

Joseph Smith and the Mormon Church

Many Catholics have limited experience with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [Mormons]. They may be familiar with their young, well-dressed missionaries, and maybe have a casual familiarity with their reputation for strong family values, but most are unaware of the very checkered history of their founder, Joseph Smith, and some of their strange, if not outright bizarre, core teachings.

When we look at the various denominations that have split away, or formed independently of, the Catholic Church, one of the best ways to evaluate them is to start with their origins. For example Jehovah Witnesses trace their beginnings to several marginal founding characters and multiple failed prophecies regarding Jesus' final return. Anglicanism began over a divorce and remarriage, and a resulting separation from the Catholic Church [rejecting the authority of the Pope, Henry VIII actually placed himself as head of his new church]. Protestantism in general began with Martin Luther, a man of questionable moral character as well, who then invented two brand new, unscriptural doctrines [the "Bible alone" and "faith alone"] that had never before been taught in the history of Christianity. Mormonism is no different.

As a young man, Mormonism's founder, Joseph Smith, indulged in the occult and divination [seeking knowledge of the future by supernatural means] – dangerous practices that can expose a person to demonic influence, without doubt. In his 30's, he would also join the Freemasons.

In 1820, at 14, swept up in a spiritual fervor that was enveloping his family at the time, Smith was disturbed by the divisions he saw in Protestantism, and was greatly confused, wondering which of the many "parties" was right. He prayed for wisdom and discernment and received a vision of a terrible darkness that gave way to a "brilliant pillar of light" [2 Corinthians 11:14 comes to mind: "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light"], after which, he saw "two personages" [apparently, the Father and Son according to Smith]. One of them told him that all the different "sects" were "corrupt" and "that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight", forbidding him "to join with any of them" [Pearl of Great Price 2:18-20].

Ironically, there is strong evidence and testimony that Smith in fact did briefly join the Methodist Church in June, 1828, but was quickly disassociated by them because of their concern over his character and divination practices.

In a second vision in 1823, Smith then claims that an angel [Maroni] appeared to him and told him where to find, "gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and... that the fullness of the everlasting gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants. Also, that there were two stones... fastened to a breastplate... the Urim and Thummim – deposited with the plates... and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book" [Pearl of Great Price].

The angel then told him that he must restore the true church and fullness of the Gospel to Earth [more on the impossibility of this “Great Apostasy” theory in part 2 of my next column!] Smith then translated the plates over the following years into the Book of Mormon.

He then added new revelations over the next 15 years, which are collected in “Doctrine and Covenants” and “The Pearl of Great Price”. Smith’s wife, Emma, testified to how Smith would dictate revelations he was receiving from God, “sitting with his face buried in his hat with the stone [his ‘seeing stone’] in it, and dictating hour after hour”. These two books, along with the Book of Mormon and the Protestant Bible, make up the Mormon “scriptures”.

But controversy pursued Smith wherever he went. In 1826, he was accused [and possibly convicted, the record is not clear] of “glass looking” [using “special” rocks/crystals to fortune-tell and gain knowledge supernaturally – think crystal ball] in Bainbridge, NY.

This all lead up to the official founding of the Mormon church in 1830. But Smith and his new church were forced, through constant persecution, to move from one state to another over the next decade. In 1831, they settled in Jackson County, Missouri. Smith contended that this was the original site of the Garden of Eden, as revealed to him by God, and the site of the new Zion for the Mormons – and the place the lost tribes of Israel would eventually return to after their exile [a second hand account claims Smith believed they were in seclusion in the Arctic].

However, Smith was then embroiled in more legal trouble, this time over finances [apparently to the tune of \$25,000 following a failed illegal bank he had established in Ohio], and run out of town yet again. They then migrated to Illinois, founding the town of Nauvoo. But after more violence, and accusations of treason and polygamy, Smith was eventually arrested and jailed.

While awaiting trial, an angry mob of over 200 men attacked the jail, and Smith was killed in the ensuing gun battle. While Mormons insist Smith was a martyr, if so, it certainly wasn’t in the Christian sense, where martyrs typically die praying for their persecutors [consider St. Stephen, who “knelt down and cried... ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’”] Smith went out in classic wild west style – with smuggled guns blazing, wounding at least 3 of his persecutors [maybe even killing some] before he was shot dead while trying to escape from a second story prison window.

But let’s change historical gears here and take a closer look at some of the problematic areas surrounding Joseph Smith’s supposedly divinely inspired writings.

While there are many issues we could address, I’ll focus on two. The first concerns

The Pearl of Great Price, and deals a stunning blow to the Mormon “scriptures”. Smith obtained some ancient Egyptian papyrus scrolls, and translated them, again with the help of the Urim and Thummim revealed by the Angel Moroni. He then concluded that these papyri were actually 4000 years old and were written by Abraham. He then included them as the “Book of Abraham” within what he claimed to be the divinely inspired “Pearl of Great Price” volume.

In 1967, the papyri were examined and translated into English by Mormon Egyptologist, Dee Jay Nelson, as well as by several of the world’s foremost Egyptologists. Their unanimous conclusion? The “Book of Abraham” was nothing of the sort! It was a typical pagan Egyptian burial document dating from relatively recent times [B.C. 200 to 100 A.D., as opposed to 4000 B.C. as Smith had claimed]. But the nail in the sarcophagus was that the actual Egyptian to English translation rendered by all the experts that examined it didn’t remotely resemble what Smith had “translated” – and it had *nothing to do with Abraham!* He had made it all up! Nelson and his family left the Mormon Church shortly thereafter...

Accusations of plagiarism have swirled around the Book of Mormon, literally from its beginning. But the gold plates themselves, on which the Book of Mormon had apparently been inscribed in “reformed Egyptian”, are another concern.

Few people had ever claimed to have seen these plates, and most of these accounts sound like they witnessed these plates only in a “spiritual” sense. But of Smith’s three closest friends and apparent plate witnesses – Oliver Cowdery [his scribe for writing down his “revelations” in the Book of Mormon], David Whitmer, and Martin Harris [who literally “sold the farm” to finance the printing of the Book of Mormon], all claiming to have seen not just the gold plates, but the angel as well – *all three of them*, stunningly, left the LDS Church! Smith would eventually strongly condemn all three men, and Cowdery, perhaps Smith’s closest accomplice, was accused of trying to “destroy the character of President Joseph Smith”, and was excommunicated.

Of the other 8 people who claimed to have seen the gold plates [but no angels], three of these left the Mormon church as well.

But there are content issues with the Book of Mormon as well. For example, it details 2 tribes that migrated to the Americas [the Jaredites from the Tower of Babel dispersion, and the Nephites from Jerusalem just before the Babylonian exile], and interacted with the indigenous peoples. After Jesus was resurrected, he visited these people and preached the Gospel to them. These people eventually apostacized as well, just as Mormons insist the Christian Church as a whole has. There are highly detailed accounts of great civilizations, extraordinary battles, great progress in architecture, textiles, metal tools and weaponry.

These accounts were apparently recorded on gold plates by a Nephite named Moroni, who named them after his Father, Mormon, supposedly a great Nephite

prophet and leader. Moroni later became an angel, and appeared to Smith, revealing the location of the plates on a hill in New York state).

But incredibly, archaeologists have not been able to find any evidence of these peoples whatsoever! Conversely, archaeologists have found countless examples of ancient settlements and battles described in the Bible – and all of these far older than the more recent great settlements and events that the Book of Mormon purports to document.

And why would the book of Mormon, written apparently by Hebrew immigrants, be written in “reformed Egyptian”, a language unknown to Egyptologists, or anyone else for that matter? Why wouldn’t it be written in Hebrew, as the Hebrews hated the Egyptians? And why is there no evidence of either language in the Americas? Such an extensive and relatively recent civilization would undoubtedly have left at least some trace of written records. But there is absolutely nothing but a story of gold plates.

In addition, large sections of the Book of Mormon have been copied directly from the King James Bible [KJV]. But the most unsettling thing about this is that Smith also included the textual errors that scholars have found in the KJV translation. One would think that if Smith had truly been working under divine inspiration as he claims, he would not have copied these errors into the Book of Mormon!

Scholars also tell us that the Book of Mormon has gone through well over 2,000 textual alterations since Smith originally wrote it – mostly spelling, grammar, and punctuation, but some significant doctrinal changes as well. For example, in 1 Nephi 11:21, the original edition says that the “Lamb of God” is “the eternal Father,” while the same verse in today’s version equates the “Lamb of God” with “the Son of the Eternal Father.” If a book was divinely inspired, as Smith claims, and we still have the original and not just copies, why would it require any changes at all?!

A final troubling detail is that the Book of Mormon claims to contain “the fullness of the everlasting gospel.” Problem is, many of the core doctrines of Mormonism are either refuted by it, or nowhere to be found in it!

For example, not a word is said about the key Mormon doctrine of “eternal progression”: that men can progress spiritually and eventually become Gods themselves – complete with their own kingdom and planet – and generate their own spirit children who will one day become their human subjects. Or additionally, that God the Father was once a mortal man on another planet, and is now an “exalted man with a body of flesh and bones”, and dwelling on a planet near the star Kolob (see Abraham 3:3-4 in The Pearl of Great Price).

And in some cases these doctrines are actually clearly refuted. For example, Mormons believe in many gods, and in particular, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are actually three distinct gods. But the Book of Mormon claims the opposite: “Now

Zeezrom said: 'Is there more than one God?' and [Amulek] answered, 'No.' And Zeezrom said unto him again, 'How knowest thou these things?' And he said: 'An angel hath made them known unto me'" (Alma 11:28-31).

In my next column, I will discuss these strange and conflicting Mormon doctrines further, and answer one of their key claims: that the Catholic Church apostacized early in its history and Christianity was not seen again until 1830 when Joseph Smith "restored" it.