Nothing New under the Sun

John A. Tvedtnes

Review of Meeting the Mormon Challenge with Love (1997), by Leon Cornforth.

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Although asked by the editor to do so, I was not really sure if this book was worth reviewing. Some people would not even call it a book. It comprises a self-published collection of photocopied sheets with a paper cover decorated with what has to be the strangest depiction of Joseph Smith I have ever seen. Floating in the air over the tabernacle of Moses, Joseph is holding the Salt Lake Temple—which was not constructed until long after his death—in his arms. It is difficult to describe the look on his face, with his eyes directed to his far right, though it makes me think that he is frightened of something.

It will come as little surprise to most readers that this book contains no new information. It is a simple rehash of old arguments, almost all of which have long ago been refuted. But unlike the authors of some anti-Mormon books, this author has at least a basic command of the English language and most of his book is well written. I was, however, disappointed with the large amount of redundancy. For example, he repeats the same quotation from Orson Pratt’s *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* on pages 8–9, 27, and on the back cover. After quoting from Joseph Fielding Smith’s *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:188, on p. 106, he repeats that quotation a few pages later (p. 111). His argument on pages 177–78 for the rejection of Sunday as the appropriate Sabbath, including the quotation from Romans 3:3–6, is essentially repeated on page 204. Similarly, his contrast of biblical and Latter-day Saint teachings about salvation found on pages 143–44 is repeated on pages 166–68, including the same scriptural quotations.
On the first page of the book, the author writes, "God was already answering my prayer even before I had prayed it—as you will see later in this book." After just four more lines, he repeats the same idea: "God heard my sincere prayer for guidance. He began answering it, in fact, before I even prayed it!" (p. 8). Soon thereafter he writes,

I have numerous Mormon relatives and friends. There are more than six hundred relatives on my mother's side alone, many of whom are practicing Mormons. So you can readily understand my genuine love and concern for Mormons individually and as an organization. (p. 8)

But then he feels impelled to repeat the idea only four pages later:

I have a high degree of respect and a great amount of love for those in the Mormon church. In that church, I have many good friends, schoolmates, and relatives—more than 600 first, second, and third cousins on my mother's side are Latter-Day Saints! My purpose in discussing Mormons and their religion is based on my love—and respect—for those in that church. (p. 12)

To paraphrase Shakespeare, Methinks the gentleman doth protest too much.

Despite the fact that the author acknowledges, "I do not expect my dear Mormon friends who are reading this chapter, to agree with me" (p. 27), he nevertheless gave the book a subtitle, "The Book for Mormons." Somehow, it seems a waste to produce a book for an audience who will not like what one has written. The subtitle notwithstanding, the words "Meeting the Mormon Challenge" suggest confrontation. To lessen the impact, the words "with Love" have been added, perhaps patterned on other anti-Mormon books such as Ed Decker's To Moroni with Love and Mark J. Cares's Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons.

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1 This sounds like a textbook example of Rule 5 from Hugh W. Nibley, "How to Write an Anti-Mormon Book (A Handbook for Beginners)," in Tinkling Symbols and Sounding Brass (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 479–80.
I must agree with Cornforth in his assessment of the LDS reaction to his book. We will not always agree with him, for he is often wrong when he defines the teachings of the LDS Church. No surprise here, though; his background in the subject is minimal at best. He acknowledges that, while his father was a Seventh-day Adventist, his mother was LDS, adding that "once in a while, Mom would take us to church with her . . . but she didn't attend regularly" (p. 7). He says, "I grew up thinking Mormon teaching was the gospel" (pp. 7–8), and then hastens to add that "I was never baptized as a Mormon" (p. 12). He further explains that "we didn't have prayer in our house; we didn’t study the Bible in our house. We didn’t discuss anything religious in our house" (p. 7). Little wonder, then, that when his family decided to begin regular attendance with the Adventists, he gained a love for the Bible and its teachings. Ultimately, he "became an ordained minister of the Seventh-day Adventist Church" (pp. 12, 160). The cover of his book indicates that it was written "by Elder Leon Cornforth." I can't help but think that he used this title to appeal to Latter-day Saint readers.

Having acknowledged his earlier unacquaintance with the LDS religion, Cornforth goes on to note that he spent "fifty-five years of careful study of [the LDS Church's] claims and the circumstances surrounding its origin" (p. 27). After that long, one would think that he would know how to spell "Jeredites" correctly (p. 17) or that Joseph Smith did not claim to translate the Book of Mormon using "silver translating stones" (p. 17); the Book of Mormon did not consist of "14 characters inscribed on the gold plates" (p. 14); Joseph Smith was fourteen years of age (not fifteen) in the spring of 1820 (p. 13); or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not have a "vice president" (p. 41). How did he conclude, from LDS sources, that the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood took place "in May 1829 (or perhaps 1831, the date is in question even by Mormons)" (p. 14, repeated on p. 152)? I also wonder how his "careful study" could have brought him to suggest that the "unique history [of the Latter-day Saints], with its record of sufferings and persecutions, have [sic] welded the Mormons together as a people" (p. 15). Since very few of today's Latter-day Saints went through persecutions and since the vast majority of the church's ten million members
are converts, it seems to me that something else welds us together. May I be so bold as to suggest that it is our faith, our testimonies?

Moreover, Cornforth is not even up-to-date on matters regarding the LDS scriptures. He declares that, "with the exception of the final chapter, Doctrine and Covenants contains revelations said to have been given to Joseph Smith. . . . The last chapter of the book is a revelation given through Brigham Young" (p. 18). He obviously hasn't looked at the book since 1981, when two additional revelations were added, one of them from Joseph F. Smith. He notes that "current versions of the book include President Wilford Woodruff's 1890 manifesto [Official Declaration 1] prohibiting polygamy" (p. 18), but does not mention Official Declaration 2, based on a revelation given to Spencer W. Kimball in 1978—two decades ago. All this points to one more fact, that Cornforth is, in reality, using previously published criticisms of the LDS Church and its scriptures. His "fifty-five years of careful study" boil down to a study of anti-Mormon literature, not of Latter-day Saint writings.

Cornforth's ignorance of Latter-day Saint scriptures is further illustrated by the fact that he uses such references as "The Pearl of Great Price, 2:17," "The Pearl of Great Price, 2:19" (both on p. 13), and "The Pearl of Great Price, 2:33-35" (p. 14) when, in fact, he is citing from Joseph Smith—History 1:17, 1:19, and 1:33-35, which is one of the four separate texts included in the Pearl of Great Price. He obviously hasn't looked at a recent edition of that volume of scripture and doesn't even use the pre-1981 editions, where the reference would have been "Joseph Smith 2" ("Extracts from the History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet"), while "Joseph Smith 1" was the prophet's rendition of Matthew 24. But things get worse; rather than directly citing Article of Faith 8, Cornforth writes, "The Bible, Mormons teach, is 'the word of God as far as it is translated correctly'" and gives, as his reference, "James E. Talmadge, A Study of the Articles of Faith, p. 236"—misspelling Talmage in the process (p. 17, repeated on p. 18).

But Cornforth is behind the times on a number of other issues. His unnumbered pages 57-104—more than a fifth of the book!—consist of a photocopied reproduction of Dee Jay Nelson's 1968 The Joseph Smith Papyri, with Nelson's signature on the cover.
Evidently, Cornforth is unaware (or unwilling to demonstrate awareness of the fact) that Nelson was discredited as an Egyptologist and lied about his academic credentials. Robert L. and Rosemary Brown exposed Nelson’s falsehoods in their 1982 book, *They Lie In Wait To Deceive*, volume I. In an 8 August 1968 letter to Jerald Tanner, who printed Nelson’s works, Egyptologist Klaus Baer wrote that “D. J. Nelson . . . needs more practice in late hieratic.” In another letter written to Tanner five days later, he wrote, “On the whole, I was not favorably impressed by Nelson’s work, not because he makes a lot of mistakes (who doesn’t?) but because he seems so convinced of the infallibility of his judgment.” In the same letter, he also wrote, “Nelson is not a skilled Egyptologist; I think he is the last person to accuse Nibley of a ‘superficial’ knowledge of Egyptian.”

But some real ironies are present in the case of Dee Jay Nelson. For example, in a letter addressed to Richley H. Crapo and me on 1 February 1969, Nelson expressed agreement with some of our positive findings about the book of Abraham, while disagreeing with others. He added, “Please bear in mind that I have never contended that J. Smith was unable to translate Egyptian (Reformed) but that, for reasons unknown to me and possibly quite innocent, he failed to translate ‘parts’ of the Book of Abraham correctly.” Commenting on one area where he found our assessment of Joseph Smith’s work to be “quite correct and most remarkable,” he added, “I made a note of the fact a few years ago. I can not explain it except to confess that J. Smith may have had some inner knowledge of the Egyptian written language.”

In a follow-up letter dated 9 March 1969, commenting on our defense of the book of Abraham, Nelson wrote, “What is still more important is that your work must surely please God. I set out

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2 I am grateful to Boyd Petersen for providing me photocopies of these letters, which are found in the collection of Baer’s papers held by the University of Chicago, where Baer taught. In the letter of 8 August, Baer, himself a non-Mormon, has a number of positive things to say about Hugh Nibley’s work on the book of Abraham.

3 In a follow-up letter dated 1 August 1969, he retracted his agreement on the basis that “only today I had an opportunity to study some large screen projected blow ups of the small Hor Sensen Fragment” that he felt explained how Joseph Smith had gotten some things right. However, he failed to address the fact that the prophet Joseph did not have the luxury of these blown-up images.
more than twenty years ago to prove Mormon Scriptures by scientific means. I wrote a very long manuscript (unpublished) which I called *The Nephite-Lamanite Place in History*. I believe it proves the Book of Mormon." Reading such words, one wonders who the real Dee Jay Nelson is—the one who left the LDS Church over the issue of the book of Abraham and then went about denouncing the church and its scriptures, or the one who, even after he had published materials critical of the book of Abraham, was claiming that his research proved the Book of Mormon. At the very least, it should prompt people on both sides of the issue to question his motives and his work.4

Much of Cornforth’s book repeats the standard anti-Mormon criticisms that have been countered and rebuffed time and time again: The Latter-day Saints don’t really believe the Bible. The Book of Mormon doesn’t have the kind of manuscript history the Bible does. There is no archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon. There is no such thing as “reformed Egyptian.” The Book of Mormon was really authored by Solomon Spaulding. Joseph Smith’s prophecies all failed, proving he was a false prophet. The Mormons believe in salvation by works, while the Bible teaches salvation by grace alone.

But Cornforth’s approach includes elements with which other anti-Mormon critics would take exception. Most notable is the fact that Cornforth, as a Seventh-day Adventist, finds the Latter-day Saints to be in error because they worship on Sunday rather than Saturday (pp. 112–13, 185–89). Other Christians would also be uncomfortable with his criticism of the LDS belief in the continuing existence of the spirit after death (pp. 128–37)—something that is not accepted by the Adventists. His approach shows the problems inherent in trying to employ anti-Mormon rhetoric culled from evangelical circles and fit it into a Seventh-day Adventist mold.

4 At some point, I think we should publish not only Nelson’s letters, but those of the various Egyptologists who responded to both Nibley and others (many of these others were anti-Mormon writers). Boyd Petersen has performed a real service in amassing photocopies of the letters from the Egyptologists, some of whom, amazingly, come to Joseph Smith’s defense when writing to critics of the LDS Church. Not surprisingly, none of these critics ever acknowledged these supportive statements.
Sometimes, Cornforth seems at odds with himself. Though he stresses (incorrectly) the lack of evidence for priesthood ordination in the New Testament (pp. 154, 163–65), he notes that he himself is “an ordained minister” (pp. 12, 160). At one point, he writes that “the restoration of the seventh-day Sabbath is a major component of the restoration of the everlasting gospel in the last days” (p. 202), citing Revelation 14:6–7, despite the fact that he had already denounced the LDS view of a latter-day restoration necessitated by an apostasy (pp. 152–53). His own religious preference makes Cornforth agree on the importance of prophecy even in our day (pp. 107–9), though his prophet is Ellen White rather than Joseph Smith (pp. 120–26). He sees White, rather than Joseph Smith, as the instrument of a latter-day restoration (p. 120). Consequently, his chapters 11 (“The Sabbath and the Real Seal of God”) and 12 (“The True Church”) are written to convince his readers that the truth can be found in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I cannot fault him for this, believing that all men are free to “worship how, where, or what they may” (Article of Faith 11). But it seems to me that if Cornforth’s goal is to convince people of the correctness of his religious beliefs, it would be better simply to give the evidence for those beliefs rather than pass on the false criticisms of the LDS faith that comprise most of the book.

While I was serving as a missionary in Geneva, Switzerland, a few members of the local Seventh-day Adventist congregation joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This so enraged their minister that he immediately printed a book critical of the LDS faith, using (what else?) the same timeworn and ill-founded arguments found in previous anti-Mormon literature. The effect was rather startling. Within weeks, several more members of his congregation were seeking out the LDS missionaries to set the record straight, and he lost more of his people. There is a lesson in this—a lesson that Mr. Cornforth should have learned before repeating the mistake.