

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

Two candidates for the Republican presidential nomination are practicing Mormons—John Huntsman and Mitt Romney. That two of the more prominent candidates are Mormons is a bit unusual. That fact also means it is important that we understand the worldview of Mormons. Finally, that Huntsman and Romney are Mormons does not disqualify them as candidates, nor does it mean that either one would be incompetent because of their Mormon faith. I believe, nonetheless, that the Mormon worldview needs to be scrutinized and evaluated for its viability and its commitment to truth. Hence, this edition of *Issues in Perspective* will be devoted to such an analysis.

The History of Mormonism

Mormonism is by far the largest and fastest growing worldview, with as many as 10 million adherents worldwide. Its beginnings revolve totally around Joseph Smith, who was born on 23 December 1805 in Sharon, Vermont. His early years were greatly influenced by his father, who curiously spent a great deal of time searching for buried treasure using unorthodox and often occult methods. His life changed in 1820 when he supposedly received a vision from God the Father and the Son, who told him that all other religions were an abomination but that he was the prophet to bring restoration.

In 1823 another vision from the angel Moroni further solidified Smith's charge from God. The angel informed him that he would uncover a number of golden plates that needed translating. He discovered these plates, inscribed with what he called "reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics," outside Palmyra, New York. He was able to translate them with a huge pair of spectacles that he called the "Urim and Thummim." According to his story, between 1827 and 1829, he "translated" the plates and in 1830 published *The Book of Mormon*. The plates were purportedly taken to heaven by Moroni.

In another vision from John the Baptist in 1829, Smith received the Aaronic priesthood and founded the "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." He subsequently relocated his religious headquarters to Ohio and Missouri, but, according to Boa, "Mormons were accused of a number of crimes in those places and were required to leave Missouri" in 1839 by order of the governor. [p. 65]

The Mormons, led by Smith, relocated to Illinois, where they built the city of Nauvoo, where he instituted the practice of polygamy. When Smith and his brother Hyrum tried to destroy a local newspaper office because of its stand against the Mormons, they were arrested and jailed in Carthage, Illinois. Tragically, an angry mob stormed the prison and on 27 June 1844 shot

and killed the two brothers, making them martyrs. The leadership mantle passed to Brigham Young, the “First President” and prophet of the church.

Under Young’s leadership, the Mormons relocated to Salt Lake City in July 1847. There they settled down and built their unique brand of religion. Young influence was virtually dictatorial, but it provided the stability needed for the group to grow. During this period, the US government sought to make Utah a state but first the Mormons resisted this effort and later refused to give up polygamy as a condition for statehood. Only when the government threatened the Mormons with property loss, did they change their doctrine and abolish polygamy as a doctrine.

Today, the Mormons are a highly structured and organized religion. Led by a First President, a Council of Twelve Apostles and a Council of Seventy, there are also bishops, counselors and teachers at all levels. Further, virtually all Mormon males serve as deacons and elders. Males over 12 years old are also members of the Mormon priesthood of Aaron or Melchizedek. Because they regard themselves as the true church, Mormons refer to all non-Mormons as “Gentiles.” [For this review of Mormon history, see Boa, pp. 64-68 and Gruss, pp. 29-37.]

For the Mormons, their scriptures define their faith. They regard scripture as the Bible, *The Book of Mormon*, *Doctrines and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*. Ken Boa summarizes the content of *The Book of Mormon*, the most important of the Mormon texts:

The Book of Mormon, which supposedly was written by several people from about 600 B.C. to A.D. 428, tells of the migration of an ancient people from the Tower of Babel to Central America. These people, known as the Jaredites, perished because of apostasy. A later migration occurred in 600 B.C., when a group of Jews were supposedly told by God to flee Jerusalem before the Babylonian captivity. These Jews, led by Lehi and his son Nephi, crossed the Pacific Ocean and landed in South America. There they divided into two opposing nations, the Nephites and the Lamanites. The Lamanites, cursed with dark skin because of their iniquity, were the ancestors of the American Indians. (Similarly, the black people are said to have been cursed with dark skin because they are descendants of Cain, the first murderer)

The Nephites recorded prophecies about the coming of Christ, and after His resurrection Christ visited them there in South America. He instituted communion, baptism, and the priesthood for the Nephites. Later they were annihilated in a battle with the Lamanites in A.D. 428. Before they were killed in battle, Mormon, the compiler of the divinely revealed Book of Mormon, and his son Moroni took the golden plates on which “the revelation” was recorded and buried them. These plates were uncovered 1,400 years later by Joseph Smith. [pp. 67-68]

How reliable is this “history?” There are several key points that demonstrate that *The Book of Mormon* is unreliable as a historic text:

1. There are no reliable witnesses to the plates Smith supposedly translated.

2. As Boa remarks, “Though *The Book of Mormon* was buried in A.D. 428, it contains about 25,000 words verbatim from the A.D. 1611 King James version of the Bible!”

3. I recently visited the new Mormon temple in Omaha, Nebraska, where I live. During the tour, one guest asked why there is no archeological evidence for the historical claims of *The Book of Mormon*. Our guide could offer no answer, but the extensive claims of the book would necessitate some kind of evidence for these peoples. There is none.

4. There is absolutely no evidence of anything called “reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics.”

Mormonism is a worldview that has generated passion and growth. It has been an aggressive religion, expecting all teens to commit two years in missionary service, for which they raise their own funds. Also, the LDS leaders expect every Mormon to tithe 10% of all income, with the result that the LDS church is extremely wealthy, with assets over \$30 billion [*Time*, 4 August 1997, p. 54]. Mormons are also visibly active in politics and social causes that promote conservative values and ethics. They remain a powerful force in American culture.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

Mormonism: Theology and Ethics

God. Mormonism teaches that God the Father was once a man, but became God. He has a physical body, as does his wife (the Heavenly Mother). Mormons deny the trinity, arguing that the Father, Son and Spirit are three separate gods. Mormons likewise teach that it is possible for all faithful Mormons to one day become gods too.

Jesus Christ. Mormonism teaches that Jesus is a separate god from the Father (Elohim) and is the spirit child of the Father and Mother in heaven. He is, therefore, the “elder brother” of all men spirit beings. His body was created through sexual union between Elohim and Mary. In fact, Mormonism teaches that Jesus was married, as a polygamist, to the two Marys and Martha. His death on Calvary’s cross does not provide full atonement, but does guarantee resurrection for everyone.

Scripture. Without question, Mormons equate *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* with the Bible; in fact, they regard it as more authoritative than the Bible. That book is complemented by other Mormon texts, the *Pearl of Great Price* and *Doctrines and Covenants*.

Salvation. The LDS church actually defines salvation as exaltation to godhood, which can only be earned through obedience to LDS leaders, Mormon baptism, tithing, marriage (which they believe is eternal) and secret temple rituals. Using 1 Corinthians 15:29, the LDS church also teaches that present day Mormons can be vicariously baptized for their ancestors, who will then be “saved.” For that reason, Mormons spend a great deal of time studying their family’s genealogy so that they can be baptized in their place.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

How Do I Build Bridges to Mormons?

Bridge #1: Mormonism has a strong commitment to the spiritual world, the realm beyond the physical; it is possible to connect with this spiritual world through the specific activities of the believer. As Bible-centered Christians, we believe that as well, but teach clearly that a relationship with God is possible only through Jesus Christ (John 14:6). In effect, as we build a relationship with Mormons, we must keep coming back to Jesus--He is the only Way! Through our lifestyle and our words, we can demonstrate that truth. They believe in a spiritual world but they simply do not have certainty on how to get there.

Bridge #2: Mormons read the Bible but through the grid of their cult. The Book of Mormon is needed to truly explain what the Bible teaches. The result is that the Bible is not enough. We must be ready to demonstrate an apologetic for the Bible as the unique Word of God. We must also be prepared to use God's Word to demonstrate the deity of Jesus, the unique saving work of Jesus and the clarity that salvation is through faith in Jesus, not through works. It is important to keep the focus on God's Word, not their books. God will honor the use of His Word and if they do not want to discuss the Bible, then do not get engaged in a conversation about their written works, unless you have adequately studied them. Remember, it is not your job to change a Mormon; that is God's business. Your job is to be a faithful witness of the truth revealed in the Bible.

Bridge #3: As with Christianity, Mormonism calls for an intense commitment. Few Mormons joined the LDS church because they were drawn initially to the Book of Mormon. The LDS meets basic human needs: the need to belong, to have fellowship, to have a sense of identity and purpose, to be affirmed as a person, to have answers for life's enduring problems. Also, many become Mormons because of the need for authority and certainty in their lives. For the Mormon, there is little ambiguity.

Therefore, we must not only be willing to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the Bible and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, but also the authenticity and genuineness of biblical Christianity. The fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) are powerful manifestations of that authenticity. Christians must also manifest the same intense commitment to Jesus and to truth that cultists manifest. We have the answers and we have the truth. The supernatural nature of our "walk" must match the power of our words.

In Acts 17:16-34, the Apostle Paul met the Athenian philosophers on their own turf. He recognized their spiritual need, recognized their religiosity and recognized their quest for truth; but he demonstrated the inadequacy of these by pointing them correctly to Jesus. That must be our methodology as we seek to build bridges to Mormons.

See James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 89-98.