
mORMONISM
EXPLAINED

What Latter-day Saints Teach and Practice

A N D R E W J A C K S O N

CROSSWAY BOOKS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Mormonism Explained: What Latter-day Saints Teach and Practice

Copyright © 2008 by Andrew Jackson

Published by Crossway Books
a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Design and typesetting by Lakeside Design Plus

Cover design: Jon McGrath

Cover Illustration: iStock Photo

First printing 2008

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jackson, Andrew, 1953–

Mormonism explained : what Latter-day Saints teach and practice /
Andrew Jackson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-58134-935-1 (tpb)

1. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—Doctrines. 2. Mormon
Church—Doctrines. 3. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—
Customs and practices. 4. Mormon Church—Customs and practices. I. Title.
BX8635.3.J33 2008
230'.93—dc22

2007042038

CH	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	09	08
12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

INTRODUCTION

My goal in writing *Mormonism Explained* was to present a concise and thorough introduction to what Latter-day Saints (LDS) officially teach and practice today primarily for the broad Christian audience, although I also wrote it for interested non-Christians and Mormons.

Diversity within Mormonism

Unfortunately, many Christians have had a tendency to stereotype Mormons and see them as all being the same. This is not true. The fact is, Mormonism contains quite a bit of diversity, and several streams of Mormon thinking and opinions exist today, although they are all still under the careful oversight of the LDS Church hierarchy.

There are Latter-day Saints who swim within the theological waters of the more traditional Mormonism represented by systematic theologian Bruce McConkie, other Mormons who embrace the progressive Mormon scholarship of Brigham Young University professors such as Dr. Stephen Robinson and Dr. Robert Millet, and then many—if not most—Mormons who were born into LDS families, live their daily lives inside the culture and world of Mormonism, and really do not think a lot

about the intricacies and theological validity of LDS teaching and practices. They seem content and happy being Mormon, and exert little energy in thinking through and evaluating the details or truthfulness of their faith.

My Mormon Qualifications

What are my qualifications to write a book on Mormonism? Many Latter-day Saints—although not all—will dismiss my book simply because I am not Mormon and have never been a Mormon. They seem to believe that only Mormons should have the privilege of writing about what the LDS teach and practice. For many Mormons, any “outsider” is seemingly suspect, if not outright labeled a deceiving enemy of their claimed restored gospel. Being called a religious bigot or Mormon-hater is not always the most pleasant experience. I must admit that I do not fully understand this Mormon mind-set, for it strongly smacks of an unhealthy martyr complex, a form of anti-intellectualism, and a fear of scholarly evaluation or critique, whether by Mormons, non-Mormons, or ex-Mormons.

Although I am not Mormon, I did not write this book in complete ignorance, in distant abstraction, or from a socially or theologically detached position. I have lived among and interacted with Mormons and Mormon culture for over a decade now as I serve as a pastor in a church in downtown Mesa, Arizona, which is one block down from the historic Arizona temple. As many of you know, the city of Mesa was pioneered and founded by the Mormons in January 1878. In fact, the large grassy park that separates our church campus and the Arizona temple is named “Pioneer Park,” memorializing the early Mormon pioneers of Mesa. As a result of living in the East Valley of the Phoenix area, I have many Mormon neighbors, acquaintances, and friends.

My Research Challenges

In writing this book, I experienced several research challenges. Probably the greatest one was determining what written, online, and individual Mormon resources I should primarily use to determine what Latter-day Saints actually teach and practice. Following is a short description of my experience in engaging in this Mormon resource search.

First, it became clear early on that average Mormons—not unlike many Christians—are simply not able to accurately and thoroughly provide a systematic explanation of their beliefs. Second, young Mormon missionaries, part of the landscape in Phoenix’s East Valley, are also actually quite theologically uninformed in the LDS faith, as Dr. Stephen Robinson himself attests:

The LDS missionaries receive very little formal training before going out to proselytize. They are almost literally babes in the woods. In fact, Mormon missionaries might be among the least knowledgeable members in a congregation. Actually such elementary understanding as most missionaries have, while it meets the needs of LDS proselytizing by bearing simple testimony, hardly constitutes a sophisticated guide to LDS doctrinal specifics. And to top it off, Mormon missionaries frequently say a lot more than they actually really know.¹

Third, Mormons seem to portray a pride in the fact that their church leaders are volunteers and are not paid. And this is true, but you quickly discover that the leaders are also not biblically or theologically trained, and I did not find them to be a collective informed resource for my book either. Again, Dr. Robinson is quite candid about describing the lack of formal biblical and theological training by today’s LDS Church leadership.²

Yet I did find some of the unofficial yet informed LDS apologists and their Web sites somewhat helpful, especially

some of the members of the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), who graciously engaged in periodic e-mail interactions with me. I did find it frustrating at times that Mormon apologists and others would want to passionately tell me what the LDS Church really teaches and practices, but then be very quick to qualify that they in no way spoke for the LDS Church.

In the end, I must say that for someone attempting to write a well-researched book on the teaching and practices of the LDS Church, the discovery that most average Mormons, Mormon missionaries, and Mormon leaders were not quality resources of credible information and insight provided quite a research challenge.

What Is Official Mormonism?

So how does a researcher and writer actually discover the official teaching and practices of the LDS Church? In my case, I decided to lean on the following statements made by Dr. Stephen Robinson and Dr. Robert Millet:

The only binding sources of doctrine for Latter-day Saints are the Standard Works of the church: the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. The only official interpretations and applications of these doctrinal sources are those that come to the church over the signatures of the First Presidency or the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (collectively). All the rest is commentary.³

The declaration, clarification, and interpretation of doctrine for the church as a whole rest with the presiding councils of the church, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.⁴

As I explain in more detail in chapter 5, Mormon teaching and practices today are based primarily in the continual divine revelations and interpretations of the LDS President and Prophet and other top apostles, and only secondarily in Mormonism's four written scriptural books that consist of the Bible (King James Version only), *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine and Covenants*, and *Pearl of Great Price*.⁵ In Mormonism, all contemporary experiences of revelation and interpretation by the LDS President and Prophet surpass all past written records of revelation in authority, including the Bible.⁶ In the Mormon mind, what God communicated in the past—even if identified as Holy Scripture—is always secondary to what God is saying to ordained Mormon apostles and prophets today.⁷

What about the Bible? Although Mormonism values the Bible, the LDS Church also states that the Bible has been corrupted, contains errors, and is missing many plain and precious truths concerning salvation.⁸ As a result, within Mormonism the Bible is functionally subordinate and subject to clarification and revision by the *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine and Covenants*, and *Pearl of Great Price*.

My Primary Mormon and Non-Mormon Resources

In writing my book, I had to make a major decision concerning what primary Mormon resources I would use. As you can see from the quotations and notes, I drew extensively—although not exclusively—from the writings of Mormon founders Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, official LDS Web sites,⁹ the manuals and curriculum produced and distributed by the LDS Church Educational System,¹⁰ the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*,¹¹ Richard Lyman Bushman's biography *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, traditional systematic theologian Bruce McConkie's book *Mormon Doctrine*, and the books of progressive Brigham

Young University professors Dr. Stephen Robinson and Dr. Robert Millet.

The primary non-Mormon books that I gleaned from were Dr. Craig Blomberg's writing in *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon & an Evangelical in Conversation*, the book *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, and Richard and Joan Ostling's well-researched book *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise*.

PART I

The Origins of Mormonism



JOSEPH SMITH: THE RESTORER OF THE TRUE GOSPEL?

Mormonism originates solely from the early-nineteenth-century visions and revelations of Joseph Smith, the first President and Prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In this most fundamental fact, Latter-day Saints present no argument or dispute. As the tenth Mormon President and Prophet, Joseph Fielding Smith, affirms with prophetic conviction: “Mormonism must stand or fall on the story of Joseph Smith.” Put simply, without Joseph Smith, there would be no such faith known as Mormonism today.¹

Joseph Smith’s Early Years (1805–1820)

Early Mormon history unfolded in the cold winters of the northeastern United States, in such places as Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and western New York.² In Sharon, Vermont, Joseph Smith Jr. was born on December 23, 1805, to

the poor farming family of Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith. The Smith family moved numerous times during Joseph's early teen years, seeking good farmland and a stable living. From 1811 to 1816, they seemed to be constantly on the move, looking for a place they could call home.

In 1816, Joseph Smith Sr. once again packed up his eight children and moved his family to neighboring Palmyra and Manchester Townships located in Ontario County, New York,³ where they purchased a hundred acres of land and built a small log home. In 1820, in a wooded grove near this log home, Mormonism officially began with Joseph's Smith's "First Vision" experience at the very young age of fourteen.⁴

Joseph Smith's First Vision (1820)

In the early nineteenth century, the western frontier region of New York State experienced zealous Christian revivals and camp meetings common to America's Second Great Awakening.⁵ New York earned its reputation of being a "burned-over religious district" as the result of out-of-control spiritual wildfires. It was a region swarming with itinerant flamboyant preachers.⁶

Along with mass personal conversions, ecstatic experiences of encountering God, and transcendent visions, another general characteristic of America's Second Great Awakening was the desire by many Christian groups to break away from historical, creed-centered Christianity in the pursuit of "restoring" the pure practice of the New Testament church. Their efforts were often fueled by homespun theology and end-time predictions of the imminent return of Jesus Christ and his millennial reign.

Early Mormonism reflected many of the common Christian trends of the times: having an authoritarian prophetic leader and being noncreedal,⁷ staunchly Arminian,⁸ fervently

restorationist,⁹ evangelistically driven, end-time-focused, and characterized by isolated communal living.¹⁰

Which Christian Church Is True?

Unfortunately, denominational rivalries and theological debates were rabid in western New York, especially among the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists.¹¹ As an impressionable, immature boy, Joseph Smith struggled deeply with the question concerning what church denomination was really the true one. During this troubled season, he wrote that he was determined to act on the familiar Bible passage of James 1:5: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."¹²

The First Vision of Joseph Smith

On a clear spring morning in 1820, fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith¹³ secluded himself in a grove of trees near his family's log home and knelt in desperation before God, requesting to receive divine wisdom concerning which Christian denomination was the true church.¹⁴ While he was battling the dark power of Satan,¹⁵ two distinct personages with tangible bodies appeared in indescribable glorious light.¹⁶ They were identified as Father God and Jesus Christ. This was the first of numerous divine visitations claimed by Joseph Smith throughout his lifetime, including Moroni, John the Baptist, the apostles Peter, James, and John, Jesus, Moses, Elijah, and many angels.¹⁷

It was during this momentous encounter that Jesus Christ reportedly exhorted the young boy not to join any Christian church because they were all corrupt and all their doctrinal creeds were simply teachings of men and an abomination to God.

The Cornerstone of the LDS Faith

For Mormons, Joseph Smith's First Vision marks the beginning of the restoration of the true authority-endowed church

of Jesus Christ back to the earth. Although there are numerous separate written accounts concerning the actual details of Smith's heavenly vision,¹⁸ the LDS Church has officially canonized only the 1838 version that Joseph Smith wrote eighteen years after his apparent experience. This official version is published today in the *Pearl of Great Price*, one of the four Standard Works of Mormonism.¹⁹ The First Vision story is the cornerstone on which the LDS Church is built. An official LDS Web site says:

Joseph Smith's First Vision stands today as the greatest event in world history since the birth, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. After centuries of darkness, the Lord opened the heavens to reveal His word and restore His Church through His chosen prophet.²⁰

Mormon President and Prophet Gordon B. Hinckley is even more precise in this General Conference statement:

Our entire case, as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, rests on the validity of this glorious First Vision. Nothing on which we base our doctrine, nothing we teach, nothing we live by, is of greater importance than this initial declaration.²¹

It is Joseph Smith's First Vision story that Mormon missionaries are trained with scripted precision to tell potential converts.²²

Joseph Smith's Teen Years (1820–1823)

The three years or so following Joseph Smith's First Vision were uneventful. From the age of fourteen to seventeen, Smith experienced no further visitations, revelations, or visions, yet

he did fall into significant temptation and error. Here is his personal confession:

I was left to all kinds of temptations; and, mingling with all kinds of society, I frequently fell into many foolish errors, and displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature; which, I am sorry to say, led me into diverse temptations, offensive in the sight of God.²³

For Mormons, Joseph Smith's wayward teen years are chalked up as a time for the young man "to grow, mature, gain experience, and receive further nurturing."²⁴

One of the more startling bits of historical information, however, is that for years following Joseph Smith's First Vision, he and his father were actively engaged in the practice of magic and divination in their desire to discover hidden treasure. They used seer stones and divining rods as instruments. Joseph Smith Jr. found two stones in 1822 and used them to see "invisible things." He gained a reputation as someone who could use these seer stones to find lost property, buried money, and other hidden things.²⁵ As we will see later, Joseph Smith even used seer stones to translate the *Book of Mormon*.²⁶ LDS historian Richard Lyman Bushman writes:

Joseph Jr. never repudiated the stones or denied their power to find treasure. Remnants of the magical culture stayed with him to the end. But after 1823, he began to orient himself away from treasure and toward translation.²⁷

In 1888, the fifth Mormon President and Prophet, Wilford Woodruff, actually consecrated one of Smith's seer stones on a temple altar in Manti, Utah.²⁸

Another major chapter in the early origins of Mormonism opens with Joseph Smith's visits by an exalted angel named Moroni (pronounced mor-oh-n-i).

Joseph Smith's Moroni Visitations (1823–1827)

On September 21, 1823, approximately three years after his First Vision, seventeen-year-old Joseph Smith reported that he experienced three visits in one night from the angel Moroni.²⁹ Moroni's visitation provided him with information about the existence and location of the *Book of Mormon*.

According to Joseph Smith, while he was praying late at night, a very bright light appeared in his room and a heavenly personage wearing a loose white robe stood before him in midair. The exalted being announced that he was Moroni, a special messenger sent from God. Moroni declared to the young Smith that God had an unprecedented salvation ministry for him to perform worldwide.

Immediately, Moroni unveiled the millennial-long secret of a sacred book—today called the *Book of Mormon*—hidden inside a stone box that was buried on Hill Cumorah only a few miles away.³⁰ This book was written on thin gold plates six inches wide and bound with three large rings.³¹

Moroni also told Smith that inside the stone box with the gold book was the Urim and Thummim, obscure objects mentioned in the Old Testament.³² The Urim and Thummim, composed of two special seer stones attached on silver bows that fastened to a breastplate, were to be used to translate the contents of the gold book from its original language of “Reformed Egyptian”³³ to King James English.

Joseph Smith describes the Urim and Thummim this way:

With the records was found a curious instrument, which the ancients called “Urim and Thummim,” which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened to a breast plate. Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God.³⁴

It is revealing that no such language as Reformed Egyptian is known or confirmed by any Egyptologist.

Joseph Smith Sees the Book of Mormon

The next day—September 22, 1823—the angel Moroni once again appeared to Joseph Smith. Moroni told Smith to go to Hill Cumorah,³⁵ where the gold book—the *Book of Mormon*—was buried. When he arrived, he rapidly found the buried stone box and pried it open, seeing the gold book and the seer stones. When Smith attempted to remove them from the stone box, however, he experienced a severe physical shock. Moroni quickly rebuked him and told him that he required another four years of spiritual preparation before he would be ready to take possession of them at the age of twenty-one.³⁶

Who Was Moroni?

It is within the story of the *Book of Mormon* that Moroni's personal identification is discovered. The *Book of Mormon* tells the narration of two peoples—the Nephites and the Lamanites—who lived on the American continent between approximately 600 BC and AD 400. The earliest family members of the Nephites and the Lamanites had emigrated from Israel to America.

Moroni was the eldest son of Mormon, a Nephite prophet and military commander-in-chief, after whom the *Book of Mormon* is named. Moroni served under Mormon in the final great battle between the initially good Nephites and the bad Lamanites in AD 421.

Prior to this final war, Mormon gave the gold book to Moroni and commanded him to preserve it for future generations. During this war, the Lamanites killed Mormon and all the other Nephites, while Moroni escaped and went into hiding. Before Moroni died, he added final contents to the *Book of Mormon*

and buried it on Hill Cumorah, where it remained untouched for fourteen hundred years.

Moroni met Joseph Smith on Hill Cumorah each year on September 22 from 1823 to 1827. During these four years, Joseph Smith received intense tutoring and preparation from Moroni in order that he would be found worthy to receive the gold book. Joseph Smith wrote about his experience:

Accordingly, as I had been commanded, I went at the end of each year, and at each time I found the same messenger there, and received instruction and intelligence from him at each of our interviews, respecting what the Lord was going to do, and how and in what manner His kingdom was to be conducted in the last days.³⁷

Today, an LDS monument stands on Hill Cumorah in New York. A ten-foot bronze figure of Moroni is stationed on top of a twenty-five-foot shaft of white granite. The figure is pointing toward heaven with his right hand and holding a replica of the gold *Book of Mormon* tablets in his left hand.³⁸ The image of the angel Moroni blowing a trumpet also stands atop many LDS temples, which Mormons see as a fulfillment of Revelation 14:6:

Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.

More Treasure-Hunting in Pennsylvania

Even during Joseph Smith's intense tutoring times with Moroni, he and his father gained a strong local reputation for using divination to hunt for treasure. In October 1825, approximately two years into his Moroni preparation years, Joseph Jr. was hired by Josiah Stowell to help him search for hidden treasure in an old Spanish silver mine located near Harmony Township,

Pennsylvania. While in Pennsylvania, these treasure hunters boarded with the Isaac Hale family. After approximately one month of searching for treasure, they had no success and abandoned the exploration.

Although LDS authorities have often denied Joseph Smith's treasure-hunting, he was found guilty of disorderly conduct and treasure-hunting through the use of divination on March 20, 1826, in Bainbridge, New York.³⁹

Joseph Smith Marries Emma Hale

While Joseph Smith was boarding at Isaac Hale's Pennsylvania home, he fell in love with Isaac's daughter Emma. When Isaac Hale strongly disapproved of his daughter's marrying Smith, he and Emma ran off and eloped. They were married on January 18, 1827.

Immediately after their marriage, Joseph and Emma moved to the Smiths' family home in Manchester, New York, where they farmed with Joseph Sr. throughout the summer of 1827.

Late one night in the fall of 1827, Moroni again appeared to Joseph Smith, declaring that he was now ready before God to receive the gold book. On the early morning of September 22, Moroni led the twenty-one-year-old Smith to Hill Cumorah and gave him the gold tablets and Urim and Thummim.⁴⁰ After hiding the gold tablets in a hollowed-out birch log, Joseph Smith would find that from then on, his life would be preoccupied with protecting and translating them.

Joseph Smith in Pennsylvania (1827–1830)

Rather abruptly, Joseph Smith decided to permanently move to Pennsylvania, where he would end up living for over two and a half years, from December 1827 to August 1830. Joseph Smith was apparently motivated to rush to Pennsylvania because he

thought many people were trying to steal the gold book from him, and so he decided to take Emma and move back to her father's home in Pennsylvania. Hiding the gold book in a barrel of beans in the back of his wagon, Joseph and Emma Smith rode out of town toward Harmony on a wintry day in December 1827.

The Translation of the Book of Mormon

Joseph and Emma Smith stayed temporarily with the Hale family before purchasing a small two-story home, where Smith began his translation of the *Book of Mormon* sometime between December 1827 and February 1828.⁴¹ Although the Bible records no such spiritual gift as translation,⁴² Joseph Smith claimed to possess the spirit of revelation and translation.

Although the detailed process of how Joseph Smith translated the *Book of Mormon* is not fully known, it seems clear that he would stare at the seer stone or the Urim and Thummim through which he would see words, similar to seeing lost objects or treasure, and dictate them to a secretary, who would write them down.⁴³ Smith would apparently stare for hours through egg-shaped seer stones located at the bottom of a hat, and dictate—by the gift and power of God—English characters he saw to his scribes, Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery.⁴⁴ This is how Daniel Peterson, a professor at Brigham Young University, describes Joseph Smith's so-called translation process of the *Book of Mormon*:

We know that Joseph didn't translate the way that a scholar would translate. He didn't know Egyptian. There were a couple of means that were prepared for this. One was he used an instrument that was found with the plates that was called the Urim and Thummim. This is a kind of a divinatory device that goes back into Old Testament times. Actually most of the translation was done using something called a seer stone. He would put the stone in the bottom of a hat, presumably to exclude

surrounding light. And then he would put his face into the hat. It's a kind of a strange image for us.⁴⁵

It is also said that Joseph Smith seemed to be in the grip of creative forces that caused him to dictate in rapid fashion, with pages pouring out of his mind like *Messiah* from the pen of George Frideric Handel. With this understanding, the *Book of Mormon* is really more a revelation than a translation.⁴⁶ LDS historian Richard Lyman Bushman succinctly summarizes Smith's translation powers and process this way:

Neither his education nor his Christian upbringing prepared Joseph to translate a book, but the magic culture may have. Treasure-seeking taught Joseph to look for the unseen in a stone. His first reaction when he brought home the Urim and Thummim was delight with its divining powers. "I can see any thing," he told his friend Joseph Knight. He knew from working with his own seer stone what to expect from the Urim and Thummim: he would "see." Practice with his scrying stones carried over to translation of the gold plates. In fact, as work on the *Book of Mormon* proceeded, a seer stone took the place of the Urim and Thummim as an aid in the work, blending magic with inspired translation.⁴⁷

The *Book of Mormon* translation was finished between April and June of 1829, approximately sixteen to seventeen months after Smith had started. Immediately following the completion of the translation, Smith showed it to eleven people. But we know that six of these witnesses—including key early Mormon leaders Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer—would eventually leave the LDS Church.⁴⁸ Joseph Smith reported that he returned the original gold plates to Moroni, who apparently took them into heaven. On June 11, 1829, Joseph Smith was granted a copyright and began to plan the publication of the *Book of Mormon*.⁴⁹

As Smith was translating the *Book of Mormon*, he was also engaged in far-out interpretations of the Bible. In April 1829, while in Pennsylvania, he claimed to receive a revelation that the apostle John was still living,⁵⁰ based on John 21:20–23:

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to him and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

More Supernatural Visitations and the Mormon Priesthoods

The Joseph Smith story continues with more supernatural visitations from John the Baptist and the apostles Peter, James, and John.⁵¹ The Mormon Church claims that through these heavenly visits it alone possesses the God-given authority of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods to act as the only lawful agent in building the kingdom of God on earth.⁵²

On May 15, 1829, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery went into the woods to pray along Pennsylvania’s Susquehanna River. While they were engaged in prayer together, John the Baptist—acting under the authority of the apostles Peter, James, and John—descended from heaven, laid his hands on them, and authoritatively imparted the priesthood of Aaron.⁵³ John the Baptist then directed Smith and Cowdery to baptize each other in the river. They emerged out of the water full of the Holy Ghost, prophesying, and experiencing a new enlightenment to the true meaning of the Bible.

As the story was told—although the exact time is unclear—shortly after the visitation by John the Baptist, Smith

and Cowdery were also visited by the apostles Peter, James, and John, who ordained them into the advanced Melchizedek Priesthood and gave them the keys of apostleship.⁵⁴

Although Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had received the authority of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods, they had not as yet received from Elijah the keys of sealing, binding, and loosing, relating to the ability to perform ordinances for the living and the dead.⁵⁵ This anointing was restored by Elijah when he apparently appeared to them during the dedication of the Kirtland, Ohio, temple in 1836.

The Publication of the Book of Mormon

Joseph Smith chose twenty-three-year-old printer Egert Grandin of Palmyra, New York, to publish the first edition of the *Book of Mormon* manuscript. Oliver Cowdery and Hyrum Smith supervised the printing, while Joseph Smith continued to live in Pennsylvania. The pages of the *Book of Mormon* were gradually taken to Grandin over several months. Since the translation manuscript was delivered with rough formatting, Grandin's typesetter, John Gilbert, added the punctuation and paragraphing.⁵⁶ On August 17, 1829, five thousand copies of the *Book of Mormon* were printed, costing approximately \$3,000. It went on sale on April 6, 1830, for \$1.25 per copy.

The First Mormon Church

Ten years after his First Vision, and only a few weeks after the publication of the *Book of Mormon*, Joseph Smith—now twenty-four years old—officially organized the first Mormon church on April 6, 1830, based in the little farmhouse of Peter Whitmer Sr. in Fayette, New York.⁵⁷ Mormons believe that April 6 is the birthday of Jesus Christ himself and thus connect the incarnation of Jesus Christ with the birth of the first Mormon church.⁵⁸

Approximately forty to fifty people gathered for the official ceremony, and Smith appointed official organizers to meet New York's legal requirements for incorporating a religious society. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery ordained each other to be the church's first elders. The new kingdom of God on earth was named the *Church of Christ*.

During the first general conference of the Mormon Church on June 9, 1830,⁵⁹ Joseph Smith received a revelation declaring himself the Mormons' primary "seer, translator, prophet, and apostle of Jesus Christ."⁶⁰ In this revelation, the Lord instructed the members of the newborn church to receive Joseph's words as if they were spoken by God himself.⁶¹ Joseph Smith made it very clear from the beginning of the LDS Church that he alone held the keys of the mysteries of the kingdom of God on earth, and that only his utterances carried God's authority for the Latter-day Saints.⁶² To this day, the ultimate authority of the Mormon Church is only and exclusively embodied in its residing President and Prophet.

Although Joseph Smith continued to live in Pennsylvania, the proactive exertion of his claims of ultimate authority and revelations from God would lead a small group of Mormons westward into lands unknown—and into a future normally found only in fairy tales.

NOTES

I. Introduction

1. Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon & an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 14–15.

2. *Ibid.*, 14.

3. *Ibid.*, 140.

4. Robert L. Millet, *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 61.

5. Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?* 57.

6. *Ibid.*, 58.

7. *Ibid.*, 59.

8. *Book of Mormon*: 1 Nephi 13:25–29; *Doctrine and Covenants* 73, 76; LDS Church Educational System, *Doctrine and Covenants: Student Manual, Religion 324 and 325* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 153–54, 158.

9. Primarily www.lds.org and www.Mormon.org.

10. LDS Church Educational System, *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, www.ldsces.org.

11. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), www.lib.byu.edu/Macmillan.

Chapter 1: Joseph Smith: The Restorer of the True Gospel?

1. Some Mormons I conversed with insist that God would have chosen another

latter-day prophet if Joseph Smith had failed for some reason. But Mormons do not simply admire Joseph Smith as Christians respect Billy Graham; they have elevated him to the biblical status of Abraham, Moses, Peter, and Paul. See Robert L. Millet, *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 157. Latter-day Saints exalt Joseph Smith to a status of greatness that is hard for Christians to imagine. Mormons believe Smith was a pre-existent spirit-man who ranked with Adam and Abraham. See *Pearl of Great Price: Abraham 3:22–23*; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 396. Mormons believe that Smith, as second only to Jesus Christ, has done more for the salvation of men in this world than any other man who has ever lived on earth. See *Doctrine and Covenants* (hereafter DC) 135:3. In their eyes, Joseph Smith is greater than any Old Testament prophet or New Testament apostle, including Moses, Abraham, Paul, and John. See LDS Church Educational System, *Doctrine and Covenants: Student Manual, Religion 324 and 325* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 349. Although Mormons do not worship Joseph Smith, they do acclaim his status of preexistent greatness and latter-day calling to a level of superiority that is unprecedented in the history of Christianity. One of the best biographies on Joseph Smith has been written by

LDS Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

2. In 1638, Robert Smith—Joseph Smith's third great-grandfather—emigrated from England to Boston. The Smith genealogy records five generations that lived in and around Topsfield Township of northeastern Massachusetts, approximately twenty miles north of Boston. Joseph Smith Sr. was born in Topsfield on July 12, 1771, to Asahel Smith and his wife, Mary. After marrying Lucy Mack, Joseph Smith Sr. moved to the town of Sharon, Windsor County, Vermont, where he began working his father-in-law's farm.

3. The Palmyra temple sits today on a high ridge at the east end of the original hundred acres of the Joseph Smith Sr. farm in Manchester Township, New York, and was dedicated by the LDS Church on April 6, 2000—the 170th anniversary of the organization of the Mormon Church.

4. Although the 1820 date of the First Vision is the official position of the LDS Church, there are many historical questions concerning whether this date and Smith's description of his First Vision are accurate.

5. *Pearl of Great Price*: Joseph Smith—History.

6. There were many wild-eyed preachers in western New York, including Lorenzo Dow (nicknamed “Crazy Dow”), after whom Brigham Young's older brother was named, and unwashed evangelist Isaac Bullard, who ran around draped in bearskin yelling his message of free love. And it was here that Charles Finney began his evangelistic preaching crusades in 1824 and 1825.

7. Actually, early Christian restorationist movements did use the motto “The Bible is our creed.” Although many Mormons take pride in rejecting historical Christian creeds, they have creeds themselves.

8. Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 206.

9. Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 151–52, 237–38.

10. See Craig Blomberg's excellent evaluation of early Mormonism in Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, eds., *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 322–24; Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 18; Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon & an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 52.

11. Although the Smith family belonged to the Presbyterian Church, apparently fourteen-year-old Joseph Jr. was personally attracted to the Methodists.

12. Joseph Smith—History, 1:5–10.

13. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 37; LDS Church Educational System, *Church History in the Fulness of Times, Religion 341–43* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1993), 31. It is recorded that Joseph Smith stated that he became very serious about Christianity at the age of twelve.

14. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 39; *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 33. This is the first time that Joseph Smith prayed out loud.

15. *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 33; Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 40; Joseph Smith—History, 1:15. Joseph Smith describes his First Vision as a deliverance experience.

16. Although this is the official LDS position, Joseph Smith actually did not indicate that he saw two personages until 1835, and they were not identified as the Father and the Son until 1838.

17. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 36. Joseph Smith Sr. probably had a strong influence on Joseph Smith Jr., since it is recorded that he had numerous visions before and after Joseph Smith Jr.'s First Vision experience.

18. *Ibid.*, 39–40.

19. Richard L. Anderson, "Joseph Smith's Testimony of the First Vision," *Ensign*, April 1996, 10–21.
20. Joseph Smith, www.JosephSmith.net. See under "Mission of the Prophet: The First Vision."
21. Gordon B. Hinckley, "What Are People Asking about us?" LDS General Conference, October 1998, www.lightplanet.com/mormons/conferences/98_oct/index.htm.
22. www.JosephSmith.net; Richard and Joan Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 24. The sacred grove of Joseph Smith's First Vision is owned today by the LDS Church.
23. Joseph Smith—History, 1:28.
24. *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 37.
25. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 48–52.
26. The hundreds of Indian burial mounds scattered throughout western New York were of great interest to early European settlers. As a result, an extensive written folklore emerged, speculating on the origins of ancient American Indian civilizations. Mormons believe that American Indians are the direct ancestors of the *Book of Mormon's* Lamanite people and thus are also direct descendants of Israelites.
27. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 51.
28. *Ibid.*, 49.
29. *Book of Mormon*: Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.
30. www.HillCumorah.org. A twelve-meter granite-and-bronze monument to Moroni stands on Hill Cumorah in New York today.
31. Because this book was made of pure gold—although some Mormons say it was an alloy of copper and gold and so simply had the appearance of gold—Moroni warned Joseph Jr. that it must not be sold in order for him to become rich.
32. Ex. 28:30; 1 Sam. 28:6; Ezra 2:63.
33. *Book of Mormon*: Mormon 9:32–34; LDS Church Educational System, *Book of Mormon: Student Manual, Religion 121 and 122* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996), 4.
34. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:537.
35. www.HillCumorah.org. The Hill Cumorah is located between the villages of Palmyra and Manchester and each summer is the site of an outdoor Mormon pageant featuring a cast of over six hundred that apparently attracts audiences of up to a hundred thousand each year.
36. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 45.
37. Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.
38. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, s.v. "Angel Moroni Statue" (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 39.
39. Ostling and Ostling, *Mormon America*, 25.
40. Joseph Smith—History, 1:59.
41. *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 45.
42. The LDS seventh Article of Faith reads, "We believe in the gift of tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues, and so forth." There is no mention of a gift of translation here either. See DC 8:1–3 concerning the spirit of revelation and translation requested by Oliver Cowdery; *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual*, 18.
43. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 71–74.
44. DC 1:29; DC 3, 5 (Martin Harris); DC 6 (Oliver Cowdery); *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual*, 3, 9, 12, 14, 28; DC 13.
45. PBS television special *The Mormons*, 2007.
46. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 105.
47. *Ibid.*, 130.
48. *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 61.
49. *Ibid.*, 32. There were apparently eleven special witnesses to the *Book of*

Mormon before its publication. Of these witnesses, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, David, John, and Jacob Whitmer, and Hiram Page all later left or were excommunicated from the Mormon Church.

50. DC 7; *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual*, 17.

51. DC 13; *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual*, 28. The story concerning the visit of John the Baptist, however, was not told until many years later. See Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 75.

52. DC 7.

53. Joseph Smith—History, 1:69; DC 13; *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual*, 28.

54. DC 7:7; 27:12–13; 128:20; *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 56. The keys of the kingdom given to Joseph Smith were the keys of the First Presidency that Mormons say Peter, James, and John received from Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

55. DC 2; *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual*, 6; *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 6–8.

56. *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 64.

57. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 109. The exact location of the LDS Church's first organization is disputed.

58. DC 20:1. God revealed to Joseph Smith the exact day on which the new latter-day Mormon Church should be organized. See *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 64. The LDS Church reconstructed Whitmer's log home in 1980.

59. *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 70–71.

60. DC 21:1–2; *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual*, 43.

61. DC 21:5.

62. Ibid., 28; *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual*, 57–59.

Chapter 2: Joseph Smith's Mormons Move West

1. *Pearl of Great Price*: Moses 7:19–21.

2. *Book of Mormon*: Ether 13:2–3; 3 Nephi 20:22.

3. *Doctrine and Covenants* (hereafter DC) 29:7–9.

4. Ibid., 21.

5. Ibid., 22.

6. Ibid., 24.

7. LDS Church Educational System, *Church History in the Fulness of Times, Religion 341–43* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1993), 70.

8. DC 3, 7–9, 13, 76.

9. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 133–42.

10. DC 28:1–7.

11. Ibid., 3:18, 20; 10:48.

12. Ibid., 32–33.

13. *Book of Mormon*: Alma 9:17.

14. DC 28:8; 30; 32.

15. *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 85.

16. Ibid., 82.

17. DC 35.

18. Ibid., 37, 38:31–32.

19. Ibid., 37:1; LDS Church Educational System, *Doctrine and Covenants: Student Manual, Religion 324 and 325* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 74.

20. DC 28:9.

21. www.lds.org. See under "About the Church: Places to Visit."

22. In 1979, the Mormon Church purchased the Newel Whitney store and restored it. It was officially dedicated on August 25, 1984.

23. DC 42.

24. Ibid., 41; *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual*, 81.

25. DC 41.

26. Ibid., 42, 51. For the list of revelations related to Joseph Smith's Law of Consecration, see *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 98.