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**Why I Am Not a Mormon: Part 1**

By Tal Davis

I have been researching, speaking, and writing about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) for more than forty years. My first encounter with LDS missionaries was when I was just eleven years old. I was home alone one summer day when two of them parked their bicycles in the street and came to my door. I invited them in and we talked for about an hour. They asked me what I knew about their church. At that point, I only knew what I had learned in school, which was mostly had to do with Mormon history; how they had migrated west and practiced polygamy. They assured me that polygamy was only in the early days of their church because there were so many women without husbands, but they no longer did that.

I listened quietly, and soon they thanked me and excused themselves. They asked me if they could come back the next week. At that time I was not yet a born-again Christian. I was naive and somewhat interested in what they had to say, so I said yes. But when I told my mother about it, she said to politely tell them to leave. The next week, the missionaries called to see if the appointment was still on. I told them I was not interested and not to come. They said okay, and that was that.

My next encounter with LDS missionaries was in 1973 when I was in college. I was living in a rented house near the Florida State University campus when, one afternoon, two LDS missionaries came to the door. This time I was far more clear about what I believed when I asked them in. We dialogued for several hours that day about our beliefs. By that time I had learned enough about

Mormonism to know it was not like most other churches. After our conversation, I was even more sure that what Mormons believed and what I believed were radically different.

So I began a lifelong study of Mormonism and other unorthodox religious groups. That being said, I have to admit, there was much about the LDS and its people that I found appealing. It is certainly true that they affirm high moral standards and strong families. I have always found their clean living ways attractive. I have never used alcohol or tobacco, so I agree with that ethos of their faith (but I do drink tea). I also agree with their emphases on sexual morality and marriage (ethical issues which some mainline Christian groups compromise more each passing year). One of my favorite professors in college was a Mormon. So you might ask me, as many Mormons have, "Why would you not consider actually joining the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?"

The answer to that question is not based on my feelings about Mormon people. As I said, I find most LDS members (but not all) to be people of high character. The answer is found in my research of the history and beliefs of Mormonism. In this series I will detail some of those issues and explain why I came to regard them as reasons for disqualifying Mormonism and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as being authentically Christian. It is these issues that explain why I am not a Mormon.

(Writers note: In 2018, the leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced that the church no longer will use the traditional designations of its identity as "Mormons" or even the abbreviation

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"LDS" in its publications or internet sites. It instructed the secular media to use only its full title – the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – or if necessary, a shorter version, "the Church of Jesus Christ." In this series, however, I will continue to use those traditional appellations since they were commonly used when I was doing my research. They are still how most people identify the church and its members.)

### History

When I looked objectively at the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I discovered a lot inconsistencies with what the church officially taught and teaches. That history, of course, starts with Joseph Smith, Jr. (Dec. 23, 1805 - June 27, 1844), a 19th century farm boy from western New York. In the Fall of 1820, according to his own story, Smith experienced a miraculous vision of God the Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ (this event was documented by Smith in the LDS scripture: *The Pearl of Great Price: Joseph Smith-History*). Smith claimed Jesus told him that all the churches then in existence were corrupt. He told him they had lost the keys to the true faith and church which he founded 1800 years earlier.

The two divine visitors then said they would empower Smith to restore true Christianity and the true church to the earth in these "Latter-days." Smith then went to work restoring the one true church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in 1830, as he had been instructed. Smith's claims garnered much opposition from those in his community who knew him well. So he and his followers eventually moved to Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, where he was assassinated in 1844 after exposures of church sponsored polygamy were pub-

lished. After Smith's death, most of the Mormons followed Brigham Young and migrated west to the Utah territory.

Since those days, numerous historical problems with Smith's story and the rise of Mormonism have been discovered. For instance, the first account by Joseph Smith of his "First Vision" visitation by God and Jesus was written in 1830. It is very different from the official version now found in the *Pearl of Great Price*. In that initial telling, Smith said he was 16 years old and had only seen one divine person, "the Lord" (apparently Jesus Christ). Smith related a second version of the story in 1835. In that account Smith said he saw many angels along with God, in the midst of a flame, and Jesus Christ. Other diverging versions that have been authenticated were also written and circulated.

It was obvious to me that Smith's assertions of what happened changed over time. His final version was not published until 1842. It seemed odd to me that "the most important event in history since the resurrection of Christ" was so unclear in Smith's recollections, and was unknown even to most Mormons until 22 years after the event. It was not officially accepted by the church until 1880 when it was canonized as LDS scripture in the *Pearl of Great Price*.

Smith also claimed to have had a "Second Vision" of an angel named Moroni in 1823. The angel purportedly showed Smith where a set of engraved golden plates were hidden near his home. Starting in 1827, according to his story, Smith miraculously translated the plates into King James English from a language he called "Reformed Egyptian." In 1830, Smith published his translation as the *Book of Mormon*.

As I further studied the life of young Joseph Smith, Jr., I found out some interesting facts not discussed much

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321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

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among LDS people. For example, he became involved in rather shady activities and was even convicted of fraudulently claiming he could find buried treasure. He also had something of a reputation among the people around his home town (Palmyra, NY) as being a trickster and dabbling in occult magic (a fact the LDS has had to affirm was true). Given all the evidence, I concluded that the events of the "First Vision" and the "Second Vision" had been concocted by Smith to explain why he wanted to start a new church. I was convinced Smith never had a vision of God and Jesus, never saw an angel named Moroni, never possessed any golden plates, and never translated them at all.

## Scriptures

You would suppose the questionable beginnings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would be enough to convince me that Mormonism is false. Nonetheless, I delved deeper into the church's doctrines to see how they squared with historic biblical Christianity. I started with the written bases of LDS beliefs. I learned that the LDS includes the Bible as one of its "Four Standard Works" – authoritative texts. However, they use only the King James Version (KJV).

That was, to start with, problematic for me. While the KJV is certainly the most influential English translation ever, why would they exclusively use a Bible version that was based on relatively late Greek and Hebrew texts. Certainly LDS scholars would know that fact. Recent translations, such as the Christian Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible, are based on far earlier texts, and use much more readable modern English. Eventually I concluded that the reason the LDS still relies only on the KJV is probably because of its second major scripture, the *Book of Mormon - Another Testament of Jesus Christ*.

As was mentioned above, Joseph Smith, Jr. claimed that, in 1827 with the help of the angel Moroni, he uncovered a set of golden plates. He asserted that he was able to translate the tablets into English using a magic seer stone he found near his home. That text became The *Book of Mormon* (the subtitle was added in the 1980s), which Smith said was "the most correct book of any on earth."

It always seemed strange to me that Smith's translation, done in the 1820s, was written entirely in 17th century Elizabethan English, just like the KJV Bible. I learned, in fact, that many passages in the Book of Mormon are identical, or nearly so, to many passages in the KJV. That may explain why the LDS still uses only the KJV in their studies. I believe they know that most English speaking people are conditioned to the KJV being the normal language of Scripture. So, by using only that archaic English Bible, it naturally makes the *Book of Mormon*, written in the same vernacular, also sound like inspired scripture to LDS members and prospective converts!

As I indicated, I had already decided that Smith's account of finding and translating the *Book of Mormon* was false. In any case, I studied to see what it said. When I had been confronted by the LDS missionaries as a young person, they gave me a copy of the Book of Mormon. They challenged me to read it and pray to God if it was true or not. They promised the Holy Ghost would testify to me in my heart that it was true. So I asked myself, "What then does the Book of Mormon have to say? Will I be convinced of its veracity?" So I read it and found out.

I found that the *Book of Mormon* is supposedly a historical account covering a thousand years of ancient pre-Colombian American history. It supposedly starts about 600 BC and

ends about AD 400 (with one section dated about 2000 years earlier). As I discovered, objective researchers have demonstrated that its historical veracity cannot be substantiated. The *Book of Mormon* is full of numerous cultural, anthropological, and zoological problems. It also contains historical anachronisms. For example, it details the presence of horses and other animals as well as weapons of steel in the Americas long before they were introduced there by the Europeans. Likewise, absolutely no archaeological evidence has ever been discovered to substantiate the events recorded in the *Book of Mormon*. I also saw evidence that Smith plagiarized much of the *Book of Mormon* story line from other fictional sources written in New England at about that same time. I concluded, therefore, that the *Book of Mormon* is a work of fiction and is not in anyway divinely inspired.

For more information about the *Book of Mormon* go to <http://www.marketfaith.org/the-book-of-mormon-is-it-another-testament-of-jesus-christ>.

But, as I also learned, that was not the end of the story. While the *Book of Mormon* is certainly the best known of the extra-biblical LDS scriptures (there is even a Broadway musical named for it), it is not the only one. I became aware that the LDS actually have two more books they regard as divinely inspired. They are *The Doctrine and Covenants* and *The Pearl of Great Price*. I learned that most of the unusual doctrines of Mormonism came from those two sources, not from the *Book of Mormon*, and certainly not from the Bible.

*The Doctrine and Covenants* is usually published under a single cover with the *Pearl of Great Price*. According to the LDS, it is "a collection of modern revelations . . . regarding The Church of Jesus Christ as it has been restored in these last days." I learned that the LDS believes Joseph Smith, Jr., and other LDS prophet/presidents, supposedly received dozens of direct communications from God that were recorded and published in the *Doctrine and Covenants*. When one reads the 138 revelations and two "Official Declarations" contained in the book, most are written as literal quotations from God himself.

The final of the Four Standard Works is *The Pearl of the Great Price*. In my research I discovered that it consists of a collection of documents either written or "translated" by Joseph Smith. The official website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints describes the contents of the *Pearl of the Great Price* this way.

*"Editions published since 1902 contain (1) excerpts from Joseph Smith's translation of Genesis, called the Book of Moses, and of Matthew 24, called Joseph Smith-Matthew; (2) Joseph Smith's translation of some Egyptian papyrus that he obtained in 1835, called the book of Abraham; (3) an excerpt from Joseph Smith's history of the Church that he wrote in 1838, called Joseph Smith-History; and (4) the Articles of Faith, thirteen statements of belief and doctrine."* (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/pearl-of-great-price?lang=eng> )

In my study of Smith's translations of the *Pearl of the Great Price*, I found several troubling facts about the book. First, Smith's supposed translations of parts of Genesis (the Book of Moses) and the Gospel of Matthew added passages to the texts not found in any known ancient manuscripts of those writings. That led me to conclude that he really did not translate them at all, he just added what he wanted to them to confirm his own teachings.

Second, I already decided that most of Joseph Smith's autobiographical information concerning his finding the golden plates and translating the *Book of Mormon* was fabricated. So it was clear to me that the section called Joseph Smith-History in the *Pearl of the Great Price* was false.

The third aspect of the *Pearl of the Great Price* I investigated was the last section called the Articles of Faith. These were thirteen brief statements written by Joseph Smith, Jr., that ostensibly summarized the beliefs of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Actually I decided that Smith's real reason for publishing the articles was to camouflage his church's unorthodox beliefs using verbiage that would seem fairly orthodox to the non-Mormon public.

And finally, I read how an enormous amount of critical research has been done on a section of the *Pearl of Great Price* called The Book of Abraham. I learned that in 1835, while living in Ohio, Joseph Smith, Jr.

purchased some ancient Egyptian papyrus scrolls from a peddler named Michael Chandler. Smith excitedly declared that one of the scrolls was actually written by the patriarch Abraham while he was in Egypt (Gen. 12:10-20) and was divinely inspired. Smith then, over the following few years, purportedly translated it from hieroglyphics into King James English. This was amazing since few people at that time were qualified even to attempt translating Egyptian writings. In any case, Smith's version was finally published in full in 1842. The Book of Abraham was eventually canonized by the LDS as inspired Scripture in 1880 and placed in the *Pearl of Great Price*.

After Joseph Smith's death in 1844, his family kept possession of the papyrus scrolls from which he had supposedly translated the Book of Abraham. They sold them to a collector in 1856. The scrolls were thought to have been destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. However, in 1966, more than a century after they were sold, the papyri were discovered preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. How they got there is not clear. Nonetheless, knowing their significance to the LDS, the museum gave them to the church's history department.

When expert Egyptologists examined the papyri, they found that the actual content of the texts bore absolutely no similarity to what was found in the Book of Abraham. They were identified as common Egyptian burial manuals written hundreds of years after the time of the Patriarch.

For decades the church refused to acknowledge the inconsistency in Smith's translation and the original text. The reason why is easy to see. If Joseph Smith got that book wrong, then what about the other books he had translated (most notably the *Book of Mormon*) and the dozens of revelations he had received directly from God. Could they have been wrong also? Such an admission would shake the foundations of the whole Mormon system.

In any case, on July 12, 2014, the LDS posted an essay on its official website titled "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham" (see it at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham?lang=eng>). The unnamed writer of the essay acknowledged that Smith got the translation from the papyri wrong, and that it was not written by Abraham. Nonetheless, the essayist (officially speaking for the church) maintained that even if the texts were unrelated to Abraham, they miraculously served as a catalyst for Joseph Smith to receive revelation from God. He argued that God supernaturally communicated truth through the texts (regardless of what was on them) which Smith wrote down as the divinely inspired Book of Abraham.

This process is similar, asserted the writer, to the way Smith got other revelations – including his corrections of the Bible in the *Pearl of Great Price* (The Book of Moses and Joseph Smith-Matthew). In those cases, as in the Book of Abraham, Smith also had absolutely no historic textual bases for his translations. Yet those books are still regarded as divinely inspired scripture by the LDS.

As we said earlier, Smith also claimed to have received numerous revelations from God that are recorded and canonized in the *Doctrine and Covenants*. Those revelations were received and recorded directly from God without the need for the intermediary of an ancient written text as were the *Book of Mormon* and the Book of Abraham.

In time, I came to see the real issue here is not just that Joseph erred in translating the Book of Abraham, the Book of Moses, and Joseph Smith-Matthew. I wondered why the church could not simply admit Smith was wrong and de-canonize those books. The reason it could not do so, I realized, was quite complicated. I learned that those books contain significant theological content considered essential in the Mormon doctrinal system, but are found nowhere else in LDS scriptures. They are key doctrines the church cannot allow to be discredited.

Many of those tenets are incompatible with historic Christian teaching. For example the Book of Abraham teaches the unorthodox view that mankind has a pre-existent life in a spirit world before we are born into this world of flesh and bone (Abraham 3:19-28). It also teaches a plurality of gods, and that the earth was

organized by the Heavenly Father, Jehovah (Jesus), and other divine spirits, out of preexisting matter, and not created "out of nothing" (*ex nihilo*) as taught by historic Christianity (Abraham 4:1). These are foundational doctrinal beliefs of Mormonism.

### **Conclusion to Part One**

So, to sum it all up, the evidence I discovered in my years of research into LDS history and scriptures led me to two inescapable conclusions. First, Joseph Smith, Jr. was not a prophet at all, but a clever and charismatic fraud who was able to fool many people. He fabricated his life story and his accounts of uncovering and translating the *Book of Mormon*. Second, the extra-biblical texts regarded as inspired scripture by the LDS are fraudulent. Thus, despite the appealing moral qualities I saw in members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I could not, and cannot, even consider joining that church. It is founded on the bases of false premises and errant scriptural texts.

But this is not the whole story of my investigation into Mormonism. In Part Two of this series, I will explore what I learned about the distinctive doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My analysis of those doctrines was the most important dimension of my conclusions about Mormonism. In the next installment I will explain what I learned about Mormon theology, what I decided about its truth claims, and why, therefore, I am *not* a Mormon.

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