

MORMONISM
THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS
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1. Introduction

1. Why study this faith?
 - Claims of the LDS Church
 - Growth of the LDS Church
 - Importance of doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16)
2. What are the challenges to understanding Mormonism?
 - Same vocabulary—different dictionary
 - Mormon epistemology (how we know something is true)
 - Mormon family and social structure

2 Brief Overview of Church History

1. Joseph Smith 1805 - 1844
2. Early 19th Century setting
3. Key Events in Mormon History
 - 1820 Joseph Smith's "First Vision"
 - 1823-26 Visit by the Angel Moroni; "golden plates" found in the Hill Cumorah in New York
 - 1830 Publication of the Book of Mormon; Church founded
 - 1831-1844 Period of membership growth and doctrinal development
 - 1844 Death of Joseph Smith; killed by a mob at Carthage jail
 - 1845 Westward migration under leadership of Brigham Young
 - 1847 Founding of Salt Lake City in the territory of Utah
 - 1890 Due to pressure by US government, LDS Church ends the practice of polygamy
 - 1978 President Kimball opens the church priesthood to blacks
 - 2000 Membership reaches 11 million; for the first time more than 50% of membership are outside the United States.

3. Key Truth Claims

1. Apostasy of earliest Christianity; true Church of Jesus Christ disappears from the earth
 - Loss of Priesthood authority (to baptize, etc.)
 - Corruption/Loss of doctrine; corruption of Biblical text
2. Restoration of the true Church of Jesus under Joseph Smith in 1830
3. Continuing revelation
4. Living Prophet & Apostles
5. Families can be together forever.

4. Self Perception

1. "Christians"—but not traditional Christians
2. The "one true Church"
3. Doing God's work; hard working & prepared
5. Persecuted and misunderstood

5. Mormon Scriptures: "The Four Standard Works"

1. **The Book of Mormon: *According to Mormonism, this book was translated by Joseph Smith, "by the power of God", from ancient gold plates. These plates were said to contain a record of the ancient inhabitants of the Americas.***

Here's the basic story: A righteous Jewish man, Lehi and his family are warned by God in about 600 BC to flee the coming Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. With God's guidance they crossed the ocean and arrived in the Americas. Lehi's son Nephi was righteous, and

became the father of the righteous “Nephites”. Lehi’s other son Laman was rebellious and wicked, and became the father of the wicked Lamanites. Because of the wickedness of the Lamanites, God marked them with “dark skin”. Over the next five centuries, the Nephites and the Lamanites greatly multiplied, filled the land, and engaged in many battles.

The climax in the story comes in 30 AD when Jesus visits the Americas following his resurrection, preaches to the people, and establishes his church in the Americas. Around 400 AD, there was one final great battle between the Nephites and the Lamanites that took place on the “Hill Cumorah”. The Lamanites wiped out the Nephites, except for Moroni, son of Mormon. Moroni then carefully buried the record of the Nephites which had been inscribed on golden plates, with the prayer that they would “come forth” in the fullness of time in the latter days. (*Note: It was Moroni, as an angelic being, who Smith claims appeared to him in his bedroom and informed him of the location of the plates.*) According to Mormonism, the Lamanites were the “principal ancestors” of the native North and South American Indians.

2. Doctrine and Covenants

Joseph claimed to receive direct revelations from God, which were written down, then revised and published in their current form in 1833. They are an Important source for Mormon life and doctrine.

3. The Pearl of Great Price

A collection of writings by Joseph Smith, including the official story of the “First Vision” (*Joseph Smith—History*), the *Articles of Faith*, *The Book of Abraham* (“translated” by Joseph Smith from an Egyptian papyrus he bought in Kirkland, Ohio; he said it was written by Abraham’s “own hand” while he was in Egypt); and two other writings.

4. The King James Version of the Bible

The Bible is believed to be the word of God “so far as it is translated correctly”.

The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible

Joseph Smith received a revelation mandating a new translation of the Bible to “correct all the errors”. He made many revisions to the King James Bible, and even added a passage to the book of Genesis that “prophesied” the coming of a “great seer” named Joseph!

6. Ten Distinctive Teachings & Practices

1. A heavenly Father and heavenly family.

- a. God is the almighty ruler of the universe, and dwells in heaven.
- b. God is a glorified, perfected man, a “personage of flesh and bones”.
- c. God is our Heavenly Father. All people are literally the offspring of a heavenly (flesh and bones) father and mother.
- d. God the Father has not always been God. He was once a man, but became God by progressing and gaining knowledge. He had a heavenly Father, who had a heavenly Father before him.
- e. Angels, demons, Satan, the gods, people—we’re all the same species.

2. Adam and Eve: a fall upward

- a. In order for us to progress and develop the Godlike qualities of our heavenly parents, we had to leave our celestial home to be tested and gain experience.
- b. Adam and Eve were the first spirit children to receive mortal bodies on this earth.
- c. The fall was ultimately a good thing and a blessing to all mankind, because it allowed for procreation, and the opportunity for people to gain eternal life.
- d. Humans beings have the potential to become Gods—just like God is God!
Famous couplet: **As man now is, God once was;
as God now is, man may become.**

3. Prophets: You don’t have a church without one!

- a. Prophets are called by God to be his representative on earth. The prophet teaches truth and interprets the word of God. He receives revelations and directions from the Lord.

- b. We have a prophet living on the earth today. This prophet is the president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. [Currently it's Russel M. Nelson.] He has the right to revelation for the entire Church.
- c. We should do those things the prophets tell us to do. A prophet will never be allowed to lead the Church astray. Great blessings follow obedience to the prophet.

4. Jesus and the Atonement

- a. Jesus is the firstborn spirit child of our heavenly parents. Lucifer is also a spirit child. They are both our brothers. Lucifer and one third of the spirit children rebelled against the Father; they were denied the right to receive mortal bodies.
- b. Jesus was born on this earth of a mortal mother and an immortal father [through normal procreation]; that is why he is called the “Only Begotten Son”. He inherited divine powers from his Father, and mortality from his mother.
- c. His life is an example of how we should obey the commandments to love God and love our neighbor.
- d. In Gethsemane, he suffered the awful anguish of punishment for every sin that any human being has ever committed. On the cross, the Father had withdrawn from Him so Jesus could have all the glory of his victory over sin and death.
- e. On the third day, he returned to his body and took it up again.
- f. Jesus suffered and died so that we could receive the all the blessings of the plan of salvation. To receive these blessings, we must come unto Him, repent of our sins, and love Him with all our hearts.
- g. Jesus has advanced to Godhood, just like Heavenly Father, and is a member of the Godhead (three separate Gods—Father, Son & Holy Ghost). Mormons call him “the Savior”, because he saved the human race from permanent physical death, and opened the door to the possibility of exaltation.

5. The Priesthood

- a. The priesthood is authority from Heavenly Father to men to allow them to act in the name of God and perform various ordinances, such as baptism, temple marriage, etc.
- b. Only worthy men may receive the priesthood.
- c. The greater priesthood is the Melchizedek Priesthood—those holding this priesthood have the authority and power to lead the Church. The lesser priesthood is the Aaronic Priesthood—those holding this priesthood have authority to baptize and serve the sacrament. Worthy boys ages 12 and up may receive the Aaronic Priesthood.
- d. The sacraments and ordinances of salvation are a prerequisite for admission to the kingdom of God and are administered only by the official priesthood of the LDS church. All other baptisms are invalid.

6. The Church: then and now

- a. Jesus established his Church (in both Jerusalem and in the Americas) when he was on the earth. Through the persecution and death of Church leaders and apostasy of the people, the Church of Jesus Christ was taken from the earth.
- b. More and more error crept into Church doctrine, and soon the dissolution of the Church was complete (called “the great apostasy”). Soon pagan beliefs dominated the thinking of those called “Christians”.
- c. For many hundred of years people lived in spiritual darkness. In the spring of 1820, Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph Smith. The Lord had chosen a new prophet and the Church was restored to the earth.
- d. The LDS Church sees itself as the custodian of the Gospel. One cannot fully come to Christ and receive all the blessings he offers independent of the LDS Church.

7. Faith, Repentance, Baptism

- a. Faith must be centered in the Lord Jesus Christ, in our Heavenly Father, and in the Holy Ghost. [Three separate beings—three Gods]
- b. Repentance means we must recognize our sins, feel sorrow for our sins, forsake our sins, confess our sins, make restitution, and forgive others. To make our repentance complete we must always keep the commandments of the Lord.
- c. We must be baptized for the remission of our sins. If we repent and are baptized, our sins are forgiven through the atonement of Jesus Christ.
- d. Upon Baptism, the member receives the privilege of being guided by the Holy Ghost, the third member of the Godhead. The Holy Ghost has a “body of spirit in the form of a man” (no one knows why he doesn’t have a physical body like the Father and Jesus).

8. The Temple: It’s Crucial for Eternal Life—but only the worthy may enter

- a. Only members of the Church who live righteously are permitted to enter the temple. Certain special, spiritual blessings are given to worthy and faithful saints [Church members], called endowments. Recipients are endowed with power and knowledge.
- b. Eternal marriage is performed in the temple. An eternal marriage allows us to be together forever, with our children. We can live in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom of God. We can be exalted as God is now and we can increase our family by having spirit children.
- c. In the temple, ordinances can be performed by proxy on behalf of those who are dead, including baptism, sealings, and endowments. The spirits of the dead may choose to accept or reject these ordinances.
- d. Mormons must receive a “temple recommend” from their bishop to be deemed worthy enough to go to the temple. Non-Mormons cannot attend a wedding in the temple, not even close family members. After going through the endowment ceremony, faithful Mormons wear “temple garments” under their everyday clothes.

9. Living the Mormon Life

- a. The fullness of the gospel is called “the new and everlasting covenant” by the Lord.
- b. When we accept the “new and everlasting covenant” we agree to repent, to be baptized, to receive the Holy Ghost, to receive our endowments, to receive the covenant of marriage in the temple and to live righteously to the end of our lives. We must keep all our covenants with exactness in order to receive the celestial kingdom.
- c. Other commandments: Keep the Sabbath Day holy; fast one Sunday per month; follow the Word of Wisdom [no alcohol; no tobacco; no coffee & tea; eat meat sparingly]; pay one tenth of income as a tithe; serve in the local ward; missionary work; temple work & more. The obedient gain eternal life.
- d. There are many other spoken and unspoken expectations for Mormons, such as doing genealogical work, storing up a year’s supply of food, and having large families.

10. Levels of Heaven

- a. At the last judgment we will be judged by our words, works and thoughts, and will be assigned to the kingdom we have earned.
- b. There are four possibilities: The Celestial Kingdom; the Terrestrial Kingdom; the Telestial Kingdom or Outer Darkness.
- c. We can become Gods like our Heavenly Father; this is exaltation. If we prove faithful and obedient to all the commandments of the Lord, we will live in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom.

“Requirements for exaltation: Be baptized and confirmed a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, receive the Holy Ghost, receive the temple endowment, be married for time and all eternity, love God and worship Him, have faith in Jesus Christ, love our neighbor, live the law of chastity, repent of wrong doings, pay honest tithes and offerings,

be honest in our dealings with others and with the Lord, speak the truth always, obey the Word of Wisdom, search out our kindred dead and perform the saving ordinances of the gospel for them, keep the sabbath day holy, attend church meetings as regularly as possible, renew our baptismal covenants as we partake of the sacrament, love and strengthen our family members in the ways of the Lord, have family and individual prayers every day, honor our parents, teach the gospel to others by word and example, study the scriptures, and listen to and obey the words of the prophets of the Lord. In other words, each person must endure in faithfulness, keeping all the Lord's commandments until the end of his life on earth."

- d. General salvation are gifts of because of the atonement of Jesus Christ, but getting to the highest level of heaven and reaching Godhood must be earned ("Grace" is defined as "enabling power" to keep all the commandments.) Only those who reach the Celestial Kingdom will enjoy fellowship with Heavenly Father & Mother, as well as Jesus and the Holy Ghost. They will become Gods in their own right, live married lives, and will procreate, producing their own spirit children.
- e. Outer darkness is reserved for Satan and the preexistent spirit children who rebelled against Heavenly Father. It is also the destination for those who have had a "testimony" of the truth of the LDS Gospel but then reject their testimony and leave the Church.

7. Historical Problems

1. Vision Problems

- a. The official version of the First Vision was written in 1838 and is now in *The Pearl of Great Price*. The earliest *version* of the story was written in 1832. The 1832 account is written in Joseph's own handwriting and is available to view online.
- b. There are significant difference in the two versions. The most important difference is that in the 1832 version Joseph has a vision of Jesus *alone*, and the conversation is about Joseph being forgiven of his sins. In the 1838 version, Joseph sees "two personages", the Father and the Son, and the conversation is about all the churches being wrong and that Joseph shouldn't join any of them. These are not just minor details that are different. The LDS church bases important theology about God the Father on this vision.

2. Book of Mormon Problems

- a. There are countless problems with LDS claim that the Book of Mormon is an ancient book that was unearthed by Joseph Smith in 1826 and translated "by the power of God".
- b. There are many linguistic and historical anachronisms.
- c. The Book of Mormon says it is written in "reformed Egyptian" or using Egyptian characters. No pre-Columbian inscriptions using "Egyptian" have ever been found in the Americas.
- d. The Book of Mormon teaches that the descendants of Lehi multiplied and covered all the Americas. It says they built fortified cities, towers, highways, elegant and spacious buildings, synagogues, churches, etc. But not **a single person, place or event in the Book of Mormon has been confirmed by non-Mormon archaeologists.**
- e. The Book of Mormon talks about extensive steel works and the production of tools, machinery, and weapons of war. But there is no evidence of a pre-Columbian ferrous industry in the Americas.
- f. DNA evidence confirms that the American Indians are of Asian origin, not Jewish.
- g. Mormons insist The Book of Mormon contains "the fullness of the Gospel". But it is missing all the most distinctive Mormon beliefs and practices, such as the plurality of Gods, that God is an exalted man, that man can become God, the preexistence, the three levels of heaven, the eternal marriage doctrine, baptism for the dead, the word of wisdom, church organization, and the Aaronic priesthood.
- h. Since Moroni took the plates back from Joseph when the Book of Mormon was finished, we have no capability to judge his ability to translate ancient texts "by the power of God.

3. Polygamy Problems

- a. Joseph Smith started secretly practicing “spiritual wifery” in 1833, when a teenager named Fanny Alger came to live in the home he shared with his wife Emma.
- b. Between 1833 and his death in 1844, Smith “married” as many as 40 women, some of them teenagers as young as 14, and some who were already *married to other men*. (The LDS Church recently acknowledge this.) Joseph publicly denied that he was practicing polygamy, although he and other top leaders of the Church were actually practicing it secretly. A “revelation”, Doctrine and Covenants Section 132, was recorded in 1843 that sanctified the practice.
- c. Open polygamy was practiced after Brigham Young and the Mormons migrated to the Salt Lake Valley in 1845.
- d. In 1890, the President of the Church, Wilford Woodruff, put a stop to polygamy due to pressure from the U.S. Government. Fundamentalist Mormons today continue to practice polygamy, believing that Woodruff disobeyed God’s specific command

4. Book of Abraham Problems

- a. Joseph Smith acquired an Egyptian papyrus in 1835 and proclaimed that it was written “by Abraham’s own hand” while he was in Egypt. He also claimed that he could translate it “by the power of God”. This “translation” is in *The Pearl of Great Price* as *The Book of Abraham*. The original papyrus was thought to be lost.
- b. After the papyrus was rediscovered in the 1960’s, Egyptologists declared that it was a common Egyptian funeral document for a priest named Hor, with incantations to help him “live” in the afterlife. It dates from around the first century. The document has nothing to do with Abraham. This casts serious doubt on his claim to be able to translate ancient writings “by the gift and power of God”, and it casts doubt on the Book of Mormon itself.
- c. See The Lost Book of Abraham documentary, available at <http://www.mrm.org/product/the-lost-book-of-abraham>

6. Racial problems

- a. The Book of Mormon teaches that the sinful Lamanites received a mark of God’s curse—dark skin. When a Lamanite repented, their skin would turn white. (2 Nephi 5:21-23; 3 Nephi 2:15-16)
- b. Moses 7:8 (in *The Pearl of Great Price*), the mark of Cain was black skin.
- c. In Abraham 1:21-27 the Egyptians are identified as being descended from Cain, and thus denied the priesthood. This passage was used to support the Mormon doctrine that blacks could not hold the priesthood.
- d. Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff and Joseph Fielding Smith, all Presidents of the Church, very specifically taught that black skin was a mark of the curse.
- e. Church President Joseph Fielding Smith taught that inferior spirit children of Heavenly Father were the ones who were sent to inhabit black bodies.
- f. In 1978 (with the Church under substantial pressure), President Spencer Kimball received a revelation and announced that the Lord had lifted the priesthood ban.

Good Resources

mrm.org

Rowe, David. *I Love Mormons: A New Way to Share Christ with Latter-Day Saints*. Baker Books, 2005.