

# The Mormon Appeal, Yesterday and Today

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## Introduction

Mormon theology seems like such a strange thing to evangelicals who look closely at it. Mormon people, on the other hand, appear normal by contrast; in fact, as for appearance, they seem quite attractive, moral, family oriented, and committed to their faith. But it is the *faith beliefs* and *churchly practices*, not the lifestyle, of the Mormons that are so off-putting. Odd doctrines, like the eternity of creation, multiple gods, the preexistence of the soul, the deification of men, and virtual universalism all seem quite bizarre. Odd practices, such as secret temple proceedings, baptisms for the dead, sacred undergarments, and deep secrecy as to the leadership structure at the top of this oligarchical (episcopal?) organization are only a few of the things that have caused orthodox Christianity generally to consider the LDS “church” a cult.<sup>1</sup> Yet, both in the 1830s and today, Mormonism has been a religious tradition with wide attraction. Outsiders, especially religious outsiders, and even more especially evangelicals, are curious to know just what that appeal is. They are curious to understand how Mormon leaders have been able to charm to their cause people whose theological worldview is (apparently) quite different from that of the LDS. In the present time, these questions have taken on a heightened sense of importance. The LDS church<sup>2</sup> seems to be going through some measure of transition, taking on the face of a tradition more in continuity with

mainstream Protestantism. Evangelicals are curious to know what is going on in the smoke-filled rooms (metaphorically speaking, of course) in Salt Lake City and the faculty lounges in Provo. We may never really know, of course, but the question still begs to be answered—Is Mormonism becoming more mainstream Christian? The compass of this paper will not allow any kind of serious or definitive answer to any of these questions, but it will gesture in the direction of some possible answers.

Early Mormonism was a complex phenomenon. Evangelicals who have the impression that a critique of Mormon roots is a *fait accompli*, a thing easily done, need to reflect a little more fully on the historical context out of which the LDS movement arose. On the one hand there is a cult of personality issue. Evangelicals generally consider Joseph Smith, Jr., to be a charlatan, a rascal, and a sexual deviant. While some of his early followers eventually left the movement over one or more issues of morality and leadership style, thousands of people in the 1830s and early 1840s saw him as a great prophet—so much so that they left home, family, friends, and previous faith and hitched their wagon to this man’s star. Smith’s retinue was made mostly of poor class white Americans from the former Northwest Territories and the Midwest, but, increasingly, others were joining the cause. By the time of the prophet’s death in 1844, some 5,000 Englishmen had

joined the throng in the city of Nauvoo, Illinois. Twenty-five years later the Mormons would count 38,000 English citizens and 13,000 Europeans on their rolls. The personal charisma of first Smith and then Brigham Young riveted the spiritual focus of a significant segment of the population of middle America, and even Europe, at this time.

Beyond the charismatic leadership of these men, what other appeal did Mormonism hold for its followers? One standing criticism about Mormonism from today's evangelicals is that its apologetic task is surely an impossible one. I will have more to say about the current state of LDS apologetics later in this essay, but it is important to note that in the mid-1800s many Americans found the Mormon apologetic quite compelling. The questions are different today than they were then, of course, but many common folk found much in the early Mormon message, even its theology, that was appealing.

### **Revising the Reformation**

The period of early Mormon development was the same time period George Marsden has called, "The Arminianizing of America." Many evangelicals, following the lead of evangelists like Charles Finney and pastors like Henry Ward Beecher, moved away from the Calvinism of the Puritan forefathers and of Jonathan Edwards toward an ideology more in keeping with the Jacksonian spirit of the times. Andrew Jackson was in fact President of the United States from 1829-1837, and his shadow lingered long after his departure from Washington. This was the age of the rugged individual who pulled himself up by his own bootstraps from obscurity, with one such individual even becoming the leader of this young nation.

This populist spirit of individualism, hard work, and the endless possibilities open to the common man was the kind of thing that would enable such men to conquer a wide-open land and make it into a single nation. It also led them to reconsider their Reformation theology heritage.

Several specific areas of Christian thought came under critical scrutiny by both intellectuals and ordinary Americans, especially predestination, the atonement, and eternal punishment. The Dutch theologian James Arminius and those he influenced had previously called into question the Reformation perspective on predestination—that election was unconditional and unilateral—within a generation or two of the movement's genesis. In the eighteenth century John Wesley and many of the Methodists followed suit, as did some New England Congregationalists who were contemporaries of Wesley, Charles Chauncy of First Church, Boston, being a prime example. The revivals spawned by the Great Awakening in America were generally Calvinistic in tone. The turn of a new century, however, would witness a shift away from the staunch Calvinism of Edwards and George Whitefield among northern evangelicals, both in New England and in the Midwest, while Baptists and Presbyterians in the South held on to these convictions much longer. This antipathy toward predestination spread widely in the nineteenth century, especially in the burgeoning Methodist movement, in the modifications being made in many Congregationalist circles, and in the rise of Restorationism. One of the great appeals of Methodism to many, for instance, lay in its rejection of the tradition of Edwards with its "scholastic metaphysics of the educated elite."<sup>3</sup> Joseph

Smith appealed to this same presentiment among American people who wanted a simple and “commonsense” approach to the truth, as they perceived it. Since it appeared to the common mind that humans were free to accept the gospel at any time, then this must be the case, and if it must be the case, then the older Reformed doctrines must be rejected as obsolete and false, even anti-American.

One legacy of Reformed theology was a doctrine of the atonement that was based mainly on the model of substitution. Christ died in the place of sinners and bore the punishment due to them for their rebellion. This doctrine, rooted in Augustinian and Anselmic explanations from the early church and medieval theology, was given explicit form by John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In the second generation of the Reformation, debates ensued about the implications of this doctrine. Calvin’s successor at Geneva, Theodore Beza, contended that substitution also entailed the doctrine of particular redemption or limited atonement. Not all of the Reformers agreed with this, and there is even some reason to question whether Calvin himself held to limited atonement. But in the ensuing debates at both the Synod of Dort and the Westminster Assembly, and with the school of Saumur, the doctrine of limited atonement became orthodox Calvinism.

The doctrine of substitutionary atonement is predicated upon a specific anthropological conviction—that humans are fallen creatures, dead in trespasses and sins, in a state of bondage from which they are unable to extricate themselves. Since humanity has fallen so low, the atonement of Jesus must be correspondingly high or great. Arminius generally agreed with this, but posited a view of the human

will, based on faculty psychology, that saw the will of humans as free from the constraints of the depravity that affected the human mind and affections. This mitigated the problem of the human condition to a certain degree such that the atoning work of Christ did not have to be quite so all-encompassing. Arminius himself died quite young without working out all of the details of his theological system, but his colleague Hugo Grotius realized that the Arminian understanding of the human condition required a re-working of atonement theory. Grotius argued that penal substitution is not at the heart of Christ’s cross work. Instead, the death of Jesus demonstrates that God, the benevolent ruler of this world, cannot abide sin, and, in the death of Jesus, God clarifies for all to see that sin leads to death and that sin is a serious matter. The death of Jesus, then, has a kind of penal aspect to it, but no substitutionary focus. Grotius was concerned that “substitution” entailed limited atonement, and as a follower of the Arminian school, he found that to be an unacceptable model. Methodism, again, followed suit.

The third area of concern for nineteenth century Americans was that of eternal punishment. Arminius never abandoned belief in the eternal punishment of the finally impenitent, but other prominent Arminians, such as Simon Episcopius, did. Episcopius moved beyond Arminius by adopting a rationalist approach to theology similar to that of the Socinians, causing him to reject the doctrine of the Trinity and other traditional doctrines on rationalist grounds. Of course it would be Socinianism that would achieve the highest development of all of these innovations—rejection of the doctrines of election and the atonement, and the doctrine

of endless punishment, along with a vast assortment of other traditional Christian tenets—all in the name of reason as the one true source of all genuine intellectual endeavor. The Socinians believed they were completing the Reformation that Luther had begun. Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone brought the notion of *voluntaryism* directly into the saving process. He affirmed, with the Apostle Paul, that justification occurred on the occasion of an individual's declaration of faith in the shed blood of Christ. Justification then was linked with one's voluntary affirmation of Christ's atoning work, and not on a long process of works or of the church's advocacy of the individual before God. The Socinians agreed with the general tone of this, but pushed the envelope dramatically further. For them voluntaryism entailed a philosophical shift to *voluntarism*, i.e., the belief that libertarian freedom of determination lay at the roots of the human condition and a genuine religious orientation. This philosophical orientation led to many of the other theological revolutions the Socinians would call for. That same philosophical spirit would overwhelm many sectors of intellectual life in Europe a century later in the form of the Enlightenment.

### **Restorationist Impulses and the Revolution against the Reformation**

Restorationism burst on the scene in America in the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century with a vengeance. There were many small movements that in one way or another claimed to rediscover primitive Christianity, a primitive Christianity long lost down the halls of church history. Three of these movements gained broad support and have survived and even thrived, along

with several late-comers, into the twenty-first century: Adventism, Campbellism, and Mormonism. These movements were united in their vehement rejection of traditional Christianity—both Catholic and Protestant—and in their belief that all such traditions carried the seed of antichrist or of Constantinianism or of some other reprehensible entity. Most of them were also united in their belief that the doctrines of the Reformation discussed in the previous section of this essay—predestination, substitutionary atonement, and eternal damnation (the exception on damnation being the Campbellites)—needed to be drastically revised or rejected altogether. These movements, along with the later Watchtower Society that grew out of Adventism, were also populist movements. They drew their constituents from the grassroots of society, and only rarely from among the social or intellectual elites.

The fact that they were populist in orientation does not mean that their leaders or even their adherents were intellectual simpletons. These new traditions did not, to any significant degree, incorporate establishment intellectuals among their numbers, whether from theological quarters or otherwise, but that is not to say that they were anti-intellectual. Eighteenth-century America was simply rife with notions that had come from Enlightenment thought. Some of these ideas were at the very foundation of the American identity itself, having been placed in the American Constitution by America's Founding Brothers. The notion that a people ought to be free from political oppression was a common theme among Enlightenment intellectuals such as Tom Paine. It needs to be said, of course, that the American version of these

Enlightenment ideals was quite different from the form that had been adopted in parts of Europe, especially France. There, *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* meant something very different, and led eventually to the Reign of Terror. In America, some Enlightenment ideals had been fused in a certain manner with Protestant views of the nature of man and salvation, along with a belief that both the Bible and reason taught that human society could and should progress toward a more just and a more prosperous future goal. That is, in much American appropriation of the Enlightenment, modern ideology and biblical teachings blended together homogeneously. This new approach could be said to be basically an extrapolation from biblical ideals alone, but it is certainly the case, historically, that some elements of this ideology were gathered from certain strands of Enlightenment thought.

This ideology was not merely the grist for intellectual mills alone, but became fodder for the common man through the proliferation of American newspapers. New scientific and philosophical ideas were spread in this manner to a larger audience, and thus made an impact unanticipated by their originators. Craig Hazen refers to this as the “Village Enlightenment.” Quoting David Jaffee, he describes this as the “‘democratization of knowledge’ that took place through changes in the ‘production, distribution, and consumption’ of printed materials in New England from 1760 to 1820.”<sup>4</sup> These ideas were borrowed, modified, and then incorporated into medical lore, farming technology, and of course, religious thought. Along with the notion of freedom from political oppression came other Enlightenment ideas: “antisupernaturalism, deism, human freedom, anticlerical-

ism, anticreedalism, progress, the priority of natural law, and the preeminence of Newtonian science, to name a few.”<sup>5</sup> Underlying all of this, as we have noted, arose from a spirit of voluntarism that saw the human will as the most determinative force in the affairs of life.

The Restorationist movements drew heavily from this stock, and since by the 1820s these ideas were being voiced about in every middle-America “village,” a steady stream of potential converts were at hand in every feed store, at every square dance, and in every town meeting from western New York to the new state of Missouri. In the case of Mormonism, when Joseph Smith came preaching his basic message, it rang true with many of these people. They were attracted not only to his charismatic personality, but to his emphasis on hard work, on utopian possibilities for the common man, on the idea that people determine their own destinies, and on the idea that while hell is certainly a possibility, decent people need not fear hell since it is reserved only for the most morally despicable persons. People were also fascinated with Smith’s discovery of an ancient book which proved that America, with all its millennial possibilities, had actually been the most chosen of all nations by God. Adam and Eve were placed here (in what is now known as Independence, Missouri), and Jesus made a visit to his chosen flock in America just as he made visitation to the chosen in Israel. The Mississippi River was just as important for biblical eschatology as the Jordan, and actually even more so. Even the notion that God is a physical being like us with origins similar to ours did not constitute a theological problem for these early followers of the new way, but for many of them actually confirmed that

this newer (older?) version of the faith was preferable, since it did bring God down to the level of the common man. That fact, Joseph Smith taught, was not a bad thing.

### **The Strange Brew of Mormon Theology**

The doctrine of the manishness of God is not the only LDS doctrine that outsiders have found problematic. And if we are going to have any way of assessing the continued appeal of Mormonism, we must give attention to some of the official doctrines of the LDS church that make them distinct from traditional Christianity. At the same time, we will not in this article be listing all of the odd and heretical notions that have ever been defended by Mormon leaders through history. Rather, we will only briefly touch on key distinctives that can be found in the canonical Mormon works.<sup>6</sup>

The Book of Abraham is a part of The Pearl of Great Price. It purports to be a testimony of Abraham that includes details of his life and his journey with God not found in the biblical account. It was composed by Joseph Smith from an Egyptian papyrus, Smith claiming that he had correctly “translated” the document. Smith even wrote *Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar* as a tool for making the translation. This account introduces many of the distinctive Mormon doctrines, including the plurality of gods, plural wives (polygamy), the rejection of creation out of nothing, and the preexistence of souls. One will sometimes hear that these doctrines are not found in the canonical Mormon texts, but this is simply not the case. This book was pronounced as one of the “Standard Works,” that is, canonical scriptures, by the Utah church in 1880.

The volume known as Doctrine and Covenants also makes doctrinal claims that are alien to the traditional Christian faith. This book is a compilation of 138 revelation chapters and two special declarations of the church, all of which are considered to be authoritative LDS teaching. Of the 138 revelations, 133 are from Smith, while the other five come from Oliver Cowdery, Brigham Young, John Taylor, and Joseph F. Smith. Among the teachings found in this book are some of Joseph’s unique views about God, the doctrine of plural marriage, the notion of celestial marriage, the teaching that Independence, Missouri, was the original location of the Garden of Eden, and various prophecies from Smith, including one that the coming war in America over slavery would escalate into a world-wide conflagration.

The Mormon doctrine of God is probably the doctrine that has garnered the greatest amount of criticism from traditional Christians. B. H. Roberts in 1901 gave what has been considered by many LDS scholars to be the finest exposition of this doctrine.

First, we believe that God is a being with a body in form like man’s; that he possesses body, parts and passions; that in a word, God is an exalted, perfected man.

Second, we believe in a plurality of Gods.

Third, we believe that somewhere and at some time in the ages to come, through development, through enlargement, through purification until perfection is attained, man at last may become like God—A God.<sup>7</sup>

This statement, though not part of canonical Mormon scripture, is merely a distillation of what Smith had already articulated in the Book of Abraham and

in statements in Doctrine and Covenants. Further, there is nothing in this statement that is different from similar statements found in *Gospel Principles* (basic Sunday School manuals), in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, or in McConkie's enormously influential volume, *Mormon Doctrine*. So, for instance, McConkie can say, "God himself is an exalted man, perfected, enthroned, and supreme. By his almighty power he organized the earth, and all that it contains, from spirit and element, which exist co-eternally with himself."<sup>8</sup> It is of course the case that Mormons do not construct systematic theology as a discipline in the same way as traditional Christianity has done, but insofar as there can be said to be an official position on these issues within the LDS community, that position is as has been articulated in the manner we have indicated here.

### **The Mormon Appeal Today**

If Mormonism's early apologetic attraction was that it resonated with the Village Enlightenment, its appeal today is more pragmatic and imagistic. That is not to say that its ideology has no draw for modern persons—the focus on libertarian freedom, its emphasis on work ethic, and similar matters still resonate as they have for over half a century. But the focus in recent decades, and especially since about 1990, has been on Mormon humanitarian concerns, Mormonism as a family faith, and Mormonism as the distillation of the best of the American dream. The current President, Gordon Hinckley, took the office officially in 1995, and since then has mounted a successful campaign to present Mormon people to the world as just that—average Americans committed to the kinds of values that have made America, and American Christianity, truly great.

Gone from the minds of many in America is the representation of the Mormon as polygamist, authoritarian, agrarian, and dour; it has been replaced with the image of the Mormon as suburban, happy, family-oriented, and successful.

Alongside Hinckley's efforts to eliminate the bad image of Mormon lifestyle a group of LDS intellectuals have been attempting to carve out a new way to articulate the faith, and, in some cases, a new apologetic in the face of traditional Christian theology. Mormon apologetics in the twentieth century is nothing new. Hugh Nibley, for instance, labored long and hard, writing thousands of pages of published material in an attempt to defend the claims of the LDS faith over against the critiques of traditional Christian scholarship and what was perceived to be anti-Mormon rhetoric. Nibley's works are available in published form today as they have been systematically reprinted by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), an organization Nibley helped to found. Nibley, who recently died, was a virtual polymath, and has been lionized by LDS intellectuals as a man who almost single-handedly took on the intellectual assaults on Mormon thought from the Christian churches.<sup>9</sup> Nibley's scholarly output was prodigious, but his methodology, and therefore his conclusions, were often suspect.

The newer generation of intellectuals are building on the work of Nibley, but they do not always pursue the same apologetic tack as he did. Among them are Blake Ostler, Stephen Robinson, and Robert Millet. Ostler has carried on the argument for the Mormon understanding of libertarian freedom and has employed that in his own theodicy. Ostler argues

that a genuine Christian theology must reject the notion of the absolute omniscience of God, for only in this way can human ethical decisions be truly free and meaningful.<sup>10</sup> Morality, in this estimation, is independent of God's dictates, and becomes a truly human, and therefore either praiseworthy or blameworthy, endeavor. For Ostler, the absolutist God of traditional Christianity makes no sense in light of biblical injunctions on morality and obedience. Ostler blames especially the Augustinian tradition for moving Christianity in the wrong direction in this matter, and calls for an approach to the faith that shares much in common with both Process Theology and Open Theism.

Stephen Robinson is best known to evangelicals through his work co-authored with Craig Blomberg, *How Wide the Divide?*<sup>11</sup> In this book the two men sought to find the points of connection and division between Mormonism and traditional Christianity. Robinson attempts to argue that Mormonism makes a better case for understanding the biblical teaching about God and Christ than does traditional Christianity, and while he has many positive things to say about the traditional faith, he demurs especially at the distinctions drawn in the Nicene and Chalcedonian definitions. He rejects for instance, the Nicene understanding of Trinity and the Chalcedonian understanding of two-nature Christology.<sup>12</sup> Essentially he criticizes orthodoxy for following a Platonic ontology, a critique that owes much to Harnack's flawed analysis of the early church councils, but fails to recognize or admit that his own ontology is materialistic, and that this materialism guides his own exegesis.

Robert Millet has attempted more ener-

getically than any other LDS scholar to bring evangelicals and Mormons together in recognizing the common content of their faith. He argues, for instance, that Mormons hold to justification by grace through faith, and that they hold to a trinitarian understanding of God that is extremely close to that of orthodoxy. Mormons have often claimed that they do not deny Trinity, only the orthodox formulation of it. But as anyone who has studied the Nicene Council will recognize, therein lies the rub. Arius thought of himself as trinitarian in some sense, and believed that what he was doing was defending a genuine understanding over against what he perceived to be the modalism of Alexander and Athanasius. This was why the Creed made the kind of fine distinctions that it did—to indicate the boundaries that could not be crossed. In his recent work, *A Different Jesus*, Millet demonstrates that, for all his claim to continuity with evangelicals, he crosses the boundary when he refers to the persons of the Trinity as “Three Beings.”<sup>13</sup> He goes on, as did Robinson, to argue that the Creeds of the early church got it wrong, and that we should contend for a faith not bound by these confessional documents. Certainly evangelicals would contend that the only source for our theology is the Bible alone, but they also contend that there is good reason to be guided by the decisions made in the trinitarian and christological debates unless there is good reason to conclude otherwise. And, so say evangelicals, there is not.

Let me make several observations. First, there is clearly an interest on the part of LDS thinkers and church leaders to explore the commonalities that exist between traditional Christianity and LDS thought, and a new interest in dialogue



that did not exist during the hegemony of people like McConkie, B. H. Roberts, and Brigham Young. There is even a spirit of collegiality in many of these conversations, and an interest in hearing what traditional Christians have to say from their own side. Further, among some Mormon scholars there has been a tendency to move back in the direction of something more like the traditional view of Trinity and even of salvation by faith. There has been a greater interest in opening up the conversation for new understandings of the relationship between God and the world than was the case in earlier Mormon thought. These can be good things, though it is not clear that the results have always been salutary. That said, there is another side to this.

With all the interest in dialogue on the doctrines of God and Christ, there is still a fundamental line drawn between orthodoxy and the LDS treatment. This is not a line that is inconsequential; it lies at the heart of the faith itself. Part of the difficulty lies in the most foundational revelation of the LDS canon—the 1820 vision of Smith in which he supposedly saw the Father and Son side by side as two physical personages, hence, two “beings,” to use Millet’s term. Orthodox Christians do not read Scripture in this fashion.

Second, Robinson’s critique of Chalcedon’s doctrine of the two natures of Christ based on his own philosophical materialism makes the LDS Jesus into just what Millet is attempting to say he is not—a different Jesus. Third, if Ostler wants to build bridges between evangelicals and Mormons he will have to do it some other way than by articulating a process ontology.

Are there some good signs in all of this? Yes. If Mormons can increasingly

come back to Scripture—true Scripture, that is, and not the latter-day revelations—there is hope that one day Mormons, perhaps many of them, will be led to reject the unbiblical accretions of their own theology. Until that day it is imperative that we continue to be faithful to our own heritage. Dialogue is important as we seek to woo intellectuals and others in the LDS faith to a more biblical model. And we must also recognize that the one true hope that anyone has for salvation is that of placing faith in Jesus alone for salvation. Which Jesus? The Jesus who was and is truly God and man, one person in two natures, the incarnation of the Logos given to the world as its one hope for redemption.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>According to the criteria established by any number of traditional Christian historians and sociologists of religion, Mormonism fits the classic profile of what a cult is. There is significant debate today, however, as to whether such terminology is useful. A new book by a professor at Salt Lake Seminary contends that we should consider Mormonism a culture, not a cult. See David Rowe, *I Love Mormons: A New Way to Share Christ with Latter-day Saints* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). While the book is intriguing in many ways, I find its case to be not compelling.

<sup>2</sup>This paper will refer to the LDS organization as a “church,” but that does not mean that the author considers the LDS organization or any of its local assemblies to be a genuine NT *church*. This is only a term of sociological convenience, not theological judgment.

<sup>3</sup>Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale,

1979), 173.

<sup>4</sup>Craig James Hazen, *The Village Enlightenment in America: Popular Religion and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>6</sup>Those include the Bible, the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and The Pearl of Great Price.

<sup>7</sup>B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Van Der Docket Discussion* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1998), 11.

<sup>8</sup>Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958, second edition, 1966), 249.

<sup>9</sup>Nibley's daughter was once asked how it felt to be the daughter of a false god!

<sup>10</sup>Blake Ostler, "The Mormon Concept of God," *Dialogue* 17 (Summer 1984): 65-93.

<sup>11</sup>Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997).

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 82.

<sup>13</sup>Robert Millet, *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 141.