

Church History (68): Religious Cults (Part 2)

Having considered Seventh-day Adventism, we come this week to Mormonism. We will consider its historical rise, authoritative documents, and major beliefs.

I. Mormonism

1. *Its historical rise.* The founder and primary prophet of Mormonism was Joseph Smith (1805-1844). "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" (Smith).¹ "Joseph Smith Jr. was born December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Windsor County, Vermont. During his early life, he moved with his family to present-day Manchester, in western New York. It was while he was living there in the spring of 1820, when he was fourteen years of age, that he experienced his first vision, in which he was visited in person by God, the Eternal Father, and His Son Jesus Christ."² In 1823, Smith is visited by an angel named Moroni who tells him about golden plates which contain new revelation from God. Smith is forbidden to unearth these plates until 1827, when he received special glasses to interpret them. Smith married in the same year, and moved his young family to Harmony, Pennsylvania. Having been assisted by Martin Harris (1783-1875) and Oliver Cowdery (1806-1850) in translating the plates, Smith published *The Book of Mormon* in 1830. Brigham Young (1801-1877), read the *Book* shortly after publication and was baptized as a Mormon two years later. "Smith and Oliver Cowdery were ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood by John the Baptist in May 1829, and soon thereafter they were also ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood by the ancient Apostles Peter, James, and John."³

"Other ordinations followed in which priesthood keys were conferred by Moses, Elijah, and many ancient prophets. These ordinations were, in fact, a restoration of divine authority to man on the earth. On April 6, 1830, under heavenly direction, the Prophet Joseph Smith organized the Church, and thus the true Church of Jesus Christ is once again operative as an institution among men, with authority to teach the gospel and administer the ordinances of salvation."⁴ In 1831, Smith moves the Mormons to Kirtland, Ohio, where they build their first Temple (1836). "In June of 1831, the Prophet Joseph Smith received a revelation directing him to go on a proselyting mission to Missouri and there hold the next conference of the Church. While the Prophet and other leaders returned to Ohio, many members of the Church settled in Missouri. Between 1831 and 1838, the Church had two centers of population. Important events were happening in both places at the same time, and officers of the Church traveled from one location to the other as necessary."⁵ In 1838, Smith was accused of adultery by Oliver Cowdery, which resulted in Smith excommunicating him. But the scandal became public and forced Smith and his followers to flee west to Missouri. After they were driven out of Missouri, they fled to Illinois in 1839. In 1843, Joseph Smith received two important revelations about baptisms for the dead and polygamy (Smith would eventually have more than 25 wives). After Joseph Smith was killed on June 27, 1844, Brigham Young replaced him as the primary leader. "Brigham Young, the senior Apostle and President of the Quorum of the Twelve, was the man God had chosen to lead his people, and the people had united to sustain him."⁶

¹ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:116

² *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price*, Kindle Edition, 1553-1554

³ *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price*, Kindle Edition, 1554

⁴ *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price*, Kindle Edition, 1554

⁵ *Our Heritage: A Brief History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Chapter 3

⁶ *Our Heritage: A Brief History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Chapter 5

As hostility against the Mormons increased, Young led the large group west in February of 1846, and on July 21, 1847, they arrived at Salt Lake Valley (which in 1896 would be called Salt Lake City, Utah). "For thirty years, Brigham Young ruled the Mormon Church and as is still the case, he inherited the divinely appointed prophetic mantle of the first prophet. So it is that each succeeding president of the Mormon Church claims the same authority as Joseph Smith and Brigham Young—an infallible prophetic succession" (Martin).⁷

"In August 1877, President Young fell very ill, and in spite of physicians' care, died within a week. He was 76 years old and had led the Church for 33 years."⁸ "In 1877, when Brigham Young died, there were 140,000 Mormons" (Hoekema).⁹ Following the death of Young, John Taylor was elected as President, and served in that position until his death in 1887. Wilford Woodruff (1807-1898) was ordained the fourth President of the Church, and in 1890, ended polygamy. "On the evening of 23 September 1890, the prophet, acting under inspiration, wrote the *Manifesto*, a document that ended plural marriage for Church members. The Lord showed President Woodruff in vision that unless the practice of plural marriage was ended, the US government would take over the temples, thus ending the work for the living and the dead."¹⁰

2. *Authoritative documents.* "In addition to the King James Version of the Bible, which Mormons accept as part of the Word of God, they have added the *Doctrine and Covenants*, the *Pearl of Great Price*, and the initial volume, the *Book of Mormon*, all canonized as authorized Scripture—the 'Four Standard Works'" (Martin).¹¹ While Mormons claim to believe the Bible, they also believe it has been corrupted by faulty translations. Joseph Smith confessed: "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."¹² By "translated correctly," Smith meant, as long as the Bible doesn't contradict his own interpretation or teaching. In 1867, Smith's revision of the King James Bible was published with the following title: "An Inspired Revision of the Authorized Version, by Joseph Smith." "Even a casual perusal of this volume will reveal that Smith made a great many changes in the Bible text which went far beyond mere 'translation' corrections" (Hoekema).¹³

(1) The Book of Mormon. "The book was written by many ancient prophets by the spirit of prophecy and revelation. Their words, written on gold plates, were quoted and abridged by a prophet-historian named Mormon. The record gives an account of two great civilizations. One came from Jerusalem in 600 B.C. and afterward separated into two nations, known as the Nephites and the Lamanites. The other came much earlier when the Lord confounded the tongues at the Tower of Babel (2,250 BC). This group is known as the Jaredites. After thousands of years, all were destroyed except the Lamanites, and they are among the ancestors of the American Indians."¹⁴ "The Lamanites received a curse because of their evil deeds, and the curse took the form of dark skin and became the American Indians. A direct quotation from the Book of Mormon solidifies its teaching that the Native Americans are cursed with dark skin, 'they were white, and exceeding fair and delightsome; that they might not be enticing unto my people the

⁷ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 237

⁸ *Our Heritage: A Brief History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Chapter 7

⁹ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 15

¹⁰ *Our Heritage: A Brief History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Chapter 8

¹¹ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 237

¹² *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price*, Kindle Edition, 2583

¹³ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 20

¹⁴ *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price*, Kindle Edition, 8

Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them (2 Nephi 5:21)" (Martin).¹⁵ The Book of Mormon consists of four classes of record plates, which were allegedly revealed to Smith: (1) the plates of Nephi; (2) the plates of Mormon; (3) the plates of Ether; and (4) a set of plates mentioned throughout the Book of Mormon known as the "plates of brass." The first three of these largely retell the history of these people (and the migration of the Jews to America in 600 BC), whereas the fourth "is given over to quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures and genealogies" (Martin).¹⁶ In total, the Book of Mormon is a collection of "plagiarisms from the King James Bible, contradictions, false prophecies, and errors of fact that cannot be dismissed" (Martin).¹⁷

(2) The Doctrine and Covenants. "While the Book of Mormon is widely read, it does not present the vast majority of the unique, definitional doctrines of the LDS faith. Instead, the D&C (as it is often abbreviated in LDS sources) is the real source of most modern LDS theology. And it is here we find the clearest presentations regarding the nature of God, especially in reference to God's relationship to man and the concept of deification" (White).¹⁸ "The Doctrine and Covenants is a collection of divine revelations and inspired declarations given for the establishment and regulation of the kingdom of God on the earth in the last days. Most of the revelations in this compilation were received through Joseph Smith Jr., the first prophet and president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Others were issued through some of his successors in the Presidency. The Doctrine and Covenants is unique because it is not a translation of an ancient document but is of modern origin and was given of God through His chosen prophets for the restoration of His holy work and the establishment of the kingdom of God on the earth in these days."¹⁹

(3) The Pearl of Great Price. "The Pearl of Great Price is a selection of choice materials touching many significant aspects of the faith and doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These items were translated and produced by the Prophet Joseph Smith, and most were published in the Church journals of his day."²⁰ It contains five parts: (1) Selections from the Book of Moses (extra Biblical accounts of Moses and his teachings); (2) The Book of Abraham (a collection of writings from Abraham); (3) A Translation of Matthew; (4) A History of Joseph Smith (excerpts from his own autobiography); and (5) The Articles of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (a doctrinal statement by Joseph Smith).

3. *Its major beliefs.* (1) God. "Mormonism denies the Trinity. It teaches that the Persons of the Trinity are not three Persons in one Being, as historic Christianity has always taught, but three separate Beings" (Hoekema).²¹ Smith's view on the plurality of gods developed over the years. Thus, he could say in 1844 prior to his death: "I will preach on the plurality of Gods. I wish to declare I have always and, in all congregations, when I have preached on the subject of the Deity, it has been the plurality of Gods. It has been preached by the Elders for fifteen years. I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods"²² The *Book*

¹⁵ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 238

¹⁶ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 239

¹⁷ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 252

¹⁸ James White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?* 58

¹⁹ *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price*, Kindle Edition, 1553

²⁰ *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price*, Kindle Edition, 2418

²¹ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 34

²² Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 34-35

of *Abraham* provides an account of creation, which is attributed to a plurality of "Gods": "And then the Lord said: Let us go down. And they went down at the beginning, and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth."²³ In a revelation dated April 2, 1843, Smith said: "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us."²⁴ In a sermon preached prior to his death in 1844, Smith provided the following description of God: "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible—I say, if you were to see him today, you see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image, and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked, and conversed with him, as one man talks and communes with another."²⁵

Thus, according to Joseph Smith, there are more than three gods. He believed that the God of Scripture, Elohim, was "that one god who has been appointed particularly for the people who inhabit this earth." In a sermon entitled, *The Christian Godhead – Plurality of Gods*, Smith said: "The doctrine of a plurality of gods is as prominent in the Bible as any other doctrine. Paul says there are Gods many and Lords many. I want to set it forth in a plan and simple manner; but to us there is but one God—that is, pertaining to us. The heads of the Gods appointed one god for us; and when you take that view of the subject, it sets one free to see all the beauty, holiness and perfection of the Gods."²⁶ Brigham Young taught the same thing: "How many Gods there are, I do not know. But there never was a time when there were not Gods and worlds, and when men were not passing through the same ordeals that we are now passing through. That course has been from all eternity, and it is and will be to all eternity."²⁷ "Mormonism believes that all gods first existed as spirits, came to an earth to receive bodies, and then, after having passed through a period of probation on the aforesaid earth, were advanced to the exalted position they now enjoy in some heavenly realm" (Hoekema).²⁸ "You have to learn how to be Gods yourselves, 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 sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power" (Young).²⁹ "Mormon theology is polytheistic, teaching in effect that the universe is inhabited by different gods who procreate spirit children, which are in turn clothed with bodies on different planets, 'Elohim' being the god of this planet. Such theology rivals anything mythology ever produced" (Martin).³⁰

According to Mormonism, therefore, man is a god in the making. Man, too, was once a spirit-creature; he then came to this earth to receive a physical tabernacle; after a period of earthly probation, he dies and is raised again; if he has passed the probation, he shall gradually advance to the status of godhood. In Mormon theology, therefore, not only is God dragged down to the level of man, but man is at the same time exalted to potential deity. All ultimate difference between God and man has been done away with in this sys-

²³ *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price*, Kindle Edition, 2524

²⁴ *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price*, Kindle Edition, 2332

²⁵ James White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?* 68

²⁶ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 37

²⁷ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 37

²⁸ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 38-39

²⁹ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 39

³⁰ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 275, 280

tem, which now promises to its adherents what Satan, through the serpent, once promised to Eve: "Ye shall be as God" (Gen.3:4).³¹

(2) Christ. As the Father, Christ once was a man. The only difference being, the Father is further along the deification process than the Son. "It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one-man converses with another, and that 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" (Smith).³² According to Mormon theology, the only difference between us and Christ, was that Christ was the Father's first-born." The only difference between Christ and us is that Christ was the first-born of Elohim's children, whereas we, in our pre-existence, were 'born' later. The distinction between Christ and us is therefore one of degree, not one of kind" (Hoekema).³³ "The Book of Moses informs us that the great work of the Father is in creating worlds and peopling them, and 'there is no end to My works, neither to My words,' He says, 'For behold, this is My work and My glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man,' and in this is His progression" (Smith).³⁴

Commenting on this the Prophet Joseph Smith has said: "What did Jesus do? Why; I do the things I saw My Father do when worlds come rolling into existence. My Father worked out His kingdom with fear and trembling, and I must do the same [that is Christ must do the same]; and when I get my kingdom, I shall present it to My Father, so that He may obtain kingdom upon kingdom, and it will exalt Him in glory. He will then take a higher exaltation, and I [Christ] will take His place, and thereby become exalted Myself. So that Jesus treads in the tracks of His Father, and inherits what God did before; and God is thus glorified and exalted in the salvation and exaltation of all His children."³⁵

(3) Salvation. "Mormonism teaches that before men inhabited this earth, they existed as spirits. Before the gods 'created' this earth, or any other earths, they 'created' a spirit world. 'For I, the Lord God, created all things, of which I have spoken, spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth' (Moses 3:4)" (Hoekema).³⁶ "How does a person receive salvation? Joseph Smith said in the Articles of Faith: "We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel. We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; repentance; baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; and laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost."³⁷ "Mormons, distinguish various degrees of salvation. The highest is sometimes called *eternal life* and sometimes *exaltation*. To gain eternal life or exaltation means to partake of the same life which the father possesses. To become eligible for this highest degree of salvation, however, one must obey all the commandments of God: 'Very gladly would the Lord give to every one eternal life, but since that blessing can come only on merit—through the faithful performance of duty—only those who are worthy shall receive it. To receive the exaltation of the righteous, in other words (i.e., eternal life), the commandments of the Lord must be kept in all things.' A very important

³¹ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 39-40

³² James White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?* 69

³³ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 53-54

³⁴ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, Volume 1, 1:22

³⁵ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, Volume 1, 1:23

³⁶ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 43, 46

³⁷ *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price*, Kindle Edition, 2581-2582

point to remember in this connection, however, is that to receive the fullness of exaltation a man must have a wife and a woman must have a husband" (Hoekema).³⁸

Complete fulfillment of the commandment of God requires that a couple must be sealed to each other for both time and eternity a couple must be sealed to each other for both time and eternity in a temple ceremony. This leads to a consideration of the doctrine of celestial marriage – one of the key doctrines of Mormonism. By way of background, we should note what is said in Section 132 of *Doctrine and Covenants*. In verses 15 and 16 of this section we read that, if a man should marry a wife not by the word of the Lord, this marriage will not be in force when the parties have died; hence, when these parties have left the present world, they are not gods but only angels in heaven, destined to minister everlastingly to those who are more worthy than they. Verses 19 and 20 go on to state that if, however, a man shall marry a wife by the word of the Lord, and this marriage is sealed to them by him who is anointed, this marriage shall be of full force when the parties are out of this world; they shall receive glory, "which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever. Then shall they be gods, because they have no end."³⁹

(4) Eternity. Mormons believe a small remnant of mankind will enter hell with the devil and his angels. "The Sons of Perdition, the human members of whom are 'but a small portion of the human race,' will be permanently consigned to hell.' The Sons of Perdition constitute the only group which shall not be redeemed. Those who are redeemed will spend eternity in one of three different kingdoms, located on three different earths" (Hoekema).⁴⁰ Mormons believe in the bodily resurrection of all men and in salvation in a threefold heaven. In Mormon theology, there are three heavens: the telestial, the terrestrial, and the celestial" (Martin).⁴¹ "The telestial kingdom will be comprised of unbelievers, the terrestrial kingdom of Christians who did not accept the Mormon message, Mormons who did not live up to their church's requirements, and men of good will of other religions who rejected the revelations of the Latter-day Saints. The highest or celestial heaven is itself divided into three levels. Only in this highest level is godhood or the possession of a kingdom for oneself and one's family to be gained. Even in the celestial kingdom, godhood is by slow progression, and in the end each who becomes a god will, with his family, rule and populate a separate planet of his own" (Martin).⁴² As Joseph Smith taught: "And the glory of the celestial is one, even as the glory of the sun is one. And the glory of the terrestrial is one, even as the glory of the moon is one. And the glory of the telestial is one, even as the glory of the stars is one; for as one star differs from another star in glory, even so differs one from another in glory in the world to come."⁴³

³⁸ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 60-61

³⁹ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 60

⁴⁰ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 72-73

⁴¹ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 299

⁴² Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 299

⁴³ *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price*, Kindle Edition, 1976