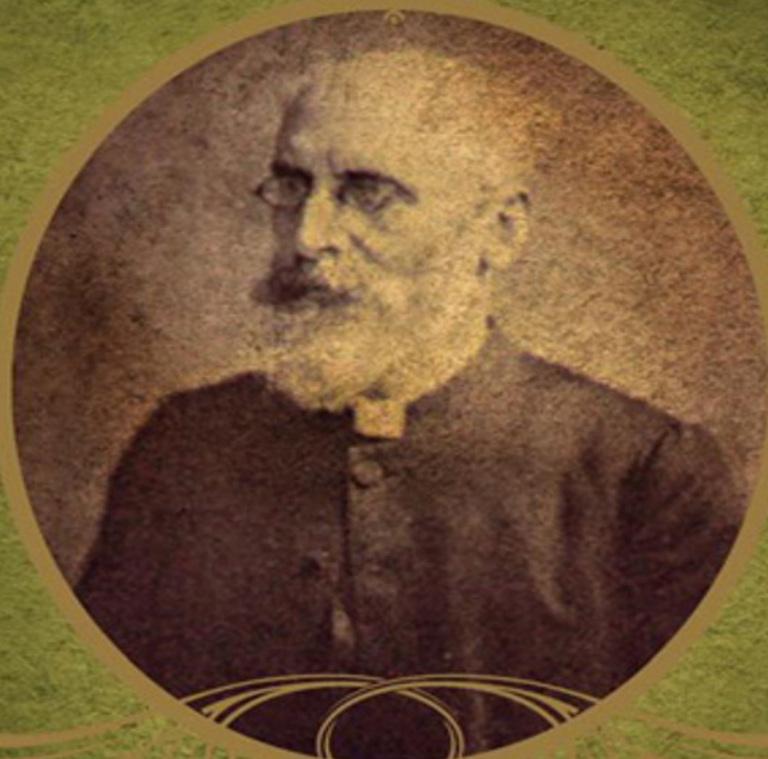


LDS PERSPECTIVES SERIES

1



ALFRED EDERSHEIM

JEWISH SCHOLAR
FOR THE MORMON PROPHETS



MARIANNA EDWARDS RICHARDSON

SPIRITUAL CONTEXT—LDS PERSPECTIVES

ALFRED
EDERSHEIM

A JEWISH SCHOLAR
FOR THE MORMON PROPHETS

by Marianna Edwards Richardson

CFI

Springville, Utah

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Part One

THE LIFE OF ALFRED EDERSHEIM


“The service of the Lord was the object in view.”

—Elder James E. Talmage quoting Edersheim

In order to understand the strength of Edersheim’s testimony and the reason he influenced the heart and mind of LDS authors, we must first carefully examine his life.

Chapter One

LOOKING FORWARD TO THE COMING MESSIAH

 THERE IS A STORY from the Talmud about the coming of the Messiah.^[1] A rabbi dreamed that he met Elijah. He went up to the prophet with great reverence and awe to ask him a question, the question that was burning in his heart:

“When will the Messiah come?”

“Go ask the Messiah yourself,” Elijah replied.

“Where do I ask him?”

“Go to the entrance of the city of Rome,” he instructed.

“How shall I recognize him?” asked the rabbi.

“He is sitting among the lepers, tending their wounds, removing their old bandages and replacing them with new ones. The Messiah dresses each wound with tenderness following this procedure day after day. He does not

want to disappoint the lepers or be distracted from his work. So, you must not divert his attention. In order to visit him, you must abide by these terms.”

The rabbi agreed and went to the city gates to find the Messiah. The rabbi approached the Messiah, who was attending to the lepers just as Elijah had described. The Messiah acknowledged his presence, declaring peace upon the rabbi and his family. Then, the rabbi asked his question:

“When will you come, Master?” the rabbi asked.

“Today,” answered the Messiah. He turned and spoke no more.

The rabbi puzzled over this meeting. Returning to Elijah, the rabbi told him what had happened. Elijah was encouraging. The Messiah had acknowledged his presence and pronounced peace upon him and his family. Because of this, the rabbi was assured a place in the world to come.

“He said he would come today. But he did not come,” said the rabbi.

“Oh, Rabbi, he did not lie. The Messiah spoke the truth when he said today. He will come today—if only you hear his voice. That is the condition for his coming today. If only humanity would hear his voice,” answered Elijah.

As a Jew, Edersheim had been taught stories like this since childhood. As a young man, he recognized and heard the voice of the Messiah as soon as he read the New Testament. For him, the Messiah came that day.

HIS JEWISH BEGINNINGS

Born on March 7, 1825, in Vienna, Austria, Edersheim's Jewish ancestry was of "direct high-priestly descent."^[2] His father, Marcus, was originally from Holland and a banker of some standing in Vienna. His mother, Stephanie, was from a wealthy Jewish family in Frankfurt, Germany. Both parents encouraged their children in intellectual and artistic pursuits, with German, French, and English all spoken in the home. Being raised in a multilingual home would have a keen influence on his later life and career.

Alfred was the youngest of their four children. He was unusually precocious and started his grammar school education with a resident tutor. At the age of ten, he entered a gymnasium. The Austrian gymnasiums were private preparatory schools for boys preparing for a university education. Illustrating his keen intelligence and social amiability, Alfred became the first Jewish boy to receive an academic award from the gymnasium he attended. He was also a high-spirited young man who enjoyed teenage fun. Once, he was arrested for mimicking the sentinels on duty. He was only released when the police discovered who his father was. His physical appearance as a youth is described as "slight, alert, . . . clad in white breeches and black velveteen coat, with long fair curls lying on his shoulders."^[3]



THE POPULATION OF Vienna, Austria, was 317,768 in 1830

While studying at the gymnasium, he also attended the Jewish school connected to the local synagogue where he was taught the cultural and spiritual traditions of his people.^[4] He learned Hebrew, Jewish history and culture, and received a thorough introduction to the Jewish Bible—the Old Testament—and its teachings. The teachings of his youth became the basis for his faith in Jehovah and love of the scriptures.



THE AUSTRIAN GYMNASIUMS
were private preparatory schools for boys
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Illustrating his keen intelligence and social
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In 1841, he continued his studies at the University of Vienna in philosophy with a personal interest in literature. In his first semester at the university, he started a literary club and was very active in student debates. Just after his first exams, Alfred's father experienced a devastating financial reversal. Dutch correspondents caused the collapse of his father's bank.

Edersheim's parents lost everything, and he had to leave the university before he could finish his degree.

This was a very difficult time for young Alfred. While his parents were trying to recover financially, Alfred did not want to be a burden to his parents. His future looked bleak. As the youngest son in a Jewish family, he had few prospects. In 1845, with only "a few dollars in his pocket,"^[5] he followed two of his tutors to Pest, Hungary (modern Budapest), a city of greater hope and more freedom for Jews. He continued his studies at the University of Pest, but he was now paying his own way through school. He hoped to work as a teacher of languages, since he was already fluent or literate in at least five,^[6] and to continue his university studies in literature and writing.

DISCOVERING THE NEW TESTAMENT

In his pursuit of employment, Edersheim was introduced to Dr. John Duncan, a Presbyterian chaplain from Scotland, and his two young colleagues, Mr. Wingate and Mr. Smith.^[7] They had been chaplains to Scottish workers building a suspension bridge over the Danube River. They were trying to start a Christian mission among the Jews in Hungary. The missionaries employed young Edersheim as a German tutor and translator.

Having been raised in a home of privilege, Alfred was impressed by the simple, holy life these men led, and they soon became friends. Their friendship led to these missionaries presenting young Alfred with the message of the New Testament. Edersheim wrote:

I had never seen a New Testament till I received the first copy from the hands of the Presbyterian ministers. I shall never forget the first impression of “The Sermon on the Mount,” nor yet the surprise, and deep feeling, by which the reading of the New Testament followed. That which I had so hated was not Christianity; that which I had not known, and which opened such untold depths, was the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. I became a Christian, and was baptized by the pastor of the Reformed Church at Pesth.[8]

His feelings were now different about Christianity and the New Testament. He had been taught that these things were unholy, unclean, and even things to be hated. The teachings of the Sermon on the Mount had changed him as they had the people who originally heard Jesus’ teachings: “When Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine for he taught them as one having authority” (Matthew 7:28–29). Edersheim was astonished by the doctrine he heard and read, for they were dissimilar to what he had been taught while a young boy in the synagogue.

But his testimony of the Old Testament did not change. It only broadened and deepened as he looked at the Old Testament through New Testament eyes: “There is unity, continuity, and progress in the teaching of the Old Testament and that all in it is prophetic of the Christ.”[9] He felt Christianity gave him a greater understanding of the traditions and history of the Old Testament, which he had been taught since his youth. His new faith gave his old faith form and purpose.

Later in his life, Edersheim reflected upon his conversion to Christianity in his personal journal: “I can say a great many things in favour of the Lord Jesus Christ—of His Power, Grace, and Love. But the greatest

I can say of them is: that He has received me. Thus, the faith of the poorest sinner brings the greatest glory to Christ.”[\[10\]](#)

His conversion would take a lifetime of testing and trials. After he was converted, he would try to strengthen his brethren (Luke 22:32) by becoming a preacher, a missionary, and a writer of spiritual insights on the Old and New Testament.

NOTES

1. Bleefeld and Shook, *Saving the World Entire*, 223–24 (Talmud source: *Sanhedrin* 98a).

[\[return\]](#)

2. Edersheim, *Tobu-va-Vohu*, vi. Very little has been formally written on the life of Alfred Edersheim. The most definitive work is a memoir written by Alfred Edersheim’s daughter Ella preceding his own thoughts in the book. A more recent work is a biography written by Dr. George Mayhew in the *Michigan Theological Journal* entitled “Alfred Edersheim—A Brief Biography” (see bibliography).

[\[return\]](#)

3. Edersheim, *Tobu-va-Vohu*, x.

[\[return\]](#)

4. Driver and Agnew, “Alfred Edersheim,” 696.

[\[return\]](#)

5. Edersheim, *Tobu-va-Vohu*, x.

[\[return\]](#)

6. Besides the German, French, and English he learned at home, he had studied Hebrew at the Jewish school and Latin at the university; *Tobu-va-Vohu*, xiii. Mayhew believes he also knew Greek and Dutch by this time, which would make seven, a

remarkable number for anyone, but especially for a young university student. See Mayhew, “Alfred Edersheim,” 171.

[\[return\]](#)

7. Blaikie and Matthew, “John Duncan,” 239.

[\[return\]](#)

8. Edersheim, *Tobu-va-Vohu*, xiii.

[\[return\]](#)

9. Edersheim, *Lectures*, 3.


[\[return\]](#)

10. Edersheim, *Tobu-va-Vohu*, 20.

[\[return\]](#)

Chapter Two

HIS BIRTH FROM ABOVE

 BECAUSE OF HIS DECISION to accept Christ, Edersheim's life was completely altered. The change in his inner life had a corresponding effect on his outer decisions. He replaced his studies in literature with theology, with the final goal of entering the ministry and sharing his strong testimony. His willingness to change his course in search of truth and service is what brought about this "birth from above."^[1] However, he was not yet acquainted with the various divisions of Christian churches. He explained, "Of 'Church questions' I knew absolutely nothing. They did not as yet arise. I had only learned the doctrines of Christianity from the New Testament, and the only outward church I really knew . . . was that of my teachers, the Scottish ministers."^[2] He was immediately baptized into the Church of Scotland, unaware of the differences between Christian sects but having a firm testimony in Jesus Christ and the Bible.



THE EDINBURGH LIBRARY was probably a place young Edersheim frequented while studying at New College.

Wanting to learn more, he followed his missionary friends to their homeland in Edinburgh. Under Dr. John Duncan's tutelage, Alfred began to read and study about his newfound religion. He entered the New College of Edinburgh, Scotland, where Dr. Duncan was the Chair of Oriental Languages. In 1843, at the age of eighteen, Alfred Edersheim entered the New College of Edinburgh to study Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Logic, History, and Moral Philosophy.[3]

A NEW TEACHER AND A NEW MAN

In the summer of 1844, Alfred Edersheim went to the University of Berlin as a visiting scholar to do additional research on Christian philosophy and biblical studies. A notable professor in Berlin under whom Alfred studied was Johann August Wilhelm Neander (1789–1850). He had also been born a Jew and converted to Christianity when he was seventeen years old, the same age as Edersheim at his conversion. At baptism, he changed his last name to Neander, which means *new man*,[4] as a symbol of his spiritual rebirth.

At the time of their meeting, Professor Neander, who was in his fifties, was an accomplished author and intense scholar of the early Christian church. Neander felt that the gospel of Jesus Christ could stand up to the most exhaustive inspection: “Nothing but what can stand as truth before the scrutiny of genuine science, of a science which does not see through the glass of a particular philosophical or dogmatic school, can be profitable for instruction, doctrine, and reproof.”^[5] These feelings about spiritual truth withstanding the examination of science are similar to thoughts Edersheim expressed later in his life during his Warburton Lecture Series when he said, “For the end is certain—not that full and free criticism may be suppressed, but that it may be utilized, that so on the evening of the battle there may be assured peace, and the golden light shine around the old truth in her new garments of conquest, revealing the full perfection of her beauty.”^[6] This fearless enthusiasm to search out truth without bending to established dogma allowed Edersheim to unfold gospel truths lost to many other Bible scholars of his day.

Although we do not have an autobiography of Edersheim’s life, through his journal writings we can catch a glimpse of his feelings and perspectives. His subsequent scriptural commentaries are often intensely personal, reflecting his rejoicing heart, enlightened eyes, and missionary zeal in sharing spiritual insights with others. Rather than writing to a distant third person, he often bore an intimate testimony encouraging readers to rededicate themselves to follow Christ. His writings would often start out being very analytical; but then, a personal “I” or “we” comment would be interspersed in the text to emphasize what the reader’s own feelings should

be about the scripture story or to express his testimony on a gospel principle.

He especially expressed tender feelings about conversion stories to Christianity, reflecting an obvious kinship with the early Jewish Christians who had to establish new religious traditions and beliefs, as he and Neander had. Particularly, Nicodemus's visits to the Savior and his questions on being born again were personally meaningful for Edersheim. His commentary on this story gives greater insight into his feelings about what it means to be truly converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ.



NICODEMUS CONCLUDED THAT
Jesus was a teacher come from God. “The
submission of heart, mind, and life to Him
as our Divine King . . . can only be learned
from Christ.”
—Alfred Edersheim



THE EXAMPLE OF NICODEMUS

Nicodemus was a wealthy man and a member of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the ruling body of the Jews and was in charge of the government and discipline of their synagogues. Each town or synagogue had a Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin in Jerusalem was the highest

ruling body of the Jews, having authority over both spiritual and civil disputes of the Jewish people.[7] Nicodemus was a man of prestige and power. He came to Jesus by night so he would not be seen. Edersheim describes the scene:

It was night—one of the nights in that Easter week so full of marvels. . . . Up in the simply furnished Aliyah—the guest-chamber on the roof—the lamp was still burning, and the Heavenly Guest still busy with thought and words. There was no need for Nicodemus to pass through the house, for an outside stair led to the upper room. He had come because he recognized Jesus as “a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2).[8]

Nicodemus’s curiosity was piqued. Jesus’ miracles had stirred his soul, but he was not yet converted. Edersheim characterized many of Christ’s followers in Jerusalem as sign-seekers who had a “milk faith” that required signs for its sustenance. These disciples were not like the Savior’s first Galilean disciples, who had left everything to follow him. Instead, they had a more difficult time letting go of their worldly status and becoming converted to their Savior: “And yet He did, in wondrous love, condescend and speak to them in the only language they could understand, in that of ‘signs.’ ”[9] Then, Edersheim makes a wonderful “we” comment: “We would not expect to be convinced of the truth of religion, nor converted to it, by outward miracles; we would not expect them at all.”[10]

Nicodemus was dealing with the inner struggle of embracing Christ and, thus, leaving many of his Jewish beliefs. This was not an easy decision for Nicodemus to make, as it had not been easy for Edersheim, giving up

everything, including associations, relationships, and a complete way of life. It truly meant a total rebirth:

Judaism could understand a new relationship towards God and man, and even the forgiveness of sins. But it had no conception of a moral renovation, a spiritual birth, as the initial condition for reformation, far less as that for seeing the Kingdom of God. And it was because it had no idea of such “birth from above,” of its reality or even possibility, that Judaism could not be the Kingdom of God. . . . Ours it is now only to “believe,” where we cannot further know, and, looking up to the Son of Man in His perfected work, to perceive, and to receive the gift of God’s love for our healing.[11]

Edersheim understood one must be converted and go through a similar renewal process to become a part of God’s kingdom. A man can be learned as to secular knowledge, but Christ’s instructions transcend worldly wisdom. Earthly acclaim is characterized by self-improvement, self-development, and self-restraint; but the Savior’s teachings are centered on submission of our minds and hearts to him.

And so it ever is with us also, when, like Nicodemus, we first arrive at the conviction that Jesus is the Teacher come from God. What He teaches is so entirely different from what Nicodemus, or any of us could, from any other standpoint other than that of Jesus, have learned or know concerning the Kingdom and entrance into it. . . . But to perceive this, not as an improvement upon our present state, but as the submission of heart, mind, and life to Him as our Divine King, an existence which is, and which means, proclaiming unto the world the Kingship of God: this can only be learned from Christ.[12]

In addition to understanding the nuances of Nicodemus’s change, Edersheim looked to the symbolic nature of the setting of this story.

Nicodemus was seeking light in the darkness and an understanding of spiritual rebirth during the springtime. These images of darkness and light, spring and rebirth, are inextricably connected with the eternal principles Christ was trying to teach. Edersheim explains in poetic simplicity how this night encounter is representative of the gospel message of Jesus Christ shining in the darkness: “Through the gusty night of our world’s early spring flashes, as the lamp in that Aliyah through the darkened streets of silent Jerusalem, that light sounds through its stillness, like the Voice of the Teacher come from God.”[13]

Christ’s message during Nicodemus’s night visit shone brightly in Edersheim’s heart. He had a firm conviction that he would willingly give all for the Savior and within just a few years of his conversion, that conviction would again be tested.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST TO OTHERS

This was a period of great disruption in the Church of Scotland. In 1843, the church had divided into two camps: the Established Church and the Free Church. The disagreement was over the relationship between the civil government and the rights of the church. The Scottish civil courts would interfere with church decisions, even over appointments of ministers. The Free Church of Scotland was breaking free of any ties with the government. Dr. Duncan was a preacher in the Free Church of Scotland, and because of Edersheim’s loyalty and love for his mentor and friend, he also became associated with the Free Church. He was very close to the

Duncan family, even living with them for a time during his stay in Edinburgh.[14]

As a result of his combined theological studies in Germany and at New College and his previous university work in Vienna and Pest, Edersheim was given a theological degree and ordained to the ministry in 1846. As a minister for the Free Church of Scotland, Alfred was soon given responsibility over four small parishes in Edinburgh. This was hard work for young Edersheim. He would teach on Sundays wherever he could, without an established congregation or meeting house: “On Sundays, he would preach in three or four different places—barn, smithy, lay-loft, road.”[15] After six months of hard work, he was able to consolidate his growing congregation and build a church building with a parsonage.



“I HATE THE KIND OF
preaching which pretends to rearing
mountains. In reality, they are only
children making mud pies, which they call
mountains.”

—Alfred Edersheim



Always a great speaker, Edersheim had a way of making religion understandable and interesting for all his parishioners. Often he started with an empty church. After hearing his sermons, crowds would soon come

and fill the pews until there was standing room only. He wrote, “I hate the kind of preaching which pretends to rearing mountains. In reality, they are only children making mud pies, which they call mountains.”[16] His message of conversion was infectious and many loved to hear him speak. His daughter Ella described him thus: “Dr. Edersheim retained a vast fund of humour . . . and an intense interest in all the questions of life—political, scientific, domestic. His conversation was of a peculiarly brilliant order, sparkling with epigram and illustration.”[17]

Less than a year after he had started preaching for the Free Church, Alfred developed a great longing to work among the Jews. In the latter part of 1846, he felt a call from God to serve as a missionary to his people. Based on this prompting, he resigned from his ministerial post in Edinburgh and traveled the long road through Greece and Constantinople to the province of Moldavia in Romania, a hub of Jewish culture and activities. He preached Christianity for over a year[18] to the large population of Russian Jews who had migrated there to escape persecution from the czar. It was during this time that he met his future wife, Mary Broomfield, from Scotland, who was also a missionary to the Jews. After returning to Scotland in 1847, Alfred and Mary wed on February 28, 1848.

In a matter of four years Alfred Edersheim had gone from a young Jewish scholar and translator to an ordained Christian minister, intent on further studying the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the process he had left behind close family associations and rich tradition all for his Savior. After having a church built for him, a privilege some ministers wait for their whole lives, Edersheim again left everything when he felt prompted by the

Spirit. It is clear through his action that Edersheim understood what the psalmist wrote:

The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul:

the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.

The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart:

the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. (Psalm 19:7–8)

NOTES

1. Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, 269 (1:388). For the references in Edersheim's *Jesus the Messiah*, I have included the book and approximate page number in the original edition of the book (book 1 or book 2, with the page number after the colon) in parentheses after the page number in the reprint used in the more recent edition cited in the bibliography. In the recent edition, both books are printed as one volume.

[\[return\]](#)

2. Edersheim, *Tobu-va-Vohu*, xiv.

[\[return\]](#)

3. Mayhew, "Alfred Edersheim," 176–77.

[\[return\]](#)

4. Mayhew, "Alfred Edersheim," 178.

[\[return\]](#)

5. Neander, *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, vi.

[\[return\]](#)

6. Edersheim, *Lectures*, ix.

[\[return\]](#)

7. Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, 265 (1:384).

[\[return\]](#)

8. Edersheim, *Sketches*, 256–57.

[\[return\]](#)

9. Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, 262 (1:379).

[\[return\]](#)

10. Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, 262 (1:379).

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11. Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, 266–68 (1:385–87).

[\[return\]](#)

12. Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, 266 (1:385).

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13. Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, 269 (1:388).

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14. Mayhew, “Alfred Edersheim,” 175.

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15. Edersheim, *Tobu-va-Vohu*, xv.

[\[return\]](#)

16. Edersheim, *Tobu-va-Vohu*, 86.

[\[return\]](#)

17. Edersheim, *Tobu-va-Vohu*, xxxii.

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18. Mayhew, “Alfred Edersheim,” 179.

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