

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

By **Tim Martin**

Founder: Joseph Smith Jr. (1805-1844).

Founding: April 6, 1830 in Palmyra, New York.

Publications: Several magazines such as “Ensign” for adults, *New Era* for youth and *Friend for Children* along with many books and church curriculum.

Unique Terms: Local churches are called *Wards*, several Wards make up a *Stake*.

Sacred Scriptures: Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price.

History

Joseph Smith Jr. claimed that in 1820, at 15 years of age, he was caught up in religious revivals in his home town of Palmyra, New York. Amidst the revivals were attempts by competing denominations to demonstrate that the others were in error. So great was the “confusion and strife” that Smith concluded that “it was impossible for a person young as [he] was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong.”¹

Soon after, Smith was reading James 1:5, which instructs Christians searching for wisdom to ask God, who will supply it. Smith understood this verse to mean that he could ask God which church was correct so he could join it. He retired to a grove of trees near his house to pray. Soon after, God the Father and Jesus descended from the clouds above. Jesus’ answer to Smith’s prayer was that “[he] must join none of them, for they were all wrong...all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt.”² This visitation is known as the “first vision.”

Three years later, an angel named Moroni appeared to Smith and instructed him to go to a hill nearby his home where he would find golden plates inscribed with the record of the ancient inhabitants of America. From 1827 to 1829, Smith translated them into the Book of Mormon.³ Afterwards, the golden plates were returned to Moroni.⁴ The Book of Mormon was published in March of 1830, and the “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints”(hereafter LDS) was formed a few weeks later.⁵ After experiencing hostility and persecution, Smith and many of his followers moved several times. In 1839, they finally settled in Nauvoo, Illinois.

According to the LDS Church, Smith received a revelation from God commanding him to live plural marriage (polygamy) in 1831. “Eventually, he and a small number of Church leaders entered into plural marriages.”⁶ In 1843, Smith dictated the revelation to his brother Hyrum, it was made public in 1852, then placed in the Doctrine and Covenants in 1876.⁷ Smith, however, publically denied his involvement with plural marriage in 1844 by swearing, “What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one.”⁸ Interestingly, the LDS Family Search Center in Salt Lake City, Utah, records that Smith had 20 wives by this time.⁹

Smith’s former Second Counselor, William Law, published a newspaper, *The Nauvoo Expositor*, accusing Joseph Smith of teaching polytheism and practicing polygamy. Smith declared the *Nauvoo Expositor* was a public nuisance and ordered the newspaper and the press that printed it destroyed. Following the destruction of the paper, Smith was arrested and jailed

along with his brother Hyrum and others in nearby Carthage, Illinois. An angry mob formed and rushed the jail in order to murder the Mormon leaders. Two guns had been smuggled into the jail that Joseph and Hyrum used to defend themselves. Joseph shot and killed two assailants and wounded a third before being shot and killed along with his brother on June 27, 1844.¹⁰

Following Smith's death, the church experienced some fragmentation with various leaders claiming to be Smith's successors. The majority eventually joined Brigham Young, one of Smith's Twelve Apostles, who led them to Salt Lake City, Utah. In a massive migration fraught with hardship, peril, and death, thousands of LDS pioneers journeyed to Utah often pulling all their possessions in handcarts. Under Young's leadership, Utah prospered and the church grew tremendously. LDS people from the East flocked to Utah along with thousands of converts from England and Scandinavia who immigrated to America.

Polygamy continued to be openly practiced by many Mormon leaders in Utah including Young. In 1890, the fourth Prophet Wilford Woodruff, received a new revelation ceasing the practice. Those who openly practice polygamy today are not members of the LDS Church but have broken away to form fundamentalist Mormon splinter groups such as Warren Jeff's Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ (FLDS).

In 1947, 117 years after it was founded, the LDS Church reached 1 million members. Just 16 years later in 1963 the church had 2 million members and jumped to 3 million 8 years after that in 1971. By the early 21 Century, the church was growing by an addition 1 million every three years (or less). In 2007, Church membership was reported as over 13 million.¹¹

Doctrine

Authority: The LDS Church holds to four books of scripture, known as the standard works: the Bible (King James Version), the Book of Mormon, Doctrine & Covenants (D&C), and Pearl of Great Price. The LDS Articles of Faith explains that the Bible is God's word "as far as it is translated correctly."¹² The other three scriptures do not have this qualification.

The Book of Mormon purports that Lehi, a Jewish man, and his extended family fled Jerusalem in a ship about 600 BC, eventually landing somewhere in Central America. In the centuries that followed, these Jewish people multiplied and became two great nations – the Nephites and the Lamanites. After years of warfare, the Nephites were exterminated by the Lamanites, who then became the "principle ancestors of the American Indians."¹³

The D&C is largely a collection of prophecies received by Joseph Smith. The Pearl of Great Price is a collection of five works. The largest being Smith's "inspired revision" of Genesis 1-6:13.¹⁴ Another large section is "The Book of Abraham." It was supposedly translated from Egyptian scrolls obtained by Smith along with mummies from a traveling antiquities dealer.¹⁵ The book is claimed to have been written by the biblical Abraham while he lived in Egypt.

The LDS Church is led by 15 apostles. The senior apostle is also God's prophet, and functions as the president of the church. "He selects two other apostles as counselors. These three function as the First Presidency."¹⁶ The remaining 12 apostles "form the Quorum of the Twelve."¹⁷ LDS "Church members view senior Church leaders – Joseph Smith, Brigham Young and the presidents of the Church that followed – as prophets of God in the same way they view Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and the apostles in the day of Jesus Christ."¹⁸

God: God, who is normally called Heavenly Father, has not always been God. In perhaps one of Smith's most famous sermons, he said "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, ... I am going to tell you how God came to be God. He was once a man like us; yea that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did...."¹⁹ Lorenzo Snow, an early apostle and contemporary of Joseph Smith explained it in a couplet: "As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man by be."²⁰ How did this mortal man become God?

By obedience to eternal gospel principles, he progressed from one state of life to another until he attained the state that we call exaltation or godhood. In such a condition, he and our mother in heaven were empowered to give birth to spirit children whose potential was equal to that of their heavenly parents. We are those spirit children.²¹

Humanity/Jesus: As just explained, humans were born as spirit children of Heavenly Father and Mother. This period of life before birth on earth is called "the First Estate." Therein, Heavenly Father called a council to announce His plan for us in this earth life. One key aspect of the plan is that His oldest son, Jesus (also named Jehovah), would be the savior. (Hence, Jesus is of the same nature as the rest of humanity). Another important part of the plan is that we would have "agency."

Agency is the “ability to choose and to act for yourself.”²² Hence, people do not possess a sin nature; they are neutral in matters of righteousness and have no inclination towards sin.

Lucifer, another one of our brothers, rejected this plan. He attempted to replace it with himself as the savior, and deny us our agency. Without agency, people would not make the wrong choice, thus “eliminating the possibility of sin.”²³ Lucifer rebelled and was joined by one third of the spirit children in a war against Heavenly Father. They were defeated and cast out of the preexistence. Lucifer became Satan and his followers became demons.

The remaining two thirds of the spirit children loyal to Heavenly Father would eventually be born to human families on earth. Some however, were less valiant in the pre-existence, thus, they were denied the priesthood. The Priesthood is “the eternal power and authority of God”²⁴ given to worthy male members. Without it, men are not able to progress to full salvation. To differentiate these humans from those who were more valiant, Heavenly Father marked them with dark skin. LDS apostle Bruce R. McConkie explained it this way:

Those who were less valiant in pre-existence and who thereby had certain spiritual restrictions imposed upon them during mortality are known to us as the negroes. Such spirits are sent to earth through the lineage of Cain, the mark put upon him for his rebellion against God and his murder of Abel being a black skin...The negroes are not equal with other races where the receipt of certain spiritual blessings are concerned, particularly the priesthood and the temple blessings that flow therefrom.²⁵

Thus, for most of its history the LDS Church has denied the Priesthood for people of color. Although they could always join the church, people of African decent were not allowed to go into a temple to perform necessary ordinances for exaltation. In 1978, the LDS prophet Spencer W. Kimball received a revelation instructing him to lift the priesthood ban. It was announced in the LDS’ Semiannual General Conference, then placed in the D&C. It states, “all worthy male members of the Church may be ordained to the priesthood without regard for race or color,” (D&C Declaration 2).

Salvation/exaltation: Just as God was born to human parents and progressed to the position of God, people in this earth life have the same opportunity. Smith said, “you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have done before you...”²⁶ Becoming a God is known as exaltation, or “salvation” in the highest sense of the word.

To achieve exaltation, a person must have faith in the LDS Jesus,²⁷ believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet, be baptized into the LDS Church and comply with “everything which God has commanded.”²⁸ Finally, the Mormon must participate in secret temple ceremonies. To do so, they must first be interviewed by their Bishop and Stake President to see if they qualify to enter the temple. Part of the interview process will examine if the member abstains from “tea, coffee, liquor, tobacco,” and gives a full 10% of their income to the LDS Church, and striving to “live righteously in all other ways.”²⁹ Temple rituals include a marriage ceremony joining couples together for “time and all eternity.” These same rituals are also performed in behalf of people who have died, and are in the spirit world. This vicarious work for the dead is akin to Jesus’ vicarious work. “Your effort approaches the spirit of the Savior’s atoning sacrifice – you perform a saving work for others that they cannot do for themselves.”³⁰

After death, everyone goes to one of two places. Valiant Latter-day Saints go to Paradise and everyone else to Spirit Prison. Even LDS members who were less than valiant will go to Spirit Prison. Missionaries from Paradise will go to Spirit prison to proselytize those who have never heard the gospel in the earth life (such as those who died before Joseph Smith restored the Gospel in 1830 and others who have never been taught by Mormon missionaries).

Eventually everyone will be released from Spirit Prison and Paradise, be reunited with their physical bodies (resurrection) and go to one of three degrees (or “kingdoms”) of glory. The lowest degree, the Telestial Kingdom, is for “liars, and sorcerers, and adulterers, and whoremongers (D&C 76:103). Though it is the lowest degree, it is still “a place of indescribable glory.”³¹ The second degree, the Terrestrial Kingdom, is for honorable people who were deceived or not valiant enough for the highest level (D&C 76:71-79).

The highest degree, the Celestial Kingdom, is where all serious Mormons want to go. It is also “divided into three levels, or degrees. The highest degree is the only part of heaven where people will live with their families. The Prophet taught that a person must be married for eternity in the temple to obtain this highest degree of the celestial kingdom.”³² This married couple will eventually become “Eternal Fathers and Eternal Mothers” by procreating spirit children.³³ These spirit children

“eventually will go on an earth like this one we are on and pass through the same kind of experiences, being subject to mortal conditions, and if faithful, then they also will receive the fullness of exaltation and partake of the same blessings.”³⁴

Christian Response

Jesus Christ: The LDS Church teaches that Jesus is Jehovah, and Heavenly Father’s name is Elohim. Elohim, however, is not a proper name for the Father, but a Hebrew word meaning “God.” “Jehovah” is a translation of the Hebrew letters YHWH.³⁵ With this in mind, the Bible repeatedly denies LDS teaching by making emphatic statements that Jehovah is Elohim. For instance, “And [Elohim] spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I am [Jehovah],” (Exo. 6:2). In Isaiah 45:5, God says “I am [Jehovah], and there is none else, there is no [Elohim] beside me.”

Also, in Isaiah 43:10, we are told, “Ye are my witnesses, saith [Jehovah]...Before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me.” This is in stark contrast to Smith’s statement above that “you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have done before you...”³⁶ If Jehovah is the only God, and no gods will be formed after Him, then the entire system of exaltation in the LDS Church is heretical.

Authority: Smith’s supposed translation of the Book of Abraham has been proven to be fraudulent. The original papyrus that Smith translated into part of the Book of Abraham was thought to be lost, but was rediscovered in 1967. It was subsequently translated by reputable Egyptologists who exposed Smith’s translation as a fabrication.³⁷

Salvation: In Romans 4:4-5, Paul explains that “when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” Hence, salvation must either be earned through works or credited by faith (see also Rom. 11:6). If it is by works, then we are cursed because we must keep all the laws (Gal. 3:10), and no one can do this (Eccl. 7:20, 1 John 1:10). Instead, salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone (John 5:24, Rom. 6:23, 1 John 5:13, Titus 3:5, Eph. 2:8-9).

Notes

- 1 Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith-History 1:8.
- 2 Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith-History 1:18.
- 3 *Our Heritage* (SLC: The LDS Church, 1996), 5-9.
- 4 Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* 2nd ed. (SLC: Bookcraft, 1966), 327.
- 5 *Our Heritage*, 11, 14. The Church’s name changed several times.
- 6 “Polygamy,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <http://lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?vgnextoid=bbd508f54922d010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD&locale=0&index=16&sourceId=9887ec6f164b2110VgnVCM100000176f620a> (accessed February 2009).
- 7 *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual* 2nd ed. (SLC: The LDS Church, 2001) 327.
- 8 *History of the Church*, Vol. 6 (SLC: The LDS Church, 1950), 411.
- 9 “Individual Record,” The LDS Church, http://www.familysearch.org/eng/search/AF/individual_record.asp?recid=7762167&lds=0®ion=1®ionfriendly=&frompage=99 (accessed February 2009). Four of the 24 women listed were sealed to Smith after he died.
- 10 *History of the Church*, Vol. 7, 103.
- 11 “Statistical Information,” The LDS Church, <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/statistical-information> (accessed February 2009).
- 12 Pearl of Great Price, Articles of Faith, #8.
- 13 This phrase is found in the introduction to the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon. Since 2007, “principle ancestors...” was changed to “among the ancestors...”
- 14 *The Pearl of Great Price Student Manual* (SLC: LDS Church, 2000), 3.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 16 “Organizational Structure of the Church,” The LDS Church, <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/background-information/organizational-structure-of-the-church> (accessed February 2009).
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 “Modern Prophets and Continuing Revelation,” The LDS Church, <http://www.newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/background-information/modern-prophets-and-continuing-revelation> (accessed February 2009).
- 19 Joseph Smith, “The King Follett Sermon,” *Ensign*, April 1971, <http://lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?vgnextoid=2354fccf2b7db010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD&locale=0&sourceId=1a79945bd384b010VgnVCM1000004d82620a> &hideNav=1.
- 20 Quoted by LeRoi C. Snow, in “Devotion to Divine Inspiration,” *Improvement Era*, June 1919, 651-56, as quoted in *Search These Commandments: Melchizedek Priesthood Personal Study Guide* (SLC: The LDS Church, 1984) 152.
- 21 *Mormon Doctrine*, 118, as quoted in *Achieving a Celestial Marriage* (SLC: The LDS Church, 1976), 132.
- 22 *True to the Faith* (SLC: The LDS Church, 2004), 12.
- 23 Dalin H. Oaks, “The Great Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign*, Nov 1993, 72-75, quoted in *Eternal Marriage*, (SLC: The LDS Church, 2003), 259.
- 24 *True to the Faith*, 124.
- 25 *Mormon Doctrine*, 527. This quote is found in the 5th printing (1970). Later editions do not include these comments.
- 26 Smith, *King Follett Sermon*.
- 27 The qualification “LDS” Jesus is given because the LDS Church teaches a different Jesus than that of the Bible. Hence, exaltation is not obtained by faith in the Jesus of scripture, but in the LDS version of a Jesus that was born to heavenly parents.
- 28 Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (SLC: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 332. As quoted in *Doctrines of the Gospel Student Manual* (SLC: The LDS Church, 2000), 48.
- 29 *Endowed From on High: Temple Preparation Seminar Teacher’s Manual* (SLC: The LDS Church, 2003), 6-11, <http://lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?vgnextoid=cf755f74db46c010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD&locale=0&sourceId=f214be335dc20110VgnVCM100000176f620a> &hideNav=1.
- 30 *True to the Faith*, 63.
- 31 *Preparing for Exaltation* (SLC: The LDS Church, 1998), 40.
- 32 *Primary 5*, (LDS Church, 1997) 121, <http://lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?vgnextoid=637e1b08f338c010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD&locale=0&sourceId=533ca41f6cc20110VgnVCM100000176f620a> &hideNav=1.
- 33 *Mormon Doctrine*, 517, as quoted in *Eternal Marriage*, 167.
- 34 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol. 2 (SLC: Bookcraft, 1955), as quoted in *Achieving a Celestial Marriage* (SLC: The LDS Church, 1976), 132.
- 35 In English Bibles, YHWH it is normally translated LORD with all capitals.
- 36 Smith, *King Follett Sermon*.
- 37 See James Walker, “The Book of Abraham Translation,” Watchman Fellowship, <http://www.watchman.org/lds/abraham2.htm> (accessed March 2009).



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