

History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism)

The Mormon Church did not grow out of the apostolic church like the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, since its history is largely unknown to many, we will take time to explore its origins.

The following abbreviated history is taken from the **official** LDS version of the history of the Church.

Joseph Smith:

Joseph Smith Jr. was born on December 23, 1805 in Sharon, Vermont. He was the fourth of eight children of a struggling farmer. His family moved to the area of Palmyra, NY in 1816. In 1820 there was a great religious fervor and revival in the area, beginning with the Methodists. His family became involved, and Joseph was taken to some of the meetings.

Joseph was concerned about which church to join, and at age 15, he read James 1:5

5 If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. (KJV)

and was impressed to pray for guidance. He retired to a clearing in the woods, and in the spring of 1820, God visited him. In fact, God the Father and the Son both visited him. At first there was a bright light, then he saw two "personages". One said to him "*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*" The Son of God then instructed Joseph that none of the established churches were correct. They were all abominations. He told Joseph "many other things . . . which I cannot write about at this time." (Joseph Smith, History 1:11-20)

On September 21, 1823, Smith was again visited. He had not joined any church, and had been awaiting instruction from God as to what he should do. While praying in his room, the angel Moroni appeared and told him that gold plates with "*the fullness of the everlasting gospel*" and the history of former inhabitants of the continent written on them. Two stones, the "Urim and Thummim" were stored with the plates and would allow Smith to translate them. However, it was not yet time for Smith to get the plates. He was given a vision of the place where they were buried. Moroni then left. Very shortly Moroni returned and repeated the entire message, including lengthy scriptural citations. A third time the same night the process was repeated. (JSH 1:30-47)

Joseph Smith went to the spot and tried to remove the plates from the box in which they were stored. Moroni prevented him from actually taking them out. He repeated these visits annually, and was prevented each time from removing the plates. He did, however, receive certain spiritual instruction. (JSH 1:52-54)

On September 22, 1827, Smith was allowed to take the plates. He then translated them using the Urim and Thummim. Joseph would sit behind a curtain and dictate the words as seen through the Urim and Thummim. Assistants would write down the words as he dictated. When the process was completed, the resulting book was published in 1830 as the Book of Mormon, named for the ancient scribe who recorded it on the golden plates.

On May 15, 1829, while the translation was in process, Joseph Smith and his assistant, Oliver Cowdery, were visited by John the Baptist, who conferred the Priesthood of Aaron on them. This action restored the "Church of God" to the earth. It was now possible for the gift of the Holy Spirit to be conferred to humans again. In June of 1829, Peter, James, and John conferred the Priesthood of Melchizedek on them, now allowing them to see God (Doctrine and Covenants 84:21-22) and to properly interpret scripture.

Joseph Smith formed the "Church of Christ" on April 6, 1830 with five members, calling himself the "First Elder". The Book of Mormon was published two months later. In 1834 the name of the church was changed to the "Church of Latter-day Saints". In 1838 it was changed to the current title, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints". It is commonly referred to as the "Mormon" church, while members strongly prefer the shortened "LDS" church.

In January of 1831, Joseph Smith had a revelation that the church should move from New York to Kirtland, Ohio (D&C 37:3, 38:31-32). In 1835, Joseph Smith published the "Doctrine and Covenants", a compilation of revelations he had received. While in Kirtland, a traveling exhibition of Egyptian artifacts

passed through. Joseph Smith purchased a number of the artifacts from the exhibitors. He determined that a papyrus he had purchased contained the writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt. The church was persecuted in Ohio, and in spring of 1839 moved to Commerce, Illinois, which they renamed Nauvoo. In 1842 he finished translating the Egyptian papyrus and published it as the "Book of Abraham".

The Mormons continued to be persecuted. Joseph Smith was arrested on trumped-up charges in Carthage, Illinois. On June 27, 1844, a mob stormed the jail, intent on murder. Joseph and his brother Hiram (also in jail) shot back with smuggled guns. Three of the members of the mob were hit, and two killed before Joseph and Hiram were both killed. This left the church without its prophet. The "apostles" (leaders of the church) convened and elected Brigham Young as their new leader.

In the winter of 1846-7, the Mormons fled to Council Bluffs, Iowa. As soon as the weather allowed, they traveled west, eventually arriving at the current site of the Salt Lake City, Utah. The church maintains its headquarters there today. It has over 6 million members worldwide, and is adding over 100,000 members annually. It has donations in excess on \$3 billion annually, and controls businesses with several times that amount of annual income.

The Record of History

The following material is NOT LDS ORTHODOXY. It is drawn from many sources, including official LDS documents. We will begin by examining certain of the dates Joseph Smith sets forward.

Smith lists the first vision as occurring in the spring of 1820 in Manchester, NY after the family had moved to Palmyra, then Manchester from Sharon, VT, and that his sister Lucy (born July 18, 1821 in Palmyra) was among those involved in the second move.

1. Can we cite any example where a Biblical author has made an error in recording history, particularly with regard to his own or his family's history?

Next, Smith records that a revival took place in Manchester, beginning with the Methodists, in 1820. The historical record is clear. No revival took place in 1820. In fact, the Methodists lost twenty-three members in 1819, six in 1820, and forty in 1821. Smith also records that the revival was in the "second year after our removal to Manchester". With Lucy born in 1821, this would put the revival in 1823 or 1824. He records other details which allow us to cross-check events. The church records and newspapers of the day exist, at least in part. The revival in question occurred in 1824-5. Thus, if Smith had been content to list the revival as occurring two years after Lucy's birth, his story would have been reasonably safe. Instead, he lists it in the D&C as occurring four years too soon.

Smith created a paper trail as well. While his account of the First Vision ("1820") in the D&C lists the Father and Son as present, his own handwritten account (1832) lists only Jesus as present and states that it was in "the 16th year of my age" which would indicate that it took place in 1821 or 1822. In Joseph Smith's handwritten diary entry for November 9, 1835, he records that he saw two angels, but neither the Father nor the Son. In the "Documentary History of the Church" (Nov 14, 1835) he talks about the "first visitation of angels" as occurring when he was fourteen years old. This would indicate that it occurred in 1819 or 1820. This would conform to the D&C account.

"CHURCH STANDS OR FALLS WITH JOSEPH SMITH. Mormonism, as it is called, must stand or fall on the story of Joseph Smith. He was either a prophet of God, divinely called, properly appointed and commissioned, or he was one of the biggest frauds this world has ever seen. There is no middle ground." (Doctrines of Salvation 1:188, Joseph Fielding Smith, Prophet of the LDS Church)

"That glorious theophany which took place in the spring of 1820 and which marked the opening of the dispensation of the fulness of times is called the *First Vision*. It is rated as first both from the standpoint of time and of pre-eminent importance. In it Joseph Smith saw and conversed with the Father and the Son, both of which exalted personages were personally present before him and he lay enraptured in the Spirit and overshadowed by the Holy Ghost.

"This transcendent vision was the beginning of latter-day revelation; it marked the opening of the heavens after the long night of apostate darkness; with it was ushered in the great era of restoration, "the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his

holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:21). Through it the creeds of Christendom were shattered to smithereens, and because of it the truth about those Beings whom it is life eternal to know began again to be taught among men.” (Mormon Doctrine, pp. 284-5, Bruce R. McConkie, Prophet of the LDS Church)

2. Based on the quotes above, describe the importance of the First Vision.

3. If a prophet is unreliable, is that prophet from God? (Jer 23:25-32; 14:13-16)

²¹ And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh;

²² For without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live.” (D&C 84:21-22, Sept 22-23, 1832)

4. How is it possible that Joseph Smith saw the Father in the *First Vision* in 1820, when he did not receive the priesthood until 1829?

Records exist of the Smith family moves. The Smith family was “warned out” of Norwich, Vermont on March 15, 1816. This common practice prevented the Smiths from laying claim to any charity from the local town to which they had moved less than a year before. Road tax records show that Joseph Smith Senior (Joseph Smith’s father) moved to Palmyra, NY in 1817, and lived there until 1822. The writings of Joseph Smith’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith, indicate that the rest of the family stayed in Vermont and joined Joseph Smith SR in Palmyra in 1820, a fact again confirmed by road tax records. The Smiths purchased land in Manchester after June of 1820. In 1823 the assessment of the land jumped, confirming improvement of the property and the move of the Smiths to Manchester after June of 1822. The two years Joseph Smith reports as passing between the move to Manchester and the revivals matches this record perfectly.

Additional records exist. The *Messenger and Advocate* of the LDS Church published an account of the first vision in installments from October 1834 to February 1835. Written by Oliver Cowdery and edited by Joseph Smith, this account places the revival in 1823 when Smith was seventeen years old. Part of the motivation for Smith’s inquiries was a “questioning whether a supreme being existed”. This seems odd given the official story that he saw the Father and Son three years earlier.

The story regarding James 1:5 is included in Cowdery’s account. He states that “Rev. Lane” (George Lane) of the Methodist Church suggested the text to Smith. He also mentions “Rev. Stockton” (Benjamin B. Stockton) of the Presbyterian Church as involved in the revival. Rev. Lane was assigned to the Susquehanna District of Pennsylvania, 150 miles from Palmyra, until his reassignment to Palmyra in July of 1824. The earliest published record of Rev. Stockton in Palmyra is with regard to a wedding Nov 26, 1823, and he wasn’t actually transferred to the area from Skaneateles, N.Y. until Feb 18, 1824.

5. Based on the record, when is the earliest that Joseph Smith could have gone to the woods in Manchester on a “spring day” to pray? If the D&C statement that it occurred in 1820 is false, what does this say about Joseph Smith as a prophet? (See Q3)

Rather than attempt to create questions for the class, we will pursue a descriptive format for the remainder of the history section.

Joseph Smith Senior and Junior were well known as “glass lookers”. Throughout the father’s life, he pursued buried treasure by means of a “seer stone”. This was a process by which a mystical stone was placed in the seer’s hat, the seer then placed his face in the hat so as to exclude light, and a vision of treasure being sought would be seen. Then digging would commence. When the treasure was not found, the treasure was said to have been moved deeper or hidden by some protective (typically evil) spirit.

JS Jr. followed in his father’s footsteps. In 1826, six years after allegedly being given great secret spiritual instruction at the first vision, and three years after allegedly being informed of the golden plates,

Smith was convicted of “glass looking” and fined in Palmyra, NY. This hardly seems to be the exemplary life of a true prophet of God. But the story gets more interesting.

While searching for treasure, he came across some fine white sand, and brought it home in a box. When his family asked what he had, Smith told them that he had been given special golden plates with the history of native peoples in the New World. When they asked to see this “Golden Bible”, he quickly said that he had been instructed by an angel that he was the only one to see them or they would be taken away. His family could lift the box, and the weight of the sand matched the story. Since his family had taken the bait so easily, he decided to make something more of it. Smith was very bright, charismatic, and a voracious reader. He had gotten the idea of the contents of the plates from a popular theory that the native American peoples were descendants of the Jews who had migrated from Palestine about the time of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. This story was fleshed out in a book titled “A View of the Hebrews”, by Ethan Smith, which was popular about then, and which Smith had almost certainly read. This became the outline of the Book of Mormon. (This is confirmed by the work of the LDS Church Historian B. H. Roberts in the 1920’s. His work was suppressed, and only brought into public view in 1976.)

He now had to create a book which matched the fantasy. Since he had no golden plates, he had to invent reasons to avoid having anyone else examine the fraud too closely. He had a friend write down the “translation” of the plates behind a screen as Smith called out the words. Smith was careful to use language of the style and phraseology of the King James Bible, so the Book of Mormon would sound like real scripture. He also quoted long passages from the Bible. As a final touch, he had witnesses sign a testimony that they had seen the plates (Testimony of Three Witnesses) and handled the plates (Testimony of Eight Witnesses).

Unfortunately for Smith, things were not quite as he would have liked them to be. When we examine the records left to us by the witnesses in their own interviews, publications, and diaries, we find that none of them actually saw the physical plates. They were assembled in various small groups in the woods, and prayed mightily. When the plates did not appear, Smith impugned their faith, and prayer resumed. Eventually all the witnesses claimed to have a vision of the plates.

This was not enough for Smith. He sent Martin Harris, one of the witnesses, to New York City to seek out an expert in Middle Eastern Languages to confirm the authenticity of the writing. He gave Harris a sheet with various characters written on it, allegedly copied from the plates. Harris found Dr. Charles Anthon, who noted that the characters appeared to be of various languages, but not in any intelligible order. His conclusion was that the sheet was a useless forgery. He refused to give Harris any confirming letter. Yet Smith records in JSH 1:64 “Professor Anthon stated that the translation was correct, more so than any he had before seen from the Egyptian. I then showed him those which were not yet translated, and he said that they were Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic; and he said that they were true characters.”

The witnesses have more to tell us. At times they saw Smith “translating” the plates without benefit of the curtain, and without plates present! They tell us that Smith would use his “seer stone” (not the Urim and Thummim) and place it in his hat. When he put his face in his hat, words would appear, and Smith would tell his scribes what to write. In fact, the first recorded mention of the Urim and Thummim was about 1834 or 1835, several years after the BOM was published.

One final episode is very telling. After the first 116 pages of the BOM was “translated”, the manuscript was “borrowed” by a friend of Smith. Smith was unable to get the pages back, and was also unable to exactly reproduce them as would be expected of a divine translation. Smith also knew that if he failed to exactly reproduce the translation, if the 116 pages reappeared, his fraud would be exposed. Always fast on his feet, Smith declared that those plates had already been divinely taken away as they were translated, and that he would redo the section from another set of “abridged” plates. That is what made it into the BOM.

In 1828, Smith attempted to join the Methodist Church, but was refused. This occurred after he was alleged to be translating the plates which would provide the true religion which had been lost from the earth for centuries. We should recall that he had been told that ALL religions were “an abomination”. The depth of Smith’s faith can readily be seen.

Earlier we mentioned the Book of Abraham. Smith claimed that he translated the writings of Abraham in Egypt from the papyrus which he purchased from a traveling exhibit. News of the discovery of the Rosetta Stone had not reached Smith, so he felt safe in his invention. He might have gotten away with his fraud, but made a crucial mistake. He published a facsimile of the original papyrus when he completed his work in 1842. The papyrus was lost for many years, but has been discovered in a museum. It has been

positively identified by the LDS church. Egyptologists have translated it and found that it is part of the "Book of Breathings", a portion of the "Book of the Dead", and has nothing whatever to do with Abraham. This common funeral text contains about 600 characters, out of which Smith created numerous proper names and thousands of words.*

It is not practical to detail more of the fraudulent history of the LDS church here. Several excellent reference works are available for the interested student. It will suffice to point out that Smith "received revelations" on numerous topics which were of immediate concern to the fledgling church over the fourteen years he was at its head. These revelations served Smith's purposes as much as they served the church, and they often proved disastrous. Several contained prophecies which not only failed to come true, but have become impossible due to the passage of time and the death of persons detailed in them. The first compilation of these revelations was known as the "Book of Commandments", and is notable for the absence of two very well known doctrines: Progression and Polygamy. When Smith republished the book in 1835 as the "Doctrine and Covenants", he rewrote many of the revelations to suit his evolving theology.

To conclude this session, we will mention one distinctive characteristic of the LDS church: progressive revelation. In essence, this doctrine states that new light is continually being given to the church by means of direct revelation. These revelations to the "General Authorities" (the Prophet and the Twelve Apostles) are scripture, just as the Bible and the BOM are considered scripture. Any revelation which contradicts a prior belief is scripture just as much as the prior revelation, with the new superceding the old. This means that there is no contradiction when LDS beliefs started out as monogamy (Jacob 2:27, etc), progressed to polygamy (D&C 132:61-63), and then returned to monogamy (D&C Declaration 1) when polygamy threatened the entry of Utah into the US. Similarly, there is no contradiction that Negroes were excluded from the priesthood (Abraham 1:26-27) by the "curse of Ham", but are now able to receive the priesthood (D&C Declaration 2).

6. What is the statement of God regarding new revelations changing the teaching of God? (Deut 13:1-5, Gal 1:8-9)

*The actual text of the source document for the "Book of Abraham" is as follows:

"Osiris shall be conveyed into the Great Pool of Khons - and likewise Osiris Hor, justified, born to Tikhebyt, justified - after his arms have been placed on his heart and the Breathing Permit which [Isis] made and has writing on its inside and outside - has been wrapped in royal linen and placed under his left arm near his heart; the rest of his mummy-bandages should be wrapped over it. The man for whom this book has been copied will breathe forever as the bas of the gods do." (Klaus Baer, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Autumn, 1968, pp. 119-120, quoted in "Letters to a Mormon Elder, James R. White, p. 159)