

## Jews in the Columns of Joseph's *Times and Seasons*

*Steven Epperson*

ON 21 MAY 1839, JOSEPH SMITH INTRODUCED AN UNUSUAL ENTRY in his journal history, writing, "To show the feelings of that long scattered branch of the house of Israel, the Jews, I here quote a letter written by one of their number, on hearing that his son had embraced Christianity" (HC 3:356–57). An impassioned letter follows. Joseph quotes it at length and verbatim without further editorial remarks. "A. L. Landau, Rabbi" of Breslau,<sup>1</sup> pleads with his son in Berlin, who is planning conversion to Christianity:

Do not shed the innocent blood of your parents. . . . Do you think that the Christians . . . will support you and fill up the place of our fellow believers? . . . [Do] not change our true and holy doctrine, for that deceitful, untrue and perverse doctrine of Christianity.

What! will you give up a pearl for that which is nothing . . . ? Why hast thou forsaken that holy law which shall have an eternal value; which was given by my servant Moses, and no man shall change it?

The distraught parent calls his son to come to his senses and his duty, then concludes the letter "because of weeping."

Why does this letter appear in Joseph's historical narrative? The entry leaps out from a page whose notations otherwise give one-sentence summaries of Smith's work days: "Saturday. May 18 — Finished my business at Quincey for the present. . . . Monday 20. — at home attending to a variety of business" (HC 3:356). With Tuesday's entry comes a cataract of words and tumultuous emotions from a devastated Jewish father a continent away.

Contemporary events among the Saints in the early Nauvoo period cannot account for this dramatic addition to Joseph's record. Neither apostate Mor-

---

*STEVEN EPPERSON lives with his wife and four children in Salt Lake City.*

<sup>1</sup> The letter is dated 21 May 1839 and is entered into Smith's journal history on that same date. It is most likely that Joseph learned of this letter after May 1839 and inserted it, according to the date of the letter as he either received it or as it was published in a second source, with the brief comment cited.

mons, the persecutions in Missouri, nor Mormonism's controversy with Christendom figure in Smith's brief introduction to the letter. The journal entry was made simply, Smith writes, "to show the feelings of . . . the Jews."

The entry is a striking example of Joseph Smith's deliberate, lifelong preoccupation with the relationship between Israel and the Latter-day Saints. During his fourteen-year tenure as the Church's first president and prophet, he inaugurated a theological tradition that affirmed the covenantal integrity and autonomous mission of both the Latter-day Saints and the Jews. In a nonsystematic manner, Joseph Smith articulated this tradition through a variety of sources, including the new scriptures he introduced, temple dedicatory prayers, numerous sermons and articles, editorials in various LDS publications, and encounters with contemporary Jews.

This emergent perspective repudiated one of the keystones of traditional Christian dogma and apologetic theology: the Christian churches' displacement of the Jews as God's new covenant people. This doctrine is called supersessionism. To supersede means to render obsolete or inferior; to make void, annul or override; to take the place of by dint of a presumed superiority to that which is displaced. In Joseph's eyes this was not the prerogative of the Church. Rather, Joseph sought out the voices of contemporary Jewry, not only to revalue Israel's significance in its own right, but also to affirm Israel's enduring witness to the church of Christ. Joseph's conclusions also removed the express, programmatic evangelization of the Jews from the Latter-day Saints' agenda. To Latter-day Saints in the 1980s, aware of the Holocaust and the modern, complex renewal of Jewish national identity, Joseph's theological heritage seems particularly constructive.

In this article I will discuss one way Joseph Smith attempted to refashion the terms of Jewish/Christian encounters. In February 1842, Joseph began a short term as editor of the *Times and Seasons*, the bi-monthly "official" publication of the Church. During his brief proprietorship over the paper, editorials and columns devoted to the Jewish people bore the impress of Smith's theological revisionism and set the *Times and Seasons* distinctly apart from ante-bellum Christian literature.

#### THE *TIMES AND SEASONS* BEFORE AND AFTER SMITH

The paper's first issue came off the press in November 1839. Ebenezer Robinson and the Prophet's younger brother, Don Carlos, were its editors. Subsequent issues appeared under the editorship of a number of individuals besides Robinson and Smith, including Robert B. Thompson and John Taylor (Crawley and Flake 1984). Under the editorial direction of these men, the paper's position about the Jewish people fit comfortably within accepted social and dogmatic conventions. The paper forthrightly denounced the persecution of Jews and their communities and encouraged their return to Palestine. But it also printed stories and doctrinal articles reflecting the traditional Christian supersessionist assessments of Israel's "religion" and the reasons for its "exile" into the world.

The first editorial position blended well with the predominant American journalistic temperament. Religious persecution was repugnant to the enlightened, constitutional sensibilities of Americans and their journalists. Thus the *Times and Seasons* attacked and deplored the outrages of the notorious "Damascus blood libel," a position championed in the pages of *Niles' Weekly*, *Frazier's Magazine*, and the *New York Herald*, from whose columns the *Times and Seasons* liberally borrowed.

On the other hand, although the editors of the *Times and Seasons* enthusiastically greeted any rumor or report of Jews gathering to Jerusalem or rebuilding the city, theologically the periodical condemned Israel's religious heritage. Resettlement movements, the editors opined, laid bare the fact that "the judgements which the Lord denounced against that people, in consequence of their repeated transgressions have indeed been fulfilled to the very letter; and the promises of their restoration, to the land of their Fathers, with their ultimate splendor and glory, now remains to be accomplished" (Robinson and Smith 1840, 154). According to these first editors, the "judgements which the Lord denounced against that people" [i.e. destruction of the temple, loss of homeland, etc.] were "clearly manifest to the religious Jews, that they had departed from the principles delivered unto them through the messengers whom God had inspired" (1840, 197).

In a major, unsigned article entitled "The Gospel," printed 1 November 1840, the conceptual negation of the Jewish people is complete. The author writes: "Every person in every degree acquainted with the Jewish history . . . knows, that God, previous to the days of the Savior's coming in the flesh, was withdrawing from that people, and that he continued to do so until they were abandoned to destruction" (1840, 197-98).

This pronouncement and the dubious exegetical presuppositions it reflects are part of a long-standing, wholly orthodox theological commitment. According to Christian supersessionist premises, the Judaisms practiced during the Second Temple period were bankrupt and apostate. Any acknowledgment by ecclesiastical historians or students of scriptures to Israel's national identity or its modern ingathering was consistently undercut by a Christian interpretation of such events. Therefore, the roads and seas Jews traveled to return to their homeland, the fields they cultivated, the foundations they laid, the walls they erected, the blood spilled, the infants born, all ultimately confirmed Christian textual and prophetic divination and vouchsafed adventist expectations. Jewish lives were not their own but were lived at the behest of Christians who alone knew Israel's story and very destiny.

When Joseph Smith began working at the *Times and Seasons* with the 15 February 1842 issue, these traditional interpretations of Jews and Judaism immediately changed. Comparing the 15 December 1841 issue with Joseph Smith's first issue two months later illuminates his divergent editorial perspective.

The 15 December issue features an article entitled "Charity," reprinted from Benjamin Winchester's LDS periodical, *The Gospel Reflector*, published independently in Philadelphia (see Crawley and Flake 1984, no. 20). Win-

chester, the “presiding elder” of the Church in Philadelphia, extolled Christian charity by denigrating presumed Jewish ethics in first century Palestine. Jews “at the time of Christ,” Winchester wrote, were broken into “sects” and had “apostatized” from Israel’s ordinances and covenants by vaunting “traditions over law” (1841, 628–29). Their acts of charity, he assumed, were grudging concessions of legalists, performed not with the benevolent intent of a disinterested heart, but mechanistically, with an eye to perfunctory service and quantifiable merit.

With the 15 February issue, Joseph, now the editor, begins publishing letters and articles culled from outside sources written by and apparently for Jews. Smith, unlike Winchester, presents these items essentially without theological comment. The effect is remarkable. Jews directly address Christian readers by letting them drop in on Jewish voices and concerns.

Thus, in Joseph Smith’s editorial debut, he presents an article about the status of Jews living among Gentiles to show “the feelings of one of the seed of Abraham, upon this subject” (1842, 692). The anonymous author of the letter, entitled, “A word in season from an Israelite, to his brethren,” asserts that as a result of the fidelity of Jews in “keeping those imperishable truths [of the Written and Oral Torah] . . . we are as completely a nation as when first established as such for we acknowledge ourselves now, as then, as being under the immediate government of the Sovereign of the universe, with the same law for our obedience as was vouchsafed to our ancient fathers” (1842, 692–93).

The constitutive intent of that law has produced, the writer continues, a concrete historical fact — a chosen people, an independent “nation” — and at the same time has furnished that people with its restless, creative *raison d’être*. “We are,” the article continues, “a separate people from all the nations of the earth . . . . The greatest object of our selection was to constitute us the instrument to work out the redemption of mankind, from the darkness, and unhappiness of a false worship.” Until that day, Israel’s purpose, according to the writer, has not yet been fulfilled. With such a calling and agenda he asks:

Shall we cast aside our real law at the bidding of the “London Society?” [The London Society for Propagating the Gospel Amongst the Jews] and the written law at the command of Deists, and self-styled philosophers? Ought we merely to accommodate our religion’s observance merely to suit our conveniences? . . . What, if we were so lost to a sense of our own dignity, would become of the trust reposed in us by the Supreme Being? what of our religion? — of ourselves as a people, of our offspring? (“A Word” 1842, 693)

The subject of this letter accorded well with Smith’s own prophetic pre-occupation and agenda — how to forge a collection of diverse individuals into a holy nation and kingdom of priests, a distinct people. The letter’s appeal to Israel to remain faithful to their redemptive, convenantal commission in spite of Christendom’s cultural solvents would have no doubt appeared to address some of Joseph’s central concerns.

The Prophet was seeking a vernacular appropriate for the “restoration of all things.” Throughout his career he turned to Israel’s institutions, categories,

and practices to distinguish the Latter-day Saints from Christendom and to underline Mormon continuity with covenant Israel. Having “translated” the Book of Mormon, and being cognizant of that text’s belief that law and doctrine had proceeded forth “in purity” from “the Jews” before Christian designs had distorted the scriptural canon, perhaps Joseph was now providing a limited forum for Israel’s voice to again edify the Saints.

It is uncertain whether Joseph knew of the debates over basic and widespread reform, hinted at in this letter, that were raging within the Jewish communities in America and Europe at that time. There is no documentation to argue that Joshua Seixas, teacher of Hebrew at the Latter-day Saints’ School of the Prophets in Kirtland, had informed Smith of the heated conflict within Judaism over the identity and leadership of modern Jewry. Nor is it certain that Alexander Neibaur, a German Jew who converted to Mormonism in England and subsequently moved to Nauvoo, provided any detailed, informed description of Orthodox or Reform movements and their respective platforms.

Neibaur could have provided the Prophet with the articles he began to quote or insert into the columns of the *Times and Seasons*. Both Smith’s record and Neibaur’s diary reveal that the two met often for German and Hebrew tutorials.<sup>2</sup> Yet neither indicates that they discussed the state of contemporary Jewry, particularly the dramatic developments within and between Reform and Orthodox camps. Though the Prophet later cited articles originating from proponents of both Reform and Orthodoxy, he never referred to the controversy or the differences between the groups.

This lack of comment, however, does not lessen the impact of the Prophet’s citing “A Word in Season from an Israelite.” The break from the obtrusive theologizing and commentary of his predecessors is abrupt and clear.

As if to underline the distinction of his argument, the 15 March 1842 issue of the *Times and Seasons* featured an extract from an essay by Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch, modern Orthodoxy’s founder and earliest prominent exponent. “Horeb: Essays on Israel’s Duties in the Dispersion” discussed “tsaadekau,” or charity, what Hirsch called “essential righteousness.” Smith hoped to show, by printing this selection, how “Jews . . . maintain principles of benevolence and charity which many of our professed enlightened Christians would do well to imitate” (p. 725). Latter-day Saint readers were directed to the words and “feelings of the Jews” in their own right, with their own particular pitch and timbre.

In rapid succession during his six-month term as editor of the *Times and Seasons*, Joseph followed up the 15 February letter with an affirmation of the “literal gathering of Israel” in one of the thirteen Articles of Faith (1 March 1842) and the extract from S. R. Hirsch’s “Essays on Israel’s Duties in the Dispersion.” Prefacing the latter column, Smith again took pains to express, unlike Winchester and others, that he sought to “show what the feelings of the Jews are, in regard to moral rectitude, and that although persecuted, afflicted,

<sup>2</sup> See Neibaur Journal entry for 24 May 1844; and also Neibaur 1876: “Had the honor of instruction [sic] the Prophet Joseph Smith until he went [to Carthage] in the German (and Hebrew) from which text he Preached several times to large Congragations [sic].”

robbed and spoiled, they still adhere with great tenacity to their ancient moral code, and maintain principles . . . Christians would do well to imitate” (15 March 1842, 725).

The following issue, 1 April 1842, included a reprint of the “dedicatory prayer” offered by Mormon apostle Orson Hyde from the summit of the Mount of Olives (pp. 739–42). Hyde had been commissioned by the Saints, in the spring of 1840, to gather information from European Jewish communities regarding contemporary attitudes about territorial restoration. In addition, Hyde was directed to dedicate and bless Palestine for the return of the Jewish people. In October 1841, Hyde arrived in Jerusalem. In the dedicatory prayer, he expressed Mormon hopes for both the gathering and the restoration of the Jews as an independent nation in Palestine and blessed and dedicated the land to flourish politically, spiritually, and agriculturally.

In the next bi-monthly issue of the *Times and Seasons* (13 April), “Rabbi” Landau’s impassioned letter to his son, which first made its appearance in Joseph’s journal in 1839, was quoted in its entirety. However, unlike the terse introduction it received in Smith’s journal, the *Times and Seasons* preface, also written by the Prophet, contains several dozen lines.

The thrust of Joseph’s introduction is polemical and combative. He begins by criticizing the Christian world for persecuting the Jews. Christians have created a “merciless” adversary to the Israel of God, a “religion . . . so at variance with the principles of righteousness” that Jews have little recourse but to “cherish in their bosoms, feelings of disgust and abhorrence at the idea of their children embracing it” (p. 754). Though he laments at this destructive and alienating visage of Christianity — “What a pity that the glorious precepts of the Redeemer should be so misrepresented” — he declines to deliver what ordinarily would have been the resolution to this bit of internal criticism. The reader looks in vain for the standard conclusion that figured in countless mission and denominational treatises on the Christian duty toward the Jews: “But we have the gospel in its purity, we will go and convert them to those glorious precepts.” Joseph does not write it.

Editorially, the Prophet was complementing the work of his distant apostle Orson Hyde. Both men had focused their attention upon contemporary Jewry; but unlike the vast majority of their non-LDS peers, in that most evangelical of periods, neither advocated missions to the Jews. Taking up this theme, the very next issue of the *Times and Seasons* (2 May) directly addresses Christianity’s time-honored nostrum for the “Jewish question.” Smith attacks contemporary mission societies. “Did God,” he asks, “ever tell the London Society, to send out missionaries?” Commenting on the reported spectacle of the attempts by a “Mr. Ewald, London Missionary” to convert a “Rabbi Judea,” Smith concludes, “What consummate ignorance is displayed in missionaries quoting the New Testament to the Jews. . . . As if the Rabbi was going to be damned by not bowing with deference to his [Ewald’s] ipse dixit” (p. 781).

After publishing several more letters from Elder Hyde during the summer months of 1842 the Prophet abruptly resigned as editor of the *Times and Seasons*. The last “Jews” column he was to edit featured an extract, in English

translation, from Michael Creizenach's, *Schulhan Aruch, oder Enzyklopädische Darstellung des Mosaischen Gesetzes*. . . . Creizenach was an early and radical spokesman for the Jewish Reform movement. In his multivolumed work, he had attempted to show "that talmudic Judaism was a reform of biblical Judaism, and, thus, that the Reform Judaism of his own time was a legitimate approach to Judaism" (Kressel 1971, 107). The *Times and Seasons* included Creizenach's plea for a revival of education and for an informed piety that would continue the work of "reform" which the Talmud had only begun.

Joseph's final, terse introductory comment on the Creizenach article summed up the intent of "The Jews" columns over which he had presided as editor. He concludes on 1 June that the subjects of the column, the Jewish people, "inculcate attendance on divine worship" and manifest, to any "disinterested reader," "true piety, real religion, and acts of devotion to God" (p. 810). For a man who claimed that he had been told by divine revelation that "all the sects . . . were an abomination" in the sight of the Lord, such a confession of respect for another religious community is striking.

Joseph's own sense and vision of Judaism and the Jewish people were thrown into high relief at both the beginning and the end of his "career" as the proprietor of the *Times and Seasons*. The transition from Winchester's article on "Charity," to the Prophet's own editorial on the imitability of Jewish benevolence and charity was marked by an abrupt shift of perspective. Similarly, as the editorial duties passed from Smith to the solid, former English dissident Methodist lay preacher, John Taylor, now a Mormon apostle, the editorial slant of the *Times and Seasons* reassumes a more conventional attitude toward Jewry.

Subsequent "Jews" columns were entered without comment and basically contained uncredited notices about Jewish immigration plans underfoot in Europe and population statistics taken from the popular press, included as interesting curiosities. The one major exception was a 1 February 1843 article, "Both One in Christ," written by a converted Jew, Alfred Morris Myres, taken from a "Gentile" Christian religious publication. The focus of the article is upon the heretofore halting attempts to convert European Jewry to Protestant Christianity, with the author citing the "Church of Rome" as the greatest obstacle to the missionary endeavor. The author invokes sympathy for Jews with the attendant hope that the Jewish "miracle" will soon be crowned with the "future blessings for them in store," that is, the blessings of Christ and his [Protestant] church.

The step from Hirsch and Creizenach to Myres signaled the demise of the "Jews" column as a conduit of Jewish expression to Mormon readers. Entries continued to be fairly frequent, but inconsequential, until Joseph Smith's death in the summer of 1844. His assassination signaled a new round of violence that climaxed in yet another mass expulsion of Mormons from dearly won homes and temple. Smith's halting approach to Israel was waylaid by death and the greater challenges forced upon his successors.

What emerges from the assembled articles and editorials printed in the *Times and Seasons* during Joseph Smith's six-month supervision is a picture

at once clear and strange. On the American frontier, in the 1840s, a Christian religious leader was editing a newspaper which featured articles on modern Jewry and its concerns. Smith was eavesdropping on conversations scripted by and for Jews, not for the purpose of disputation and displacement, but for imitation and instruction.

The Prophet stands at the head of a significant Mormon theological "tradition" that sought to rewrite the terms of the encounter between Jews and Christians. The editorials and articles in the *Times and Seasons* join other works by Joseph Smith in delineating this new perspective. In sum, he denounced Christian anti-Jewish bias, repudiated programmatic evangelization of the Jewish people, and denied the corporate guilt and punishment traditionally assigned the Jews for the death of Jesus of Nazareth. In sermons, scriptures, periodicals, and encounters with Jewish contemporaries, Joseph sought to rehabilitate Christian theological and historical judgements of Jewry, Judaism, and Jewish institutions of both the past and the present.

The effect of Smith's work was a strong affirmation of Israel's enduring covenant. They were, in his estimation, a people of "true piety and real religion." Joseph Smith's recognition of the integrity of Israel's worth independent of the Church of Christ is at once a troubling and constructive theological heritage to the church he organized as it confronts and encounters the traditions and claims of other religious communities.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "A Word in Season from an Israelite, to His Brethren." *Times and Seasons* 3 (15 February 1842): 692-93.
- Crawley, Peter, and Chad J. Flake. *A Mormon Fifty: An Exhibition in the Harold B. Lee Library in Conjunction with the Annual Conference of the Mormon History Association*. Provo: Friends of the Brigham Young University Library, 1984. Number 2.
- HC. Joseph Smith, Jr. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. B. H. Roberts, ed. 2d ed. rev. 7 vols. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978.
- Hyde, Orson. "Interesting News from Alexandria and Jerusalem." *Times and Seasons* 3 (1 April 1842): 739-42.
- Kressel, Getzel. "Creizenach, Michael." In *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 5. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1971.
- Myres, Alfred Morris. "Both One in Christ." *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 February 1843): 85-89.
- Neibauer, Alexander. Journal. 1841-61. LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- . *Reminiscences*. March 1876. LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Robinson, Edward, and D. C. Smith. Untitled editorial. *Times and Seasons* 1 (August 1840): 154-55.
- Singer, Isidore, ed. *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4, s.v. "Creizenach, Michael." New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1903.
- Smith, Don Carlos, and Ebenezer Robinson. Untitled editorial. *Times and Seasons* 1 (August 1840): 154.
- Smith, Joseph Jr. "The Jews." *Times and Seasons* 3 (15 February 1842): begins at p. 691- (1 June 1842): ends p. 811.
- "The Gospel." *Times and Seasons* 2 (1 November 1840): 197-98.
- Winchester, Benjamin. "Charity." *Times and Seasons* 3 (15 December 1841): 627-30.