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Mormon Crisis
Anatomy of a Failing Religion
JAMES A. BEVERLEY



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To my uncle Bill

(William Edward Bulman, 1920-)

Your dedication in fighting for freedom in World War II,
your love for family and friends, and your faithful witness
to Jesus Christ is an inspiration

Contents

Foreword.....	7
Preface	9
The Mormon Story	15
Joseph Smith and the First Vision	25
The Prophet and Buried Treasure.....	35
Those Many Wives.....	43
The Church and the Prophets.....	51
The Book of Mormon.....	63
Doctrine and Covenants.....	75
The Pearl of Great Price.....	83
The Book of Abraham	93
God and Many Gods.....	103
Jesus, Holy Spirit and Humanity.....	113
The Temple and the Secrets	123
Blacks and the Priesthood.....	135
Conclusions	145
Postscript.....	155
APPENDIX MATERIAL	
Mountain Meadows Massacre.....	157
Evangelicals and the LDS.....	161
Modern Mormon Polygamy	164
Timeline of Mormonism	167

Resources for Further Study.....	173
Recommended Reading	175
Endnotes.....	177

The Mormon Story

The growth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is one of the amazing realities of religion in the last two centuries. Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, founded the Mormon Church in 1830. There were six members. Today there are over 5 million members in the United States, part of a worldwide membership of 14.5 million.¹ The first meeting took place in one home in New York State.² Today members gather in over 28,000 congregations in 177 countries.

A New Prophet for a New Church

The story of Mormonism hinges around a controversial nineteenth-century man named Joseph Smith, Jr. He was born on December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Vermont, but moved with his family to Palmyra, New York, in 1816. Joseph's family and other area residents were divided over which church to join. Mormons believe that Joseph prayed about the matter and on a spring day in 1820 both God the Father and Jesus appeared to Joseph Smith and told him to restore the one true church. This episode is called the "First Vision" story and constitutes one of the most important historic claims of Mormonism.³

Mormons also believe that Smith continued to receive supernatural revelation. On September 21, 1823 an angel named Moroni told him of gold plates that were buried in the hill Cumorah near Palmyra. Smith was denied permission to get the plates until the same date in 1827. Earlier that year Smith married Emma Hale. Their first two years of marriage were taken up with getting the plates, translating them and then getting the book published. The result was the release of The Book of Mormon in March 1830. Smith claimed that the gold plates

Mormon Crisis

contained the record of Jewish groups who settled in the Americas around 600 B.C. Early converts were drawn to Smith and The Book of Mormon but the Latter-day Saints also received opposition from traditional Christians.

Some Mormons settled in Ohio in 1831 and others moved further west to Missouri. Mormons believe that Smith continued to receive divine guidance. His revelations were recorded in the Book of Commandments in 1833 and then later in Doctrine and Covenants. Mormons continued to be persecuted, especially in Missouri. This came in part because of Mormon claims about God promising that they would take over Jackson County. Smith also proclaimed that Independence, Missouri, would be the site of the New Jerusalem predicted in the Book of Revelation. Smith himself was arrested there in 1838 during the "Mormon Wars" but escaped custody in 1839.⁴ Smith then built a new Mormon community in Nauvoo, in the northwest part of Illinois.

During the early 1840s Smith was the object of both internal dissent and external criticism, particularly regarding the practice of plural marriage. In June 1844 Smith was jailed in Carthage, Illinois, on charges of ordering the destruction of a newspaper called the *Nauvoo Expositor*, a paper started by William Law, a leading ex-Mormon. Law had circulated the view that Smith believed in many gods and practiced polygamy. Before coming to trial Smith and his brother Hyrum were killed by an angry anti-Mormon mob on June 27, 1844.

The Move to a New Frontier

The early Mormons were devastated by the killing of their prophet. His death brought despair and confusion to the young church. Various Mormon elders vied for leadership, including James J. Strang, Sidney Rigdon, and Brigham Young. In the end, most Mormons chose to follow Brigham Young, who was head of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Young helped to stabilize the Mormons but persecutions started again and Young decided to lead the Mormons westward.^v Most Mormons who stayed behind followed either Strang or Rigdon or eventually joined the Reorganized Church of Latter-day Saints, now known as the Community of Christ.

Young left with a small company on February 1846. Soon after thousands of Mormons followed in long wagon trains in what is

The Mormon Story

probably the greatest migration in American history. Young's group climbed the last incline and saw the great Salt Lake Basin on July 24, 1847. Young wrote in his journal: "The spirit of light rested on us and hovered over the valley, and I felt that there the Saints would find protection and safety."⁶ Young, often called the American Moses, was declared the second prophet of the Church on December 27, 1847. He became the first governor of Utah and led the LDS Church until his death on August 29, 1877.⁷

Young's leadership was not without its problems and controversies. Utah was declared a USA territory in 1850 but relations between Young and the federal government collapsed later in the decade. James Buchanan, elected U.S. President in 1857, ordered U.S. soldiers to Utah the same year. This provocation led to the Utah War, largely a non-violent standoff between Mormon militia and the U.S. Army that lasted from the summer of 1857 until April of 1858.

One of the darkest episodes in Mormon history took place in the context of the Utah War. On September 11, 1857 a group of 120 settlers from Arkansas were killed while traveling through southern Utah on their way to California. This has become known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Brigham Young implicated Indians in the murders but the massacre was the work of Mormon militants, under the leadership of John D. Lee. Though Young was never directly implicated in the massacre, there is reason to believe that he helped set the stage for one of the largest mass murders in American history.⁸

The Polygamy Issue

Brigham Young led Mormons in their first public advocacy and practice of plural marriage. The doctrine was officially sanctioned in 1852 though Joseph Smith claimed to receive a private revelation on polygamy in 1843. As we will note later, Smith had many plural wives and he set the pattern for other LDS leaders, including Young. The U.S. government turned a blind eye to polygamy during Young's presidency but pressure increased after his death, especially with the passing of the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887. This Act gave the U.S. government the power to take over all church assets as a result of continued practice of polygamy.

The federal pressure against polygamy led Mormon president

Mormon Crisis

Wilford Woodruff to issue a manifesto against polygamy in 1890. This compromise with the federal government led to Utah's admission to statehood in 1896. While some LDS leaders continued to sanction plural marriages privately, within two decades it became clear that the LDS Church would no longer support those Saints who chose that path. The Woodruff Manifesto reads in part:

Inasmuch as laws have been enacted by Congress forbidding plural marriages, which laws have been pronounced constitutional by the court of last resort, I hereby declare my intention to submit to those laws, and to use my influence with the members of the Church over which I preside to have them do likewise. There is nothing in my teachings to the Church or in those of my associates, during the time specified, which can be reasonably construed to inculcate or encourage polygamy; and when any Elder of the Church has used language which appeared to convey any such teaching, he has been promptly reproved. And I now publicly declare that my advice to the Latter-day Saints is to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the law of the land.⁹

Post-Manifesto LDS history

The twentieth century brought the LDS Church into mainstream America. As polygamy moved further from regular LDS life, the Church expanded its missionary force, increased its focus on family living, Temple rituals, and relief work.

The most significant change in the modern LDS story came in 1978 when Mormon prophet Spencer W. Kimball ended the ban on blacks holding the priesthood. This change was heralded in front-page news stories all over the world and earned the LDS Church greater respect among non-Mormons. Contrary to what some critics argue, the evidence clearly suggests that Kimball did not make the change for pragmatic reasons alone but felt that the radical change in policy was mandated to him by God.

In 1995 the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve released "The Family: A Proclamation to the World." This document affirmed traditional family values and anchored marriage and family in the will of God. "Marriage between man and woman is essential to His

The Mormon Story

eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity.”¹⁰ The conservative nature of Mormonism was evident in the proclamation and coincided with longstanding objections to feminism and gay rights, two issues that have grown in significance in the last three decades.

Salt Lake City was chosen as the base for the 2002 Winter Olympics. This not only brought the LDS faith to the attention of a watching world but introduced Mitt Romney to an international audience. In his later bid for the 2008 Republican nomination and in the 2012 Presidential run Romney staunchly defended his Mormon faith. While he avoided getting into specific debates about Mormon history or doctrine, he also refused to minimize his personal belief in the LDS Gospel. In his 2007 “Faith in America” address, Romney declared: “I believe in my Mormon faith and I endeavor to live by it. My faith is the faith of my fathers – I will be true to them and to my beliefs.” He went on to say that he is often asked his belief about Jesus and stated: “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind.”¹¹

Romney is joined by over 14 million Latter-day Saints worldwide who believe that God restored the Gospel to the earth through a prophet named Joseph Smith. The Saints believe that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the “one true Church” on the earth and that this Church has been led by prophets since its founding in 1830. The Church today has over 50,000 missionaries spreading the message of a restored Gospel that they believe was originally given by Jesus Christ two thousand years ago.

The LDS message

The LDS understanding of the Christian gospel is presented in the Articles of Faith, originally written by Joseph Smith in 1842. The Articles contain items typical of the Protestant world of Smith’s upbringing but also provide unique LDS expressions on various doctrines.

1. We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.

Mormon Crisis

2. We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression.
3. We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.
4. We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.
5. We believe that a man must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof.
6. We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth.
7. We believe in the gift of tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues, and so forth.
8. We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe The Book of Mormon to be the word of God.
9. We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.
10. We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and, that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory.
11. We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may.
12. We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.

The Mormon Story

13. We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.

The vision expressed in the Articles is consistent with an Arminian/Methodist understanding of the fall of humanity and the openness of salvation to all (articles 2-3). Smith was no Calvinist. As is well known, the Mormon movement is part of a larger movement known as Christian primitivism (article 6) though, of course, the LDS Church claims to be “the one true Church”.¹² The Articles also show a strong charismatic emphasis (articles 5 and 7), in keeping with the worship style of the earliest LDS community. The charismatic element in Mormon worship largely died out in the Church’s first generation.¹³

Unlike the Protestant groups of his day, Smith believed in revelation beyond the Bible, not only with the Book of Mormon as Scripture but with continuing revelation (articles 8-9). By 1842 the Saints had already included Doctrine and Covenants as additional scripture. Smith also moved beyond his Protestant roots in suggesting that America plays a special part in the divine economy (article 10). This is no surprise given the American focus in The Book of Mormon.

Contemporary Issues

Whatever Latter-day Saints share in common with traditional Christians or with mainstream society has not exempted Mormons from antagonism. This was especially true in the early decades of Mormonism. Even today the LDS Church is the brunt of political and social attack, shown in nasty critique on Romney while he was the Republican candidate for President, in *South Park* satire, and in various negative newspaper cartoons and editorials. The smash hit 2011 musical *The Book of Mormon* is a further example of attack on the LDS, though the play suggests nothing sinister about Mormonism.¹⁴ Most of the deeper modern antipathy to Mormonism has to do with specific theological critique by evangelical Christians and general scorn by atheist and secular voices.

Mormon Crisis

One internal drama in modern LDS history involved a case of forgery and murder. In October 1985 Salt Lake City was rocked by a series of bomb explosions that killed two people. Mark Hofmann, a dealer in rare Mormon documents, was charged with murder. He was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. The case is important for students of Mormonism because of Hofmann's dealings with top Mormon leaders. The evidence suggests that the Mormon leaders were not open both about material in Church archives and about their full interaction with Hofmann. As well, some critics noted that the LDS prophet at the time failed to use his alleged supernatural gifts to detect Hofmann's forgeries.¹⁵

LDS leaders received enormous criticism for their resistance to the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and early 1980s. Sonia Johnson was excommunicated from the Church in 1979 for her outspoken endorsement of the ERA.¹⁶ A further round of unrest over feminism took place in the early 1990s, symbolized in the action taken against three leading LDS feminists Lavina Fielding Anderson, Maxine Hanks, and Lynne Kanel-Whitesides. They were part of the September Six—six members who were either excommunicated or disfellowshipped in September 1993.¹⁷ Since those times of unrest the LDS leaders have taken a more nuanced approach to feminism. This softening explains the return of Maxine Hanks to the Church in 2012 and the tolerance towards feminists in the LDS blogosphere.¹⁸

Gay rights continue to occupy a more contested space for LDS authorities, especially since the Church supported Proposition 8, a California ballot proposition in 2008 that sought to overturn recognition of same-sex marriage. LDS Church authorities backed Proposition 8 and many Mormons supported the campaign financially and in door-to-door canvassing. The Proposition was passed in November 2008 but eventually overturned by a California court in 2010. As of fall 2012 the case awaited appeal before the U.S. Supreme Court.

The LDS Church has consistently endorsed sexual practice only within traditional marriage bonds. However, rhetoric against homosexuality has softened in recent years. LDS leaders have also recognized that some of the therapies designed to “cure” gays have not been as successful as promised. The LDS Church is open to gays serving in Church positions as long as they do not violate Church teachings

The Mormon Story

against homosexual behavior.¹⁹ In 2011 Mitch Wayne, an openly gay LDS member, was chosen as executive secretary to the LDS Bishop in a part of San Francisco. Wayne has expressed willingness to obey Church law.²⁰ The pro-gay LDS group Affirmation, founded in 1977, believes Church leaders should bless same-sex marriage.²¹

The biggest challenge LDS authorities face today is the growth of dissent and skepticism within LDS circles. This has been noted most clearly by Marlin Jensen, the official LDS Church Historian and a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy. Jensen has acknowledged a growing attrition rate among members. Jensen also took part in what is known as the Swedish Rescue, a program which involved official LDS plans to reverse high apostasy rates among Mormons in Sweden.²² The program is being applied to other countries where members are leaving the Church or experiencing loss of faith.

The Mormon Stories organization is attempting to explore doubts among contemporary Latter-day Saints through its Why Mormons Question project. The major figure in Mormon Stories is John Dehlin, a former LDS missionary who found himself increasingly uncertain about major elements of LDS doctrine. In spite of his reputation as a New Order Mormon, Dehlin decided in early 2013 to stick with the LDS Church, a move that led to sharp criticism by critics of Mormonism, particularly ex-members. Many traditional Mormons objected to Dehlin's skepticism and self-identification as a Mormon and he was targeted by some major Mormon apologists. Dehlin's life story is a powerful illustration of the powerful grip of Mormon culture.²³ The same holds true for Joanna Brooks, another Mormon Stories leader, and author of *The Book of Mormon Girl*.²⁴

The Why Mormons Question project has already completed one major survey which charted the major reasons that lead to loss of belief. Of these, the top ten are:

1. Polygamy/polyandry
2. Doubts about authenticity of the Book of Abraham
3. Blacks and the Priesthood
4. DNA and the origins of the American Indian
5. Masonic influences in the temple ceremony
6. Multiple, conflicting versions of the First Vision

Mormon Crisis

7. Anachronisms in the Book of Mormon
8. Women and the Priesthood
9. Past church positions on science, age of the earth, evolution, etc.
10. Issues with the authenticity or credibility of the priesthood restoration²⁵

Of course, only a miniscule number of Latter-day Saints have lost belief when contrasted to the millions of Mormons who continue to believe, live and share the Mormon Gospel. With Romney's run for U.S. President creating a Mormon moment, LDS authorities continue to look for new ways to increase effectiveness in public, including social media. The "I am a Mormon" campaign has been hugely popular, as one example. As of 2012 the Church occupied the #1 ranking on Facebook for religious groups and charities.²⁶