

# WHO ARE THE MORMONS?

by **Brian W. Harrison, M.A.**

ISBN 85826-232-0

A.C.T.S No. 1764 (1982)

NIHIL OBSTAT: Peter J. Kenny S.T.D. Diocesan Censor.

IMPRIMATUR: Peter J. Connors D.C.L. Vicar General, Melbourne

1st September 1982.

## I. THE MORMON CHURCH TODAY

### **A Knock at the Door**

"Good morning! We'd like to speak to the head of the house, please!" Denise looks at the two men at the door of her flat for a moment, slightly bemused. They are well-groomed, with short-cut hair and dark suits. They have name-tags reading 'Elder Richards' and 'Elder McKay', although there is nothing very 'elderly' about them: neither appears to be over twenty-one. There is frankness and honesty in their faces, and to Denise's young Australian ears, well-tuned to the media's constant flow of imported songs, movies, and television shows, the American accent brings with it subtle overtones of modernity, competence, and good style.

"Well," she replies, rather awkwardly, "this is my flat. I live here with my small son."

"Oh, that's fine," joins in the other young man. "We'd really appreciate it if we could come in for a few moments. We'd like to bless your home."

Denise is becoming slightly embarrassed. These visitors are obviously peddling a religion of some sort - and that is something she hasn't much time for. She was baptized a Catholic, and believes vaguely in Someone Up There, but went to a state school, and has not been near a Church in years. She married Rick in a civil ceremony. She is on the point of telling the two young Americans politely that she's not really interested today, thank you; but then, on a sudden whim, she changes her mind. After all, it's been pretty lonely these eighteen months since Rick walked out on her, leaving her with three-year-old Brett and a deserted wife's pension. Not much social life now. It can't do any harm, she thinks, to talk to these obviously harmless young fellows, even if they turn out to have a few weird ideas.

"O.K." she replies, "I guess so. Come in - you'll have to excuse the mess. Brett's always leaving his blocks all over the floor." That sudden whim was one that changed Denise's life. Before long, she was hearing the story of how, shortly after Jesus Christ came to earth two thousand years ago, the Church he established became totally corrupt, abandoning many of the doctrines and practices of its founder. Only about 150 years ago was the "everlasting gospel" restored in its original purity through new revelations given through an angel to an appointed prophet, an American youth named Joseph Smith Jr.

### **Getting Involved**

Denise found it all a bit much. Her visitors had an obviously deep conviction - their faith plainly meant a

lot more to them than the vague or half-hearted religiosity displayed by many of her acquaintances who regarded themselves as practising Catholics or Protestants. Perhaps they were on to something. But how could she possibly assess the truth or falsity of their rather extraordinary claims? They left her some pamphlets and said they might call again before long.

Within a few days the two young men were back. They did not seem quite so strange this time. As pleasant as ever, they were by no means raving fanatics. Denise learned that Donnie and Marie Osmond, whose television show she had often enjoyed, were devout members of their Church. Nothing weird about them - they were attractive and talented entertainers. More importantly, their image enshrined values which the better part of Denise's nature told her were true and good: innocence, cheerfulness, family loyalty, with never a trace of anything arrogant or smutty or cynical. Definitely G-rated.

During the next couple of weeks, Denise went along to a few Church functions. She attended a "fireside night", at which young single men and women gathered in a family home for informal prayer, a round of brief 'testimonies' about their experiences in the Church and their faith in Joseph Smith's revelation, and a friendly supper and chit-chat (no smoking, alcohol, tea or coffee).

A Sunday gathering at the Church began in the morning with study classes in religious doctrine, and a segregated session in which the women discussed homemaking, cooking, child-rearing and family life, in a spirit of obvious pride in their distinctive role as homemakers. Babies and small children were everywhere - clearly a source of great joy to mothers who, as Denise soon discovered, were repelled by abortion and contraception, and saw large families as a rich blessing from the Lord. She had always been a little disdainful of such attitudes, and tended to feel that women's emancipation in the 1980s required a certain loosening of these 'apron-strings'. But as she mingled with these pleasant young mothers who welcomed her so warmly, Denise became aware of an unsuspected sense of dignity which came through in this love of domestic activity. Perhaps, after all, it was her own values that had been somewhat warped. Maybe she was the one who needed 'liberation': liberation from media propaganda which encouraged women unconsciously to ape the life-styles of men.

In the afternoon a quite lengthy, and rather informal, service of worship followed. It was more like a 'meeting' in some ways. Between hymns and prayers, different members of the congregation (both men and women) would stand up and talk about a variety of things, sometimes religious, but often just practical: the state of things within the local congregation; difficulties being experienced in daily life by members who might need special assistance or prayers; or the financial matters which play a very large part in a denomination which is run with American business efficiency, and requires from each employed member one-tenth of his/her income (tithe) as a donation to the Church.

### **Denise is Converted**

After that Sunday the two 'elders' came to visit Denise every day for a week, and she came to feel more and more at home with them and their Church. Perhaps more than anything else she was impressed by their warmth and hospitality, the obvious goodness of their values, and the sense of deep unity and solidarity in their religious community. She mentioned this to her American visitors, who were not slow to point out that these qualities she observed were evidence of their Church's divine mission: Jesus had taught, "By this will all men know that you are mine, that you love one another," and had also declared that "a tree is known by its fruits".

Denise had to admit that the lifestyle of this Church contrasted pretty favourably with her vaguely-remembered childhood religion, in which the Catholics she knew seemed to only half-believe in their Church and its teaching, and ducked in and out of Church on Sunday as if it were a mere 'filling-station' - never even getting to know most of the other members.

How could she really be certain, though, that Joseph Smith really was a prophet from God? After all, some of his claims did seem pretty strange. When, after much discussion about the doctrinal issues, Denise put this question to her counsellors, the response moved her deeply. They did not try to present her with more

arguments, more reasons, more objective evidence. The time for rational apologetics was over. One of the elders leant forward slowly, looked her straight in the eye, and quietly 'bore his testimony' in tones of the utmost authority and conviction.

"Denise," he affirmed, "I've prayed long and hard about this - many times. And I know - I *Just know* and believe from the deep experience of my own heart - that Joseph Smith is the true prophet sent by God to restore his everlasting gospel. And if you honestly ask God to enlighten you, he'll speak to your heart clearly in the same way. We can see that the Holy Spirit has been touching you, Denise, these last two weeks, as you've come to discern God's love alive and active in our Church community. Don't turn away from him. Just accept it in humble faith, and you can be baptized this coming Sunday."

Denise did pray for guidance. And suddenly it all seemed to feel so right. How **could** such goodness and sincerity be wrong? Surely that warm feeling of reassurance and conviction in her heart was as clear an answer to her prayer as she could expect? She decided then and there to be baptized, and the missionaries left to report the happy news to the Church. That week, in the mail, Denise received letter after letter, card after card, from local believers (most of whom she had never met) expressing their joy and congratulations on her conversion, and welcoming her in advance to the Church community. That Sunday she was baptized by the bishop. It was an occasion of great rejoicing as yet another member was enrolled in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often known simply as the "LDS" Church or, more commonly, the Mormons.

### **The Appeal of Mormonism**

The story of Denise could be the story of any one of many converts of the Latter-day Saints - in Australia and many other countries - who have been won by the door-knocking campaign of thousands of young missionaries throughout the world. Perhaps 600 are active in Australia at the time of writing. The Mormon Church is practically the fastest-growing denomination in the world, as well as being a business empire with an annual income of over one billion dollars. Beginning in 1830 with 30 members, it had over 268,000 by the turn of the century, passed the million mark shortly after World War II, and has exploded from 2 million members in 1964 to more than 4 million in 1978.

The appeal of this church seems to lie largely in the qualities which held such an attraction for Denise - the appeal of a loving Christian community, which should of course be found in every Catholic parish, but is not always clearly in evidence, as we must admit candidly. Unlike some of the more 'unworldly' sects, the LDS Church is down-to-earth in many ways, with a strong emphasis on practical charity. It takes great care to share its resources for the assistance of its own aged, sick, poor, handicapped, and unemployed members. Education is given high priority, and Brigham Young University in Utah, with an enrolment of well over 25,000 students, is the biggest church-affiliated university in the U.S.A.

The LDS Church is not without its intellectuals and apologists, but in general it does not tend to emphasize the need for rational evidence as a criterion to religious truth. Its missionaries and teachers, as we have seen, prefer to appeal powerfully to the emotions. They encourage each other (and potential converts) to look for God in the experience of their own hearts, imagining that internal feelings of conviction, serenity, or "burning in the heart" can safely be assumed to be the testimony of the Holy Spirit. By endlessly repeating to each other their absolute, unshakeable faith in Joseph Smith's trustworthiness, Mormons reinforce an essentially blind faith which dismisses any persistent questioning or coldly critical appraisal of the 'prophet' and his message as evidence of insincerity, lack of true prayerfulness, or satanic hardness of heart.

This sheer dogmatism bears a surprising affinity with the apparent sophistication of liberal Christianity which relies subjectively on a 'lived experience of faith'. While spurning rational argument for God's existence and the objective truth of revelation, it can have a powerful impact on those who may be gullible, lonely or insecure. It is important for Catholics to be well aware of this if they are going to try 'talking turkey' with the zealous young men who come knocking at the door.

There is a seeming paradox in the way Latter-day Saints approach the non-Mormon ("Gentile") world. On the one hand they are unsurpassed in the zeal with which they seek converts. But on the other hand they are much more cautious than most religious groups about providing easy access to their various theological works and 'scriptures' (apart from the **Book of Mormon**, which is always readily available). You will not find public LDS bookshops and reading rooms in our cities where the inquirer can simply browse around at will without being accosted.

Mormons much prefer to introduce outsiders gradually to their doctrines. In a face-to-face situation they can control the level of doctrinal input, and the flow of conversation. There is a good reason for this rather secretive procedure; and while hostile critics tend to see it as deviousness, the Mormons themselves would consider it a prudent and charitable method of evangelization. The fact is that while the LDS Church strives to promote an initial media image of Christian 'normalcy' by publicly emphasizing many features of its code and creed which are similar (or at least, sound similar) to traditional Christian ideas, their true beliefs are very bizarre, and would alienate many potential converts irretrievably if they were bluntly spelt out all at once, rather than being introduced little by little.

Cases have been recorded of LDS converts abandoning the Mormon Church when, after a whole year or more of membership, they finally realized with dismay what the Mormons really mean by some of the Christian-sounding words they use. For while the LDS 'Articles of Faith' sound quite familiar in many ways to those who have been brought up in a Christian culture, they are given a totally different meaning. Mormons like to say, for instance, that they believe in the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Ghost - and in the miraculous conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary, without a human father. But, as we shall see, their understanding of these doctrines has nothing in common with the authentic Christian interpretation.

Most sects, and even other world religions such as Judaism and Islam, at least share with us the same basic monotheistic belief, that is, belief in one God, a spiritual Being far beyond our comprehension: eternal, unchangeable, all-knowing, all-powerful, the personal Creator and Lord of the entire universe and all that exists in it - 'seen and unseen'. The Mormons, in sharp contrast to this, are polytheists. They believe that the cosmos is eternal and uncreated, and that it is inhabited by a great many gods (and goddesses) who are not very different in their essential nature from us humans. We shall turn now to look more closely at the origin of this church and its "restored gospel", which is supposed to be identical with that preached by Jesus and the early Christians.

## II. THE FOUNDATION OF THE LDS CHURCH

The story of the Latter-day Saints begins with the birth of Joseph Smith Jr on 23 December 1805, in Sharon, Vermont. As Mormons themselves are quick to point out, his family was poor, and Joseph never received much formal education. In his autobiography (now published in the volume **Pearl of Great Price** and regarded as divinely-inspired scripture) Smith tells us that after his family moved to Palmyra, New York, he became engrossed at the age of fourteen in a religious revival movement which was sweeping the countryside. However, in searching for the true faith, he was troubled and confused by all the conflicting Protestant versions of the gospel - Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and so on.

### Visions and Golden Plates

In response to the Bible's promise of wisdom to the honest seeker (James 1:5), Joseph tells how he prayed for guidance, and was "immediately" treated to a supernatural manifestation. A terrifying darkness seemed to envelop him, but this was soon followed by a "pillar of light" brighter than the sun which delivered him from this "enemy power". And then:

"I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name, and said, pointing to the other: 'This is my Beloved Son. Hear Him' " (**Pearl of Great Price** - Joseph Smith 2:17).

These "Personages" then told Joseph that he should not join any of the existing Christian 'sects', for they were all wrong: "all of their creeds were an abomination", and all those who were members were corrupt (**ibid.** 2:19).

Smith goes on to claim that three years after this, on 21 September 1823, he experienced a second vision, in which an angel appeared to him:

"He called me by name, and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me, and that his name was Moroni; that God had a work for me to do . . . . He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang. He also said that the fulness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Saviour to the ancient inhabitants. Also, that there were two stones in silver bows - and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim - deposited with the plates . . . . and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book" (**ibid.**)

This exalted messenger directed him to a locality on the west side of a nearby hill, and Smith tells us that, sure enough, he unearthed the golden plates and other objects in a stone box. But before he could remove them, the angel appeared again, and told him he was not to take them yet, but was to wait exactly four years. Accordingly, we learn that on 22 September 1827, Joseph returned to the hallowed spot, and received the **Book of Mormon**, inscribed on the plates in "Reformed Egyptian" (a language unknown to non-Mormon scholars) from the angel. He kept them for two years or so, translating them with the miraculous help of the 'Urim and Thummim'.

Exactly how he made use of these objects (if at all) is not made clear. One of Smith's associates, Martin Harris, testified that even before securing the plates, Joseph possessed a special stone which he would place in his hat. Then, pulling his hat closely over his face, he would claim to discern where money or other treasure was buried in the ground. This, according to eye-witness David Whitmer, was the procedure he used when translating the plates, which were concealed from others in the room behind a screen, and under a tablecloth or pillow-case (Martin 1978, *The Maze of Mormonism*, pp 50-1). Smith's wife Emma also testified as to how she acted as one of his scribes:

"I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour" (**ibid.** p.50).

A number of witnesses allegedly saw the golden plates, and left their testimonies. Harris, Whitmer, and another assistant, Oliver Cowdery, swore in a signed statement that they had "seen the plates" and "the engravings which are upon the plates". In the same statement they also affirmed their certainty "that (the plates) had been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us". Later on, a further eight witnesses - mostly from the Smith and Whitmer families, also signed a statement testifying that they had seen and handled the plates, "which have the appearance of gold".

Finally, when the translation was complete, Smith tells us that he returned the plates at the angel's command. Cowdery later told Brigham Young, Smith's successor as head of the Mormon Church and pioneer of Utah, that he and Smith took them back to the "Hill Cumorah" and deposited them underground in a room full of other plates (Barrett 1973, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration*", Brigham Young University Press, p. 118). Presumably, the Latter-day Saints believe they are hidden there to this day.

## **New Revelations, New Church**

**The Book of Mormon** was only the first in a constant stream of new 'revelations' which Joseph Smith handed down during the next fifteen years - 135 in all. Many of these are now printed in the other two

volumes which Mormons recognize (in addition to the Protestant Bible) as divinely-inspired scripture - **Doctrine and Covenants** and the **Pearl of Great Price**.

An initial problem was to secure the publication of the **Book of Mormon**, which local printers apparently did not consider a potential best-seller. The difficulty was overcome by a convenient new revelation: God told the prophet Joseph that Martin Harris must sell part of his farm in order to finance the venture. Harris promptly obeyed, to the tune of \$3000, and the first edition of 5000 copies rolled off the press in 1830. On April 6 that year, the new Church was formally established with 30 members at Fayette, N.Y.

There was much hostility, however, from the local populace, many of whom regarded Smith as a charlatan and a thief; and the infant Church, though growing all the time through the zealous proclamation of the 'restored gospel', was forced to migrate through several states during the 1830s, all under the guidance of precise revelatory directions given through the prophet.

The 'saints' moved to Jackson County, Missouri, which Joseph revealed would become "Zion" - the "New Jerusalem" where Christ would soon return to earth to reign in glory. (Jackson County was the original site of the Garden of Eden, and the lost tribes of Israel were also expected to return there eventually from their long, secluded exile up beyond the Arctic Circle). At Kirtland, Ohio, Smith found himself in trouble with the law on financial charges, while in Missouri the leading Church officials were tarred and feathered, then run out of town.

Conscious, no doubt, of the saying that prophets are not honoured in their own country, the persecuted Mormons moved onwards to the banks of the Mississippi in Illinois, where they founded the town of Nauvoo (a word Smith said was Hebrew for "beautiful place"). Here he reigned for some years, not only as Prophet, but also as "General" and "Chief Justice". His word, in fact, was law. But after the neighbouring citizens became increasingly incensed at Mormon propaganda and practices, including reported instances of polygamy, Smith and his brother Hyrum were at length arrested and jailed. There, at Carthage, Illinois, on 27 June 1844, an angry mob stormed the jail and shot dead the two Smith brothers while they were awaiting trial. The Latter-day Saints revere their founder as a martyr, but it is doubtful whether he qualifies for that designation in its classical sense: far from surrendering his life voluntarily for the sake of his faith, Joseph Smith Jr. died with a gun in his hand, in a true Western-style shoot-out.

Shortly afterwards, under the charismatic leadership of Smith's elected successor, Brigham Young, the Mormons migrated once again, this time out to the far west, where they settled permanently by the Great Salt Lake, and built up a unique politico-religious community - often in the face of hardship and opposition, and at the cost of cruel bloodshed on both sides in the initial struggles with the "Gentile" world. That community endures to this day as a powerful social, economic and political influence in the state of Utah, centred on Salt Lake City. Such success may in itself appear to be a sign of credibility; but we shall do well to examine the Mormons' claim on our allegiance rather more closely.

### **III. GOLD PLATES AND MIRACULOUS STONES - A CREDIBLE REVELATION?**

#### **Criteria for an Authentic Revelation**

In assessing the truth or falsity of an alleged revelation from on high, there are several criteria which a prudent and reasonable person will want to apply. One obvious test will be the content of the alleged revelation itself. If it turns out to be incoherent or self-contradictory, or if it is irreconcilable with other truths which we can ascertain by our natural human reasoning, then of course it cannot be true. (We shall look at the doctrinal content of Mormonism in due course.)

But if it passes that test, this in itself will only prove that it **may** be true. We shall need further evidence before we can wisely accept in faith that it definitely **is** true. (It will be unreasonable, of course, to go to the opposite extreme and demand absolute, 'scientific' proof before we are prepared to believe, as that would be 'stacking the cards' in advance against God. The 'rationalist' who rests his scepticism towards any

revealed religion on this principle forgets that God may wish to respect the freedom he has given us: to give us the opportunity of exercising faith as a virtue - the virtue of loving trust in his truthfulness. Persuasive indicators are all we can reasonably expect: absolute proof, by its very nature, could only come with that direct, 'face-to-face' knowledge of God which is what Christians mean by the heavenly reward that follows our period of trial here on earth.)

Intrinsic plausibility of the alleged revelation, then, is not enough. Religion is an area where it is to some extent necessary to judge a book by its cover, so to speak; that is, to judge a purported revelation by the credentials of the 'revealer', and not only by the content of his message. It would be easy, but intellectually dishonest, for a Catholic writer to score cheap points against the Mormons simply by setting out the strange LDS theology in a scornful, polemical style, relying on its mere oddity and unfamiliarity to his readers to immunize most of them quite effectively from any potential sympathies which they might feel for the ministrations offered by young Mormon door-knockers. But this would be a mere appeal to prejudice, of the sort which can just as easily and cheaply be turned against Catholics by unbelievers and pagans.

To those hearing them for the first time, many of our own beliefs - biblical inspiration, the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, the Real Presence, and so on - certainly sound just as implausible or outlandish as some of the Mormon doctrines. The point is that we puny mortals, living in a small corner of a vast cosmos, with very little direct knowledge of ultimate reality, and biased unconsciously by all sorts of passing cultural and philosophical influences, must be very cautious about presuming to know **in advance** what sorts of things God would or would not do or reveal - and especially about assuming that any given report of supernatural phenomena (miracles, angels, and so on) can be dismissed without further ado as incredible to 'modern man'.

As one who personally finds no difficulty in believing that on Mount Sinai God once spoke through tablets of stone, I do not feel especially inclined to laugh out of court immediately the suggestion that on the Hill Cumorah he spoke again on plates of gold. After due consideration, to be sure, I believe the one and reject the other. But this is not because stone seems to me vastly and obviously more credible than gold as a preferred medium of divine communication; nor because I find it self-evident that the wastes of Sinai are a far more appropriate venue for mystic divine revelations than the rolling hills of up-state New York.

Nor (with respect to our Protestant brethren) is it primarily because I am confident that my personal interpretation of the Bible is vastly and obviously more competent than that found in Joseph Smith's supposed plates and other supplementary 'scriptures'. *Indeed, Mormons in controversy with Protestants habitually make the telling point that the 'Bible alone' principle is not only logically incoherent (none of the 66 books of the Protestant Bible claims that itself and the other 65 - and no others - are inspired by God and constitute the sole source of revealed truth) but leads directly and irremediably to the plethora of conflicting denominations which, as young Joseph realized, could scarcely reflect the true plan of Christ for his Church.* Latter-day Saints point out (very sensibly) that the Bible needs some sort of infallible clarification from an ongoing, living Church authority, if it is to be a focus of unity, rather than division, amongst Christians.

No, the basic reason why I accept Moses' tablets, but reject Joseph Smith's plates, is that the former are offered to me, as it were, by a vastly and obviously more competent-looking authority. In looking for signs of trustworthiness in a self-styled bearer of divine revelation, *I find that the Catholic Church - that organized communion of Jesus' followers which has existed continuously from the first century A.D., recognizing the leadership of the Apostle Peter and the line of Roman Bishops - has credentials infinitely more impressive than those of Joseph Smith Jr.* Let us consider those of the latter.

### **Joseph Smith - a Credible Prophet?**

In the first place, it is clear that as a youth, Smith was a practitioner of the occult and superstitious practice of divination, which has always been emphatically forbidden by the Scriptures and the Church. We have already noted his method of 'translating' the golden plates. In many pre-literate cultures,

including that of the North American Indians, the practice of gazing at special stones (especially luminous quartz crystals), with a view to obtaining secret knowledge, has been common. Amongst the less-educated whites in upper New York early in the 19th century, this practice of 'peep-stone' gazing or 'glass-looking' was sufficiently widespread to be outlawed as a form of charlatanry. Smith later denied any participation in such activities, but the evidence cannot be ignored. Several years after Smith assumed the role of Mormon prophet, his disillusioned father-in-law, Isaac Hale, recalled how, in November 1825, Joseph was employed by a team of 'money-diggers', and that:

"his occupation was that of seeing, or pretending to see by means of a stone placed in his hat, and his hat closed over his face. In this way he pretended to discover minerals and hidden treasures. His appearance at this time, was that of a careless young man - not very well educated, and very saucy and insolent to his father." (Martin, W: *"The Maze of Mormonism"*, 1978, p34).

Hale noted that when the team began digging (without success) in the area where Smith had told them an old Spanish fortune was buried, he claimed that "the enchantment was so powerful that he could not see." The diggers soon gave up, and Smith, who had been boarding at Hale's house, took off, leaving an unpaid bill of \$12.68 (*ibid.*)

Hale was not alone in testifying to Joseph's dubious activities. On 11 December 1833, another neighbour, Willard Chase, swore an affidavit before a Wayne County JP, stating the way in which Smith obtained his 'peep-stone'. In 1822, Smith and his brother Alvin assisted Chase in digging a well. Chase found a curious-looking stone, and as they were examining it, "Joseph put it in his hat, and then his face into the top of his hat." Smith wanted to keep the stone, but Chase (who desired it as a curio) would only lend it to him. While he had the stone on loan (two years or so) Joseph "began to publish abroad what wonders he could discover by looking in it." In about 1825, some time after it was returned, Joseph's brother Hyrum came and asked Chase to lend the stone again. He agreed, but in the fall of 1826, Hyrum angrily refused to give it back. Chase asked for it once more in 1830. Hyrum again refused him, shaking his fist and telling him that "Joseph made use of it in translating his Bible" (*ibid.* pp. 221-2).

Joseph Smith was in fact convicted of 'glass-looking' in the Bainbridge Court in March 1826. The court record was printed twice in the 19th century, but the original was for some reason unobtainable, and this provided LDS apologists with a loop hole: they denied emphatically that the court record was genuine, admitting that if it was, this would be a fatal blow to the credibility of their prophet (e.g. Nibley 1961, *"The Myth Makers"*, Bookcraft, Salt Lake City, p.142). However, on July 28, 1971, an independent document was discovered, verifying the authenticity of the missing court record: an original bill of costs in the handwriting of Justice Albert Neely, detailing his fees for a list of cases tried in 1826. There, in the middle of the list, is the name of Joseph Smith, convicted for the 'misdemeanour' of 'glass-looking' on 20 March 1826. ( Martin *ibid.* pp. 35-8. Martin's book reproduces a photograph of this document, and gives still further contemporary evidence of Smith's 'peeping' activities with his stone and hat.)

Smith's consistency is also open to serious question. The final, official version of Smith's discovery of the plates is, as we have seen, that the angel Moroni appeared and informed him how to get them. But two neighbours, the brothers Hiel and Joseph Lewis (regarded by their fellow-citizens as "truthful, honourable, Christian gentlemen") testified that in 1827, when he first began translating the alleged plates, Smith's original story was that his mystic informant was none other than the ghost of a bearded Spaniard, with his throat cut from ear to ear, and blood streaming down! Not one word about angels! (*ibid.* pp. 335-6). Perhaps even worse, the Lewis brothers recall that in June 1828, two years before the foundation of the Mormon Church, Joseph Smith approached their father, Rev. Nathaniel Lewis, and expressed the wish to join his denomination - the Methodist Episcopal Church. However, he was so notorious as a person of bad character that the Methodists agreed to keep him only if he agreed to submit to a disciplinary investigation and publicly renounce his fraudulent and hypocritical practices. Joseph confirmed their suspicions that his application was motivated chiefly by a desire to gain respectability by declining these conditions promptly, and having his name struck off the Methodist roll after only three days. (*ibid.* pp. 336-7) The glaring inconsistency, of course, is that according to Smith's "divinely-inspired" autobiography in the

**Pearl of Great Price**, God himself had already told Joseph in the first vision of 1820 that he must **not** join any of the existing 'sects', all of which were "corrupt". What business, then, had he in becoming a Methodist'?

Smith's handling of money scarcely inspires confidence in his reliability. G. T. Harrison, a practising attorney and former Mormon, has researched the court records of Geauga County, Ohio, and found that thirteen lawsuits were brought against Smith between 1837 and 1839 by creditors, for sums totalling nearly \$25,000. Most of these resulted from the failure of a highly dubious "bank" which he had set up in Kirtland in contravention of Ohio state laws. Although the LDS Church has subsequently denied that he was ever proven guilty, the court records show at least five convictions (*Martin* 1978, pp. 38-9). Smith by that time had a large following of reverential disciples who constantly had to bail him out. The prophet's response to these charges against him may be assessed by the reader in the light of Christ's teaching on humility and praying for our persecutors. In his **History of the Church** (6:408-9) [reprinted 1976] Joseph writes:

"In all these affidavits, indictments, it is all of the devil - all corruption. Come on! ye persecutors! ye false swearers! All hell, boil over! Ye burning mountains, roll down your lava! for I will come out on the top at last. I have more to boast of than ever any man had. I am the only man that has ever been able to keep a whole church together since the days of Adam. A large majority of the whole have stood by me. Neither Paul, John, Peter, nor Jesus ever did it. I boast that no man ever did such a work as I. The followers of Jesus ran away from Him; but the Latter-day Saints never ran away from me yet."

### **The '*Book of Mormon*' - Divinely Inspired?**

The origins of the **Book of Mormon** are open to still further devastating criticism. One would think, for instance, that if part of the miraculous translation from the golden plates was lost in the initial stages, it should not have been too difficult for a genuine 'seer' to translate the missing portion again, as long as he still had the plates and the miraculous translating stones (the "Urim and Thummim") in his possession. The following incident alone, therefore, should be sufficient to persuade all but the most credulous that there was something 'fishy' about the whole business.

As the LDS historian *Barrett* recounts it, the first 116 pages of English transcript, taken down by the scribe Martin Harris at Smith's dictation, were lost irretrievably after Harris took them home to show to his sceptical wife. Mrs Harris either lost, destroyed, or concealed the manuscript. She refused to disclose what had happened to it, and Harris had to return empty-handed to the furious prophet. Smith's behaviour in the face of this new set-back is exactly what we should expect from a none-too-subtle hoaxer who has loudly claimed to possess an infallible, supernatural translating technique, and now sees that he risks exposure by being unable to reproduce the original translation.

Does he start all over again, humbly trusting in the power of God to vindicate the truth of his claims? Not at all. He now receives yet another 'revelation' from God, commanding him not to re-translate the first part, because "Satan" has inspired "thieves" to alter the stolen manuscript, so that if he produces another true and identical version of the first 116 pages, they will publish their "altered" version as the original, in order to discredit him! Fortunately, however, it turns out that the missing portion can be dispensed with anyway: the Lord 'reveals' that it is only an "abridgement" by the ancient historian Mormon of a fuller narrative written by the still earlier patriarch Nephi. Very conveniently, Nephi's plates are also there in Joseph's collection, so he translates them instead! (*Barrett* 1973, pp. 84-7). (If Smith had been sincere in claiming the ability to produce another identical translation of "Mormon's abridgement", he would not have been frightened to go ahead and do so. To succeed in discrediting a genuine revelation, his enemies would obviously have needed to produce the original 116 pages for public inspection, and to alter it with such consummate skills that impartial scrutineers would be unable to detect the slightest signs of erasure, thinning of paper, or difference in handwriting - a well-nigh impossible task!)

Perhaps the most irrefutable evidence for the fraudulent character of the **Book of Mormon** is that which has come to light as recently as the mid-1970s, through the research of three young Americans, Wayne Cowdrey, Howard Davis, and Donald Scales.

From a very early date, the relatives and acquaintances of a retired Congregationalist minister, Rev. Solomon Spalding, who died in 1816, had complained very vocally against the Latter-day Saints that their new "Bible", that is the **Book of Mormon** was really a plagiarized version of an unpublished novel, **Manuscript Found**, which was written by the deceased clergyman and circulated at the time amongst his friends. A number of affidavits were sworn to this effect, but their publication and propagation was sporadic and poorly organized, while the LDS Church launched a massive counter-attack which capitalized on the fact that the original draft of **Manuscript Found** could not be produced to verify the affidavits. The Mormons naturally claimed that these were malicious, satanically-inspired falsehoods. All that remained was an earlier Spalding novel, **Manuscript Story**, which shows some definite stylistic similarities with the **Book of Mormon**, but also some marked differences.

Eventually, most anti-Mormon writers stopped appealing to the Spalding theory as an explanation for the **Book of Mormon**, because the available evidence seemed too flimsy and unsubstantiated.

Cowdrey, Davis and Scales, however, have now pieced together a long chain of events connecting Smith and Spalding. The chief link in the chain was an itinerant evangelist named Sidney Rigdon, who had a close friend who worked at the print shop in Pittsburgh from which Spalding's second manuscript disappeared. A Dr Winter later claimed to have been shown the manuscript by Rigdon in 1822. Rigdon was eventually baptized into the Mormon Church in November 1830, and always claimed that he had known nothing of Smith or Mormonism until late that year. However, **Cowdrey et al** have now found at least ten people who testified that they had seen Smith and Rigdon together a number of times from 1827 onwards - the very period when Smith was preparing the **Book of Mormon**.

The climax came in 1976, when Cowdrey and his friends were examining some old manuscripts in an LDS Church library. They came across a few pages from the **Book of Mormon**, in handwriting no one had been able to identify. The researchers, however, had managed to track down some undisputed samples of Spalding's handwriting at Oberlin College, Ohio, including a deed of January 1811 bearing his signature. And there, amidst the quiet and rather dull surroundings of papers and bookshelves, the awesome truth dawned on them that these harmless-looking scraps of ageing paper had the potential to shatter once and for all the myth of Joseph Smith the saint and prophet: a great historic American myth for which men and women had lived and died and suffered and killed; a myth which had pioneered part of the 'wild west', built the state of Utah, and now ruled the hearts and lives and fortunes of millions round the world. This extract from the **Book of Mormon** ("translated" from "golden plates" in 1828) was in the handwriting of Solomon Spalding (died 1816)! The young men had stumbled on part of the long-lost manuscript of Spalding's second novel - crushing evidence of Smith's plagiarism and deceit, which had ironically been preserved by the unsuspecting Mormons themselves!

They proceeded to write a book detailing the results of their research (**Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon?** Santa Ana, Vision House Publishers, 1977). The LDS Church has issued denials of the identification, and has prohibited any further examination of the relevant manuscript. But the detailed testimonies of two independent handwriting experts, William Kaye and Henry Silver, are photographically reproduced for all to see: the unquestioned Spalding documents and the supposed **Book of Mormon** extract are judged professionally to be definitely in the same hand (*Martin*, 1978, pp. 62-4).

### **The 'Book of Abraham'**

As if this were not sufficient indication of the true character of Joseph Smith, still further evidence has come to light in recent years, in connection with the so-called **Book of Abraham**. This is another 'translation' produced by Smith and included in the volume **Pearl of Great Price** as inspired Mormon scripture.

In 1835, Smith acquired some ancient Egyptian papyri, and with the help of Oliver Cowdery and (supposedly) the miraculous "Urim and Thummim", he 'translated' the documents, making the astounding announcement that they were none other than the story of the Patriarch Abraham, written the best part of 4,000 years ago!

The papyri were lost for well over a century, but came to light again in 1967 at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. Identified beyond dispute as those actually used by Smith, they were accepted enthusiastically by the LDS Church in Utah, as a golden opportunity to vindicate the divine inspiration of their prophet. The Church's only well-qualified Egyptologist, *Professor Dee Jay Nelson*, was asked to translate the papyri into English. He did so, and within the next few years, several of the world's leading Egyptologists verified that his translation was an accurate one. However, eventually he and his family resigned from the Mormon Church in 1975 - a decision which must have been painful indeed for former devout followers of Joseph Smith. Why was Nelson's faith in the 'prophet' destroyed? Simply because he and the other experts verified conclusively that the so-called **Book of Abraham** is an ordinary pagan Egyptian funeral text, dating from somewhere between 200 B.C. and 100 A.D. (at least 1500 years after the time of Abraham). Its contents have nothing whatever to do with the biblical patriarch, and bear no relation to Smith's English 'translation', published as the 'Word of God' in the **Pearl of Great Price**. Since then, the LDS Church leaders have kept as quiet as possible about the whole issue, no doubt praying that some miracle will eventually occur to vindicate in some unimaginable way the veracity of their founder. (Detailed documentation on this affair, including reproductions of relevant correspondence, can be found in *Martin 1978*, pp. 150-70).

### **The Witnesses to the 'Golden Plates'**

The evidence against Joseph Smith's own credibility is now so overwhelming that corroboration of his testimony even by persons of otherwise unquestioned reliability could scarcely restore any real confidence in his 'revelations'. And Smith's associates scarcely seem to fall into that category, even by the Mormons' own standards. The principal witnesses, Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer, always stuck to their story of having seen the plates in the presence of an angel, but *all three subsequently left the LDS Church*.

For a man who allegedly believed in Smith as a prophet of God, Cowdery showed a strange lack of faith in his leader. The Mormon historian Ivan Barrett relates how he was excommunicated in 1838 for (amongst other things) attempting to "destroy the character of President Joseph Smith", for selling his own land in defiance of one of Smith's very down-to-earth revelations', and for disgracing the Church by his dishonest business practices (*Barrett 1973*, p. 370). David Whitmer was also accused by the Church council of defaming Smith, of neglecting his duties as a Church official, and of disobeying the 'Word of Wisdom' (another of Smith's 'revelations' forbidding the use of tobacco, alcohol, and "hot drinks"). Harris appears as a very credulous man. On other occasions he solemnly reported that he had seen and talked to Jesus in the form of a deer, as well as seeing the devil, who resembled a "jackass with short, smooth hair, like a mouse" (Brodie, *"No Man Knows My History"* 1946, p. 81). Although he swore to having seen the golden plates, Harris later admitted under cross-examination that he only saw them "with the eye of faith" - whatever that might mean. "I did not see them as I do that pencil-case", he said, "(but) I saw them just as distinctly as I see anything around me - although at the time they were covered with a cloth" (Whalen 1967, *The Latter-day Saints in the Modern World*, p. 32). Finally, of the eight further witnesses who claimed to have seen and handled the plates (but without any angels) in June 1829, *three subsequently abandoned the LDS Church* (*Barrett 1973*, pp. 110-11).

What can we conclude, about the trustworthiness of the men on whose testimony of plates and angels, marvellous stones and silver bows, the entire Mormon religion depends absolutely? The exact details will probably never be known, but it is clear that Joseph Smith was certainly dishonest and probably superstitious. The Spalding manuscript; the connivance of Sidney Rigdon and possibly others; the fabrication, very possibly, of some bogus 'plates' to lend credence to the story; Smith's superstitious interest in crystal-gazing, which may have resulted in a partly genuine belief that he possessed a secret

key to knowledge; and a number of ill-educated and not very saintly associates - these now appear as the main ingredients in the original Mormon recipe.

Some Catholics are aware of the demonic dimension of reality, and of the extensive, well-documented evidence of strange preternatural phenomena which sometimes occur in connection with dabblings in the occult. They will not need to insist that the whole phenomenon must necessarily be explained in entirely 'natural' terms. The Scriptures predict the arrival of false prophets with deceptive 'signs and wonders', and testify to Satan's ability to disguise himself as an "angel of light" (2 Cor. 11). If there were indeed some extraordinary phenomena - visions, voices, automatic writing or whatever - this could help to explain the early growth of the Mormon Church. Such phenomena, coupled with the success of the movement and the adulation of ever-growing crowds of converts, may well have led Smith to believe increasingly in his own divine mission, regardless of his duplicity. Such self-deception seems to be a fairly common psychological phenomenon amongst cult-leaders.

#### IV. MORMON THEOLOGY

I argued earlier that the credentials of a self-styled messenger from God may often be the crucial factor in deciding whether or not we should believe him - quite independently of the actual doctrines he asks us to believe. I put it to the fair-minded reader (of any religion or none) that the solid evidence we have adduced so far, regarding the credentials and character of the 'founding fathers' of Mormonism, should convince us that it would be extremely foolish to accept anything at all on their say-so; and especially on Joseph Smith's say-so. To put it bluntly, I would not buy a used religion from this man (much less a brand new one) even if it should turn out to offer an internally consistent and plausible-sounding theology, or perhaps certain Bible verses which seem to lend support to its distinctive doctrines.

Whether or not the LDS gospel does in fact sound consistent and appealing, readers can now judge for themselves: we shall conclude our little survey of the Mormons and their Church by setting out briefly the main distinguishing features of their creed, and how this differs from Catholic teaching.

##### **The '*Book of Mormon's*' Message**

Smith's new "Bible" tells how ancient peoples from the Near East migrated to America and were visited by Jesus Christ after his resurrection. They are believed to be God's true people. However, the civilization, great cities, advanced metallurgical technology, and agricult-resources which it attributes to the 'Nephites', 'Jaredites', and other alleged ancient Americans are quite incompatible with what archaeologists have discovered. This contrasts sharply with the way in which excavations in the Near East are frequently found to corroborate the genuine antiquity and authenticity of the historical narratives in the Bible.

Also, we cannot help wondering why a book which was supposed to have been miraculously translated, word for word, should have undergone more than two thousand textual changes between the original edition and the ones in use today (Whalen 1967, p. 49). In 1 Nephi 11:21, for instance, the original edition says that the "Lamb of God" is "the Eternal Father", while the same verse in today's version equates the "Lamb of God" with "the Son of the Eternal Father". There are many anachronisms in the *Book of Mormon*, large slabs of which (about 27,000 words in all) are direct quotations from the King James Bible of 1611. It perpetuates some of the errors of that translation, such as the word "torn" instead of "refuse" or "offal" as a translation of the Hebrew *suchah* in Isaiah 5:25. In some places we find really astonishing reports: in Ether 15:31 we read of a gentleman named Shiz who "struggles for breath" **after** his head has been cut off - and then finally dies! (More extensive criticism of the **Book of Mormon** can be found in Whalen 1967, pp. 40-50, and Martin 1978, pp. 47-59.)

##### **God and Creation**

The first article of the Christian creed is held in common with all great monotheistic religions: God is One; he is infinite, self-subsistent Spirit, the Almighty "Creator of Heaven and Earth". All limited and finite

beings depend utterly on him for their existence.

LDS doctrine, however, denies this fundamental theistic premise. The 'inspired' **Doctrine and Covenants (DC)** 93:3 states that the "elements are eternal" and indestructible. The things we see were not created out of nothing, but only "framed" or "organized" out of pre-existing matter (**DC** 20:17). The Mormon world-view is in fact very materialistic, because it makes the mistake of assuming that if something is real, we ought to be able to make a mental 'picture' or image of it. This leaves no room for truly spiritual being. Mormon 'revelation' asserts that "all spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes" (**DC** 131:7).

For Mormons, God is an essentially material being in time and space, who is only partly responsible for our existence. From a Catholic viewpoint, this reduces him to an idol, unworthy of human worship and adoration. Although at times he is said to be "unchangeable" in some sense (e.g. **DC** 20:17), he is in fact believed to be capable of 'growth' and 'maturation'. In fact, he was once a quite lowly figure, as we are, and has now taken on a celestial body: "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's" (**DC** 130:22). Because the Bible tells us that God made man "in his own image" (Gen. 1:26-7), Latter-day Saints conclude that he must fully share our nature. (if such reasoning were valid, then the "image" I see in the bathroom mirror must also be a three-dimensional being, composed of "flesh and bones".) The prophet Joseph proclaimed:

"God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil . . . yea, God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did." (**History of the Church** 6:305-6).

Brigham Young, who like all Smith's successors as President, Prophet, Seer and Revelator of the LDS Church is supposed to enjoy infallibility, declared on many occasions as "revelation" that the earth where God once lived was in fact **this** earth; and that he and Adam are one and the same person. Modern Mormons, however, do not generally accept this, and try to argue that Young was not speaking **ex cathedra**, so to speak - not with his full authority.

### 'Gods' and Men - Essentially the Same

Although Mormons commonly talk about 'God' in a way that might easily create an impression of the unique Being of orthodox Christianity, they actually believe in the existence of many 'Gods' ruling the many worlds scattered throughout the universe. Whether one or more of these is supreme over the rest seems rather obscure. In any case, we are to worship **our** 'Heavenly Father' - the God of **this** world, who 'organized' it into its present condition. Smith asserted that, "The heads of the Gods appointed one God for us" (**History of the Church** 6:475). Thus, by their own admission, Mormons worship a being who is not necessarily the supreme being - merely our local deity. To Catholics, that sort of worship would be idolatrous.

On the basis of certain biblical texts which speak of various 'gods' (understood by Catholics to mean either false gods or lesser spiritual beings), the Latter-day Saints' polytheistic gospel proclaims a whole race or 'species' of divine beings, of which 'Heavenly Father' is only one member. Unable to form a clear picture in their minds of the Christian mystery of three Persons in one God, Mormons reject this doctrine, and 'reinterpret' the Trinity in a way that posits three quite separate members of the God-species who happen to be of particular importance to us on planet Earth. Joseph Smith declared:

"I will preach on the plurality of Gods . . . 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 that these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods." (**History of the Church** 6:474).

Our Father in Heaven is married to at least one female deity, and together they procreated all the billions

of human beings as 'spirit children': all of us are claimed to have lived in heaven as spirits before entering a body here on earth. Devout 'saints' sing a hymn written by one of Smith's widows, Eliza Snow:

In the heavens are parents single?  
No; the thought makes reason stare!  
Truth is reason, truth eternal tells me  
I've a mother there.

Some of these spirit children rebelled, and became the Devil and his angels. Their punishment is that they are eternally denied the opportunity of eternal progress. If we accept the Mormon gospel and live virtuously, we shall not only rise again physically, along with all mankind, but will keep on developing until we are Gods ourselves. If not, we will only reach a lower 'kingdom' in the future life. (Heaven consists of a hierarchy of three 'kingdoms' - 'celestial', 'terrestrial' and 'telestial'; few if any of us will be bad enough to join the devils in Hell, or the 'Second Death'.)

The essence of the Mormon gospel is summed up very clearly by the contemporary LDS theologian Glenn L. Pearson:

"The truth we have found to be that gods, angels, devils and men are of a common parentage. They are the same in physical appearance and original potentiality. Gods are those members of the divine race who have reached the status that might be called perfect maturation, or realization of the maximum potential." (Pearson 1961, *"Know Your Religion"*, p. 24).

Still more succinctly, another Mormon leader, Lorenzo Snow, summed up the 'restored and everlasting gospel' in a widely-quoted aphorism: "As man is, God once was, and as God is, man may become." Catholics, on the other hand, believe that by grace we will be transformed into more perfect 'images' of God in the Mystical Body of Christ, and live forever in his direct presence. The suggestion that any human creature might eventually rise to equality with his Creator would be seen as both absurd and blasphemous.

### **The Mormon idea of Christ**

How does Jesus Christ fit into the LDS theological scheme? In common with orthodox Christians, Mormons believe that Christ by his suffering, death, and resurrection is our Saviour, and made possible our 'exaltation'. (However, by this 'exaltation', of course, they mean the un-Christian notion of becoming equal with God.) Since Mormons believe that we, no less than Jesus, were begotten in a very literal way in the spirit world by two heavenly parents, a problem arises for them. A recent Mormon catechetical text, glossy and profusely illustrated, deals with it under the heading, "Jenny's Question":

"The Markham family had been to Sunday School and was driving home. Brother Markham asked each of his four children what they had learned that day . . . When Jenny was asked what she had learned, she replied, "Daddy, I'm confused. The teacher talked about Jesus' being God's **only** son. I thought all of us were God's children"."

The lesson goes on to suggest that "Jenny's Question" is answered well in the words of a "modern prophet", Joseph Fielding Smith (President of the LDS Church early this 20th century):

"I want the little folks to hear what I am going to tell you . . . Now, we are told in scriptures that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God in the flesh. Well, now for the benefit of the older ones, how are children begotten? I answer just as Jesus Christ was begotten of his father. The difference between Jesus Christ and other men is this: Our fathers in the flesh are mortal men, who are subject unto death: but the Father of Jesus Christ in the flesh is the God of Heaven . . . Mary, the virgin girl, who had never known mortal man, was his mother. God by her begot his son Jesus Christ, and he was born into the world with power and intelligence like that of His Father." (**Family Home Evening** 1972, pp. 125-6).

Brigham Young emphatically denied that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost (**Journal of Discourses**

1:51). Mormon doctrine is really a denial of Jesus' virginal conception, as we can see from above: "older ones" know how children are begotten, and that is just how Jesus was begotten, so we are told. God himself - a God of 'flesh and bones' - is the father 'in the flesh' of Jesus, rather than a 'mortal' man. In plain language, God the Father appeared at Nazareth and had sexual intercourse with Mary. Such was the 'miraculous' conception of Jesus, in Mormon theology.

## **Marriage - Polygamous and Eternal**

Orthodox Christians believe that the union of one man and one woman, for the duration of this earthly life, is God's true and original plan for the family (although polygamy, having more than one wife, was tolerated for a time amongst the ancient Hebrews). The **Book of Mormon** itself is severely opposed to polygamy, stating that David's and Solomon's plural marriages were "abominable" before the Lord, who explicitly commands his people to practise monogamy (Jacob 2: 24,27).

However, this did not prevent Smith from subsequently taking a keen interest in women other than his wife Emma, who was most unhappy about her husband's behaviour. Eventually, on 12 July 1843, Smith received the divine seal of approval in the form of a new revelation to the effect that polygamy was now commanded by the Lord: "And let Mine handmaid, Emma Smith, receive all those that have been given unto My servant Joseph, and who are virtuous and pure before me". This "new and everlasting covenant" had to be practised by all Mormons, as far as possible, on pain of eternal damnation (**DC** 52:132).

The "covenant" was certainly "new", but not quite "everlasting". During the next few decades, leaders such as Smith, Young, and Heber C. Kimball took dozens of wives each, but there were not enough women available for most LDS men to take more than one wife - two or three at the most. At length, when the U.S. government threatened to confiscate Mormon property, and deny statehood to Utah, the danger of eternal damnation for refusing to practise polygamy faded away: President Wilford Woodruff, in a **Manifesto** of 24 September 1890, instructed Mormons to "refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the law of the land."

Monogamy however, is regarded still as an evil to be tolerated only because of unjust civil laws. Polygamy is still seen as the theoretical norm, and Mormons believe it will be practised in the next life. (LDS 'fundamentalists' still practise it quietly in pockets of Utah.) Respected LDS theological opinion surmises that Jesus himself married Mary Magdalene, Martha, and possibly others, and naturally appeared first to "his own dear wives" after the resurrection (*Whalen* 1967, p. 123).

Jesus taught that there is no marriage in heaven (Matt. 22:30), but Mormons 'seal' their marriages for eternity, where they believe they will go on procreating more and more 'spirit children' forever, in order to populate more and more worlds. Indeed, they believe that this 'celestial marriage' is essential in order to reach the 'celestial kingdom' - the supreme level of heavenly glory. Women can enter there only by virtue of the priesthood of their husbands. There is a complex Mormon hierarchy, headed by a council of twelve "apostles": virtually all LDS men are priests of one rank or another, in either the "Aaronic" or "Melchisedek" priesthood.

## **Racist Theology**

From a Christian point of view, one of the most offensive themes in Mormonism is the racist theology. Until 1978, the LDS Church taught the following doctrine, as expressed in a recent standard theological text:

"Negroes in this life are denied the priesthood; under no circumstances can they hold this delegation of authority from the Almighty. The gospel message of salvation is not carried affirmatively to them. . . Negroes are not equal with other races where the receipt of certain spiritual blessings are [sic] concerned." (McConkie 1966, "*Mormon Doctrine*", p.527).

Although no missions were organized to convert black people, they were accepted into the Church as

non-ordained members if they applied of their own accord. According to the 'inspired' **Book of Abraham** (whose credibility we have discussed above), those who are descended from Canaan are "cursed . . . as pertaining to the priesthood" (1:26). The general opinion was that the negroes' lineage goes back from Canaan through Ham to Cain: the 'prophet' Brigham Young declared that the "mark of Cain", divinely imposed on him as a punishment for murdering Abel, was "the flat nose and black skin" (**Journal of Discourses** 7:290). Negroes in general however, were thought to have been set into black bodies here on earth because of their own previous misdemeanours in the spirit world - they were 'fellow-travellers' with Lucifer and the rebellious angels. In the words of Mark E. *Petersen* addressing a religion teachers' convention at Brigham Young University, 27/8/54:

"Think of the Negro, cursed as to the Priesthood . . . who, in the pre-existence lived the type of life which justified the Lord in sending him to earth in the lineage of Cain with a black skin, and possibly being born in darkest Africa - if that negro is willing when he hears the gospel to accept it, he may have many of the blessings of the gospel. . . If that Negro is faithful all his days, he can and will enter the celestial kingdom. He will go there as a servant, but he will get celestial glory."

According to Brigham Young, it was the "decree of God" that Cain's descendants should eventually be given the priesthood, when the "mark" (i.e. the black skin) was lifted from them; and that this in turn would occur only when "the seed of Abel shall be redeemed" (*Martin* 1978, p.185). Since negroes are still black, the conditions anticipated by this "decree of God" have clearly not yet arrived. However, on 9 June 1978, faced with a growing and embarrassing pressure from the civil rights movement, and with a rapidly increasing number of part-negro converts to Mormonism in Brazil, the [1982] current Prophet, Seer and Revelator, President Spencer W. Kimball, received a contradictory revelation from God, affirming that the "long-promised day" had in fact arrived: race was henceforth to be no longer a barrier to the priesthood or any other privileges in the LDS Church. This is now to be added to the Mormon scriptures in further editions of the **Pearl of Great Price**.

One other racist prophecy of Brigham Young, however, still lingers on in a milder form. Young thundered against intermarriage between whites and negroes, declaring that "the penalty, under the law of God, is death on the spot. This will always be the case." (**Journal of Discourses** 10:110). President Joseph F. Smith, in a letter of 9 May 1966, still asserted that "It would be a serious error for a white person to marry a Negro, for the Lord forbid it". And even after the new revelation of 1978, Apostle Le Grand Richards told an interviewer that intermarriage has not thereby been approved, and that the Church's position is still that "people (should) live within their own races." (*Martin* 1978, p.192)

## V. FACING THE FACTS.

We have argued in this booklet that although it is unreasonable to demand absolute proof in this life for the validity of religious faith, faith must be rationally defensible, and grounded in some strong and objective evidence. From a Catholic viewpoint, the Mormon faith does not pass this test. It is unworthy of an honest and rational person, for instance, to keep trusting in the divine inspiration of Joseph Smith's **Book of Abraham**, after *Dee Jay Nelson* and other Egyptologists have exposed its fraudulence, simply because he "feels his heart burning within him" when he reads that book. (This poignant plea was urged by a devout Mormon elder who wrote to Professor Nelson, begging him to return to the LDS Church - *Martin* 1978, P.161.)

Catholicism need not depend for its credibility only on subjective inward experiences, no matter how comforting or uplifting. *It makes good sense* to explain the existence of the vast number of composite, limited, and changeable beings in the universe by the appeal to traditional theism, belief in one creator God. It does not make sense to "explain" them (as Mormonism does) by postulating a multiplicity of finite 'Gods', basically similar in nature to ourselves, whose own existence cries out for explanation as much as ours does.

*It makes sense* to believe that if the Son of God himself organized the nucleus of a community which was

supposed to carry on his teaching in perpetuity, *he would then assist this community always to remain faithful - as indeed he promised it would (Matt. 16:18)*. It does not make sense to maintain that while Christ's original Church was not only fallible, but in fact became totally corrupt and apostate for fifteen centuries or more (in spite of his promise to the contrary), a brand new Church, 'restored' by a patently dishonest 'prophet', is to be trusted as an infallible interpreter of the original revelation - especially when its new 'revelations' sometimes contradict each other.

*It makes sense to believe that the constant and unrivalled stream of well-testified miracles over two millennia, often in association with men and women of great holiness of life (think of Lourdes, of Fatima, of the inexplicable picture at Guadalupe, of the dozens of marvellously incorrupt bodies of saints) is a pointer to the authenticity of the Catholic Church. It does not make sense to ignore all of this - and to brand all of these saints as hypocrites who worshipped God only "with their lips" - in favour of a few 'visions' and other unusual phenomena, reported over a very limited time, and in a very limited locality, by persons who for the most part were not noted either for consistency or for sanctity.*

The Latter-day Saints are generally good and devoted people, whom many Catholics could do well to emulate in their zeal and spirit of sacrifice, in their concern to build loving Christian communities, and in their positive approach towards family values and the sanctity of life. Nevertheless, their 'gospel' is a sad travesty of Christ's Gospel. *If this pamphlet can assist some Catholics to be more aware of this, and perhaps help some Mormons to find the painful, yet joyful, path to the true home of all Jesus' followers, it will have served its purpose.*

\* \* \*

## REFERENCES:

### Mormon Publications:

*The Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City, Utah, 1978.

*Doctrine and Covenants*. Salt Lake City, Utah, 1976.

*Pearl of Great Price*. Salt Lake City, Utah, 1978.

(These three, together with the Bible, constitute the 'standard works' of the LDS Church. They are regarded as inspired scripture.)

Barrett, Ivan J. *Joseph Smith and the Restoration: A History of the Church to 1846*. Brigham Young University Press, 1973.

*Family Home Evening: No. 1 - Personal Commitment*. Salt Lake City, 1972.

McConkie, Bruce R. *Mormon Doctrine*. Bookcraft, Salt Lake City, 1966.

Nibley, Hugh. *The Myth Makers*. Bookcraft, Salt Lake City, 1961.

*Salt Lake City, 1975, The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*. Deseret Book Co.

Pearson, Glenn L. *Know Your Religion*. Bookcraft, Salt Lake City, 1961.

Petersen, Mark E. *Race Problems, As They Affect the Church*.

Address at the Convention of Teachers of Religion on the College Level. Brigham Young University, 1954. 27/8/1954.

Roberts, B. H. *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*. Salt Lake City, 1915.

Smith, Joseph, Jr. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Vols. 1-7. Deseret Book Co. Salt Lake City, 1976.

Young, Brigham, *Journal of Discourses*

### Non-Mormon Publications:

Brodie, Fawn M. *No Man Knows My History*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1946.

Burrell, Maurice C. & Wright, J. Stafford. *Some Modern Faiths*. Inter-Varsity Press, 1973.

Cowdrey, Wayne, Davis, Howard A., & Scales, Donald R. *Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon?*

Vision House Publishers, Santa Ana, 1977.

Marquardt, H. M. *The Book of Abraham Papyrus Found*. Modern Microfilm Co., 1975.

Martin, Walter. *The Maze of Mormonism* (Revised and enlarged edn.) Vision House Publishers, Santa Ana, California, 1978.

Nelson, Dee Jay. *The Joseph Smith Papyri - a Translation and Preliminary Survey*. Modern Microfilm Co., Salt Lake City, 1968.

O'Dea, Thomas F. *The Mormons*. University of Chicago Press, 1957. Rumble, Leslie, M.S.C. *The Mormons or Latter-Day Saints*. (Revised Australian edn.) A.C.T.S. Publications, Melbourne, 1966. [An Edition of this pamphlet is down-loadable and accessible at [www.pamphlets.org.au/cts](http://www.pamphlets.org.au/cts)]

Whalen, William J. *The Latter-day Saints in the Modern World*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1967.

Young, Kimball. *Isn't One Wife Enough?* Henry Holt & Co. N.Y. 1954.

\* \* \* \* \*