

The Goofiest Sect of All

A Rationalist Looks at Mormonism

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With the recent focus on Salt Lake City, Utah as the site of the International Winter Olympics of 2002, the world's attention has once again been drawn to the Mormon religion. Salt Lake City, the "Zion" of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, as the Mormons call their church, has certainly gloried in the world's spotlight.

With the advent of this newfound LDS marketing tool, I thought it might be of interest to many rational thinkers to find out a bit more than they perhaps already know about Mormonism. In order for this writing to be an article and not a book, its purpose must be severely limited to simply giving a brief overview of how the Mormon Church itself claims that the *Book of Mormon* came into existence. I will also mention an archeological problem the *Book of Mormon* seems to have created for the Mormons. Additionally, I will briefly comment on a portion of each of the other two sacred texts of the LDS Church, those being the *Doctrine and Covenants*, and the *Pearl of Great Price*. In this process, I must of necessity make a few observations about the founder of the Church, Joseph Smith.

The LDS church, at approximately 11.5 million adherents, is the fastest growing of the modern religious sects (those founded after 1800), and it seems, the one with the most books written about it, both apologetic and debunking. Obviously, this article cannot even begin to cover such areas as the church's theology, its long history, Joseph Smith's colorful biography, nor its many controversies and tragedies.

The *Book of Mormon* (hereafter referred to as the BOM) was first published in 1830. Its author was the then 25 year old Joseph Smith Jr. (He dropped the "Jr." after his father died.) Of course, young Joseph claimed that he did not "author" the book at all. He simply translated it from an ancient text written in an equally ancient language he referred to as "reformed Egyptian." This text was written or engraved on some golden plates which Joseph claims to have unearthed in a hill called the "hill Chumurah" on September 21, 1823. This hill is near Manchester, New York. How did Joseph know exactly where to dig for these wondrous golden plates the skeptic might ask? Easy! An angel named Moroni came to him in a "vision" as early as 1820 when the then 14 year-old Joseph claims to have received the "First Vision." In the "Second Vision" in 1823, Moroni informed Joseph of the precise location of some gold plates which contained the sacred history of some ancient Hebrews (Yes, "Hebrews." That is not a misprint.) who lived in America from about 2200 BCE to about 421 CE. No, I am not making this up. In case you think I am just kidding, let me quote from the introduction to the current edition of the BOM published by the LDS church itself, to wit:

"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 BC, 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. This group is known as the Jaredites. After thousands of years, all were destroyed except the Lamanites, and they are the principal ancestors of the American Indians.”

The Introduction continues to explain to the prospective convert how Jesus Christ came over to the Americas (Don’t ask.) and ministered to the Nephrites, “soon after his resurrection.” The Introduction continues to explain that Jesus taught these ancestral Americans how to “gain peace in this life and eternal salvation in the life to come” through him—Jesus. This is just a side thought, but since, according to the BOM, the Nephrites were “destroyed” by the Lamanites who became the ancestors of our Native Americans, what exactly did J.C. accomplish with his mission to the Nephrites? This is never explained. The BOM story *would* explain, however, why the native Americans whom the early explorers found here seemed to have been completely ignorant of the biblical Jesus. But, as I said, that is only a side point.

The official Introduction continues: “After Mormon completed his writings, he delivered the account to his son Moroni, who added a few words of his own and hid up the plates in the hill Cumorah.” Yes, I assure you, that is an accurate quote from the official, current, BOM Introduction. You can look it up yourself. I just love the phrase, “who added a few words of his own,” don’t you? I can only suppose that the Lord’s original dictation to Mormon was not quite “right” in the angel’s son’s [himself an angel] opinion. Therefore, he took it upon himself to fix it up a bit just as I, as an English teacher, often do with my student’s papers.

In any event, without going into further hilarious detail, the above is the crux of the fabulous tale that young Mormon “missionaries” are peddling in living rooms across America, and indeed throughout dozens of countries over the face of the earth. Freethinkers will probably not be much interested in reading the BOM, even for laughs. It’s dry, King James English style (Isn’t it curious that the ancient “reformed Egyptian” translated into perfect King James style English?) would probably quickly put the active mind to sleep. Mark Twain once aptly described the BOM as “chloroform in print.”

Incidentally, the Mormon Church regards the BOM as a sort of second installment of the Christian Bible—old and new testaments. The BOM is regarded as the document that “restores by God, through Joseph Smith, the only true church.” Therefore, all other Christian churches (Mormon’s refer to their adherents as “gentiles”) are false—no surprise there. It follows, then, that the authenticity of the BOM is no small matter.

To quote Alice while she was in Wonderland, the story gets “curiouser and curiouser.”

When one consults the documents and testimony of Joseph Smith’s contemporaries in the early 1800s as to precisely *how* the BOM was “translated,” one finds a great deal of agreement from several witnesses that a special “peep stone,” or “seer stone” was used. Now, the modern reader may not be familiar with the use of a “peep stone” to “see” things such as buried treasure, not normally visible to the naked eye. However, their use was apparently well known in the New England states in the early part of the 19th century as a kind of folk conjurer’s device. There was a similar conjurer’s device also commonly used at that time known as a “dowsing rod.” The use

of the dowsing rod to magically locate underground water has survived among superstitious peoples to the present time. The “seer stone,” on the other hand, has gone out of fashion. Several acquaintances of the Smith family have testified that Joseph Smith had used a “seer stone”—a small, dark colored, smooth stone with a hole in its center—to seek and dig for buried treasure prior to the angel Moroni’s considerate revelation of the location of the magical golden plates with the Book of Mormon on them. Lucky for Joseph, he already had just the thing for their translation. Many witnesses observed Joseph Smith on several occasions using his seer stone, which he would put into the crown of his hat, then bury his face in the crown. Inside the crown of the hat, he claimed that a sort of luminous “spiritual light” would appear before him enabling him to “see” the golden plates, even though they may not have been right “there” at the time, and to successfully translate them. (Now, stop giggling. This is serious stuff, apparently, to Mormons.) He would normally dictate to a scribe, often seated on the other side of a curtain, who would write down what Smith said. (My research did not reveal whether he sort of hollered through the crown of the hat, or whether he removed his face from time to time to reveal what he had “seen.”)

Joseph’s first scribe was his long suffering first wife, Emma. Later, the gullible Mr. Martin Harris acted as Smith’s scribe. Poor Harris excitedly showed the first 116 pages to his wife who apparently tore them up as the work of the devil. At least to this date, the missing 116 pages have never surfaced. Joseph and Harris had to start all over again. Joseph was furious. Probably out of a feeling of guilt, Harris ended up selling his farm to finance the publication of the BOM. (The Smith family always seemed to have had great difficulty, in the years before Joseph’s church “took off,” in eking out a living.) Thirdly, a Mr. Oliver Cowdrey, a young schoolmaster who was boarding with the Smith family, acted as Smith’s secretary/scribe. Despite Mormon claims that the 275,000-word manuscript was completed in a matter of a few months, it probably took about three years to complete.

Interestingly, there is still some controversy among Mormon scholars (Yes, perhaps that phrase is an oxymoron.) concerning exactly how the plates were translated. Despite the testimony alluded to above, Joseph Smith claimed that, actually, he used a special translating device which the angel Moroni was nice enough to leave with the plates—neatly packed in a stone box—in order to successfully reveal their message. This translating device is referred to as the “Urim and Thummin.” What is the “Urim and Thummin” you may ask? Well, no one knows exactly. However, Joseph Smith’s rather suggestible mother was recorded to have said that this device, “consisted of two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass, and the glasses were set in silver bows.” Of course, the controversy centers on the following question: Did Joseph exclusively use his rather unholy “seer stone” (a conjurer’s device), or the much more holy “Urim and Thummin,” or a combination of both to translate the plates? Do you care? I didn’t think so.

The golden plates as well as the Urim and Thummin were, according to Mormon history, apparently taken back by the angel Moroni, perhaps to be re-buried at some other location. Those same “Mormon scholars” referred to above believe the likely location of at least some artifacts of ancient Nephites, as well as a possible new burial site of the golden plates, may center around Central America. These same “scholars” now claim that the great battles described in the BOM between the Nephites and the Lamanites may not have taken place around

New York, despite the golden plates being found there. The BOM mentions a “narrow neck of land” and an apparently tropical climate. For the past 50 years BYU and other Mormon sponsored organizations such as the New World Archeological Foundation have sponsored archeological trips and “digs” in and around Chiapas and the Yucatan. Smith himself speculated that the Maya might have been the “Book of Mormon peoples.” To this date, not a single shred of evidence has been turned up that would back up this theory. Yale University archeologist, Dr. Michael D. Coe, an expert on the Maya, has stated that, “There is not a whit of evidence that the Nephites ever existed. The whole enterprise is complete rot, root and branch. It’s so racist it hurts. It fits right into the nineteenth-century American idea that only a white man could have built cities and temples, that American Indians didn’t have the brains or the wherewithal to create their own civilization.” Seems clear enough to me!

Above, I have briefly discussed the *Book of Mormon*, its creation, its tale of ancient Hebrew tribes in America, and its “translation,” and dictation by Joseph Smith. Less familiar to most freethinkers is the fact that the prolific Mr. Smith also wrote, for the most part, the two other sacred texts of the Mormon Church. These are the official *Doctrine and Covenants* of the church, and another book entitled, *A Pearl of Great Price*.

Strangely, the BOM as well as these above mentioned two texts are freely passed out to this day by the LDS Church to any prospective converts who ask. In fact, if you ask for a copy of the BOM, you will be given this “triple combination” as the Mormons call it. I said “strangely” because there are portions of both the D & C and the Pearl text that have caused and continue to cause more embarrassment to the church than is caused even by the ludicrousness of the BOM yarn. The “embarrassments” I refer to in the D & C are that Joseph Smith’s official, holy doctrines have had to be “corrected” twice since he originally proclaimed them as the “gospel truth.” The first instance occurred in 1890 when it was necessary for the church to reverse the official sanction and blessing by Joseph Smith of “plural marriage.” (See doctrine 132, still—amazing as it may seem—proudly reprinted in every edition of the triple combination.) The church was literally forced to make this change as a condition for statehood. President and prophet, Spencer W. Kimball, made a second embarrassing change in 1978. (Incidentally, each succeeding president of the church is authorized to make such changes since they are considered just as much of a “prophet, seer, and revelator” as was the original president, Joseph Smith.)

This second change allowed, without mentioning African-Americans, that “all worthy male members of the church” would be “eligible for priesthood and temple blessings.”

The document entitled, *A Pearl of Great Price* includes three sections entitled the “Book of Mathew,” a “Book of Moses,” and the now infamous, “Book of Abraham.” In what would seem to be—but apparently is not—a church-destroying embarrassment, the entire “Book of Abraham” has been thoroughly proven to be an outright fraud by knowledgeable scholars and Egyptologists, over and over again. The problem was and is that, unlike his prudent “return” of the golden plates to the angel Moroni, Joseph Smith actually kept the original papyri that, according to official Mormon history, “came into the hands of Joseph Smith in 1835.” According to Smith, these papyri were written by the patriarch Abraham himself about 4000 years ago and contained new revelations about God’s will which Smith generously “translated” from the original hieroglyphics and revealed to the world. Obviously Smith was entirely

unaware of the discovery in 1799 of the Rosetta Stone, which was not successfully translated until the late 1830's, and even then was only understood by a few academics. From Smith's vantage point, it must have seemed perfectly "safe" for him to make up what ever he wanted regarding the "true message" of the ancient hieroglyphics.

In a decision that the LDS church would later surely regret, the church itself put Smith's "translation" to a scientific test. In 1912, LDS Bishop Spalding submitted facsimiles of the original papyri, made by Smith himself, to a panel of eight recognized expert Egyptologists. Much to the chagrin of the church, the panel's unanimous opinion was that Smith's translation had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the material on the copies of the original papyri. At some point the Church announced that Smith's original papyri conveniently seemed to have "disappeared" and were presumed destroyed in the Chicago fire of 1871. There must have been many a sigh of relief among the church higher-ups for several years after that. But wait.... Oh no! Joseph Smith's authenticated original papyri were re-discovered in 1967 by a researcher at the Metropolitan Museum of Art where, apparently, some thoughtless Mormon Church official had stored them for safekeeping. Since that time, virtually every competent Egyptologist (non-Mormon) who has studied the papyri have confirmed the original Egyptologists' opinions that the "Book of Abraham" is a complete and utter fabrication! Of course, all of this is well known to the LDS hierarchy, although it is certainly not eagerly shared with the general membership.

The reader must be wondering by now, just as I have since I began my research into Mormonism, just how in the world is it possible that the LDS church not only continues to survive, but that, incredibly, it is actually rapidly growing in numbers of adherents and in influence. One might understand how many of the early backwoods, largely illiterate, superstitious original converts might have been duped by the apparently charismatic yarn-spinner Joseph Smith. However, one must ask in these modern times, when people are supposedly better educated, how can this continued survival and even growth be accounted for? I must confess that, frankly, I am at a complete loss for a satisfactory answer to that question. The only explanation that comes close for me was well stated by the inimitable H. L. Mencken when he said, "The curse of man, and the cause of nearly all his woes, is his stupendous capacity for believing the incredible."

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- (1) *Joseph Smith Jr. As a Translator, an Inquiry Conducted by Rt. Rev. F. Spalding D.D, Bidshop of Utah*, 1912, and (2) *Joseph Smith as an Interpreter And Translator of Egyptian*, by Samuel A. B. Mercer, Ph.D., 1913.
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Note: Jerald and Sandra Tanner and their Utah Lighthouse Ministry—despite their “mission” to convert adherents away from the “false religion” of Mormonism, and to the “true religion” of mainstream Christianity—have done some of the best research available anywhere to support the conclusion that *The Book of Mormon* and all of the “sacred writings” of Joseph Smith Jr. are simply early nineteenth century fiction, partly created by Joseph and partly plagiarized from the bible and other sources available to Mr. Smith.

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