

Judaism and Mormonism: Paradigm and Supersession

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FOR SOME TIME NOW, especially since World War II and the shock and guilt evoked in the Western world by the virtual extermination of the European Jews, traditional Christian views of the role of the Jewish people and religion in the divine economy have been considered and reconsidered. The most obvious of these views, going back to the first Christian century, has been that the role of the Jews and Judaism was superseded by the Christ-event—the person, teachings, ministry, and death of Jesus of Nazareth—and the emergence of Christianity out of that event. Taken literally, that meant that Israel in the religious sense was *de trop*, finished, archaic, its wretched condition an example of punishment for unbelief in the Christian faith, even an evidence for its truth. On some final day the Jews' anomalous situation was to be solved by their conversion to that faith. Judaism had been replaced by the Christian Church, the new and true Israel, Torah by Christ, the final and full revelation. This is the viewpoint that I term "supersession."

At the same time biblical Israel served as an exemplary model for those Christian thinkers and groups who took seriously the Old Testament example of life lived in faith, despite all catastrophes and sufferings, of the presence of holiness in the concrete world of nature and history. The Judaic emphasis on personal ethics and social justice evoked an affirmative response. For the learned this attraction manifested itself in a serious study of the Hebrew language and scriptures; for laymen, in an intensive reading of the Old Testament in vernacular translations and in the bestowal of Old Testament names on their children—

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a borrowing still continued in many areas. To this view I give the term “paradigm.”

Granted that this interest did not usually extend to a knowledge of Rabbinic Judaism, which had also emerged from the rubble of first-century Jerusalem and which was the religious culture of the existing Jews who lived in the host nations of Christendom.¹ For most Christians the Jews who provided the glowing example were in the pages of the Old Testament, not the little-known, odd, often humiliated and despised people who occupied the Jewish quarters in Christian town and cities. For most Christian theologians the continuing existence of the Jewish people and religion has been a problem. (For some the return of Jews to Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state in our unredeemed time contradicted a long-held belief foreclosing this possibility [Friedman 1989, 430]). Indeed, shortly after World War II, an ecumenical conference in Europe looked forward to a “spiritual final solution” of the Jewish problem, to the “spiritual destruction of Judaism” (Cain 1980, 24).² Is it going too far to say that this implied a final supersession?

Edmund Wilson, in his fascinating essay “The Jews,” reminds us that at least one Christian group was so intensely attached to the Judaic paradigm that they sedulously emulated Jewish religious customs: the New England Puritans and their latter-day descendants. “The Puritanism of New England,” he asserts, “was a kind of new Judaism, a Judaism transposed into Anglo-Saxon terms” (Wilson 1956, 90). He cites Harriet Beecher Stowe recalling how her grandfather adopted the Orthodox Jewish prayer stance, erect and leaning on a chair, and of her husband’s wearing of the *yarmulke*, the traditional Jewish headgear for prayer and study, while he perused the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud in what Wilson terms a “rabbinical metamorphosis.” Rudolf Glanz in *Jews and Mormons* (1963) mentions far more extreme examples among English “Anglo-Israelites,” including circumcision and seventh-day sabbatarianism. Wilson notes that a New Englander in Santayana’s novel *The Last Puritan* metaphorizes that drastic sacrament, saying, “We were always a circumcised people, consecrated to great expectations” (1956, 92). For a deep and broad presentation of paradigm and replication among English and New England Puritans, see Rex Cooper’s magnificent study of Mormon covenant organization (1990, esp. 1–48).

¹ Exception must be made of the medieval scholastics, such as Aquinas, who were acquainted with Maimonides and other Jewish religious philosophers.

² This occurred at the meeting of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948.

Mormons never engaged in such extreme imitations of the Judaic paradigm as the *davenning* posture, *yarmulke*-wearing, or seventh-day sabbatarianism (Glanz states that only the Beaver Island group observed the Saturday sabbath). Yet the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints provides the classical example of the stress on biblical Israel as paradigm. Its replication of biblical Israel was to be no merely metaphorical or symbolic enterprise; it was, in Buberian terms, to be “done up into life,” through creating a holy commonwealth in the concrete here and now, not only a new religious community but a new society. Much has been written on this kind of replication of the paradigm, including the ill-fated imitation of Israelite polygamy.

But beyond this familiar aspect of Mormon doctrine and practice, paradigm in traditional Mormon belief became literal identification, not only in spirit but in flesh. Sterling McMurrin, the eminent Utah philosopher and explicator of Mormon theology, in personal correspondence with me, and New Testament scholar W. D. Davies in his essay “Israel, Mormons and the Land” refer to a doctrine of direct “blood” relationship between biblical Israelites and Mormons of European descent (McMurrin 1990; Davies 1978). We are all familiar with the story of direct descent of the American Indians from the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon, what Fawn Brody calls the “red sons of Israel.” Not so familiar is the doctrine of literal biological descent of Mormons of European stock. I have experienced vehement objections and incredulity when I mentioned the doctrine to younger Mormons, who thought I had confused latter-day European converts with the Lamanites.

To my suggestion that Joseph Smith was speaking “spiritually” and not literally when he referred to the change wrought by the Holy Ghost on Gentile converts, making them “of the seed of Abraham,” McMurrin responded with documents that emphasized the literal intent of the doctrine. For example, Joseph Smith said, “The effect of the Holy Ghost upon a Gentile is to purge out the old blood and make him actually of the seed of Abraham” (HC 3:380; Smith 1951, 149f). Brigham Young repeated this teaching in an April 1855 discourse on “the gathering of Israel” and emphasized the direct descent of Mormons from Ephraim, the youngest son of Joseph, as well as the mixture of Israelite blood with all the peoples of the world (JD 2:268f). According to Joseph Smith, a visible, physical change could occur during the cleansing of Gentile blood, extending even to spasms and apparent fits. McMurrin states that when he was a high-school student, he heard an apostle testify to a complete physical change in a Gentile recipient of the Holy Ghost, so that his friends could no longer recognize him.

Although some teachings seem to make mere belief in the gospel by a Gentile the occasion of the work of the Holy Spirit, this is usually ascribed to the inspired declaration of lineage in the patriarchal blessing; that is, that the Gentile is a lineal descendant of Ephraim. Daniel Ludlow, in a recent *Ensign* article, notes that “the clear teaching of the prophets” is that the great majority of Gentile converts are already of the blood of Abraham by birth, through the scattering of Israel among the nations, so that only a relatively few need be “adopted into the House of Israel” (1991, 54). But why, then, the patriarchal declaration, and what the answer to the question put aptly to me by Davis Bitton: “Who is a Goy?” Joseph Smith, “a pure Emphraimite?” Converts “from China, Russia, England, California, North or South America” already of Abrahamic lineage? All this comes under the heading of “the gathering of Israel” (Ludlow 1991, 53).

For an illuminating scholarly discussion of the doctrine of direct blood lineage, see Cooper’s depiction of the shifting emphases on “shared genetic substance” and “code of conduct,” descent and assent, blood and faith, in the history of Mormon doctrine (1990, ch. 4–5, *passim*). A strikingly similar alternation in the history of Judaism is found in Menachem Kellner’s distinction between the two varying norms of Jewish identity: the Abrahamic, through biological descent; and the Mosaic, through Torah adherence (Kellner 1991, ch. 5–7). Jan Shipps, in a monumental discussion of “saintmaking,” also signals the alternation of emphases, in the various phases of Mormon history, on descent and consent, birth and obedience (Shipps 1991). B. H. Roberts notes in his autobiography that “because of the completeness of her faith,” his mother was regarded as a “natural-born Israelite,” confirmed by her obedience to the requirement to gather into the Utah Zion despite the agonizing break-up of her family in England (1990, 7).

James E. Talmage presents a clearly metaphorical interpretation of the claim in his commentary on the Articles of Faith: “The name Israel, thus held with commendable pride by the remnant of a once mighty nation, was used in a figurative manner to designate the covenant people who constituted the Church of Christ [in the 1st century]; *and in this sense it is still employed*” (Talmage 1987, ch. 17, 316, bracketed phrase and italics added). Obviously, despite allegations of Mormon literal-mindedness, a respected Mormon thinker may take the road of “spiritual” interpretation.

Cooper notes that the New England Puritans “saw themselves as the ‘spiritual’ children of Abraham, and as a new or ‘surrogate’ Israel” (1990, 23). Going further back to a great systematic thinker of the Protestant Reformation, he cites this passage from Calvin’s *Institutes*, opting for adoption rather than direct descent:

The children of Abraham, under the old dispensation, were those who derived their origin from his seed, but that appellation is now given to those who imitate his faith. [Thus] we are called his sons, though we have no natural relation with him. And we in comparison of them are called posthumous, or abortive children of Abraham, and that not by nature, but by adoption, just as if a twig were broken from its tree and grafted on another stock. (in Cooper 1990, 23-24)

This perhaps tedious piling up of citations is by no means a digression from our main theme, paradigm and/or supersession. This becomes clear when we absorb Davies' "Israel, the Mormons and the Land," presented at a conference of non-Mormon scholars, Christian and Jewish, shepherded by Truman Madsen at Brigham Young University in 1978 (Davies 1978). Davies draws mainly from the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. In addition, he utilizes the insights and analyses he developed in his research on the salient attitudes of first-century Christianity towards the people and land of Israel (Davies 1974). He concludes plausibly that the LDS scriptures assert that the Mormons are literal descendants of the ancient Israelites and that the Mormon community and people are the direct continuation of the faith and people of Israel. Hence, for Mormons there is no "Old Israel" set off against a "New Israel," since Mormonism is simply a new stage in a new locale in the ongoing history of Israel. Davies holds similarly that there can be no "supersession of the old covenant by the new" in Mormonism or even a doctrine that the one is preparatory to the other, since it asserts the eternity of covenants. However, he admits that Joseph Smith in D&C 22:1-4 states that all the old covenants are abolished by "the new and everlasting covenant" of baptism (Davies 1974, 95, n. 18). In any case, Davies seems to opt for paradigm as the Mormon emphasis rather than supersession, the traditional Christian stance.

Furthermore, Davies finds in the doctrine of biological continuity between ancient Israel and the Latter-day Saints something absolutely unique in the history of Christianity, which never claimed a fleshly bond or transformation for Gentile converts. He finds in this extraordinary claim a potential ground for what he sees as an absence of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism in Mormonism, in contrast with their perennial occurrence in traditional Christianity. He asserts a basically pro-Jewish, even pro-Judaic stance for the LDS Church, which believes it is the continuation of ancient Israel. He claims a complete absence of anti-Jewish bias in the Mormon scriptures, including a "benign attitude towards the Jewish dispersion" after the fall of Jerusalem (1978, 83). This is indeed heartening for Jews and Christians of good will. Naturally the question arises for the pesky historical mind, "Is it true?" (Wilson has demonstrated that "an atavistic obsession with the Jews," to the point of blood descent as well as spiritual identity, resulted in

anti-Semitism as well as pro-Semitism in the case of some latter-day heirs of New England Puritanism [1956, 94-106]).

To answer this pesky historical question, I did a close textual examination of the first two books of the Book of Mormon, 1 and 2 Nephi, to see just what attitudes they expressed toward the Jews and Judaism. I compared them with Davies' assertion that Mormon scriptures, in contrast with traditional Christian writings, offer no condemnation of the Jews for the trial and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, no interpretation of the destruction of Jerusalem and worldwide dispersion of the Jews as divine punishment, no vilification of the Jewish people as inherently and uniquely evil. Yet this is what I found: the examined texts state that "the Jews" are responsible for the passion and death of Christ, that they are deicides. The destruction of their holy center and their dispersal among the nations of the world were a direct result of their sins. They have been punished not only for their actions, but also for their unbelief, their rejection of Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah (see 1 Ne. 19:13-14; 22:3-5). The Pauline olive-tree metaphor is used to express the view that the "natural" have been replaced by the "wild" branches, so that the full gospel now comes from the Gentiles to the Jews, superseding the former Jews-to-Gentiles message (1 Ne. 10:13-14; 15:12-16; 22:8-9). All this, we may note, is familiar Christian doctrine.

There are also charges that the works of the Jews "were works of darkness and their doings were doings of abominations," that they have been destroyed from generation to generation because of their iniquities (2 Ne. 25:2, 9). Here we obviously have a reflection of the Hebrew prophets' fulminations against their people for their sins. But in 2 Nephi 10:3 the special wickedness of the Jewish people is asserted, culminating in deicide. There it is prophesied, supposedly in the sixth century B.C.E., that Christ would "come among the Jews, among those who are the more wicked part of the world; and they shall crucify him . . . and there is none other nation on earth that would crucify their God." Not only wickedness is attributed to the Jews, but an especially loathsome wickedness. Is there anything in traditional Christian expressions about the Jews more vilifying than this?

At the same time there are many expressions of admiration for the Jews in the Book of Mormon, as well as admonitions against cursing and hating them. The Bible comes from the Jews, the Book of Mormon counsels, and Gentiles should thank the Jews for that. To the Jews are due thanks for not only the history of the patriarchs, kings, and prophets, but also the records of the Mosaic law, which have gone forth to all peoples. Christ has come to save all humans in all times and places. Yet the original law must be retained to order human lives, and the

Jews have given us that law. Thus, both eternal salvation (through Christ) and the ordering of temporal life for all humankind are from the Jews.

Davies' tripartite analysis of the Mormon claim to a direct continuation of biblical Israel into *return, restoration, and reinterpretation* promises a more illuminating view of the incidence of paradigm and supersession in Mormonism than his claim of the relatively benign attitude in Mormon scriptures toward first-century Jews and Judaism. The nineteenth-century founders of Mormonism, he notes, were not satisfied with an abstract, ideological claim of connection with ancient Israel, a mere theoretical return. Instead they insisted on a concrete restoration of its life and institutions in the life and community of American Latter-day Saints. This included not only the emulation of the biblical patriarchs' practice of polygamy, but also the restoration of the biblical priesthoods and the offices of patriarchs and prophets, as well as of the twelve apostles and the seventy. (No need to note for the knowing reader that restorationism extended to the renewal of the original Christian church, as well as of ancient Israel.)

More important than these ecclesiastical institutions and offices is the intense identification of the early generations of Mormons with the quest and hope of ancient Israel. The Saints saw themselves as also arising out of the wilderness and journeying to the promised land, persisting in their quest despite daunting catastrophes and the fierce enmity of other peoples. Zion, the New Jerusalem, the Holy City, was their ultimate goal, a real city in a real land, a special place for a special people. So not only was there to be a millennial return of original Judaite Jews to Palestine and Jerusalem, but also an ingathering of latter-day members of the House of Israel to a center in America. This shift from a place in West Asia to a place in North America signaled the necessity for Mormons to reinterpret the Israelite paradigm. The traditional Jewish emphasis on a holy land and a holy city was to be emulated, but it was directed to a quite different locale.

This holy place had to be somewhere on the North American continent, but just where was uncertain, shifting from Kirtland, Ohio, to several other places, finally ending in the Great Basin area and Salt Lake City, though retaining Jackson County, Missouri, as the ideal and ultimate center. Thus Mormonism emulated Judaism's this-worldly, "materialistic" centering on a particular place, an especially holy territory on this earth, though redirecting it to an American locale. Mormons accepted and emulated Israelite traditions, customs, and hopes; but they also reinterpreted them to fit their own place and time. As Davies says, they "Americanized" the ancient territorial emphasis and

even internationalized and "spiritualized" it as they spread out to world-wide missions, so that now Zion may be said to be located "in the heart" rather than in some geographical locale.

Here we may ask another pesky question. Does "reinterpretation" really imply supersession, as does "fulfillment" in Davies' analysis of first-century Christian attitudes towards Judaism? Like many other Christian movements, Mormonism had both to acknowledge its archaic origin in biblical Israel and at the same time announce its supersession, even if that be interpreted irenically as "fulfillment" or "completion." As a potential universal religion, open to all human beings, Mormonism paradoxically had to distance itself from the people and religion of Israel while at the same time identifying with it and emulating its institutions and customs. Going beyond Christianity, Mormonism parallels Islam, where a founder-prophet announced a new, final, and full revelation for all humankind, and Judaism, along with Christianity, was assigned a respected but minor role as a People of the Book. Doctrinally and effectually Judaism and Christianity were superseded by the Islamic socioreligious community.

The relevant question for us now is not whether there is supersession in Mormon scriptures and doctrines—I have shown that it is there. A new, unique dispensation is proclaimed, effectively leaving all former dispensations behind in the history of salvation. The Old Law has been superseded by the New Gospel, to which all Jews will be converted in the millennial age. The relevant question for us here and now in late-twentieth century America is whether the verses cited in Mormon scriptures denigrating the Jews have affected the attitudes of present-day Mormons.

So far, the testimonies I have seen, written or oral and necessarily anecdotal, have been almost entirely from Jews who have lived and worked in the Great Basin area. They unanimously commend Mormon tolerance, a witness to philo-Semitism if not philo-Judaism. Is Judaism regarded as a respected forerunner, on a lesser subordinate level, as in Islam and many Christian faiths, or as a contemporary fellow-traveler in the history of religions, still very much alive and creative, even a present-day exemplar? Perhaps oral interviews by persons skilled in the art of drawing out actual attitudes and beliefs, done on a fairly large scale, and concentrating on members of the LDS Church, may help to answer these questions, for which scriptural reading and interpretation, however deep and broad, cannot suffice.

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