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Rabbi William J. Leffler

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Frank J. Johnson and Rabbi William J. Leffler.  
*Jews and Mormons: Two Houses of Israel.*  
 Hoboken, New York: Ktav Publishing, 2000.

Reviewed by David E. Bokovoy

In addition to everything else they do, words can be ambassadors of goodwill, spreading the messages of a culture.”<sup>1</sup> This statement by Joseph Lowin, the director of Cultural Services at the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, coincides with the thesis of *Jews and Mormons: Two Houses of Israel*: “Jews need to know more about Mormonism, and Mormons about Judaism” (131). The authors, Frank J. Johnson (a Mormon high priest) and William J. Leffler (a Jewish rabbi), undertake to explain the differences and similarities between their respective religions in a frank and yet somewhat cordial dialogue. Apparently, the authors have corresponded with one another since they became friends at Dartmouth College in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Their book provides a much-needed foundation for the spreading of goodwill between two unique perspectives.

The book contains eight alternating chapters on Mormonism and Judaism, with a ninth devoted to areas of mutual misunderstanding. Major topics include the backgrounds of each religion, the main religious ideas of each, the respective elements of life and practice, and views about the House of Israel. Both authors explain their own views in the discourse of their own religious heritage, but they are mindful of how those ideas or expressions will sound in the ears of the other. The discussion roams freely over many topics, sometimes revisiting issues hashed out on previous pages. Often the reader feels like an eavesdropper listening in on a sometimes blunt conversation between two spirited advocates who are not much aware of any audience. In addition to these chapters, there are three well-constructed appendices containing Orson Hyde’s October 1841 dedication of Israel, a midrash on Psalm 9, and the responsa.

Obviously, Mormonism and Judaism represent two religious paradigms based on distinctly unique presuppositions. The different premises are most evident when the authors compare the view among Latter-day Saints that truth is absolute with the tendency among Jews to view truth as less than concrete. Considering the chasm between these opposing perceptions, one wonders whether this book can possibly accomplish its primary objective to help Mormons and Jews better understand one another.

Leffler offers a profound observation: “Judaism is the religion, or, one might say, the religions, of the Jewish people” (1). Consequently, Latter-day Saints should recognize that Leffler writes from the perspective of a “modernistic” or “reformed” Jewish rabbi, which he openly acknowledges in the preface. This point cannot be overemphasized, for much of his interpretation of Judaism can in no way be associated with any consensus among all Jews. Latter-day Saints can find diverse sets of similarities and differences by comparing Mormonism with Orthodox, Hasidic, conservative, or reform Judaism. For example, several fundamental Latter-day Saint doctrines find significant counterparts in certain Jewish traditions that are not apparent in reformed Judaism. These would include the doctrine of a pre-mortal soul, as promulgated in Jewish mysticism, and the notion of an anthropomorphic deity, as declared in major sections of the Hebrew Bible and in some Rabbinic literature.<sup>2</sup>

The two authors disagree on whether the Old Testament is to be taken literally—a disagreement that supposedly represents a massive stumbling block between the two faiths: Leffler takes a critical approach to the Hebrew Bible<sup>3</sup> while Johnson continually insists that all Latter-day Saints view the Old Testament as both historically and literally correct in all respects. But neither of these views is representative of either religion as a whole. For example, Rabbi Leffler’s assessment is a far cry from Moses Maimonides’s eighth article of faith, in which the preeminent Jewish philosopher declares: “The Torah is from heaven; to wit, it [must] be believed that the whole of this Torah which is in our hands today is the Torah that was brought down to Moses, or Teacher; that all of it is from G[o]d.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, some faithful Mormons may be sympathetic in many respects to the critical approach.<sup>5</sup>

The authors often fail to grasp these and other fundamental elements of opposing views within their own religions, and they do far too little to correct these oversights. Perhaps this only shows how difficult a task the authors have undertaken, even for two well-intended interlocutors. For example, oversimplifications arise in their discussions on mutually recognized scripture, on the translation and interpretation of the scriptures, and on concerns over the historicity of scripture.

Aside from these and other stumbling blocks, *Jews and Mormons* falls short of captivating the reader. Missed opportunities to enrich the conversation between Jews and Latter-day Saints abound. For example, when Leffler cites the rabbinic tradition of a *Messiah ben Joseph*, the book would have proved more interesting if Johnson had mentioned the Latter-day Saint scholars who have associated this legend with Joseph Smith.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the authors could have focused more on temples, since these structures serve a central role in both traditions (though admittedly far less so for reformed Jews). As one Jewish author has recently observed, “The liturgy and the Bible—the classical sources that are accessible to every Jew—point to the centrality of the temple in Jewish thought.”<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, their discussion would have benefited from a comparison of the teachings of Joseph Smith and the similar Rabbinic tradition found in Louis Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews*:

God was indeed anxious to have a sanctuary erected to Him, *it was the condition on which he led them* [the Israelites] *out of Egypt*, yea, in a certain sense the existence of all the world depended on the construction of the sanctuary, for when the sanctuary had been erected, the world stood firmly founded, whereas until then it had always been swaying hither and thither. (emphasis added)<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, Joseph Smith held a remarkably similar view: “What was the object of gathering the Jews, or the people of God in any age of the world? . . . *The main object was to build unto the Lord a house* whereby He could reveal unto his people the ordinances of His house and the glories of His kingdom” (emphasis added).<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding its shortcomings, *Jews and Mormons* represents a worthwhile and noteworthy attempt at open dialogue between two distinct religious traditions. “Religion is an answer to man’s ultimate questions,” writes the distinguished Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel; “the moment we become oblivious to ultimate questions, religion becomes irrelevant, and its crisis sets in.”<sup>10</sup> The book *Jews and Mormons* serves as an attempt to explain the answers to these ultimate questions.

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1. Joseph Lown, *Hebrewspeak: An Insider’s Guide to the Way Jews Think* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1995), 7.

2. On the corporeal nature of deity in Judaism, see Jacob Neusner, *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars

Press, 1992); and Jacob Neusner, "Conversation in Nauvoo about the Corporeality of God," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996–97): 7–30.

3. Leffler mistakenly suggests that the Pharisees originated the Jewish practice of juxtaposing passages from the Bible to develop theology. The process of inner-biblical exegesis developed much earlier in Israelite society. See, for example, Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1988); and Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

4. As cited in *The Commentary of R. Hotev Ben Shelomo to the Thirteen Principles of Maimonides*, translated by David R. Blumenthal (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 144. Maimonides, in his commentary on the *Mishnah*, compiles what he refers to as the *Shloshah-Asar Ikkarim*, the Thirteen Articles of Faith, compiled from Judaism's 613 commandments found in the Torah. For an introduction to Maimonides's relevance for contemporary Judaism, see Louis Jacobs, *The Book of Jewish Belief* (New Jersey: Behrman House, 1984), 67–68.

5. See for example John L. Sorenson, "The 'Brass Plates' and Biblical Scholarship," *Dialogue* 10 (autumn 1977): 31–37; and Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 191–243, where both Latter-day Saint authors apply critical tools to the Book of Mormon.

6. See, for example, Matthew B. Brown, *All Things Restored: Confirming the Authenticity of LDS Beliefs* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2000), 34–39; Joseph Fielding McConkie, *His Name Shall Be Joseph* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes Publications, 1980); Joseph Fielding McConkie, "Joseph Smith as Found in Ancient Manuscripts," in *Isaiah and the Prophets: Inspired Voices from the Old Testament*, ed. Monte S. Nyman (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984), 11–31; Victor L. Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 179; and Truman G. Madsen, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 106.

7. Joshua Berman, *The Temple: Its Symbolism and Meaning Then and Now* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1995), xvi–xvii.

8. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1937), 4:150–51.

9. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 307–8.

10. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 3.