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# mormonism EXPLAINED

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What Latter-Day Saints Teach and Practice

A N D R E W J A C K S O N

CROSSWAY BOOKS  
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PART I

# The Origins of Mormonism



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## JOSEPH SMITH: THE RESTORER OF THE TRUE GOSPEL?

Mormonism originates solely from the early-nineteenth-century visions and revelations of Joseph Smith, the first President and Prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In this most fundamental fact, Latter-day Saints present no argument or dispute. As the tenth Mormon President and Prophet, Joseph Fielding Smith, affirms with prophetic conviction: “Mormonism must stand or fall on the story of Joseph Smith.” Put simply, without Joseph Smith, there would be no such faith known as Mormonism today.<sup>1</sup>

### Joseph Smith’s Early Years (1805–1820)

Early Mormon history unfolded in the cold winters of the northeastern United States, in such places as Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and western New York.<sup>2</sup> In Sharon, Vermont, Joseph Smith Jr. was born on December 23, 1805, to

the poor farming family of Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith. The Smith family moved numerous times during Joseph’s early teen years, seeking good farmland and a stable living. From 1811 to 1816, they seemed to be constantly on the move, looking for a place they could call home.

In 1816, Joseph Smith Sr. once again packed up his eight children and moved his family to neighboring Palmyra and Manchester Townships located in Ontario County, New York,<sup>3</sup> where they purchased a hundred acres of land and built a small log home. In 1820, in a wooded grove near this log home, Mormonism officially began with Joseph’s Smith’s “First Vision” experience at the very young age of fourteen.<sup>4</sup>

### Joseph Smith’s First Vision (1820)

In the early nineteenth century, the western frontier region of New York State experienced zealous Christian revivals and camp meetings common to America’s Second Great Awakening.<sup>5</sup> New York earned its reputation of being a “burned-over religious district” as the result of out-of-control spiritual wildfires. It was a region swarming with itinerant flamboyant preachers.<sup>6</sup>

Along with mass personal conversions, ecstatic experiences of encountering God, and transcendent visions, another general characteristic of America’s Second Great Awakening was the desire by many Christian groups to break away from historical, creed-centered Christianity in the pursuit of “restoring” the pure practice of the New Testament church. Their efforts were often fueled by homespun theology and end-time predictions of the imminent return of Jesus Christ and his millennial reign.

Early Mormonism reflected many of the common Christian trends of the times: having an authoritarian prophetic leader and being noncreedal,<sup>7</sup> staunchly Arminian,<sup>8</sup> fervently

restorationist,<sup>9</sup> evangelistically driven, end-time-focused, and characterized by isolated communal living.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Which Christian Church Is True?***

Unfortunately, denominational rivalries and theological debates were rabid in western New York, especially among the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists.<sup>11</sup> As an impressionable, immature boy, Joseph Smith struggled deeply with the question concerning what church denomination was really the true one. During this troubled season, he wrote that he was determined to act on the familiar Bible passage of James 1:5: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."<sup>12</sup>

### ***The First Vision of Joseph Smith***

On a clear spring morning in 1820, fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith<sup>13</sup> secluded himself in a grove of trees near his family's log home and knelt in desperation before God, requesting to receive divine wisdom concerning which Christian denomination was the true church.<sup>14</sup> While he was battling the dark power of Satan,<sup>15</sup> two distinct personages with tangible bodies appeared in indescribable glorious light.<sup>16</sup> They were identified as Father God and Jesus Christ. This was the first of numerous divine visitations claimed by Joseph Smith throughout his lifetime, including Moroni, John the Baptist, the apostles Peter, James, and John, Jesus, Moses, Elijah, and many angels.<sup>17</sup>

It was during this momentous encounter that Jesus Christ reportedly exhorted the young boy not to join any Christian church because they were all corrupt and all their doctrinal creeds were simply teachings of men and an abomination to God.

### ***The Cornerstone of the LDS Faith***

For Mormons, Joseph Smith's First Vision marks the beginning of the restoration of the true authority-endowed church

of Jesus Christ back to the earth. Although there are numerous separate written accounts concerning the actual details of Smith's heavenly vision,<sup>18</sup> the LDS Church has officially canonized only the 1838 version that Joseph Smith wrote eighteen years after his apparent experience. This official version is published today in the *Pearl of Great Price*, one of the four Standard Works of Mormonism.<sup>19</sup> The First Vision story is the cornerstone on which the LDS Church is built. An official LDS Web site says:

Joseph Smith's First Vision stands today as the greatest event in world history since the birth, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. After centuries of darkness, the Lord opened the heavens to reveal His word and restore His Church through His chosen prophet.<sup>20</sup>

Mormon President and Prophet Gordon B. Hinckley is even more precise in this General Conference statement:

Our entire case, as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, rests on the validity of this glorious First Vision. Nothing on which we base our doctrine, nothing we teach, nothing we live by, is of greater importance than this initial declaration.<sup>21</sup>

It is Joseph Smith's First Vision story that Mormon missionaries are trained with scripted precision to tell potential converts.<sup>22</sup>

### **Joseph Smith's Teen Years (1820–1823)**

The three years or so following Joseph Smith's First Vision were uneventful. From the age of fourteen to seventeen, Smith experienced no further visitations, revelations, or visions, yet

he did fall into significant temptation and error. Here is his personal confession:

I was left to all kinds of temptations; and, mingling with all kinds of society, I frequently fell into many foolish errors, and displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature; which, I am sorry to say, led me into diverse temptations, offensive in the sight of God.<sup>23</sup>

For Mormons, Joseph Smith's wayward teen years are chalked up as a time for the young man "to grow, mature, gain experience, and receive further nurturing."<sup>24</sup>

One of the more startling bits of historical information, however, is that for years following Joseph Smith's First Vision, he and his father were actively engaged in the practice of magic and divination in their desire to discover hidden treasure. They used seer stones and divining rods as instruments. Joseph Smith Jr. found two stones in 1822 and used them to see "invisible things." He gained a reputation as someone who could use these seer stones to find lost property, buried money, and other hidden things.<sup>25</sup> As we will see later, Joseph Smith even used seer stones to translate the *Book of Mormon*.<sup>26</sup> LDS historian Richard Lyman Bushman writes:

Joseph Jr. never repudiated the stones or denied their power to find treasure. Remnants of the magical culture stayed with him to the end. But after 1823, he began to orient himself away from treasure and toward translation.<sup>27</sup>

In 1888, the fifth Mormon President and Prophet, Wilford Woodruff, actually consecrated one of Smith's seer stones on a temple altar in Manti, Utah.<sup>28</sup>

Another major chapter in the early origins of Mormonism opens with Joseph Smith's visits by an exalted angel named Moroni (pronounced mor-ohn-i).

## Joseph Smith's Moroni Visitations (1823–1827)

On September 21, 1823, approximately three years after his First Vision, seventeen-year-old Joseph Smith reported that he experienced three visits in one night from the angel Moroni.<sup>29</sup> Moroni's visitation provided him with information about the existence and location of the *Book of Mormon*.

According to Joseph Smith, while he was praying late at night, a very bright light appeared in his room and a heavenly personage wearing a loose white robe stood before him in midair. The exalted being announced that he was Moroni, a special messenger sent from God. Moroni declared to the young Smith that God had an unprecedented salvation ministry for him to perform worldwide.

Immediately, Moroni unveiled the millennial-long secret of a sacred book—today called the *Book of Mormon*—hidden inside a stone box that was buried on Hill Cumorah only a few miles away.<sup>30</sup> This book was written on thin gold plates six inches wide and bound with three large rings.<sup>31</sup>

Moroni also told Smith that inside the stone box with the gold book was the Urim and Thummim, obscure objects mentioned in the Old Testament.<sup>32</sup> The Urim and Thummim, composed of two special seer stones attached on silver bows that fastened to a breastplate, were to be used to translate the contents of the gold book from its original language of "Reformed Egyptian"<sup>33</sup> to King James English.

Joseph Smith describes the Urim and Thummim this way:

With the records was found a curious instrument, which the ancients called "Urim and Thummim," which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened to a breast plate. Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God.<sup>34</sup>

It is revealing that no such language as Reformed Egyptian is known or confirmed by any Egyptologist.

### ***Joseph Smith Sees the Book of Mormon***

The next day—September 22, 1823—the angel Moroni once again appeared to Joseph Smith. Moroni told Smith to go to Hill Cumorah,<sup>35</sup> where the gold book—the *Book of Mormon*—was buried. When he arrived, he rapidly found the buried stone box and pried it open, seeing the gold book and the seer stones. When Smith attempted to remove them from the stone box, however, he experienced a severe physical shock. Moroni quickly rebuked him and told him that he required another four years of spiritual preparation before he would be ready to take possession of them at the age of twenty-one.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Who Was Moroni?***

It is within the story of the *Book of Mormon* that Moroni's personal identification is discovered. The *Book of Mormon* tells the narration of two peoples—the Nephites and the Lamanites—who lived on the American continent between approximately 600 B.C. and AD 400. The earliest family members of the Nephites and the Lamanites had emigrated from Israel to America.

Moroni was the eldest son of Mormon, a Nephite prophet and military commander-in-chief, after whom the *Book of Mormon* is named. Moroni served under Mormon in the final great battle between the initially good Nephites and the bad Lamanites in AD 421.

Prior to this final war, Mormon gave the gold book to Moroni and commanded him to preserve it for future generations. During this war, the Lamanites killed Mormon and all the other Nephites, while Moroni escaped and went into hiding. Before Moroni died, he added final contents to the *Book of Mormon*

and buried it on Hill Cumorah, where it remained untouched for fourteen hundred years.

Moroni met Joseph Smith on Hill Cumorah each year on September 22 from 1823 to 1827. During these four years, Joseph Smith received intense tutoring and preparation from Moroni in order that he would be found worthy to receive the gold book. Joseph Smith wrote about his experience:

Accordingly, as I had been commanded, I went at the end of each year, and at each time I found the same messenger there, and received instruction and intelligence from him at each of our interviews, respecting what the Lord was going to do, and how and in what manner His kingdom was to be conducted in the last days.<sup>37</sup>

Today, an LDS monument stands on Hill Cumorah in New York. A ten-foot bronze figure of Moroni is stationed on top of a twenty-five-foot shaft of white granite. The figure is pointing toward heaven with his right hand and holding a replica of the gold *Book of Mormon* tablets in his left hand.<sup>38</sup> The image of the angel Moroni blowing a trumpet also stands atop many LDS temples, which Mormons see as a fulfillment of Revelation 14:6:

Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.

### ***More Treasure-Hunting in Pennsylvania***

Even during Joseph Smith's intense tutoring times with Moroni, he and his father gained a strong local reputation for using divination to hunt for treasure. In October 1825, approximately two years into his Moroni preparation years, Joseph Jr. was hired by Josiah Stowell to help him search for hidden treasure in an old Spanish silver mine located near Harmony Township,

Pennsylvania. While in Pennsylvania, these treasure hunters boarded with the Isaac Hale family. After approximately one month of searching for treasure, they had no success and abandoned the exploration.

Although LDS authorities have often denied Joseph Smith's treasure-hunting, he was found guilty of disorderly conduct and treasure-hunting through the use of divination on March 20, 1826, in Bainbridge, New York.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Joseph Smith Marries Emma Hale***

While Joseph Smith was boarding at Isaac Hale's Pennsylvania home, he fell in love with Isaac's daughter Emma. When Isaac Hale strongly disapproved of his daughter's marrying Smith, he and Emma ran off and eloped. They were married on January 18, 1827.

Immediately after their marriage, Joseph and Emma moved to the Smiths' family home in Manchester, New York, where they farmed with Joseph Sr. throughout the summer of 1827.

Late one night in the fall of 1827, Moroni again appeared to Joseph Smith, declaring that he was now ready before God to receive the gold book. On the early morning of September 22, Moroni led the twenty-one-year-old Smith to Hill Cumorah and gave him the gold tablets and Urim and Thummim.<sup>40</sup> After hiding the gold tablets in a hollowed-out birch log, Joseph Smith would find that from then on, his life would be preoccupied with protecting and translating them.

### **Joseph Smith in Pennsylvania (1827–1830)**

Rather abruptly, Joseph Smith decided to permanently move to Pennsylvania, where he would end up living for over two and a half years, from December 1827 to August 1830. Joseph Smith was apparently motivated to rush to Pennsylvania because he

thought many people were trying to steal the gold book from him, and so he decided to take Emma and move back to her father's home in Pennsylvania. Hiding the gold book in a barrel of beans in the back of his wagon, Joseph and Emma Smith rode out of town toward Harmony on a wintry day in December 1827.

### ***The Translation of the Book of Mormon***

Joseph and Emma Smith stayed temporarily with the Hale family before purchasing a small two-story home, where Smith began his translation of the *Book of Mormon* sometime between December 1827 and February 1828.<sup>41</sup> Although the Bible records no such spiritual gift as translation,<sup>42</sup> Joseph Smith claimed to possess the spirit of revelation and translation.

Although the detailed process of how Joseph Smith translated the *Book of Mormon* is not fully known, it seems clear that he would stare at the seer stone or the Urim and Thummim through which he would see words, similar to seeing lost objects or treasure, and dictate them to a secretary, who would write them down.<sup>43</sup> Smith would apparently stare for hours through egg-shaped seer stones located at the bottom of a hat, and dictate—by the gift and power of God—English characters he saw to his scribes, Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery.<sup>44</sup> This is how Daniel Peterson, a professor at Brigham Young University, describes Joseph Smith's so-called translation process of the *Book of Mormon*:

We know that Joseph didn't translate the way that a scholar would translate. He didn't know Egyptian. There were a couple of means that were prepared for this. One was he used an instrument that was found with the plates that was called the Urim and Thummim. This is a kind of a divinatory device that goes back into Old Testament times. Actually most of the translation was done using something called a seer stone. He would put the stone in the bottom of a hat, presumably to exclude

surrounding light. And then he would put his face into the hat. It's a kind of a strange image for us.<sup>45</sup>

It is also said that Joseph Smith seemed to be in the grip of creative forces that caused him to dictate in rapid fashion, with pages pouring out of his mind like *Messiah* from the pen of George Frideric Handel. With this understanding, the *Book of Mormon* is really more a revelation than a translation.<sup>46</sup> LDS historian Richard Lyman Bushman succinctly summarizes Smith's translation powers and process this way:

Neither his education nor his Christian upbringing prepared Joseph to translate a book, but the magic culture may have. Treasure-seeking taught Joseph to look for the unseen in a stone. His first reaction when he brought home the Urim and Thummim was delight with its divining powers. "I can see any thing," he told his friend Joseph Knight. He knew from working with his own seer stone what to expect from the Urim and Thummim: he would "see." Practice with his scrying stones carried over to translation of the gold plates. In fact, as work on the *Book of Mormon* proceeded, a seer stone took the place of the Urim and Thummim as an aid in the work, blending magic with inspired translation.<sup>47</sup>

The *Book of Mormon* translation was finished between April and June of 1829, approximately sixteen to seventeen months after Smith had started. Immediately following the completion of the translation, Smith showed it to eleven people. But we know that six of these witnesses—including key early Mormon leaders Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer—would eventually leave the LDS Church.<sup>48</sup> Joseph Smith reported that he returned the original gold plates to Moroni, who apparently took them into heaven. On June 11, 1829, Joseph Smith was granted a copyright and began to plan the publication of the *Book of Mormon*.<sup>49</sup>

As Smith was translating the *Book of Mormon*, he was also engaged in far-out interpretations of the Bible. In April 1829, while in Pennsylvania, he claimed to receive a revelation that the apostle John was still living,<sup>50</sup> based on John 21:20–23:

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to him and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?"

#### ***More Supernatural Visitations and the Mormon Priesthoods***

The Joseph Smith story continues with more supernatural visitations from John the Baptist and the apostles Peter, James, and John.<sup>51</sup> The Mormon Church claims that through these heavenly visits it alone possesses the God-given authority of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods to act as the only lawful agent in building the kingdom of God on earth.<sup>52</sup>

On May 15, 1829, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery went into the woods to pray along Pennsylvania's Susquehanna River. While they were engaged in prayer together, John the Baptist—acting under the authority of the apostles Peter, James, and John—descended from heaven, laid his hands on them, and authoritatively imparted the priesthood of Aaron.<sup>53</sup> John the Baptist then directed Smith and Cowdery to baptize each other in the river. They emerged out of the water full of the Holy Ghost, prophesying, and experiencing a new enlightenment to the true meaning of the Bible.

As the story was told—although the exact time is unclear—shortly after the visitation by John the Baptist, Smith

and Cowdery were also visited by the apostles Peter, James, and John, who ordained them into the advanced Melchizedek Priesthood and gave them the keys of apostleship.<sup>54</sup>

Although Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had received the authority of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods, they had not as yet received from Elijah the keys of sealing, binding, and loosing, relating to the ability to perform ordinances for the living and the dead.<sup>55</sup> This anointing was restored by Elijah when he apparently appeared to them during the dedication of the Kirtland, Ohio, temple in 1836.

### **The Publication of the Book of Mormon**

Joseph Smith chose twenty-three-year-old printer Egert Grandin of Palmyra, New York, to publish the first edition of the *Book of Mormon* manuscript. Oliver Cowdery and Hyrum Smith supervised the printing, while Joseph Smith continued to live in Pennsylvania. The pages of the *Book of Mormon* were gradually taken to Grandin over several months. Since the translation manuscript was delivered with rough formatting, Grandin's typesetter, John Gilbert, added the punctuation and paragraphing.<sup>56</sup> On August 17, 1829, five thousand copies of the *Book of Mormon* were printed, costing approximately \$3,000. It went on sale on April 6, 1830, for \$1.25 per copy.

### **The First Mormon Church**

Ten years after his First Vision, and only a few weeks after the publication of the *Book of Mormon*, Joseph Smith—now twenty-four years old—officially organized the first Mormon church on April 6, 1830, based in the little farmhouse of Peter Whitmer Sr. in Fayette, New York.<sup>57</sup> Mormons believe that April 6 is the birthday of Jesus Christ himself and thus connect the incarnation of Jesus Christ with the birth of the first Mormon church.<sup>58</sup>

Approximately forty to fifty people gathered for the official ceremony, and Smith appointed official organizers to meet New York's legal requirements for incorporating a religious society. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery ordained each other to be the church's first elders. The new kingdom of God on earth was named the *Church of Christ*.

During the first general conference of the Mormon Church on June 9, 1830,<sup>59</sup> Joseph Smith received a revelation declaring himself the Mormons' primary "seer, translator, prophet, and apostle of Jesus Christ."<sup>60</sup> In this revelation, the Lord instructed the members of the newborn church to receive Joseph's words as if they were spoken by God himself.<sup>61</sup> Joseph Smith made it very clear from the beginning of the LDS Church that he alone held the keys of the mysteries of the kingdom of God on earth, and that only his utterances carried God's authority for the Latter-day Saints.<sup>62</sup> To this day, the ultimate authority of the Mormon Church is only and exclusively embodied in its residing President and Prophet.

Although Joseph Smith continued to live in Pennsylvania, the proactive exertion of his claims of ultimate authority and revelations from God would lead a small group of Mormons westward into lands unknown—and into a future normally found only in fairy tales.