

The Mormons: A Doctrinal Overview

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Mention the word Mormon and a number of images surface. We might envision a famed musical organization, the Tabernacle Choir, possibly in performance with the Philadelphia Orchestra presenting a full, stirring rendition of Handel's Messiah. That group carries with it the reputation of America's premier large-sized chorale.

A second image presents us a picture of courageous pioneers pushing handcarts across the desolate plains. Traveling in small, well-organized groups, as they forge bravely ahead, fleeing persecution and savoring bitter-sweet memories of their slain prophet. They are producing that western saga in which they settle the vast inter-mountain region and make the desert bloom.

A third image presents the Mormon as a somewhat lecherous American sheik living in a polygamous relationship with his many wives. Early American tourists, among them newspaperman Horace Greeley and humorist Mark Twain, were enticed to Utah by the "Mormon Question." Once there, Mark Twain wryly suggested how difficult it must be for Brigham Young to sleep in the midst of all the snoring.

A fourth picture is that of two stalwart, upstanding door-to-door salesmen. They impress the community with their amiable, but determined testimony to their beliefs, backed by an aura of moral uprightness and propelled by an optimistic conviction regarding their present and future fate. They are the advance-men for the proselytizing blitz now impacting on urban and suburban American communities.

These images typify America's reaction to its foremost homegrown religious sect. The pictures are current and most of them, are positive. As one of relatively few church bodies which utilize the name of our Lord and Savior directly in its name, it gives the impression of a worthy embodiment of American Christianity. Yet lurking behind this appealing mask is a deceptive, anti-Christian bias to life. Familiar words take on strange meanings. Law and Gospel are turned inside-out, with the Gospel becoming Law and the Law losing its force. A survey of Mormon doctrine reveals work-righteousness in its crassest form.

Salvation and the Stages of Existence

To note what the Mormon church tells its people about salvation, we must take into consideration the doctrines regarding the three basic stages of existence as they have been developed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The stages of existence involve the pre-existence, mortality, and the post-resurrection. The post-resurrection, in turn, is divided into at least five different levels.

Pre-existence, the Mormon member is told, was his full-blown state before he was born into this world. In this stage he and all other people were spirit beings, "the offspring of exalted parents." Here they were "men and women appearing in all respects as mortal parents do, excepting only that their spirit bodies were made of a more pure and refined substance than the elements from which mortal bodies are made." In other words, they had real bodies, but not yet mortal bodies. Mormon theologian Bruce McConkie insists that this premortal existence is based on two central truths. First, God is a personal being, "not a spirit essence that fills the immensity of space." In His physical image man was created. Secondly, "matter is self-existent and

eternal”; creation is “merely the organization and reorganization of the eternal substance.” There is no creation *ex nihilo*. Apparently spirit creatures came into being through a “begetting” activity of God, in which the celestial parent rearranged pre-existent matter into such spirit bodies. With God the Father pre-eminent in wisdom among the spirit bodies, He set up laws to make it possible for his spirit-children to “advance like himself.” Pre-existence, the Mormon is told, was perhaps infinitely long. It was a time of “probation, progression, and schooling.”ⁱ

Foremost among these spirit bodies was Christ, the “only-begotten of the Father.” Some spirit beings advanced more than did others. These became great leaders in the upcoming mortal life. Among those who did not do well are the members of inferior races, including the blacks, who later received the curse of Cain. The Mormon in his pre-existence must have done surpassingly well. For in mortal life he is given the privilege of exposure to the true church—the Mormon church—and with that an opportunity to gain the highest of heavens.

The second phase is mortality. The Mormon is told that this second phase is a severe probationary state in which he is being tested for faithfulness to the “regulation of the gospel.” In the process of taking on mortal life, he almost entirely gave up the vast store of knowledge and experience which he had gained in the stage of pre-existence. The Mormon cites the romantic poet William Wordsworth with an apt expression of this transition in the “Ode on Intimations of Immortality”:

*Our birth is. but a sleep and a forgetting;
The soul that rises with us, our Life's star
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.
The homely nurse doth all she can
To make her foster-child, her inmate, Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palance whence he came.*

Mortality implies death. The joining of the mortal body and spirit in this life is temporary, since they will be separated in death, but they will again be permanently joined in the resurrection. This second phase is a brief phase between the other two much longer phases stretching both ways to eternity.ⁱⁱ

After death, according to the Mormon, man eventually will be resurrected through the merit of Christ. But before the final resurrection will come the Millennium. At its commencement, it is claimed, Christ will return and establish His visible kingdom in Jackson County, Missouri. Mortal existence, it is suggested, will have extended through six thousand-year periods. With the seventh, the Millennium commences. Some Mormons imply that on this basis we can conclude that the Millennium will begin in about the year 2,000 AD.

After the Millennium comes the final resurrection. The final resurrection will commence with the Judgment. The Mormon is assured that the Judgment has lost its terror. “To the Mormon the judgment is not a terrible thing, fraught with the fear of inevitable punishment, but it is a calm and merciful appraisal of the success or failure each of us has made in his eternal adventure under the Plan.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the Mormon view, God calmly goes about the process of making a

classification and assigning each human being to the appropriate level of postresurrection living.

To the Mormon salvation takes on three different aspects, but Christ has a central role in only one respect. The Mormon is instructed that the purpose of Christ's mission was to provide the resurrection. This and this only is "grace" as viewed by the Mormons. This bestowal of grace is nearly universal without any regard to faith in Christ. Consequently, Mormon doctrine insists that we must distinguish between unconditional or general salvation (which Christ provides in the resurrection) and conditional or individual salvation (which is obtained through one's own merit.) Mormons are virtual universalists. Only the few "sons of perdition" are to be denied general salvation, receiving hell as their reward. All the others go on to one of five levels. The level of one's attainment depends on works, not on Christ. "Once we have been resurrected, it will be our own efforts and not Christ's sacrifice that will be the deciding factor." Indeed, faith is largely irrelevant.^{iv}

The lowest level of post-resurrection glory is the telestial. Although most of the adult people from the time of Adam will find themselves at this level, the Mormon will not be there. These are people who are "carnal, sensual, devilish." These are people who "have chosen the vain philosophies of the world rather than accept the testimonies of Jesus." They will be "servants of the Most High; but where God and Christ dwell, they cannot come." Their telestial glory, although passing human understanding, is much inferior to that of other levels, just as the light of stars is feeble in comparison with that of the moon and the sun.^v

The second level is the terrestrial kingdom. The Mormon is told he might end up here. This level will be comprised of four groups:

- 1: "Accountable" people who were "without law"
2. Those who accept the gospel in the spirit world though rejecting it in mortal life
3. Honorable men who have been deceived into not accepting the gospel
4. Lukewarm Mormons.

These have been living under terrestrial law, leading an upright life but not "conforming to the standards whereby the human soul is sanctified by the Spirit." Their glory is like that of the glory of the moon, which reflects the glory of the sun. These people "receive of the presence of the Son, but not of the fullness of the Father." If the Mormon finds himself here, "to all eternity" he will be "unmarried and without exaltation."^{vi}

The celestial kingdom is the true Mormon kingdom of God and its glory is typified by the sun. "By devotion and faithfulness, by enduring to the end in righteousness and obedience, it is possible to merit a celestial reward." Within this celestial kingdom there are three heavens or degrees. It is envisioned that baptism places a person on the way to the celestial world and that celestial marriage "puts a couple on the path to the highest heaven."^{vii}

The Mormon's salvation is shot-through with work righteousness; man himself is the center of the whole scheme. Christ is turned into merely a forerunner who by his effort made possible the resurrection. Faith, as we know it, has been totally removed, as is evident in the following statement:

One of the untrue doctrines found in modern Christendom is the concept that man can gain salvation (meaning in the kingdom of God) by grace alone and without obedience. This soul-destroying doctrine has the obvious effect of lessening the determination of an individual to conform to all the laws and ordinances of the gospel, such conformity being essential if the sought-for reward is in reality to be gained.^{viii}

The work of Christ is further diminished when we note the strange Mormon doctrine of blood atonement. President Joseph Fielding Smith has said, “Man may commit certain grievous sins—according to his light and knowledge—that will place him beyond the reach of the atoning blood of Christ. . . . If then [a man] would be saved, he must make sacrifice of his own life to atone--so far as his power lies—for that sin.” Mormon theology bases capital punishment on this doctrine, but admits that this doctrine “can only be practiced in its fullness in a day when the civil and ecclesiastical laws are administered in the same hands.”^{ix}

Doctrines Regarding Man and God(s)

The Mormon is taught to be exceedingly optimistic regarding man’s potential. Moving from man’s first state in pre-existence to the present estate in mortality, God’s children have brought along with them essential goodness, with the “potential to become God-like in our attitude and character.” Original sin is disavowed and the goal of life is to return once more to God’s presence, having developed toward Godhood:

Speaking of ourselves and quoting the Master, we say that the kingdom of God is within us, which implies that as God’s children we have in us the seeds of Godhood. Christ admonishes us to this end saying, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”^x

Such theories regarding man inevitably cause an altogether different view of man’s fall into sin. Sin is merely an occasional problem with which we need to grapple during our time of probation here in this world. Similarly, the fall was not a disaster, but “part of the great Plan.” Indeed, the Mormon thinks of it as a “fortunate fall,” for otherwise he could not have come to know the difference between good and evil, would have been deprived of the opportunity to carry out his work righteousness, and could not have earned his particular niche in the celestial kingdom. Adam, rather than standing in contrast to Christ, becomes like him. For Adam the participation in the fall “was a sacrifice that brought mortality, and Adam willingly paid the price of sin and death to give us that privilege.”^{xi}

Mormon teachings about God are confusing and occasionally even contradictory. In the Book of Mormon there are indications that the concept of God is that of the Christian Trinity. But later writings, especially in *Doctrines and Covenants*, Mormon founder Joseph Smith began speaking about the “plurality of gods,” a term he preferred to polytheism. In the book of Genesis he identified the Father with Elohim and Christ with Jehovah. Mormon doctrine insists that the Father “has a spiritual body, which by revealed definition is a resurrected body of flesh and bones.” In contrast, the Spirit has only a spirit body. Taken together, “three glorified, exalted, and perfected personages comprise the *Godhead* or supreme presidency of the universe.” Thus to the Mormon the Godhead is not a Trinity, but a troika.^{xii}

Some descriptions of God seem to be according to traditional Christian concepts. Joseph Smith termed God the “only supreme governor and independent Being in whom all fullness and perfection dwell; who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient; without beginning of days or end of life. . . .”^{xiii} But later in life Joseph Smith spoke of God in a different way. Then he indicated that men could become as God is and further suggested that God himself, even the Father, was once a man:

We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see . . . 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.

According to the following description, eternal life is really the process of becoming a god:

Here then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true god; and *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, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in the everlasting burnings . . . What is it.? To inherit the same power, the same glory, and the same exaltation, until you arrive at the station of a god, and ascend the throne of eternal power, the same as those that have gone before.^{xiv}

Mormon doctrine becomes even more strange when the Mormons add a Mother in Heaven to the Heavenly Father: “Implicit in the Christian verity that all men are the spirit children of *an Eternal Father* is the usually unspoken truth that they are also the offspring of an *Eternal Mother*.”^{xv}

Still more strange is the suggestion by Joseph Smith that there is “a god above the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” insisting that it is inconceivable that any being would be without parent, not even the heavenly Father.^{xvi}

In all this it is obvious that Mormon doctrine steals glory from our God. In essence, the only difference between Christ and any other human being is one of degree rather than kind. Similarly the glory of the heavenly Father is diluted by the theory of plurality gods. That especially becomes evident when Mormonism suggests that men have the ability to become what God is. Finally, it should also be noted that the Mormon doctrine of God is materialistic, since Mormons insist that God is not a spirit, but is a being with spirit matter.

Ordinances

The Mormons have developed a series of ordinances in church life based upon their doctrine.

The first ordinance in the life of a Mormon is “naming.” This is a replacement for baptism, since the Mormons reject infant baptism on the supposed basis that children are innocent until reaching the age of accountability. This simple ceremony of carried out in the local Mormon church.

At age eight, the age of accountability, the Mormon child becomes eligible for baptism, which is termed “the very gateway into the kingdom of heaven—an indispensable step in our salvation and exaltation.” Done by immersion only and usually in private, it must be performed by a member of the priesthood. After baptism, works are still necessary for salvation: It is necessary to keep the commandments of God and endure to the end.^{xvii}

Confirmation is the next ordinance for the Mormon and involves the bestowal of the Holy Ghost. It is done in the presence of the congregation with three or four men of the higher

(Melchizedek) priesthood officiating.

The next ordinance for which a Mormon is eligible is priesthood. The priesthood, limited to males, is envisioned as an addition to the Mormon's conventional vocation. Pending proper qualifications, the name of the candidate is presented to the local body of the priesthood for approval. The appropriate ceremony is carried out in the presence of those holding the same level of priesthood and is done through the laying on of hands. There are two basic levels of priesthood, the Aaronic (the lower) and the Melchizedek (the higher). Each in turn consists of three levels. The Mormon youth may begin in the Aaronic priesthood at age twelve as a deacon, at age fourteen become a teacher, and sometime later become a "priest." The Melchizedek priesthood also consists of three levels, with all three using the generic term elder. A Mormon may enter the basic level at age nineteen, and later proceed to the second level ("the seventies") and the third level (high priest). Advancement within the Melchizedek priesthood is related to faithfulness and assignment. Those holding the level of high priest are eligible to hold any office within the Mormon church. Of the priests, roughly half are Aaronic and half are Melchizedek priests.

Another dispensation involves "blessings." At the official level of church hierarchy the dispenser of blessings must be a lineal descendant of Joseph Smith Sr., the father of the Mormon founder. These persons are designated as a patriarch and provide official blessings upon written request. Locally, blessings may also be provided on the personal level. These include anointings, especially for time of illness, carrying overtones of faith healing.

Included among the ordinances is marriage, the most significant of all. Perhaps the most famous aspect of Mormon marriage is the practice of polygamy begun by Joseph Smith and continued until disavowed in 1890. Although given "by inspiration," this abrogation may only be temporary in view of the claim that "obviously the holy procedure will commence again after the Second Coming of the Son of Man and the ushering in of the millennium."^{xviii}

Although Mormonism's former adherence to polygamy may be its most famous doctrine concerning marriage, much more important is the doctrine concerning celestial marriage. Civil marriages may be performed involving Mormons, and these are recognized by the Mormon church as being binding for this life. But the Mormon is brought up to value the celestial marriage much more highly. Apparently it can be performed only in a Mormon temple (not a Mormon church). It is binding "for time and all eternity." Family relationships of parent, children, and relatives are similarly involved in celestial marriage and will endure in the celestial kingdom.

To the Mormon, celestial marriage is of supreme importance:

The most important things that any member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ever does in this world are: 1. To marry the right person, in the right place, by the right authority; and 2. To keep the covenant made in connection with this holy and perfect order of matrimony—thus assuring the obedient persons of an inheritance of exaltation in the celestial kingdom.^{xix}

Thus baptism and celestial marriage are of supreme importance to the Mormon. "Baptism is the gate to the celestial kingdom; celestial marriage is the entrance to an exaltation in the highest heaven within the celestial world."

Exceedingly strange from our point of view is the Mormon practice of baptizing and

marrying vicariously on behalf of the dead. Yet it is somewhat logical, considering other Mormon doctrines. Somehow baptism must be provided for anyone to enter the celestial kingdom. But the practice of these ordinances is limited only to this earthly life. Therefore living Mormons must provide their dead ancestors opportunities for the blessings of baptism and marriage, if they did not have those opportunities in their mortal life. With the establishment of the family relationship on an eternal basis, Mormons have accordingly developed an excessive interest in the genealogy. Thus thousands of vicarious baptisms and sealings (establishing of family relationships through marriage) take place in Mormon temples each year.

Revelations

Weird doctrines have their basis in an equally weird set of holy books. The story of an angel appearing to Joseph Smith, Jr. in western New York state and revealing to him some divine plates is well known. Supposedly the plates had been buried at that spot in the fifth century. The message was composed in a language which Smith termed "Reformed Egyptian." The problem of his not knowing that language was miraculously solved when the angel also provided him a pair of divine spectacles called Urim and Thummim. With these he was able to read and translate the plates. The lengthy *Book of Mormon* is the story of three migrations from the Old World to the New, the resulting development of the American Indian tribes, and the appearance of Christ in the Western Hemisphere after His resurrection.

In actual fact, the *Book of Mormon* is insignificant as a foundation for Mormon doctrine. Somewhat more important is the *Pearl of Great Price*, containing alleged writings by Abraham, Moses, and others. Of great importance is *Doctrines and Covenants*, revelations which God supposedly provided Joseph Smith from 1830 to the time of his death in 1844. These three, together with the Bible as "correctly translated," comprise the Mormon canon.

For the Mormon revelation has not ceased. In a sense, the individual Mormon will receive revelations as he is possessed of the Holy Spirit. But these pertain only to him. The Mormon church supposedly can receive revelations of a general nature which are binding upon the entire church. Only the leader of the Mormon church is capable of receiving such revelations. This power has not resulted in substantial additions to the Mormon canon. Of the 136 sections of *Doctrines and Covenants* only one was written after the time of Joseph Smith—that by Brigham Young as the Mormons were about to leave Omaha on their great trek west. Nonetheless, the position of president of the Mormon church carries much unofficial authority in the matters of doctrine and practice. Mormon literature frequently will quote a work by a president of the church on points of doctrine without providing additional attestation in the Mormon scriptures.

An Achilles Heel or Two

The Mormons carry with them an aura of invincible success. Their conversion rate is very high, promising to make this anti-Christian sect an ever greater menace. Yet there are some noticeable cracks in the facade.

Mormon doctrine is patently racist. The implied condescension toward blacks has already been noted. Similarly, the darker color of Indians is explained in the *Book of Mormon* as a curse by God upon those who were disobedient; with renewed obedience in the future, their skin can supposedly become white again.

Another problem is a tendency toward schism, which is enhanced by the doctrine of continuing revelation. The foremost of the break-away groups is the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, with its headquarters in independence, Missouri. Doctrinally it

rejects polygamy, plurality of Gods, blood atonement, baptism for the dead, and celestial marriage. Joining its membership was Emma, the widow of Joseph Smith. She could neither accept the leadership of Brigham Young, nor admit to the polygamous relationships her husband had been establishing in the years just before his death. The Reorganized Church must choose as its leader a direct descendent of Joseph Smith.

The leadership struggle following the assassination of Joseph Smith spawned several other splinter groups. One is called the Church of Christ—Temple Lot. Its chief reason for existence is possession of title to the land in Jackson County, Missouri upon which Joseph Smith said that the Temple should be built. Interestingly, that lot is almost entirely surrounded by property owned by the Reorganized Church. Several underground Mormon organizations exist in the West, which furtively attempt practicing polygamy.

Upon careful examination their sacred books also provide an embarrassment to the Mormons. Stylistically the *Book of Mormon* is a hybrid, combining the words and concepts of a 19th century storyteller with a rich over-larding of King James' archaisms. With only a little exaggeration, Mark Twain has noted that if one would remove the oft-repeated "and it came to pass" from the Mormon scripture, the *Book of Mormon* would be only a pamphlet.^{xx} The frequent references in the *Book of Mormon* to the religious controversies of the early 19th century American frontier, together with an obvious anti-lodge bias, belies the claim of origin in the 5th century; Furthermore, the setting for *the Book of Mormon* is untenable. There is no "fit" between the Mormon account and the history of the Western Hemisphere as it has come to light. The assertion that the American Indians are really transplanted Jews is incredible.

Overall Observations

However weird Mormon doctrines may seem, they can in part be explained by the forces which spawned the movement.

Mormonism is a child of its time, and its time was the American frontier. Fredrick Jackson Turner, the famed American historian who suggested that the uniqueness of American society is to be seen in the frontier experience, can observe much support for that frontier thesis in Mormonism. Mormonism reflects the frontier religion of the early 19th century, including the Great Awakening. Although inherently autocratic, Mormonism embodies the frontier sense of independence and self-reliance, which doctrinally has become imbedded in its system of work-righteousness.

In a broader way, too, Mormonism reflects American culture. As America's foremost cult, it appropriately reflects materialism—not only of the practical kind, but also the philosophical kind, with Mormonism suggesting that matter is more eternal than is God.

Above all, Mormonism reflects its two early leaders, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. No doctrinal overview of the Utah Mormons would be complete without reference to these leaders. In Joseph Smith, its dreamy founder, The Church of Latter-day Saints had its initial charismatic leader. He also provided its naive myth and its early frenzied growth. In Brigham Young it had its American Moses, who not only led it to its promised land, but also gave it organization, stability, and direction. Together these two represent the entire spectrum of liberal-conservative religious tendencies. We can see in Joseph Smith a 19th century James Jones; perhaps the Mormons were fortunate their prophet died before he had opportunity to self-destruct. On the other hand, Brigham Young, one part clever religious leader and one part astute businessman, can be seen as the 19th century man-in-the-gray-flannel-suit. The Mormons have something to satisfy the gamut of religious tastes.

But through it all we observe a religious delusion. These modern cultists have created God in their own image. Indeed, the temple in Salt Lake City is rather like the Tower of Babel: the Utah-based Mormons are busy making themselves into gods. Unfortunately, this delusion is not always apparent. The Mormons use such familiar words as *faith*, *grace*, and even Savior, but infuse them with altogether different meanings in keeping with their devious and devastating work-righteousness. Therein lies the danger for 20th century American Christians, as apparently upright, Bible-believing Mormon ambassadors ring doorbells, suggesting by both word and life that they represent a higher level of Christianity. If Mormonism is America's greatest homegrown religion, it is at the same time its most deceptive religious delusion.

References

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- ^v McConkie, p. 778.
- ^{vi} McConkie, p. 784.
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- ^{viii} McConkie, P. 671.
- ^{ix} Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol. I, pp. 133-38; quoted in McConkie, p. 93.
- ^x Bennett, p. 198.
- ^{xi} Bennett, p. 207.
- ^{xii} McConkie, pp. 319-320.
- ^{xiii} Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, p. 9; quoted in McConkie, p. 317.
- ^{xiv} Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, pp. 345-47; quoted in McConkie, p. 321.
- ^{xv} McConkie, p. 516.
- ^{xvi} Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, pp. 370-73; quoted in McConkie, p. 577.
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- ^{xix} McConkie, p. 118.
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