

Latter-day Saint and Jewish Interfaith Relations

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My journey into the world of Judaism began with an old, dusty Institute manual. I was a missionary in the Philippines, hungry for anything that could help me better understand the Bible. I thought I understood the Book of Mormon pretty well, along with the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price. But I hadn't spent nearly as much time studying the Bible and didn't understand its writings nearly as well. In particular, the Old Testament was a mystery to me; it felt like it was written in a foreign language, even though I was reading it in English. So I found an Old Institute manual that had been tucked away in a forgotten corner of my apartment, broke it open, and began reading its commentary on the first chapters of Genesis. Several passages mentioned words and ideas in Hebrew, and it quickly became clear to me that understanding Hebrew and ancient ways of thinking could open doors of insight into my scripture study and discipleship.

Two years later, I was registering for classes at Brigham Young University-Idaho. I had promised myself that every semester, I would take one class that interested me, but which wasn't required for graduation. As I looked through the course catalogue, I came across a Biblical Hebrew class, and thought, "That sounds like a lot of fun" (which should give you an idea of just how much fun I was in college). My teacher began the first day of class by talking to us about how much Joseph Smith loved Hebrew. Here's a good summary from the Church's *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church* manual for Joseph Smith:

“Among other subjects, Joseph Smith and the other brethren studied Hebrew, the language in which most of the Old Testament was originally written. The Prophet’s journal for this period shows that he studied Hebrew nearly every day, often for many hours a day. His journal entries include words such as ‘Spent the day in reading Hebrew’ or ‘Attended school and read Hebrew.’ On January 19, 1836, he recorded: ‘Spent the day at school. The Lord blessed us in our studies. This day we commenced reading in our Hebrew Bibles with much success. **It seems as if the Lord opens our minds in a marvelous manner, to understand His word in the original language.**’ A month later, he wrote: ‘Attended the school and read and translated with my class as usual. **My soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original.**’

This was really exciting to me—Joseph Smith was enlivened by his study of the Old Testament in Hebrew, and he felt it prepared him to receive a number of distinctive Restoration doctrines. For example, in one of his later public sermons, the King Follett discourse, Joseph’s discussion of Hebrew words and ideas leads directly into a meditation on the eternal nature of humanity and our capacity to become like our Heavenly Parents.

As for my Hebrew class, I was right—it was one of the most fun classes I’ve taken in my life. Almost every day in class, the teacher showed how understanding a simple Hebrew verb could completely change the way I could understand a familiar scriptural story. And, after only a few weeks, Hebrew verses from the Old Testament flared to life in my hands, captured my mind, and sunk into my heart. I was converted to the imaginative power of studying the Old Testament in Hebrew.

This led to my pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Religion at BYU, with an emphasis on the language, history, and religious world of the Old and New Testaments. This was an excellent preparation for understanding the scriptures, but perhaps the most important preparation for my

future interfaith engagement was a class that studied the religions of the people outside of ancient Israel. The teacher of this course would bring in small statues of these ancient gods and would often make fun of them—even going so far as to bring in dinosaur toys to stand in place of these gods. The teacher thought this was funny, as did many of the students, but something about this made me very uncomfortable.

Yes, these were gods that nobody worships today, but as I read the scriptures of the people who worshipped them in the past, I was moved by the beauty of their writings and could feel the devotion of the authors across thousands of years. These people found meaning and purpose in the worship of and devotion to these gods, and they deserved to be respected for their efforts to be true to the light and knowledge they possessed. And I felt that, even though they didn't worship in the same way that I did, or even if they worshiped a different god entirely, perhaps they could teach me something about what it meant to be a person of faith.

The next most significant turning point for my engagement with people of other faiths was a lecture I attended by Latter-day Saint Professor Robert L. Millet, who has been meeting formally with Evangelical Christians for over twenty years—and who is currently leading a long-term project for the Widtsoe Foundation that brings together eight different Christian groups to discuss important passages from the New Testament. At this lecture, Brother Millet spoke about his own personal growth in the area of interfaith engagement. He told us that, at first, his purpose in wanting to talk with people of other faiths was to “prove” that his Church was right and theirs was wrong.

As he continued to meet with other religious leaders and scholars, his purpose shifted from wanting to prove that his own faith was true to wanting to truly understand why such good people could believe something so different from him. And finally, as he matured in his understanding of

and relationships with people of other faiths, Brother Millet said that he is now driven by wanting to see how God is working in mysterious ways through people who practice other religions.

Around the same time, I found myself drawn to Nephi's powerful vision of the Tree of Life, which subtly transforms into a vision of the life of Jesus, his followers, and an epic battle between good and evil (1 Nephi 11-14). One passage in particular stood out to me: 1 Nephi 14:10. "Behold there are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is the mother of abominations." I had assumed that the "church of the Lamb of God" Nephi referred to was just another name for the church I belonged to, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. After all, the Doctrine and Covenants said that this was the "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased" (D&C 1:30).

But if my church—the "only true and living church"—*was* the "church of the Lamb of God" that Nephi mentioned, then it would mean that every other church in the world was part of the "church of the devil." I had witnessed goodness, beauty, and truth in the other religious traditions I was studying, and so I had a problem: How could these churches and traditions be part of the "church of the devil?"

As I re-read the scriptures, spoke with friends and mentors, and read statements by Latter-day Saint leaders, I found something that helped to broaden my understanding. It was a General Conference talk given by Elder B.H. Roberts in 1906. Here's what he said:

"I understand the injunction to Oliver Cowdery [in D&C 18:19-21] to 'contend against no church, save it be the church of the devil,' to mean that he shall contend against evil, against

untruth, against all combinations of wicked men. They constitute the church of the devil, the kingdom of evil, a federation of unrighteousness; and the servants of God have a right to contend against that which is evil, let it appear where it will, in Catholic or in Protestant Christendom, among the philosophical societies of deists and atheists, and even within the Church of Christ, if, unhappily, it should make its appearance there.”

Here, then, was part of my answer: When Nephi wrote that “there are save two churches only,” he was not using the word “church” in the same way I was using it. Elder Roberts suggested that the “church of the devil” was not a specific religious organization. Rather, the “church of the devil” was another way of saying “anything that is evil or untrue,” no matter where it is found—in other churches, philosophical or political organizations, or even within my own church.

However, this also meant that the “church of the Lamb of God” Nephi mentioned was not a single religious organization. Elder Roberts continued:

“Let it be understood, we are not brought necessarily into antagonism with the various sects of Christianity as such... **Wherever we find truth, whether it exists in complete form or only in fragments, we recognize that truth as part of that sacred whole of which the Church of Jesus Christ is the custodian;** and I repeat that our relationship to the religious world is not one that calls for the denunciation of sectarian churches as composing the church of the devil.

“All that makes for untruth, for unrighteousness constitutes the kingdom of evil—the church of the devil. All that makes for truth, for righteousness, is of God; it constitutes the kingdom of righteousness—the empire of Jehovah; and, in a certain sense at least, constitutes the Church of Christ [or, the church of the Lamb of God]. With the latter—the kingdom of righteousness—we have no warfare. On the contrary, both the spirit of the Lord’s commandments to His servants and

the dictates of right reason would suggest that **we seek to enlarge this kingdom of righteousness both by recognizing such truths as it possesses and seeking the friendship and co-operation of the righteous men and women who constitute its membership.**” (Conference Report, April 1906, p. 15).

According to Elder Roberts, the “church of the Lamb of God” was not a single religious group—it was “a kingdom of righteousness;” something much larger. But I still didn’t know how to make sense of the phrase “the only true and living Church.” If people of other faiths could recognize enough truth to be part of this “kingdom of righteousness,” why would they not join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Wouldn’t God want to steer them toward “the only true and living Church?”

It was another General Conference talk that helped me to increase in understanding on this issue. In 1928, the apostle Elder Orson F. Whitney said: “Perhaps the Lord needs [good people] on the outside of his Church, to help it along. They are among its auxiliaries, **and can do more good for the cause where the Lord has placed them, than anywhere else...**Hence, some are drawn into the fold and receive a testimony of the Truth; while others remain unconverted—for the present; the beauties and glories of the gospel being veiled temporarily from their view, for a wise purpose...**God is using more than one people for the accomplishment of his great and marvelous work. The Latter-day Saints cannot do it all. It is too vast, too arduous, for any one people.**” (Conference Report April, 1928, pp. 58-60).

According to Elder Whitney, there are people who can do more good *outside* of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints than they could do *inside* the Church. Or, to put it differently, there are unique types of good that need doing in the world that, for whatever reason, cannot be fully realized by a member of our church. And so, God is continually raising up people outside of

the Church who are uniquely suited to bless and heal the entirety of God's children. This idea excited me and rang true to my previous experiences with those of other faiths. It also gave me eyes to more clearly see the good, the true, and the beautiful that God is cultivating in the world through people of other faiths.

During my graduate studies over the next several years, I worked closely with Jewish professors and students as we studied the world of the Old Testament, which they refer to simply as the Torah, or the Hebrew Bible. I gained a deeper appreciation for their rich history of religious tradition, their devotion to studying and interpreting scripture, and their dedication to a way of life that sets them apart from the rest of the world both socially and spiritually. In other words, I went beyond falling in love with a book of scripture; I fell in love with a people.

My interactions with Jewish colleagues during my graduate studies were all very positive, with one exception. I was taking a seminar on the creation of scriptures in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, taught by an Orthodox Jewish professor. And while Latter-day Saint scripture was not part of the course, this professor made several negative comments about Joseph Smith and Latter-day Saint scripture. The statements didn't come across as hateful, but they were certainly ignorant.

For some reason, I thought it would be a good idea to correct my professor's misunderstanding of Latter-day Saint scripture by writing a research paper—an assignment which would determine my final grade in the class. I began by identifying a topic that we were both familiar with: the Dead Sea Scrolls. This collection of ancient scrolls was likely written and preserved by a community of devout Jews who left Jerusalem and established a home in the desert because they believed the Temple priesthood had become corrupted. They believed it was their responsibility to not only perform the rituals that God required, but to preserve God's word.

Thanks to their efforts and devotion, the scrolls preserved by this community are among the oldest examples we have of Old Testament texts and also include many sacred writings that do not appear in today's Bible. It is clear that this community took their scriptures very seriously, but more than that, they took their *relationship* to the scriptures seriously. This Jewish community believed that their scriptures were dynamic, not static. The writings of the prophets were the living word of God, not dead words to be recited and recorded. And so, while copying the different books of scripture word for word to preserve them for future generations, some community members felt moved upon by God to add their inspired insights directly into the scriptures they were preserving.

This is somewhat similar to what Joseph Smith appears to be doing with his Inspired Translation of the Bible, what we usually refer to as the Joseph Smith Translation or JST. While other religious communities of his time saw the scriptures as sacred and therefore untouchable, Joseph saw the scriptures as being sacred *because* they were touchable. For Joseph, the scriptures were a record of God's word to his people in the past, received by ancient prophets. And so, as a modern prophet who received God's word for his people today, Joseph felt moved upon to add his inspired insights directly into the text of the Bible.

Both the Dead Sea Scrolls community and Joseph Smith saw themselves as part of living traditions that regularly received revelation from a living God. Their scriptures were not meant to be texts for academic study; they were the record of an ongoing conversation between a people and their God. Some would argue that changing or adding to the scriptures was a sign of disrespect for the word of God. But this ancient community and a modern Prophet added to their scriptures because of their deep respect and abiding love for the word of God and its importance in their lives.

My research paper was well received by this Orthodox Jewish professor, who left many written notes throughout expressing his interest in the similarities between this ancient Jewish community and a latter-day Christian religious leader. Luckily for me, I passed the class, but more importantly, I feel that my Jewish professor went away with a better understanding of and appreciation for Joseph Smith and the contributions he made to the religious world.

I was later invited to teach religion courses at Brigham Young University, where I felt called to help students engage with and appreciate other faiths. In my Book of Mormon classes, I spent quite a bit of time talking about the church of the Lamb of God in 1 Nephi 11-14 and the ways in which Latter-day Saints can enlarge the kingdom of God by engaging with people of other faiths and respecting their religious beliefs and commitments. In my New Testament classes, much of my course was aimed toward helping students understand the beauty and richness of Judaism specifically. This proved to be difficult in many cases, as it required students to overcome false assumptions and bits of misinformation or misunderstandings about Judaism that had been unintentionally taught and reinforced through years of Sunday School, Seminary, and even other Religion professors. But when these students chose to become intellectually humble—when they set aside their preconceptions of what a scripture was “supposed to mean” and instead genuinely tried to understand the world of the original author and what those words might have meant to him and his contemporaries—the students received an outpouring of God’s spirit as they translated these new scriptural insights into their own lives.

After teaching at BYU for a few years, I had the opportunity to join the John A. Widtsoe Foundation—a nonprofit organization committed to increasing religious literacy about the Church among the academic and interfaith communities. One of the first major interfaith events the Widtsoe Foundation held was a two-day conference at the University of Southern California, a

university recognized around the world for its excellence in education. The title of the conference was “Sacred Space, Sacred Thread: Perspectives Across Time and Traditions.” Professors of Religion and members of several religious traditions came together to discuss what sacred spaces and clothing meant to a variety of religious communities throughout history and into the present. Ancient Israelite religion or Judaism was represented in some way during nearly every conference session, an evidence of the impact this religious traditions has had on the way we think about the importance of setting apart holy places for worship, as well as the importance of wearing clothing endowed with holiness in the lives of worshipers.

This conference about sacred space and sacred clothing was an incredible setting where people of different faiths—and some of no faith whatsoever—could explore the ways that religious communities have shaped the world through the outward manifestations of their beliefs. The proceedings were broadcast live online and was viewed at over 1,500 locations in nine foreign countries (Canada, UK, Germany, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Greece, Tanzania, and Colombia) as well as across the United States. In fact, the conference was so important that the papers presented were immediately accepted for publication by an academic press and will soon be published so that the world can benefit from these vitally important conversations about faith.

Earlier this year, the Widtsoe Foundation and the University of Southern California’s Office of Religious Life arranged for a life-sized replica of the Israelite Tabernacle to be built on campus. I worked closely with a Jewish Rabbi to create informational signs which were posted around the exhibit for visitors to learn about the history, beliefs, and religious practices of the Israelites through the lens of this sacred structure. It was an excellent opportunity for me to bond with a faithful member of the Jewish community over a holy place that we both loved and which fired our religious imaginations, inspiring us both toward greater devotion to our respective traditions.

Over the course of three days, hundreds of people toured the Tabernacle, including an incredibly diverse faculty, student body, and members of the community. And, to reach an even wider audience, my Jewish colleague and I used the information we gathered for the exhibit to help create a free smartphone app for both Apple and Android devices that recreates the Tabernacle in 3D. It allows users—wherever they are—to virtually explore every area of the Tabernacle and learn more about what happened there.

This collaborative, hands-on exhibit was able to increase their understanding of and sympathy for not only the sacred space of the ancient Israelites, but also for modern religious groups whose practices reflect the acts of worship performed in the Tabernacle and then in the Temple at Jerusalem, even after its destruction a century after the crucifixion of Jesus. For instance, in the Jewish tradition, many of these Temple-related practices have continued in their liturgy, including the weekly Shabbat dinner ceremonies they hold in their homes. And for Latter-day Saints, many of these ancient Temple-related practices are symbolically echoed in our Temples across the world. This exhibit was very well received and served to spark conversations about the meaning and importance of living a religious life.

A few years ago, I was invited to join the LDS-Jewish Academic Dialogue project, a group of about twelve Latter-day Saints and representatives of the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jewish traditions. We meet twice a year—once in Utah (where most of the LDS participants teach), and once in California (where most of the Jewish participants teach). These meetings include closed-room presentations and discussions among this group of scholars, as well as public events where members of Latter-day Saint and Jewish communities can learn more about each other's faith. The topics of the small-group meetings have included Christian teachings of Jesus's

“fulfilling” the Law of Moses, the experiences of LDS and Jewish women in secular and religious spheres, and the State of Israel.

This last topic—the modern State of Israel—is a complicated topic that divides Jews and Latter-day Saints alike, as you can imagine when politics meet religion. Many Latter-day Saints see the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 as a direct fulfilment of the “gathering of Israel” prophesied in Restoration scripture, not to mention Elder Orson Hyde’s dedication of the Holy Land in 1841. For these Church members, the modern State of Israel is a political organization that possesses a degree of holiness and which God is clearly using to bring about the restoration of Israel in the latter days.

However, according to professional polls, not all Latter-day Saints have the same beliefs about the State of Israel. In fact, some polls report that students who study for a semester at the BYU Jerusalem Center are actually more likely to favor significant changes in the State of Israel that would give greater political rights and privileges to Palestinians living in the area. This is likely due, in part, to the relationships these students develop with the Palestinian families who live near the Jerusalem Center. For these Latter-day Saints, the State of Israel is more of a political organization than a religiously-aligned institution, and therefore, is capable of improvement.

There is a similar difference in opinion about the State of Israel among the international Jewish community, as evidenced by several recent news articles comparing the views of Jews living in the United States and the views of Jews living in Israel. This is, in part, due to the difference in the religious affiliation of the Jews who live in either country. For instance, there are more Jews who are less religiously-inclined living in the United States than there are in the State of Israel—people for whom being a Jew has more to do with ancestry and tradition than it has to do with religious beliefs or ritual.

In the LDS-Jewish dialogue group, most of our Jewish colleagues favored a two-state solution to the continuing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, which would reduce Israeli political power in the area. They, too, see the State of Israel as more of a political organization than a religiously-centered institution and do not necessarily feel a deep, personal connection to its future. Of course, this issue is far too complex to deal with here—what is most important to know is that support for the political State of Israel is not necessary for being considered either a faithful Jew or a faithful Latter-day Saint.

Along similar lines, something that has fascinated me about this process of interfaith dialogue between Jews and Latter-day Saints is that occasionally there is just as much disagreement between members of the same faith as between members of the different faiths on certain topics. In these discussions we haven't avoided talking about sensitive subjects like authority, cultural appropriation, and gender. The fact that this group can discuss such difficult subjects together is a testament to the strength of our personal and professional relationships. These meetings have been so meaningful and productive that we are currently planning on holding our next dialogue session in Jerusalem—the first time an academic interfaith dialogue of this kind between Latter-day Saints and Jews will be conducted in the Holy Land.

The effects of this dialogue have been far-reaching. As a result of this LDS-Jewish interfaith dialogue, my relationship with the Jewish community has deepened. In 2017, I was contacted by a reporter for the *Times of Israel*, a Jerusalem-based online newspaper that reports on developments in Israel, the Middle East, and around the Jewish world, including the ways in which other religious communities interact with Judaism. The topic of his article was the annual Passover services held at Brigham Young University as an educational experience for a Latter-day Saint audience about Judaism. In particular, this international newspaper was interested in the ties

between the Church and ancient Israel, interfaith relations between Mormons and Jews today, and the general level of understanding about Jews and Judaism among Latter-day Saints.

My Jewish dialogue colleagues have also invited me on several occasions to come speak to their university classes about the history, beliefs, and practices of the Church. One of these professors is an ordained Rabbi in the Conservative Jewish tradition and teaches courses on interfaith engagement at a Catholic university. He and I model an interfaith dialogue for the students, where we discuss both the similarities and differences in our traditions' ideas of sacred spaces, as well as our approaches to religious leadership. The students are then able to make observations about our exchange and ask questions about our religious beliefs and practices, and much of the time is dedicated to correcting misunderstandings the students have about both traditions.

Another of my dialogue colleagues has had me give a guest lecture in her Comparative Religion graduate seminar at a Jewish school. My topic was the Latter-day Saint concept of sacred space, especially the role of the temple in Latter-day Saint theology and worship. These Jewish students were fascinated by the similarities and differences between the imagery and rituals of the Temple in Jerusalem and Latter-day Saint Temples. The close connection between Temples and covenants for Latter-day Saints was something that resonated strongly with them, as did the expectation that members return often to the Temple to worship. The concept of ecclesiastical interviews for recommends to enter the Temple also made sense to them, since their own religious community has clear moral and dietary requirements—not for the sake of keeping arbitrary commandments, but for the purpose of developing a certain sort of spiritual character and setting one's self apart from others as God's people.

I also took time to explain the doctrine of performing temple ordinances for the dead in the context of sealing families together for eternity and the theological necessity of agency. This was particularly important, because many in the Jewish community have felt hurt by hearing that deceased members of their community—including those who were tragic victims of the Holocaust—have been vicariously baptized in Temples, which they see as symbolically tearing them away from their community and “forcing” them to become Mormon. This discussion allowed some much-needed healing to occur and helped the students to gain a greater appreciation for the beliefs and practices of Temple-going Latter-day Saints. To make a long story short, during the two-hour class, I essentially taught a graduate-level Temple Preparation course to a room of Jewish women. And it was a *lot* of fun.

But true interfaith engagement isn’t just about sharing one’s own beliefs. The Thirteenth Article of Faith says that “if there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.” In the best interfaith interactions, both parties actively seek after that which is good, beautiful, and true in the other tradition. One well-respected Christian theologian described the critical importance of creating a space for a sort of “holy envy” for the beliefs, traditions, and practices of other faiths. The more time I spend in serious conversations with my Jewish colleagues, the more I admire their spiritual lives and the unique good that God is accomplishing through them and the Jewish community.

At the same time, I have also come to better appreciate the distinctive differences between our faiths and the beauty of unique doctrines found only in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In my experience, I’ve found that intensive engagement with people of another faith is like learning a second language. Those who only know their native language cannot fully appreciate the unique ways their language is able to express thoughts and communicate feelings. However,

when one learns a second language with another set of rules and different vocabulary, he or she is then able to see much more clearly exactly what makes the native language so beautiful. And for every additional language one learns, the more deeply one is able to appreciate that native language. Not only that, but the easier it becomes to see how language works as a whole. Similarly, by engaging in interfaith dialogue with a variety of peoples of faith, I have come to see more clearly how large and diverse the church of the Lamb of God is and how our Heavenly Parents are working in mysterious ways to bless all of their children.