AN EXPLANATION OF MORMONISM

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introduction

Mormonism is a religious movement founded by Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805-44). Since Mormons have so many doctrines lacking in other Christian traditions, some scholars classify it, not as a denomination (like Catholicism, Lutheranism, Methodism, etc.) but as a religion (like Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, etc.)

As of 2012, there were about 14.8 million Mormons: 6.4 million (43%) in the United States and 8.4 million (57%) outside it. 84% of US Mormons are non-Hispanic whites; 30% (4.5 million) regularly attend services.

The following is an overview of the history and doctrines of Mormonism.

1805-1831: New York

Joseph Smith was raised in Palmyra, a village in western New York. His father was a struggling farmer who sometimes dug for pirate treasure.

Both of his parents engaged in folk magic and claimed to have supernatural dreams and visions. Joseph’s mother and some of his 10 siblings attended a Presbyterian church, though Joseph and his father apparently did not. Joseph did, however, experience the wave of religious enthusiasm known as the Second Great Awakening (1795-1835). In fact, the western wedge of New York State hosted so many revivals that Charles Finney, the leading revivalist, called it “the burned-over district.” Several revivals were held near Palmyra from 1817-1825 (his teenage years); his neighbors remembered him at a Methodist one.

*writing the Book of Mormon*

Although he did not mention it until 18 years later, Smith claimed to have had a vision in 1820 (age 14). From a pillar of light, God and Jesus stepped forth; they told Joseph that all Christian sects were corrupt and that they would soon bring him a new revelation. A second vision occurred in 1823 (age 17). An angel named Moroni revealed that gold plates with writing on them were buried on a hill three miles from his farm (Smith later named the hill Cumorah). With the plates Joseph would find a breastplate containing two stones (the *urim* and *thummim* of the Old Testament) in a frame like glasses; with the glasses Joseph could understand the plates. After the vision, Joseph found the plates but could not remove them.

In the meantime, Joseph found three small colored rocks with magical powers; like the promised *urim* and *thummim*, they were seer stones. In 1825 (age 20), he moved 130 miles south, where he was paid to use the stones to find buried coins across the border in Pennsylvania. It was there he met his wife, Emma. They returned north, and in 1827 (age 21) he finally was able to remove the gold plates. They were written in ancient Hebrew, but with a hieroglyphic script. Smith would cover his face with his hat, the stones near his eyes, and would dictate a translation of the plates (sometimes the plates were not even in the room). Emma transcribed Smith’s dictation; then a neighbor, Martin Harris, took over. Harris took a copy of some of the hieroglyphs, with their translation, to an orientalist at Rutgers College and to another one at Columbia College. Harris claimed that the scholar at Columbia verified both the characters and the translation; the scholar later claimed, however, that he had told Harris it was a hoax.

In 1828, Harris asked Smith if he might show 161 pages of translation to Harris’s doubting wife. But he also showed the pages to neighbors, and the manuscript disappeared. Smith forgave him and, for safety, began transcribing at the home of a friend, John Whitmer. Soon the task of transcribing fell to Oliver Cowdery (1806-50), a schoolteacher and psychic. When Smith received a revelation that he should have the plates witnessed, he gathered Harris, Cowdery, and David Whitmer (John’s son); he did not show them the plates, but Moroni revealed the plates to each of them in turn. Smith included a statement by the “Three Witnesses” in the Book of Mormon. Later, the “Eight Witnesses” (three of Smith’s brothers, four of his sons, and a son-in-law of David Whitmer) had the plates revealed to them. The witnesses guessed that the stack of gold leaves weighed perhaps 50 pounds.

*priesthoods*

In 1829, John the Baptist appeared to Smith and Cowdery. He announced that Smith was first elder in the church and Cowdery second. They baptized one another in the Susquehanna River; Smith later realized that this act also made them members of a priesthood of Aaron. John the Baptist also promised the revelation soon of a higher priesthood, the priesthood of Melchizedek (Gen 14; Heb 6-7). Smith revealed the Melchizedek priesthood to others in 1831.

The priesthood of Aaron is the lower of the two priesthoods. Nowadays, teenage boys enter the three Aaronic orders: deacons (ages 12-13), teachers (14-15), and priests (16-17). Deacons and teachers may assist at worship services; priests may conduct them. The priesthood of Melchizedek, the higher priesthood, is for men 18 and up. It has five offices (lowest to highest): elders, high priests (pastors in local churches, called wards), patriarchs (over 55), seventies, and apostles. Only Melchizedek priests may fill positions of responsibility over the whole church, positions collectively called the “general authorities.” The general authorities are (highest to lowest): first presidency (a triumvirate of church president/prophet, first counselor, and second counselor); quorum of the twelve apostles; presiding bishopric (presiding bishop, with his first and second counselors; they oversee church businesses and properties); quorums of the seventy (the seventies administer policies of the higher ups to the lower downs); and area presidencies (presidents, with their first and second counselors; areas are geographical, e.g., Europe, Mexico). Aaronic priests can baptize; bot only Melchizedek priests can, by laying on of hands, confer the Holy Spirit after baptism.

*history in the Book of Mormon*

The Book of Mormon was published in March 1830. (Smith claimed that, when he completed translating the plates, Moroni took them back.) The Book of Mormon claimed to include translations from multiple sets of plates (all were among the plates uncovered by Joseph on the hill).

(1) The plates of Ether were the oldest set. (The cache of plates that Smith uncovered did not include the plates of Ether themselves, but rather a set of plates on which the angel Moroni had summarized the Book of Ether.) The plates spoke of Jared, a non-Jew who was at the Tower of Babel. Jared migrated to America, and his tribe became America’s first inhabitants, the (non-Jewish) Jaredites. The Jaredites killed each other off in wars. Their last prophet was Ether, who wrote their story before dying. The Book of Ether establishes that God and Jesus are separate physical beings and that the heavenly Jerusalem will descend, not in Israel, but in America. (Although the history of the Jaredites is the earliest part of the story in the Book of Mormon, Smith’s translation of Moroni’s summary of the plates of Ether is an appendix.)

(2) To supply the first 400 years of Jewish history in America, Smith did not use the plates of Mormon (which he had translated and which Martin Harris lost), but another set of plates written between the plates of Ether and the plates of Mormon: the small plates of Nephi.

(3) The plates of Mormon supplied most of the present-day Book of Mormon. (The author of the plates, Mormon, based his work on yet another set, the large plates of Nephi, which were not included among the cache.) The plates of Mormon tell the story of a Jewish family that sailed from Israel to America about 600 bc. (The family is not one of the “lost ten tribes of Israel”: those had been scattered in 721 bc.) The father of the migrating family was Lehi, a descendent of Manasseh; with him said two sons, Nephi and Laman. Generally, Nephi’s descendants were righteous, whereas Laman’s descendants persecuted the Nephites. God cursed the Lamanites with a darker skin, and they became the ancestors of American Indians. (God also cursed Ham with darker skin, Gen 9:22, 24-25; African Americans descended from him.) After his resurrection, Jesus visited the Nephites for three days. As in Israel, he appointed 12 apostles, instituted the Lord’s Supper, taught the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, and ascended. Centuries later, in ad 384, the Lamanites destroyed the Nephites; among the survivors was the prophet Mormon, who wrote all of this history on the plates of Mormon. Around ad 420, Moroni (Mormon’s son and, by then, the only surviving Nephite) wrote an appendix to his father’s book, summarized the Book of Ether, and hid all of the plates in the hill in New York. After his death, Moroni became an angel; and, centuries later, he appeared to Joseph Smith to reveal the location of the plates.

Today, Mormons defend the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Critics point out anachronisms. (1) Lehi’s descendants could not know Jewish history prior to c. 600 bc except through the scriptures that Lehi brought with him; yet much of Jewish history prior to c. 600 bc was not written down until after c. 600 bc (e.g., 1 Samuel-2 Kings were written in the 500s). (2) The Book of Mormon knows passages in Second Isaiah (Isa 40-55), but those date from the 500s. (3) The Nephites in America had Old-World livestock and crops; no evidence of these has been found. (4) People were in America thousands of years before the Mormon date for the Tower of Babel. (5) Archaeology and genetics do not link native Americans with ancient Jews.

*theology in the Book of Mormon*

Despite the unusual history in the Book of Mormon, the text mostly supported the teachings of Christian groups that Smith may have encountered in his youth.

(1) Like Methodism and Seventh-day Adventism, the Book rejects Calvinist doctrines. It teaches that humans are not totally depraved, that the will is involved in salvation (Arminianism), that Christ died for all, and that salvation can be lost. It also emphasized God’s benevolence: for most, afterlife punishments will be temporary; few sinners (only the worst) will end up in hell; and heaven has three levels of bliss, each with further subdivisions.

(2) Like Seventh-day Adventism, Mormon eschatology is premillenial. Since Jews must be re-gathered in Israel before Christ’s advent, Mormons took care to convert American Jews (Indians). After terrible persecutions, Christ will return and establish his 1,000-year kingdom on earth. His return will be soon.

(3) As in the restorationist sects (Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ), true Christianity must be New-Testament Christianity. All earlier forms of Christianity have lost their way (the great apostasy).

(4) Like the Anabaptists (Mennonites and Amish) and the Baptists, only adults (age 8 or older) can be baptized, and baptism is by immersion.

(5) Like the Shakers, early Mormons experienced the gifts of the Spirit (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12, 14; Eph 4). Prophecy, of course, is crucial in Mormonism (visions, angelic revelations). Speaking in tongues was initially common, but throughout the 1800s it declined and has all but disappeared.

(6) Like Adventists, there was a tendency to mingle Old-Testament and New-Testament teachings and institutions. Hence Mormon “temples”; “stakes” (of a tent, Isa 54:2) for groups of congregations; Mormons as adopted Jews (successors of the Nephites); non-Mormons are “gentiles.”

At a later date (1842), Smith summarized most of these early Mormon doctrines in the “Articles of Faith.” That document is now accepted as scripture by Mormons.

A month after publishing the Book of Mormon, obeying a revelation, on April 6, 1830, Smith formally founded the church. 50 Mormons were present; Smith and Cowdery ordained each other elder. Soon they were rebaptizing all the members and ordaining leaders. As a restorationist (one who believed that all other churches had apostatized), Smith named the new church simply “Church of Christ.”

In September 1830, Parley Pratt was rebaptized a Mormon in Palmyra. Pratt was from Kirtland, Ohio, 260 miles east; he had been a Disciples of Christ minister. Smith asked him to join a group about to do mission work among the Indians in western Missouri. Stopping in Cleveland on the way, Pratt converted fellow Disciples minister Sidney Rigdon, and 130 of Rigdon’s flock.

1831-1838: Kirtland, Ohio

In January 1831, most Mormons in New York decided to move to Kirtland—partly to escape persecu­tion, partly to comply with Joseph’s revelations. The next month a revelation prompted Smith to implement “the law of consecration”: all were to donate their private property, to be used as the saints needed. (Combining Acts 11:29 and 4:35 yields, “from each according to ability,” “to each according to need.” See also Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 1 Tim 6:10). The system failed, and two years later Smith substituted tithing; but the law of consecration remains an ideal.

As the Mormons moved to Kirtland during 1831, Cowdery, among the missionaries in Missouri, reported back that he had found where the New Jerusalem would descend. Smith joined Cowdery in July and declared Independence, Missouri, to be the exact spot. The Mormons at Kirtland decided to move there. Throughout the 1830s, Mormons increasingly moved to Missouri. But, except for visits in 1832 and 1834, Smith continued to live in Kirtland.

Soon, however, the Missouri Mormons were driven into the counties north of Independence. Smith organized 200 young men, known as Zion’s Camp, to save the settlement; but they arrived too late.

In 1832 Smith began sending out missionaries in pairs. He also sent some of the quorum apostles to Britain and Europe. They had surprising success; by the end of the decade, Mormons were sailing to America.

In 1833 Smith received a revelation concerning diet. Mormons were to avoid tobacco, alcohol, tea, and coffee. (Mormons therefore substituted wa­ter for wine in communion.) They were to eat meat moderately and enjoy grains, fruits, and vegetables.

That same year Smith revealed that the Mormons were to build a temple. (Up till then, Mormons had worshiped outdoors or in homes or barns.) The Kirtland Temple was dedicated in 1836.

When a bank that Smith initiated in 1837 collapsed after one month, many left Mormonism, including half of the leaders. The defectors took control of Kirtland and the Temple. With an arrest warrant out for bank fraud, Smith, with Rigdon, fled to Far West, a town the Mormons had founded in Missouri north of Independence. They arrived in the Spring of 1838.

1831-1839: Missouri

Smith immediately tried to assert control of Far West, but his authoritarian style alienated the leaders already in place. When over half the Mormons in Far West objected to him, he began excommunications (even Cowdery was excommunicated). Smith and Rigdon even approved secret vigilante groups (called Danite bands); these drove out the malcontents.

Some of the raiders burned gentile (non-Mormon) homes. When Mormon troops accidentally shot at the state militia, the governor decreed: “[the Mormons] must be exterminated or driven from the State . . .” This initiated the 1838 Mormon War. In the Haun’s Mill Massacre, a mob slaughtered 17 Mormons (including children). But the war was short-lived: when the army surrounded Far West, Smith capitulated. One general ordered another to execute Mormon leaders on the spot, but the other general insisted on due process. While the leaders sat in jail during the Winter of 1838-39, the Mormons trekked 170 miles east, across the border into the small town of Quincy, Illinois. In April, 1839, the leaders escaped jail (perhaps they were allowed to) and joined their fellow Mormons.

1839-1846: Nauvoo, Illinois

Smith and Rigdon purchased land 45 miles north along the Mississippi River, at a town called Commerce, Illinois. Smith renamed the town “Nauvoo,” meaning beautiful place. 8,000 Mormons moved there in 1839. (By 1841, it was the largest town in Illinois, bigger than Chicago; and Smith controlled its government, courts, and militia.)

In 1840, Smith revealed that God wanted a temple at Nauvoo. It was dedicated in 1846 and was 60% larger than the Kirtland Temple.

From 1842 to 1844, Smith announced radical changes to Mormon doctrine. Up to now, Mormonism had not been that different from other forms of Christianity (except for the unusual history: Jaredites, Nephites, etc.). Now, however, it became quite different.

*gods*

Smith believed that everything is made of matter. He denied that God created the universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*): he created it out of pre-existing matter. But there are two types of matter, fine and coarse; human intelligence and angels are not immaterial but made of fine matter (angels have spirit bodies).

In addition to his usual reference to “God” in the singular, Smith also referred to other gods. All gods are flesh and blood and are male or female (indeed, they procreate). Once created, gods are immortal (their bodies are incorruptible) and very powerful.

Smith mentioned 5 gods by name. Elohim is the greatest god; Jehovah is his near equal. Michael is a third very powerful god. Elohim has two sons, Jesus and Lucifer. Each of these 5 gods has at least one wife. They formed the earth and govern it, just as other gods govern other worlds. In fact, the named gods were originally humans on other worlds; having become gods there, they were given Earth as their dominion.

*plan of salvation*

Prior to birth, humans have existence as angels: they have bodies of fine matter but lack human bodies. Michael voluntarily took on human flesh and became Adam. In Mormonism, Adam is not the weak progenitor who caused the fall; he is a hero, since the fall started human procreation. Procreation allows angelic humans to become embodied, the first step toward existence for eternity in the celestial kingdom. But humans are still hampered by corruptible bodies; so Jesus, Elohim’s dutiful son, assumed a human body to redeem humans. (Like Michael, afterward ascending he resumed his incorruptible body.) By obedience, we humans can gain incorruptible bodies—we can become gods ourselves.

After Christ’s second coming, and his thousand-year reign on earth, most humans (except for the few in hell) will go to one of three “kingdoms of glory”: the telestial, the terrestrial, or the celestial. (The three kingdoms are based on 1 Cor 15:41a, “There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars,” and on 2 Cor 12:2, “I know a person [who] was caught up to the third heaven.”) The telestial kingdom is for sinners who reject the gospel; the telestial kingdom is nevertheless pleasant. The terrestrial kingdom is for those who accept the gospel, but not fully. The celestial kingdom is for those who are obedient to the required covenants and ordinances. The only inhabitants at the highest of the celestial kingdom’s three levels are those who have been sealed to their spouse in celestial marriage. Those in the celestial kingdom may become gods, forming and ruling worlds of their own.

*ordinances*

In Mormonism, an ordinance is a ritual. Smith announced two new ordinances in January, 1841: baptisms for the dead, and washings and anointings (soon called “endowment”). In 1843, he announced a third: celestial marriage. (This ordinance, he said, was also revealed to him in 1841; but, knowing it would be controversial, he delayed its announcement.) Once the Temple was built, these rituals were only to be performed there. Today, there are 5 “saving ordinances.” Two are necessary to enter the celestial kingdom: baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Three are necessary to enter the highest level of the celestial kingdom: priesthood ordination, endowment, and celestial marriage.

Mormons receive baptisms for themselves in their local wards (churches), usually at age 8. Baptisms for the dead are based on 1 Cor 15:29, where Paul uses proxy baptisms as an argument for the resurrection: if there is no resurrection, “what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?” For Mormons, proxy baptisms create a sense of solidarity with ancestors (rather like Jews under the covenant); and they ensure an extended family in the hereafter. Over 200 million dead people have now been baptized by proxy. Of course, to identify progenitors, detailed genealogical records must be kept; and the Utah Temple’s records are the best in the world.

The washing and anointing ritual results in certain blessings and promises. These blessings and promises are known as “endowments”; in fact, nowadays “endowment” is the name used for the ritual itself. The roots of the ritual seem to be both Jewish purity rites and cleansing baths, as well as Masonic initiation ceremonies (Smith’s brother Hyrum was a Mason since the 1820s; Smith became one in 1842.) Mormons usually gain an endowment for themselves as young adults, since the ceremony is required for those entering the Melchizedek priesthood or missionary work. At the regional temple, males and females are separated. They bathe and are anointed with oil; they receive new names; they put on an undergarment with four Masonic-type symbols (probably derived from Masonic aprons); Mormons are to wear the undergarment for the rest of their lives. (They must keep secret three endowment items: the signs, the tokens, and the sacred name.) In groups, they are taken through a series of rooms in the temple, symbolizing the early stages of the cosmic drama: creation, Lucifer, Adam and Eve, and the fallen world. As they move through rooms symbolizing the lower kingdoms (telestial and terrestrial), at four stations they learn instructions that, combined with obedience, will ensure admission to the celestial kingdom. (Saving knowledge is a direct borrowing from Masonry, which in turn borrowed it from Gnosticism.) At each station there are passwords to memorize, passages to recite, special hand grips, and the donning of clothing. At the entrance to the room symbolizing the celestial kingdom, candidates repeat the passwords before a veil that also has the same four Masonic-type symbols; an actor behind the veil, who plays Elohim, reaches through for a special handshake and an embrace; then the candidate enters the celestial kingdom. (Like baptism, an endowment can be by proxy, where a living candidate undergoes the ritual for the benefit of a dead person; some Mormons repeat the ritual hundreds of times.)

The third new temple ordinance announced by Smith was celestial marriage. If Mormons marry outside the temple, their marriages are ordinary and end at death. After death, the former spouses are single and serve the gods as angels; they can never become gods. But if Mormons marry inside the temple, their marriages are celestial and will survive death. After death, the eternally-united spouses attain the highest degree of celestial glory: they become gods. Temple marriages are sometimes followed by another rite, the (eternal) sealing of children to parents. (This is only necessary for children born before the parents have undergone temple marriage.) Celestial marriage is one of the most important doctrines to Mormons.

Like baptisms, endowments and temple marriages may be done by proxy, for those who have died. Some Mormons undergo the three ordinances hundreds of times. The three ordinances make celestial glory available, but they do not guarantee it: sinful Mormons may lose it.

*polygamy*

In the Book of Mormon (Jacob 2:27), God condemns plural marriage: “For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none.” But celestial marriage entails plural marriage. Suppose a man has a temple marriage, his wife dies, and he has a second temple marriage. (Women can only be sealed to one hus­band.) In the next life, he will have two wives for eternity. Obviously, God approves of plural marriage. God’s approval seems obvious in the Old Testament too: the patriarchs had multiple wives (4 women gave birth to Jacob’s 12 sons, Gen 35:22-26), and so did the early kings (Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, 1 Kgs 11:3).

Smith had begun to have relations with other women than Emma at least as early as Kirtland (1831-38). His affair with his teenage servant, Fanny Alger, became known to Oliver Cowdery by January, 1838; in April, Cowdery was excommunicated by a high council. In Nauvoo, from 1841-43, Smith took multiple wives. 8 are named in Mormon records, but historians think there were about 40. Some were even married to others at the time. To add plural wives, Smith claimed, one needed the approval of the prophet (Smith; nowadays, the president); and the first wife must agree. From 1841 on, Smith performed multiple marriages for select elders (perhaps 40); all denied polygamy in public, and Smith and the elders became a secretive oligarchy.

*Smith*’*s martyrdom*

By the Spring of 1844, Nauvoo was a town ready to explode. Smith had urged all Mormons everywhere to cluster at Nauvoo; by this time it held 15,000. As mayor, Smith controlled the city council, the newspapers, and 3,000 troops. Gentiles (non-Mormons) became increasingly concerned to see an area of the United States become a theocracy. A church in control of a state seemed anti-American. And the new rites were secret, elitist, with non-Christian elements and even rumors of bigamy. When, in January 1844, Smith announced he was running for the president of the United States, many felt something must be done.

When even some apostles and a counselor objected to Smith’s dictatorial methods and rejected polygamy, Smith excommunicated them. They founded a newspaper and viciously attacked him. He retaliated by breaking into their building and removing their presses. This gave politicians in the county seat at Carthage, Missouri, an excuse to move in. Smith, with his brother Hyrum and a few others, were arrested for treason and taken to jail in Carthage. On June 27, 1844, a mob attacked the jail and shot both Smith and his brother. Two days later, he was buried at Nauvoo.

The Mormon was response was not what the outsiders hoped: many Mormons saw Smith as a martyr like Jesus. An oath of vengeance was added to the endowment ceremony: “You [promise] to pray to Almighty God to avenge the blood of the prophets upon this nation [the United States], and that you will teach the same to your children . . .” (The church removed the oath in 1927.)

Several men vied to succeed Smith as leader, but the two main claimants were Sidney Rigdon and Brigham Young. Rigdon, the ex-Disciples minister, had been Smith’s first counselor since 1832. Young represented the quorum of the twelve apostles. Rigdon rejected the three temple ordinances; Young accepted them. Rigdon lacked tact and leadership skills; Young won by an almost unanimous vote.

*sects*

So great was the upheaval in the “succession crisis” that almost half of all Mormons left the church, and many formed sects of their own. (Steven Shields claims that there are now over 400 denominations, most claiming to be the one true church.) The Mormons under Young continued with the name, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (Smith had revealed that name in 1838). Major sects included:

1844: Church of Christ (Rigdonite)

1844: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strangite)

1844: True Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

1853: Church of Jesus Christ (Cutlerite)

1862: Church of Jesus Christ (Bickertonites)

1860: Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS)

The two largest groups today are the LDS (the majority that continued under Young) and the RLDS. The LDS contains over 98% of all Mormons (around 15 million). The RLDS has 1.5% (250,000). The RLDS was founded with Joseph’s oldest remaining son, Joseph Smith III, as leader; its headquarters is in Independence, Missouri. By renouncing the Nauvoo innovations (gods and ordinances), it essentially reverted to Mormonism as it was before 1840. Over the years it has become much like many liberal Protestant churches. When in 1984 its president announced a revelation that the church should ordain women to the priesthood, a group split off, the Restoration Branches (from which the Remnant Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints sprang).

1846-1848: migration

During the two months before his death (May-June 1848), Smith had discussed with a “council of fifty” the possibility of moving further west. Leadership of the “Mormon Exodus” (traditionally 1838-1869) fell to Brigham Young. When Illinois revoked the Nauvoo charter in 1845, Young agreed that the Mormons would leave. The leaders chose Salt Lake Valley. In February 1846, Mormons crossed the iced-over Mississippi to Iowa. So many houses were left empty that they sold for pennies on the dollar. Nauvoo was mostly empty by Fall.

Young sent advance parties to prepare base camps for the rest of the faithful. In this way they inched by stages across Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, and Utah, creating the “Mormon Trail.”



Well-organized wagon trains began in April, 1847. European Mormons also heeded the call to Utah.

1847-present: Utah

By July 24, 1847, a base camp had been dedicated at what became Salt Lake City. 2,000 Mormons were there by the end of the year. The massive arrival came in 1848: by then the City had been platted, towns elsewhere formed, and canals dug and crops planted. The timing was fortuitous: young Mormon men were soon sending back gold from the 1848 California Gold Rush. President Millard Fillmore appointed Brigham Young the first governor of Utah. In 1853, the cornerstone for the Utah Temple was laid.

When in 1852 Young made public the doctrine of plural marriage, a national scandal ensued. Army troops were sent to Utah. In Fall 1857 the Mountain Meadows Massacre occurred: Mormons and Paiute Indians attacked a wagon train, killing all but the children too young to report what had happened. With the coming of the Civil War, however, confrontation with gentiles subsided.

*canon*

The Mormon canon of scripture was coming together around this time. It consists of 4 works.

(1) Having begun as an apocalyptic sect (like Seventh-day Adventism) and a restorationist sect (like the Disciples of Christ), Mormonism naturally accepted the Bible as scripture.

(2) When the Book of Mormon was published in 1830, it, too, was immediately added.

(3) At Kirtland, Smith, with Cowdery and Rigdon, published *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835). It began with lectures on doctrine (subsequently dropped). The second half was revelations and covenants that God had sent Smith. (Since Smith’s time, revelations received by subsequent presidents [who are also prophets] have been added. Future revelations will also be added; in that sense, the Mormon canon is an open canon, i.e., can be added to.)

(4) In 1851, the *Pearl of Great Price* was published. It is a collection of items by Smith that were published in Mormon periodicals in his day. It contains 5 items.

* the “Book of Moses” (dictated by Smith in the 1830s-1840s)
* the “Book of Abraham” (1835), translated from Egyptian papyri
* “Joseph Smith-Matthew” (1831), an excerpt from Smith’s retranslation of Matthew
* “Joseph Smith-History” (1838), early events in Joseph Smith’s life (an excerpt from a longer autobiography)
* the “Articles of Faith” (1842), a summary of doctrines (including a denial of original sin).

(The “Book of Abraham” contains some unusual doctrines: Jesus, Lucifer, and their father lived with other gods on a transparent planet near the star Kolob; when Jesus was chosen to help create the Earth, Lucifer felt slighted and led spirits in rebellion; creation is from pre-existent matter; intelligences are eternal; humans pre-exist as spirits. The *Pearl of Great Price* was added to the canon in 1880.)

These four works are referred to collectively as the “standard works.”

*polygamy—again*

After the civil war, plural marriage became an issue again (especially after the transcontinental railroad in 1869 exposed Utah to the world). Probably no more that 20%-30% of Mormon marriages were polygamous, and two-thirds of those involved only two wives—so about 85% of Mormon marriages were monogamous. Still, for the leadership, polygamy was a sign of wealth and God’s favor: at his death in 1877, Brigham Young had 55 wives. Some argue apologetically that polygamy was a safety net for a surplus of women; but in fact the numbers of men and women were always nearly equal.

On February 3, 1890, the US Supreme Court made a fateful ruling: it unanimously decreed that “Banning polygamy . . . does not violate the First Amendment right to free exercise of religion” (*Davis v*. *Beason*). It quoted an earlier lower-court ruling (*Reynolds v*. *United States*, 1878): “However free the exercise of religion may be, it must be subordinate to the criminal laws of the country, passed with reference to actions regarded by general consent as properly the subjects of punitive legislation.” The Supreme Court cited, as an example, human sacrifice. Worse news came in May: the Supreme Court upheld the Edmunds-Tucker Act, an 1887 law permitting the seizure of LDS property and the requiring of an anti-polygamy oath before voting. Eight months later (Sept. 25), the Mormon president, Wilford Woodruff, published the “First Manifesto”: “I now publicly declare that my advice to the Latter-day Saints is to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the law of the land.” (A year later, Woodruff said that, 2 days before the “Manifesto,” he had received a revelation from Jesus, ordering the church to cease plural marriages; that revelation is now in *Doctrines and Covenants*.) In 1896, Utah became a state (but only after adding to its constitution that “polygamous or plural marriages are forever prohibited”).

Nevertheless, plural marriages continued—albeit fewer in number and in secret. In 1902, even then-president Joseph F. Smith (the founder’s nephew) admitted that he cohabited with his plural wives after 1890. Thus, in 1904 president Smith issued a “Second Manifesto,” which added to the ban on polygamy the injunction that polygamists would be excommunicated.

In the new century, “Mormons became experts at building bridges with conservative Christians at points of overlap, and in deemphasizing Mormon distinctiveness. . . . [The church gave up] its effort to achieve a semisovereign, relatively isolated Mormon kingdom” (Conkin 221). Soon it was building temples around the world; there are now 163.

*sects*—*again*

But not all Mormons accepted the repudiation of plural marriage. In 1912, dissenter Lorin C. Woolley wrote the first account of “the 1886 revelation,” according to which Joseph Smith appeared to church president John Taylor (1880-87) and said that the Lord would never revoke celestial marriage, “for it is everlasting.” Thus began a second explosion of sects (such as occurred during the succession crisis after Smith’s death). The sects that arose on this occasion are collective known as “Mormon fundamentalism.” In the late 1920s, about 40 polygamist families gathered in the sister cities of Short Creek, Arizona, and Hildale, Utah. (In 1960, Short Creek became Colorado City.) In 1929 Joseph W. Musser asserted that president John Taylor, immediately after receiving the 1886 revelation, appointed seven men (including himself) to a Council of Friends. The council had apostolic authority over the LDS church, and its purpose was to ensure that Mormonism would never deny plural marriage. Hence, the later “Manifestos” are void. The followers of the Council of Friends split in 1952; the minority became the Apostolic United Brethren (they continued to be governed by the Council), and the majority became the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS: they opted for one-man rule). (The name, however, was not adopted until 1984.) In both groups, young men and women do not date; marriages are arranged.

In 2002, Warren Jeffs became leader of the FLDS. He taught that male FLDS members must have at least three wives to get into heaven; and the more wives, the closer to heaven. Jeffs was arrested in 2007 on two counts of child sexual assault (the wives were 12 and 15). The sect’s lands in Colorado City-Hildale were worth over $100 million. In 2011 he received a life sentence. The *New York Times* estimated that Jeffs had 87 wives. He remains the head of the FLDS today.

Many more Mormon-fundamentalist sects have formed, none with memberships over 10,000. Estimates of the number of Mormon fundamentalists in the US range from 20,000 to 60,000. There are tiny groups also in Canada and Mexico.

*minorities*: *blacks*, *women*, *and gays*

Since 19th-century Mormonism taught that African Americans were under the curse of Ham (Gen 9:22, 24-25), few African Americans became Mormons. Those who did join could not become priests (only whites and Indians could). Under the influence of the civil-rights movement, however, American society increasingly pressured the church to change. In 1978, President Spencer W. Kimball announced that henceforth African Americans will be admitted to the priesthood.

More recently, on 2 Jan. 2019 the LDS church announced changes to temple rituals to better express gender equality. In the endowment ceremony, women no longer promise to hearken to their husbands, as their husbands hearken to the Lord; moreover, Eve is no longer silent after the expulsion from Eden. The marriage ceremony, has changed: men and women now make identical promises—and they do so together, not separately.

Finally, the LDS church’s treatment of gay members has changed. In 2015 it implemented a policy which declared that Mormons in long-term homosexual relationships are apostates. It also said that children of same-sex couples: cannot be blessed as infants or baptized at (usually) age 8; cannot be ordained to the Aaronic priesthood (if teenage boys); and cannot engage in missionary service (usually at age 18) (unless they publicly disavowed their parents’ relationship). In January 2016, Russell M. Nelson defended the 2015 policy as a revelation of God: God had “inspired his prophet . . . to declare the mind of the Lord and the will of the Lord.” However, on April 4, 2019, Nelson (now president) reversed “the ban” (though same-sex Mormon couples still commit a “serious transgression”). This new position is “also a revelation” (Reiss “Mormon”).

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