

A Most Imperfect Book

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They appear to embrace the tenets of Christianity. Though you may not know much about their religious services, you've almost certainly seen their missionaries traveling about on bicycles. Their temples are magnificent buildings. According to some, they have their own state. They are the religious group known as the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, or simply put, the Mormons.

The beginning of the Mormon Church is an interesting story. In 1820 at the tender age of fourteen, Joseph Smith, Jr. claimed to have received a theophany in which God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him in a wooded area near his home in Palmyra, New York. When Smith asked which church he should join, the divine figures responded that he should join none. According to these people, all of the churches had become abominable.

The angel Moroni contacted Smith while he was in prayer three years later, in 1823. The messenger told him about a book that existed that was written upon gold plates. It described those who inhabited America prior to European settlement. Smith was shown the location of this book several years later in 1827. The divine messenger led him to a location called the Hill Cumorah where the plates, containing the text of the *Book of Mormon*, were buried. The plates were buried with Urim and Thummim, eyeglasses that enabled Smith to read the plates (he later switched the reading apparatus to a small stone, which performed the same function).

According to Smith, the golden plates were written in 'reformed Egyptian hieroglyphs.' When translating these plates with his magical devices, a new world opened up before him. The plates recorded the migration of a Jew named Lehi and his family from Jerusalem to Central America in the sixth century B.C. They founded a vast civilization stretching from coast to coast. Millions of people inhabited sprawling cities with temples as splendid as that of Solomon. Sadly, the story is as fictitious as it is grand.

The fabrications truly begin with Smith's claim of finding golden plates containing an Egyptian text. The 'reformed Egyptian' language that Smith translated never existed. There are several different phases of Egyptian language that existed from c. 3000 B.C. through A.D. 400, including hieroglyphs, Hieratic, Demotic, and Coptic. No 'reformed' Egyptian text has ever been

uncovered, nor have archaeologists ever discovered Egyptian hieroglyphic writing in North America.

Some believe Smith deliberately chose Egyptian as the text of the *Book of Mormon* because hieroglyphs had not yet been deciphered. Like other indecipherable texts from Greece and India, it may have appeared to Smith that his deception would never be uncovered. About the same time that Smith supposedly received his revelations, French scholar Jean Francois Champollion cracked the hieroglyphic code and opened the previously hidden world of texts from ancient Egypt. The discovery opened the floodgates on evidence that showed – and continues to show – that Smith invented the Mormon scriptures.

One of the marks against Smith's reliability as a prophet is the convenience of his revelations. When one of his associates' wives balked at selling property for the financing of the initial publication of the *Book of Mormon*, Smith received a revelation that the man should not 'covet' his own property, but sell it so the book could be published. When Smith's wife Emma questioned the existence of the golden plates, Smith received the 'Elect Lady' revelation in which he directed her not to question their existence. On some occasions, Smith was wrong in predicting future events, which forced him to admit that while some revelations were of God, the rest could come from men or even the devil.

During the 1980s, rumors surfaced that the Smithsonian Institute used the *Book of Mormon* as a guidebook in its archaeological research. There is evidence that church leaders in the 1930s asserted that Institute used and even quoted the Mormon scriptures in their work. In 1996, The Smithsonian's department of anthropology prepared a letter refuting the claim. Contrary to Mormon belief, they explained that American Indians did not have wheat, barley, oats, millet, rice, cattle, pigs, chickens, horses, donkeys, or camels prior to the arrival of European explorers in 1492. In addition, iron, steel, glass, and silk were not used in the Americas prior to this time, although they appear commonplace in the *Book of Mormon*. Finally, the letter claimed that no reputable scholar specializing in either Near Eastern archaeology or the prehistory of the Americas had discovered anything resembling Egyptian culture. In 1998 the National Geographic Society issued a statement similar to the one issued by the Institute for Religious Research, stating that the society had no knowledge of any discovery that substantiated the *Book of Mormon*.

The Bible is said to be an imperfect book, yet even unbelievers have supported its general reliability. In the May/June 1990 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, renowned American archaeologist (and agnostic) William Dever said,

The Bible is no longer an isolated relic from antiquity, without provenance and thus without credibility. Archaeology may not have proven the specific historical existence of certain biblical personalities such as Abraham or Moses, but it has for all time demolished the notion that the Bible is pure mythology. The Bible is about real, flesh-and-blood people, in a particular time and place....

Unlike the events of the Bible, it is impossible to locate the events depicted in the *Book of Mormon* and the other Mormon scriptures such as the *Pearl of Great Price* and the *Book of Abraham*. Archaeology has never uncovered any artifacts, inscriptions, or other physical evidence of the events recorded in Mormon history, a point admitted even by some Mormon scholars.

Mormons think of themselves as Christians in the truest sense of the word and bristle at the idea that their religion is branded as a cult. Even so, Mormonism demonstrates a number of qualities that lead to its classification as a pseudo-Christian cult. Cultic groups frequently include new revelation that reinterprets existing revelation. The Bible teaches that God is unchanging (James 1:17), so any new revelation must be consistent with what He has already given. Almost all of the themes of the New Testament are firmly rooted in, and developed from, the Old. The *Book of Mormon* is quite different. According to Smith, the angel Moroni told him that the doctrines of the churches were contemptible. Mormon theology cannot be supported from either the Old or New Testaments and actually contradicts them. One such example is the reinvention of Jesus. The *Book of Mormon* views Jesus not as God incarnate but as the archangel Gabriel, brother of Satan. The belief that after death human beings will become godlike creatures given their own planet to rule explicitly controverts the biblical teaching that God is One (Deuteronomy 6:4-6).

One of the biggest problems of Mormonism is its claim to be Christian, in spite of its redefinition of Christian terminology. When reporters asked recent presidential hopeful Mitt Romney if he was a Christian, his standard response was, "I believe in God the Father; I believe in His Son Jesus Christ." As a practicing Mormon, Romney cannot believe that God is the one

true God, nor does he believe that Jesus is divine. The terminology he and other Mormons use sounds very Christian, but digging a little deeper reveals that it has only the veneer of Christian orthodoxy.

Paul tells the churches in Galatia, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8, ESV; cf. Revelation 22:18-19). Ironically, Smith claims an angelic messenger showed him the book dubbed “another Testament of Jesus Christ.”

For all its billing as “the most correct of any book on earth,” the supposed inspiration of the *Book of Mormon* is betrayed by its anachronisms, contradictions, later editorial work, and even racism. While the Bible bears every mark of authenticity, the *Book of Mormon* appears to be nothing more than the invention of a 19th century con man.