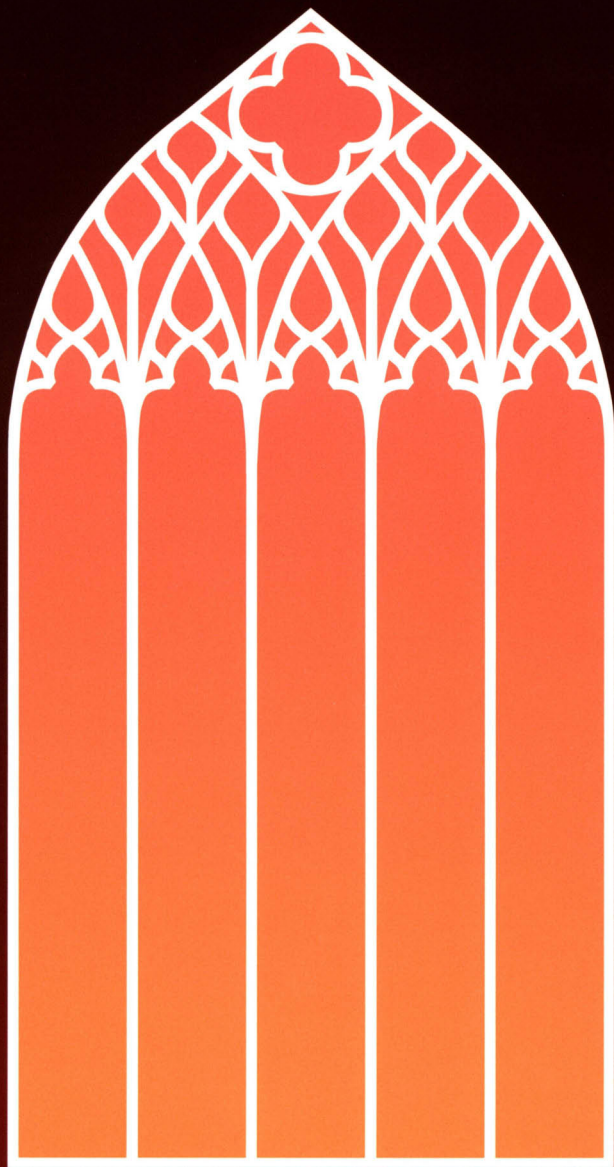
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# JOURNAL OF MORMON HISTORY



FALL 2008

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Volume 34, No. 4  
Fall 2008

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## CONTENTS

### LETTER

Correction *Dean Hughes* vi

### ARTICLES

“Temple Pro Tempore”: The Salt Lake City Endowment  
House *Lisle G Brown* 1

“They Shall Be Made Whole”: A History of Baptism for Health  
*Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine L. Wright* 69

“Cheat the Asylum of a Victim”: George Albert Smith’s  
1909–12 Breakdown *Mary Jane Woodger* 113

Appropriating the Secular: Mormonism and the World  
Columbia Exposition of 1893 *Konden Rich Smith* 153

Under the Gun at the Smoot Hearings:  
Joseph F. Smith’s Testimony *Michael Harold Paulos* 181

Buchanan’s Thrust from the Pacific: The Utah War’s  
Ill-Fated Second Front *William P. MacKinnon* 226

### REVIEWS

Michael Harold Paulos, editor. *The Mormon Church on Trial:  
Transcripts of the Reed Smoot Hearings* *Val Hemming* 261

---

David Dye and Joshua Mariano. *27 Hidden Gems from Church History*; David A. Dye. *Sacred Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith: An In-Depth Examination of the 1903 Letter of Benjamin F. Johnson*; and David A. Dye, ed. *Sacred Scribe: Entries from the Journals of Leonard John Nuttall*

Brian C. Hales 265

Donald Harman Akenson. *Some Family: The Mormons and How Humanity Keeps Track of Itself* J. Michael Hunter 271

### BOOK NOTICES

Laurel Stowe Brady. *In the Time of John Taylor: Dancing with the Sun* 275

Carol Freeman Braby. *Letters from Jerusalem 1913–1914: Correspondence of H. Arthur and Edna Howland Koehler* 276

Anthony W. Ivins. *The Relationship of Mormonism and Freemasonry* 277

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Donald Harman Akenson. *Some Family: The Mormons and How Humanity Keeps Track of Itself*. Montreal: McGill University/Kingston, Ontario: Queen's University Press, 2007. 349 pp. Charts, appendices, notes, index. Cloth: CA \$34.95, US \$29.95, UK £16.99; ISBN: 978-0-7735-3295-3

*Reviewed by J. Michael Hunter*

Donald Harman Akenson, a professor of history at Queen's University in Ontario and senior editor at the press that printed this book, believes that scholars cannot ignore what he considers one of "the most important approaches to human history" currently underway—the LDS Church's genealogical efforts (186). Akenson encountered the Mormon genealogical program while researching the Irish in Ontario. Wanting to avoid the high costs of land title searches at the county registrar's office, Akenson turned to a local LDS family history center where he was able to obtain microfilm copies of the land titles for "next to nothing" (185). "Instead of walking past this monumental edifice with our eyes fixed on the ground," Akenson writes, "we should look up and at least ask, 'how useful is the Mormon project—and to whom?'" (186).

Akenson's central argument is that there are four basic genealogical forms used in the world today. These include two unilineal (matrilineal and patrilineal) and two bilineal (standard double and variable double). He provides illuminating charts to explain these systems; but basically the matrilineal system connects lineage through a single female line while the patrilineal system connects lineage through a single male in each generation. Bilineal systems, on the other hand, link generations on both the male and female sides. People of European heritage are most familiar with the standard double system, and it is the system used by the LDS Church to record lineage on pedigree charts. The variable double is some variation of the standard double that takes many forms depending on the culture. In some cultures, for example, generations can choose to follow either the male line or the female line but can select only one. The result is a lineage that oscillates back and forth between matrilineal and patrilineal. There are other variations that are too complex to discuss here.

Akenson contends that genealogy "is the collections of certain socially approved stories that are arranged according to one of a limited number of possible patterns" (98). His concern is that the "Mormon genealogical machine" through "ethnocentric imperialism" is forcing the standard double system on the world and, in the process, determining how the world keeps track of itself, which, in turn, affects the way the human story is told (195, 110).

According to Akenson, the Mormons, following the Hebrew example, consider genealogy in terms of a biological pedigree rather than a socially determined lineage. Akenson argues that the position of individuals in a genealogical narrative should be determined as much by social custom as by biology. Akenson provides numerous examples of world cultures, both ancient and modern, that do not fit into the standard double system, but which are forced into such a system by the LDS Church “only by breaking apart historical realities and making all family systems retrospectively fit with the Mormon model” (119).

One specific example of this forced conformity is same-sex marriages where the couple has adopted children. Akenson points out that such a family unit could not be recorded using the LDS Church’s computer program “without using an acetylene cutting torch and a high voltage arc welder” (118). As a result, these family units are not getting recorded, and evidence of their existence is effectively wiped out of the human story. Akenson’s book is in effect a warning to historians and other scholars to be aware of the “emerging LDS genealogical imperium” (19). Akenson concludes that the “Mormon project” is “badly off-kilter” (185). As he explains in inflammatory prose: “The LDS [system] is demonstrably wrong in its base-belief that there is only a single grammar of genealogical narrative. The coercive character of this belief must be resisted, for it quashes the integrity of cultures that do not fit the story of their humanity into the procrustean template: and because the Mormon paradigm can be embraced only by rejecting empirical, statistical, and historical evidence for the existence of other, incompatible ways that human beings have kept track of their humanity” (186).

Akenson is original in his approach to the world genealogical research phenomenon in which the LDS Church plays a huge part. By placing genealogy in a literary context, he raises intriguing questions about who controls the human narrative. He also raises interesting questions about the LDS Church’s efforts to provide a single narrative in the form of a huge database designed to link all humankind back to Adam and Eve. Akenson questions the accuracy of such a database, stating that “biological inaccuracy in human lineages is so great as to render most full genealogies genetically invalid in half-a-dozen generations, even if the paper documentation is perfect” (186). Akenson also points out that the database often gets to Adam in some very strange ways. For example, the database includes Skjold who was married to Gefion, a Norse mythological figure who at one time had mated with giants to produce sons who were useful as massive draught-oxen. Skjold’s father was Odin, the one-eyed Norse god of wisdom (154).

A fundamental flaw in Akenson’s critique of the “Mormon project” is his insistence on judging it on his own terms while giving little regard to the Mormons’ original intent and purposes in creating the project in the first



place. LDS President Wilford Woodruff stated, "We want the Latter-day Saints from this time to trace their genealogies as far as they can and to be sealed to their fathers and mothers. Have children sealed to their parents and run this chain through as far as you can get it." For the Mormons, then, the project has everything to do with sealing power and the uniting of families—fathers, mothers, children. It also accepts limitations. At some point, researchers will have gone "as far as you can get it."

The Mormons chose the standard double system because it worked very well with their theological understanding of the eternal family unit. The other forms are simply theologically incompatible. The "Mormon project" has been a great boon to professional genealogists, hobbyists, historians, and other scholars, but the Mormons would not finance such a huge undertaking if it did not meet their religious objectives.

In light of these considerations, which Akenson does not acknowledge, let alone explain, it seems absurd for Akenson to call the project "badly off-kilter" (185). Off-kilter according to whose intents and purposes? Akenson's? Historians'? The Mormons'? By the end of the book, it is not clear if Akenson is lecturing the Mormons, warning historians, or doing some wishful thinking of his own. Rather than critiquing the project he has at hand, he ends up critiquing the project he wished the LDS Church had created, the project that would have worked well with his conception of how the world works.

By essentially ignoring the Mormon concept of sealing power, Akenson also underestimates the flexibility of the system in regards to Mormon social constructs. In the "Mormon project," sealing prevails over biology. Children sealed to adoptive parents appear on the pedigree chart as children of the parents of sealing, not on the pedigree of their biological parents. At times, living biological mothers and fathers allow their children to be sealed to stepmothers or stepfathers, which generally changes the pedigree to conform to the sealing without regard to biology. Special circumstances and unique family dynamics sometimes result in other approved sealing arrangements that do not necessarily conform to biology.

If then the Mormons are not constrained by the standard double system, others can also adapt the system to their own unique needs or simply scrap the system and come up with one of their own. Granted, the Mormon system does make it sometimes appear that there is only one way of recording genealogy and telling the story. That is the value of Akenson's work: He shows us that there are many social constructs and, therefore, many ways of telling the story. However, I have to disagree with his contention that the Mormons are coercing people into telling the story their way.

His intemperate descriptions, while colorful, obscure his points and will no doubt hinder a useful discussion of his thesis. While he calls on his

readers to “tolerate” and “try to understand” the “merry-go-round of psycho-hallucinating nutters” that exist in the world (in which he includes Mormons), he himself shows little tolerance. Akenson explains that even though Joseph Smith “engaged in forgeries that were so easily detectable as to be embarrassing” and his writings were the “sort of thing a smart twelve-year-old would do,” his “audience of rural proles” fell for “his Big Con” (19, 29, 31, 33, 34). He concedes, “There are some very fine, albeit very few, professional historians who deal with Mormon history from within the LDS and at an evidentiary level demanded by the historical profession. On the other hand, if one wishes to observe just how crazy the non-professionals can be, note the church’s desperate reaction to the 1983 forgery by Mark Hoffman [sic; should be Hofmann] of a letter that claimed to show that Joseph Smith learned of the golden plates from an encounter with a white salamander” (288 note 21).

A few final caveats for readers already familiar with Mormon history. In his chapter on the origins of the LDS Church, Akenson relies heavily on Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History* (1945; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963 printing). He unquestioningly accepts Brodie’s narrative and interpretation; so readers already familiar with Brodie will gain no new historical insights here. In his chapter on the development of Mormon genealogical efforts—“God’s Massive Engine?”—Akenson relies on *Hearts Turned to the Fathers* by James B. Allen, Jessie L. Embry, and Kahlile B. Mehr (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1995). *Hearts* is obviously more comprehensive, but also more coherent, than Akenson’s chapter. Finally, it is important to realize that Akenson’s book is more about raising questions than providing answers—and there is value in that approach.

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