

Answering Mormonism

By John Feakes, JF-M-525

Joseph Smith Jr. began the Mormon cult more than 180 years ago. Since then, Mormonism has grown into one of the largest and wealthiest cults in the world.¹ Like virtually all cult leaders, Smith claimed to have received divine revelations and a special mission from God. According to Smith, God the Father and the Lord Jesus appeared to him in a forest near Palmyra New York. During this encounter, his divine visitors called upon him to restore the true church.² Further miraculous revelations followed. According to Smith, John the Baptist appeared and gave him the Levitical Priesthood. Later, he was visited by the apostles Peter, James, and John, who gave him the Melchizedekian Priesthood.³ Smith claimed to have received a number of angelic visitations as well. In one visitation, an angelic messenger revealed the location of an ancient book that had been buried in the forest more than 1,400 years.⁴

Smith claimed that this document was composed of pages of thin gold, bound together with rings like a modern binder. Its text was a mysterious blend of Hebrew and Egyptian (referred to by Smith as “Reformed Egyptian”), which was engraved into the book’s metal pages. Smith claimed to have taken the book home, and, by “the gift and

¹Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), p. 194.

²*The Restoration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 2005), p. 8.

³*Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴Joseph Smith, *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1981), 1:33-34.

power of God,” translated it into English.⁵ The translation became known as the *Book of Mormon*, and its publication in 1830 marked the official beginning of the Mormon cult.

Mormons recognize the *Book of Mormon* as “another Testament of Jesus Christ,” and regard it at least as authoritative as the Bible. Similar to the Bible, the *Book of Mormon* is largely an historical record of God’s dealings with his people. Unlike the Bible, however, the *Book of Mormon* focuses on ancient cultures in the New World. The story begins with approximately 20 Jewish people fleeing from Jerusalem and arriving in the Americas around 600 B.C. In time two distinct groups are said to have developed, both of which were supposedly visited by the Lord Jesus following his resurrection. One group, known as the Nephites, remained faithful to the Lord and so kept their white skin. The other group, the Lamanites, rebelled against God, and so incurred the punishment of having dark skin. By A.D. 421, the Lamanites completely eradicated the Nephites. According to the Book of Mormon, the Lamanites are the “principal ancestors of the North American Indians.”⁶

As the cult grew in number, so did Smith’s alleged revelations. These revelations served to distance the cult doctrinally from historic Christianity in a numbers of ways. Smith claimed for instance, that there are many gods (polytheism) and that the gods were once human beings. By following the doctrines and ordinances of the Mormon Church, a

⁵*True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 2004), p. 157.

⁶*The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1981), Title page; Introduction 1:2.

person could become a god the same way the God of the Bible did.⁷ Smith further insisted that human males practise polygamy as an essential part of their evolution to godhood.⁸ This doctrine caused many outside the cult to see Smith as nothing more than an immoral charlatan. Smith ran afoul with the law and, while in jail, an angry mob stormed the prison and murdered him.⁹ After Smith's murder, one of his disciples, Brigham Young, assumed the role of "living prophet." In order to flee persecution, he moved the cult westward to Utah, where he established its new headquarters.

Though Mormons claim to represent original Christianity, there are compelling reasons to question this claim. All of Mormonism's unique doctrines rest upon two "pillars." The first is Smith's claim that the church of Jesus Christ had been eradicated from the planet and needed to be restored. The second is the *Book of Mormon*. If these two supporting "pillars" are invalid, the whole edifice of Mormonism—with all of its complex doctrines and ordinances—collapses. The supposed need for restoration will be addressed first.

Smith claimed that shortly after the death of the last apostle, the church of Jesus Christ became hopelessly corrupted. Many essential gospel truths were lost, and perhaps most importantly, priesthood authority vanished from the earth.¹⁰ Without this special authority, no one could baptize believers or administer other essential ordinances (e.g.,

⁷John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on the Mormon Church* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1991), p. 16.

⁸Ed Decker and Dave Hunt, *The God Makers* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1984), p. 168.

⁹Bob Larsen, *Larsen's New Book of Cults* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), p. 312.

¹⁰*The Restoration*, p. 8.

temple rituals) essential for salvation. Since the Bible is universally recognized as Christianity's founding document, it is logical to consult it first when assessing Mormonism's claims. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the Lord Jesus unambiguously stated that his church was invincible. Jesus said, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).¹¹ This flatly contradicts Smith's claim that the gates of hell had indeed prevailed for over 1,700 years.

Mormons typically cite Acts 20:28 to support their claim that the church was eradicated soon after the death of the last apostle. Paul states in this passage, "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock." In context, Paul is making his farewell address to the elders at Ephesus. Paul's concluding remarks in his letter to the same church show that he could not have been referring to *total* apostasy as Mormons maintain. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21). Paul could hardly have spoken of Christ being glorified *in the church* throughout *all* ages, knowing that the church was on the verge of extinction.

God's promises to preserve his word are sprinkled throughout the Bible. "The word of the Lord," wrote Isaiah the prophet, "will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8). The psalmist agrees, stating that, "The counsel of the LORD standeth forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations" (Psalm 33:11). The Lord Jesus himself declared, "Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away" (Luke 21:33). It is difficult

¹¹All Scripture is from the *King James Version*.

to reconcile the Mormon claim of complete apostasy (including corruption and loss of the scriptures) with these promises, especially when God has declared his Word to be magnified above his name (Psalm 138:2). The words of the apostle John effectively refute the Mormon claim that doctrinal truths, essential to salvation, had been lost. John writes near the end of his Gospel, “These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:31). According to the Bible, trusting in the Christ described in the Gospel of John alone is sufficient for salvation.

From a purely historical perspective, the Mormon claim of complete apostasy fares no better. The New Testament is by far the best-attested literary work in history. There are well over 5,000 ancient Greek manuscripts alone.¹² When ancient translations are added, the number of New Testament manuscripts rises to almost 25,000.¹³ These bibliographical data indicate that the New Testament has not undergone radical revision or corruption. In addition to the manuscript evidence, there is the testimony of the early church. From the first century until now, Christian thinkers have been recording their philosophies and theologies in formal treatises, commentaries, and personal letters. Their extant writings clearly indicate that these men relied on the same Bible Christians revere today.¹⁴ Furthermore, the classic creeds of Christendom reflect doctrines based upon what is contained in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. On the other hand, these

¹²Normal L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986), p. 385.

¹³Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 34.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 44.

creeds contain no hint of Mormonism's distinctive doctrines. The first of Mormonism's "pillars" appears invalid.

The second of Mormonism's foundation claims is the *Book of Mormon* itself.

Jeffery Holland noted its singular importance in assessing the movement's credentials:

Everything of saving significance in the Church stands or falls on the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and, by implication, the Prophet Joseph Smith's account of how it came forth is as sobering as it is true. It is a "sudden death" proposition. Either the Book of Mormon is what the Prophet Joseph said it is, or this Church and its founder are false, a deception from the first instance onward.¹⁵

As evidence of authenticity, Mormons will often argue that Smith was an uneducated farm boy who certainly could not have produced something as impressive as the *Book of Mormon*. Literary elegance, however, is hardly a reliable test for divine inspiration. Many see the Koran, for instance, as a literary masterpiece yet reject its claims of divine authorship.¹⁶ Furthermore, Muhammad is said to have had even less education than Joseph Smith. It is obvious that in order to argue cogently for the divine inspiration of the *Book of Mormon*, one must appeal to more than literary elegance. Even if this test were granted, the *Book of Mormon* is so replete with errors and inconsistencies that it is almost certainly a nineteenth century hoax.

The first major problem with Book of Mormon is the claim that it was originally written in "reformed Egyptian" upon golden plates (or, as in 1 Nephi 4:38, "plates of brass"). There is no precedent for this in Jewish history. In Old Testament times, God's people wrote upon scrolls in Hebrew. The Bible clearly states that since the time of the

¹⁵Jeffrey Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1997), pp. 345-347.

¹⁶ N. J. Dawood, *The Koran* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 11.

patriarchs, Egypt had its own unique culture and language (Genesis 42:23, Psalm 81:5; 114:1-2). Furthermore, Egypt has been known as the enemy of God's people since the time of the Exodus. Wicked Jeroboam allied himself with Shishak, the King of Egypt (1 Kings 11:40), who, in 925 B.C., invaded Jerusalem and raided the Temple (1 Kings 14:25-26). In 604 B.C. Pharaoh Necho killed King Josiah (2 Chronicles 35:22-24). God's people, including Jeremiah the prophet, mourned over the loss of this godly king (2 Chronicles 35:25-26). Jeremiah further donated all of chapter 46 of his prophecy to warning Egypt of impending judgement for her wickedness. It makes no sense to suggest that God's prophets living 600 years before Christ would have written in anything other than Hebrew; an Egyptian script is out of the question. Furthermore, there is abundant archaeological evidence that the Jewish people wrote in Hebrew from at least the 10th century B.C.¹⁷

Before leaving the subject of Smith's alleged Reformed Egyptian there is one more Mormon claim to be addressed. According to another of Mormonism's standard writings, the *Doctrine and Covenants*, Martin Harris (one of Smith's associates) took a sample of the so-called Reformed Egyptian script to Charles Anthon for verification. Anthon, a professor of Greek, Latin, and grammar, is said to have confirmed the validity of both the script and Smith's translation (*Doctrine and Covenants* 1:63-65). Anthon's own testimony regarding his visit from Harris is quite different. In a letter to E. D. Howe, Anthon stated:

The whole story about my having pronounced (*sic*) the Mormonite inscription to be "reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics" is perfectly false. Some years ago, a plain and

¹⁷John Noble Wilford, "A is for Ancient: Describing an Alphabet Found Near Jerusalem," *The New York Times*, 9 November 2005.

apparently simple-hearted farmer, called upon me with a note from Dr. Mitchell of our city, now deceased, requesting me to decypher (*sic*), if possible, a paper, which the farmer would hand me, and which Dr. M. confessed he had been unable to understand. Upon examining the paper in question, I soon came to the conclusion that it was all a trick, perhaps a hoax. . . . This paper was in fact a singular scrawl. It consisted of all kinds of crooked characters disposed in columns, and had evidently been prepared by some person who had before him at the time a book containing various alphabets. Greek and Hebrew letters, crosses and flourishes, Roman letters inverted or placed sideways, were arranged in perpendicular columns . . . I have frequently conversed with my friends on the subject, since the Mormonite excitement began, and well remember that the paper contained anything else but “Egyptian Hieroglyphics.”¹⁸

The second major problem with the *Book of Mormon* is its claim that the Native Americans are of Jewish descent. Before dealing with this claim historically and scientifically, it is first necessary to set this claim in its historical context. When Smith published the *Book of Mormon*, there was plenty of speculation concerning the origin of North America’s indigenous peoples. In this regard, the *Book of Mormon* is hardly unique. Plenty of books had already been written on the subject. For instance, in 1825 Ethan Smith (no relation to Joseph Smith) wrote *A View of the Hebrews*, in which he suggested that the 10 lost tribes of Israel migrated to the Americas. He further mentions a lost book of God that would one day be returned. Like the *Book of Mormon*, a *View of the Hebrews* contains copious quotations from Isaiah. In light of the many parallels between the two works, Mormon scholar B. H. Roberts stated:

In the light of this evidence, there can be no doubt as to the possession of a vividly strong, creative imagination by Joseph Smith, the Prophet, an imagination, it could with reason be urged, which, given the suggestions that are to be found in the 'common knowledge' of accepted American antiquities of the times,

¹⁸E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painsville, OH: n.p., 1834), pp. 270-272, as quoted in Martin, pp. 212-213.

supplemented by such a work as Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*, would make it possible for him to create a book such as the *Book of Mormon* is.¹⁹

The Lemba tribe of South Africa also claim to have a familial connection to the Jewish people. Like the Mormon claim regarding the Native Americans, the Lemba also claim that their connection to the Jews extends back to around 600 B. C. Genetic similarities between the two groups confirm the Lemba's claims.²⁰ Similar tests, however, have not revealed a single Jewish genetic marker among the Native Americans. On the other hand, the Native Americans do show a marked morphological and genetic similarity to the people of Asia.²¹

Certain linguistic issues create a third major problem with the *Book of Mormon*. The first is Smith's choice to translate the golden plates into Elizabethan English. Several of the grammatical errors in the *Book of Mormon* indicate that its writer was unfamiliar with this archaic dialect. There is pronoun disagreement, for instance, in Mosiah 4:22. Here the text reads, "...and yet *ye* put up no petition, nor repent of the thing which *thou* hast done" (emphasis added). Other examples could be cited.

The *Book of Mormon* contains large portions of text that appear, verbatim, in the *King James Version* of the Bible. The variations in these passages based upon homonymy make it certain that Smith was not translating an ancient document as he had claimed, but was guilty of plagiarism. For instance, in Isaiah 5:4 God asks, "Wherefore, when I looked

¹⁹B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 243, 250.

²⁰K. Owens and M. King. "Genomic views of human history," *Science* 286 (1999): 451-453.

²¹ *DNA vs. The Book of Mormon* (Brigham City, UT: Living Hope Ministries, 2003), DVD.

that it [Israel, typified as a vineyard] should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?” In 2 Nephi 15:4, however, God supposedly declares, “Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes it brought forth wild grapes.” The variation in meaning between the two passages is based on the homonymy of the term “wherefore.” In the *King James Bible* it appears as an interrogative, in the Book of Mormon, as a conjunction. A similar relationship exists between Isaiah 13:3 and 2 Nephi 23:3. The Isaiah passage reads, “I have called my mighty ones for mine anger, even them that rejoice in my highness.” The *Book of Mormon* states, “I have also called my mighty ones, for mine anger is not upon them that rejoice in my highness.” The variation in meaning hinges on the term “for.” The *King James Version* uses it as a preposition, the *Book of Mormon*, as a conjunction. Variations of this kind are not unlikely as one copies (or, as critics of Mormonism allege, *plagiarizes*) copious amounts of English text.

A comparison between Isaiah 2:6-9 and 2 Nephi 12:8-9 furnishes additional evidence of sloppy plagiarism. The Isaiah passage declares, “Their land is also full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made. And the mean man boweth down, and the great man humbleth himself, therefore, forgive him not.” The *Book of Mormon* is almost identical. It reads, “Their land is also full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made. And the mean man boweth *not* down . . .” (Emphasis added). By adding the word “not,” Smith has changed the meaning of the text completely. In Smith’s version, God is pronouncing judgment on those who refuse to bow to idols, which makes no sense. The relationship between Isaiah 10:10 and 2 Nephi 20:10 is another example of a probable misreading of the biblical text. Isaiah states, “As my hand hath *found* the kingdoms of the

idols”, whereas the *Book of Mormon* passage reads, “As my hand hath *founded* the kingdoms of the idols” (emphasis added). Similar variation exists between Isaiah 14:19 and 2 Nephi 24:19. The Isaiah passage reads, “But thou art cast out of thy grave like an abominable branch, and as the *raiment* of those that are slain” (emphasis added). The *Book of Mormon* alters the text, rendering it, “But thou art cast out of thy grave like an abominable branch, and as the *remnant* of those that are slain” (emphasis added). Such variations from the biblical text are best explained as simple copying errors. In all likelihood, Smith was copying from the *King James Version* rather than translating from an ancient text.

There is much to suggest that Joseph Smith is the actual author of the *Book of Mormon*. In addition to grammar errors and evidence of sloppy plagiarism, the *Book of Mormon* contains just the type of errors one would expect from a poorly educated charlatan. For instance, according to Jacob 4:1, many things were left unrecorded because of the difficulty of engraving on the plates. Students of biblical history would want to know why this Jewish fellow would struggle to record his words on plates when he could have recorded it in scroll form. Even more puzzling is the copious amount of extraneous words strewn throughout the book. “It came to pass,” a phrase common in the *King James Version*, appears in the *Book of Mormon* more than 2,000 times. Perhaps the best example of this is 4 Nephi 4:6, where the writer uses 57 words to tell his readers that 59 years had passed.

The Book of Mormon contains obvious geographical errors as well. For instance, 2 Nephi 19:1 describes Galilee as being “by way of the Red sea, beyond the Jordan.” This is an obvious misquote of Isaiah 9:1, which describes Galilee as simply “by way of

the sea, beyond the Jordan.” Isaiah is obviously referring to *the Sea of Galilee*, and Matthew 4:13-16 confirms this straightforward understanding of the text. The reference to the “Red Sea” in this context marks a telling geographical error; the Red Sea is nearly 230 miles from Galilee.

After examining the *Book of Mormon* in great detail, Mormon scholar B. H. Roberts concluded that, “If it be assumed that [Joseph Smith] is the author of [*The Book of Mormon*], then it could be said there is much internal evidence in the book itself to sustain such a view.”²² In support for this assertion, Roberts stated:

“In the first place there is a certain lack of perspective in the things the book relates as history that points quite clearly to an underdeveloped mind as their origin. The narrative proceeds in characteristic disregard of conditions necessary to its reasonableness, as if it were a tale told by a child, with utter disregard for consistency.”²³

Doctrinally speaking, Mormonism and historic Christianity differ profoundly. For instance, the Bible teaches that a person is saved by placing their faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31). No amount human effort can pay a person’s sin debt; salvation is by grace alone (Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 4:4-5; Titus 3:5-6). According to Mormonism, however, the work of Christ on the cross was insufficient to secure our salvation. A person must add to it with his own good works (2 Nephi 25:23). Mormonism’s incorrect view of salvation is the direct result of Joseph Smith’s faulty Christology.

On the Mormon view, neither Christ nor God the Father is maximally great. They, like an infinite number of gods before them, had to achieve godhood by obeying the law of eternal progression. Furthermore, because both Father and Son have bodies of flesh

²²Roberts, p.251

²³Ibid.

and bone, they are limited by space; neither one is capable of occupying more than one space at a time. Thus on Mormonism, space and matter are at least as eternal and ultimate as the gods. Holding such a low view of the Lord, it is no wonder the Mormon sees Christ's sacrifice as insufficient to secure his eternal salvation.

The biblical view of God is quite different. According to the Bible, there is only one God who has been God from all eternity (Isaiah 43:10-11). He is the creator of time, space, and matter (Jeremiah 10:12). He is maximally great, meaning he is infinite in all his perfections. There is none greater than the biblical God (Hebrews 6:13). Though God is one in being, he nevertheless exists as three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That is, the three persons of the Trinity have shared the same divine nature from all eternity (John 4:24; Hebrews 1:3). Though the concept is impossible for finite creatures to comprehend fully, it is not logically inconsistent. Mormon theology, however, contains multiple systemic contradictions.

Mormonism teaches that there are an infinite number of gods, all of whom evolved into godhood. Being finite, none of these gods can be said to be maximally great. Furthermore, if the gods were obligated to conduct themselves in accordance with a prescriptive moral standard, there must be a God *above* the Mormon gods; there must be an objective *prescriber*. The Christian God, whose own good character *is* the standard of goodness, is therefore shown to be a moral necessity, even for the Mormon gods.

According to Brigham Young, matter itself is eternal.²⁴ Therefore, on Mormonism, history is comprised of an actually infinite number of events. Philosophers

²⁴*Teachings of the Presidents of the Church* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1997), p. 113.

have recognized for centuries that sets with an infinite number of members are actually impossible. Thus, if logical consistency is a legitimate test for truthfulness, Mormonism must be judged false. In response to such arguments, Mormons often maintain that religious truth is not subject to human logic and reason. From a Christian perspective, however, Mormon theology does not transgress a standard of reason anchored in human opinion, but God's own rational and good character. The law of non-contradiction, for instance, is a rational and moral standard according to which human thinking *ought* to conform. God is by nature truthful and he expects his creatures to be truthful as well. When a person violates the law of non-contradiction, he is not only thinking irrationally, but he is engaging in the character of lying. Christianity not only provides a logically consistent conceptual scheme, but an appropriate foundation for logical and ethical absolutes as well. Mormonism can provide neither.

The weight of evidence against Mormonism is overwhelming. There is not a shred of historical or archaeological evidence to support the history presented in the *Book of Mormon*. On the other hand, there is a plethora of linguistic and historic evidence that argues against it. Most importantly, Mormonism's doctrines seriously conflict with those of historic Christianity. Because Christianity is a rational and moral necessity, right reason demands that it be believed over and against Mormonism. In all likelihood, Mormonism represents Joseph Smith's deceptive bid for self aggrandizement. However, given Mormonism's blasphemous theology and continued bitter denouncement of biblical Christianity,²⁵ satanic influence cannot be ruled out.

²⁵Ankerberg and Weldon, p. 8

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