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## What is "Mormonism"?

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**Abstract:** This article presents an overview of the contents of the Book of Mormon, emphasizing the fact that Jesus Christ is the central character of the book, and that the LDS church is clearly distinguished from other Christian sects by the manner in which it believes in modern revelation. The Book of Mormon is an example of such revelation.

## WHAT IS "MORMONISM" ?\*

JAMES E. TALMAGE

OF THE COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE

IT SHOULD BE KNOWN that the term "Mormon," with its several derivatives and cognates, is a misnomer applied to the Church and its people very early in the history of their organisation. The pseudonym has reference to the Book of Mormon, a volume that was first issued from the press about the time of the organisation of the Church as a body corporate in the United States. The true and official title of this religious body is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Concerning the Book of Mormon, much misapprehension exists in the minds of those who have heard about it but know little of it. By the way, the vagrant rumour occasionally reaches my ears that this book is intended for the initiated only, and that non-members can procure copies only through misrepresentation or bribery. The facts are that the Book of Mormon has been published in most of the civilised languages of the globe, and in many of the tongues that are prevalent on the isolated islands of the sea. The book is sold at a price as near the actual cost as possible, and every proper method is used to facilitate its distribution. The Church does not seek to make profit out of its sale. During the last few months copies of the Book of Mormon have been placed in many of the large libraries of Great Britain; and it is pleasing to be able to announce that any public library or any community reading-room will be supplied with a copy for the asking.

The Book of Mormon is primarily a history of the aboriginal peoples of the American continent. Mainly it is a sacred history, dealing more particularly with the teachings of the ancient prophets than with the rise and fall of rulers; though enough of the secular record is presented to properly connect up the important events in chronological order.

Far from this book being the "Mormon Bible," as some people have been led to think, it is in no sense a substitute for the Holy Bible of Christendom. The Latter-day Saints know but one Bible, specifically so-called, and that is the Bible itself, comprising the Old and the New Testaments. We quote from the Authorised Version, otherwise known as the King James Version, and we preferably use the Oxford and Cambridge issues.

However, the Book of Mormon is Scripture; it gives an account of the dealings of God with the people on the Western Continent, even as the Holy Bible gives a similar account with respect to the

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\*Address given, by invitation, at the Sheffield Educational Settlement, Sheffield, Sunday evening, January 11, 1925.

peoples on the Eastern Continent. Far from there being any antagonism between the two, the Book of Mormon supports the Bible in all matters of common record. Briefly stated, the Book of Mormon tells of the departure of a colony of Jews from Jerusalem in the year 600 B.C., and this by divine direction. It describes their journeying to the coast of the Arabian Sea, their building and provisioning a vessel, their crossing of the ocean under the guiding hand of God, their landing on the shores now known as America, their prosperity and development in the West, their division into factions which developed into two opposing nations known as Nephites and Lamanites, and the ultimate destruction of one of these nations.

But the book is more than a chronicle of even such great events as these. All through the period covered by its account, approximately one thousand years, divinely-commissioned prophets received revelations from the heavens and gave them unto the people, as did Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Malachi, and others on the Eastern Hemisphere. For six centuries from the time of the exodus from Jerusalem the prophets told of the promised advent of the Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh, and described with circumstantial detail the incidents of His predicted birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection from the tomb; and with these predictions was associated another, to the effect that the Resurrected Lord would manifest Himself in person among the Nephites.

The sacred record avers that at the specified time the crucified and resurrected Saviour did appear in Person, proclaiming Himself, showing unto the people His precious hands and feet, and giving unto them the Gospel, by which the outward forms of the Law of Moses were superseded. The Lord established His Church among the Nephites, calling and ordaining twelve men, like unto the Apostles of the East and prescribing the same requirements and conditions as He had taught while in a state of mortality in Judea, Samaria and Galilee.

Thus the Book of Mormon stands as an additional witness to the Christ; and that this witness might be established appears as the main purpose of the divine plan in sequestering an independent people on a continent then unknown to the world at large.

The main objection to the acceptance of the Book of Mormon for what it purports to be lies in what is regarded as a mystery concerning its origin. The translator of the ancient records, Joseph Smith, whose name is known by good or evil report amongst all nations, solemnly avowed that he was visited by an angel, who announced himself as Moroni, the last of the ancient scribes who had engraved the history of the people upon the plates of metal, who had buried them in the earth about the year 420 A. D., and who came in 1823 to the latter-day Prophet as a resurrected being.

Were I asked to specify some one feature or characteristic by which the theology or doctrines taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is most clearly distinguished from the teachings of most Christian sects, I should name their belief in the reality of latter-day communication from God to man. The coming forth of the Book of Mormon is an illustration of such divine revelation. Why should it be deemed impossible for God to communicate through His prophets to-day as He did in ancient times? The spirit of the present age is that of continued revelation. We live in the very atmosphere of expectancy. In a broad sense what we call here discovery or invention is on the other side a revelation unto man. But in the specific sense, that of direct communication from the heavens, by which divine direction is given as of old, continued revelation is a present-day actuality.

The first revelation given in the current dispensation was a restoration of the knowledge that had once existed upon the earth but had been lost, respecting the personality of God. Joseph Smith bore solemn witness to the world, that in the year 1820 the Eternal Father and His Son Jesus Christ did reveal themselves unto him; and that he knew from personal experience that those two Personages were separate and distinct individuals, after whose form and image man had been created. In the light of further revelation, this prophet of the last days taught that the spirit of man is literally the offspring of God; that we have been born in the lineage of Deity; and that by the operation of the accepted laws of heredity it is possible for man to advance in righteousness so that, sometime in the eternities to come, he may actually attain to the exalted condition of Godhood.

A connected truth is that man is essentially eternal. Modern revelation has made plain the fact that we lived before we were born into mortality. Individuality is everlasting. You were you and I was I before we assumed bodies of flesh and blood; moreover, you will be yourself and I shall be myself through and beyond the change we call death. We recognise four distinct stages of progression:

(1) The unembodied state, in which our spirits lived as individual intelligences, endowed with the powers of action and the capacity to choose.

(2) The embodied state, that in which we now find ourselves, our immortal spirits tabernacled in bodies composed of the elements of this earth.

(3) The disembodied state, brought about by death, whereby the spirit leaves the body, which latter belongs to this earth and is left behind while the spirit continues to live.

(4) The reembodied state, which is brought about by a literal resurrection from the dead, whereby the spirit takes upon itself again the body of flesh and bones, never to be separated therefrom.

We may further designate these stages or states as (1) the unborn; (2) the born; (3) the dead; (4) the resurrected.

Through and by latter-day revelation, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in all its ancient purity and with all its inherent powers, has been restored to the earth; and the embodiment of that Gospel, that is the Church of Jesus Christ, has been reestablished upon the earth, and all this in strict accordance with the predictions of the Lord and of His prophets. Did not John, the Apostle-Revelator, declare that he had been shown what was to take place in after times, namely, the coming of an angel having the everlasting Gospel to preach to them that dwell upon the earth, to every kindred, tongue and people? Read studiously and prayerfully Revelation 14: 5, 6, 7.

But, it has been said, there was no need of a restoration in view of the fact that the Christian world has had the Gospel from the ancient apostolic age to the present. True, the Holy Bible has been a common possession, but is the Bible the Gospel? At best the Bible is but a record of the Gospel; and between a written account of a thing and the thing itself there is a radical distinction. By way of illustration: One may read and study with care all that is said in the Holy Bible concerning baptism as an indispensable requirement for salvation; but does that knowledge give to such a one even a semblance of authority to administer the ordinance of baptism? Joseph Smith affirms that unto him and to a companion in the ministry, came an angel who announced himself as John, known of old as the Baptist; and that this being laid his hands upon the heads of the two mortal men and did ordain them to the requisite degree of priesthood, by which they were authorized and commanded to baptise believing and repentant applicants. As showing the order by which authority is exercised, John the Baptist informed the two that he was acting under commission and instruction from the presiding three of the ancient Twelve, namely Peter, James and John.

Joseph Smith and his associate, Oliver Cowdery, further affirm that the three Apostles named did also manifest themselves and ordain those two men to the Holy Apostleship, with commission to preach the restored Gospel, to organise the Church of Jesus Christ upon the earth anew, and to build up that Church by promulgating the Gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue and people.

As directed, these men brought about the organisation of the Church; and as inspired or specifically instructed from time to time, they called other men and ordained them to graded offices in the Holy Priesthood. Thus it is that every man bearing that Priesthood in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can readily follow the line of authority and trace his ordination to Joseph Smith, the Latter-day Prophet and Revelator, who, as stated, was ordained to the Lesser, or Aaronic, Priesthood, by

the one who held the presidency of that Priesthood in ancient times, namely, John the Baptist; and the Higher, or Melchizedek, Priesthood, by Peter, James and John, who were the presiding Apostles in the days following the personal ministry of our Lord the Christ by whom those three were ordained.

It is thus made obvious that this Church has something new to offer to the world. It professes to speak with authority and not as the scribes who derive their commission from institutions established on human initiative. The Church affirms that even as the Lord Jesus Christ and His Apostles foretold, there was a great falling away, or universal apostasy from the Church as established by Jesus Christ, and that the Holy Priesthood ceased to be operative upon the earth. We appeal to history as vindicating the predictions of these ancient men of God; and we point to the fact that competent authority in the present age has not only admitted but positively avowed the awful fact of this universal declension. The Church of England attests the fact in her Book of Homilies, first published about the middle of the sixteenth century and retained unto this day as an official publication, "Appointed to be Read in Churches" as occasion may require in place of sermons. In Homily XIV, designated as the "Homily against Peril of Idolatry," the Church of England said and says:

"So that laity and clergy, learned and unlearned, all ages, sects, and degrees of men, women, and children of whole Christendom—an horrible and most dreadful thing to think—have been at once drowned in abominable idolatry; of all other vices most detested of God, and most damnable to man; and that by the space of eight hundred years and more."

With the world in such a condition of spiritual darkness there had to be a restoration of light; and we proclaim that this restoration, foreseen and foretold, has been effected. We offer no new Gospel, but proclaim the glad tidings of the old one, the eternal one, come again. The conditions of membership in the Church to-day, which are the requirements of citizenship in the Kingdom of God, are identical with those taught of old; and these comprise as first or fundamental principles the following:

1. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the one and only Redeemer and Saviour of the race. This embraces faith in the entire Godhead or Holy Trinity, the Eternal Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost; these being distinct personages but one in purpose and method.

2. Repentance of sin. This comprises a genuine sorrow for past transgressions, and a resolute endeavour to seek divine assistance in avoiding sin, in resisting temptation, and in a determined effort to live in accordance with the laws of individual purity and righteousness.

3. Baptism by immersion, at the hands of one having authority

to administer that holy ordinance, whereby, as the Lord has promised, He will grant remission of sins.

4. The imposition of hands by those duly authorised by ordination to officiate, for the bestowal of the right and title to the companionship of the Holy Ghost.

These indispensable conditions, these absolute requirements, are no mere prescriptions of men, but are specifically set forth and laid down by the Author of the plan of salvation.

In this practical age we naturally ask for a showing of results in connection with the operation of any plan or system. The following are a few of the fruits of "Mormonism":

1. A system of church organisation unknown since the disintegration of the Primitive Church through apostasy. This organisation comprises all the essential offices and officers of the olden Church—apostles, high priests, seventies, elders, bishops, priests, teachers, deacons. The religion of "Mormonism" is practical, dealing with the spiritual it is true, but also in a prominent degree with the essentials of every-day life.

2. A missionary system whereby the Gospel message is proclaimed throughout the world. The missionaries of the Church labour in their appointed fields without remuneration, bearing their own expenses except so far as they may be assisted by the voluntary generosity of those amongst whom they minister.

3. An organisation not dependent upon the capricious giving of a wealthy few, but supported by the law of the tithe, and by free-will offerings for the assistance of the worthy poor.

4. Auxiliary associations, which are conducted as helps in the government of the Church. Among these are the Relief Society, the Sunday School, the Young Men's and Young Women's Mutual Improvement Association, the Primary Association for children, and Religion Classes, whereby the secular instruction of the schools is supplemented by training in the duties of a truly religious life.

5. A community in which individual chastity and virtue are counted of higher worth than life itself; and a marriage system, which, while in strict accord with the laws of the land, provides for the continuation of family relationship beyond the grave, and thus solemnises the union of man and woman not *until death doth them part*, but *for time and for all eternity*.

6. A community whose vital statistics, in comparison with those of Great Britain or the United States, show a much higher average age at death, in other words prolonged life, a high birth rate, low death rate, high marriage rate, few divorces, and a very low rate of infant mortality.

7. A people whose industry, thrift and prosperity are proverbial. They have shown their ability to conquer the desert, and to establish homes. Official records show that in "Mormon"

communities over 75 per cent. of the members own the homes in which they dwell.

I bear to you solemn witness that nowhere can be found a people amongst whom sexual purity is held in higher esteem, or is more strictly demanded of its members, than the Latter-day Saints.

“Mormonism” then is a religious system embodying the Gospel of Jesus Christ as taught in earlier dispensations, and essentially based upon the restoration of that Gospel with all its inherent powers and privileges in this the dispensation of the last days. It provides for the temporal as well as the spiritual salvation of humankind, and teaches that morality is a privilege and a boon, as thereby is gained the experience without which eternal advancement would be impossible. Its message to the world is one of good tidings and cheer, coupled nevertheless with positive warning of predicted judgments that shall surely overtake men and nations except they repent and turn unto God. It stoutly defends the right of freedom in worship according to the dictates of the individual conscience, the while enjoying all rational toleration of religious belief and practice.

It voices a persuasive but authoritative call to repentance, and invites all mankind to come in through the portal of baptism while yet there is time, and participate in the blessings assured. It proclaims the second advent of the Lord Jesus Christ to be near at hand, and summons the world to prepare for His glorious coming.

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### DEATH

**BIGGS**—Sister Ellen Biggs of Varteg (Welsh Conference) died December 22, 1924. Deceased was born at Blania, Monmouthshire, in 1841, and was baptised and confirmed in July, 1866, by Elder T. Willet. Sister Biggs was a true missionary in her community and a constant supporter of truth and righteousness. She leaves a noble posterity who honour this wonderful mother and friend. Funeral services were held December 21, at the home and in the Wesleyan Chapel, under the direction of President Lewis F. Hansen. The speakers at the services were President Lewis F. Hansen, Brother R. Thomas and Elders Allen C. Reynolds and Charles L. Johnson. Elder Gordon Burt Affleck dedicated the grave.

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