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For nearly forty years I have studied and researched the truth claims of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS/Mormons). In all those years, I have had numerous opportunities to dialog face to face with Mormons, including stake presidents, local bishops, missionaries, and scholars at Brigham Young University. In most cases, the discussions have been respectful and friendly. I have discovered that most LDS sincerely regard their faith as a form of Christianity sharing many characteristics of other denominations, but with some unique distinctives.

Nonetheless, in those years of research, I have discerned that not just some, but almost all LDS beliefs are totally contrary to historic Christian concepts. In this two-part series we will examine six critical problems of Mormonism, and show why it is essentially different from all historic Christian denominations and movements. In this first installment we will analyze the problems faced by the LDS concerning its history, its ecclesiastical authority, and its cosmology.

1. The Historical Problem

Mormonism claims that Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805-1844) was appointed by God and Jesus Christ as a latter-day prophet. According to Smith's own story, in the Fall of 1820, when he was 14 years old, he was visited in a vision by God (Heavenly Father) and Jesus Christ. Smith maintained that the two divine personages called him to restore true Christianity to the earth. This event is what Mormons call Smith's "First Vision." It is regarded as a crucial element in LDS history and "the foundation of this church." (Smith's first-person

story is canonized in LDS Scripture in The Pearl of Great Price: Joseph Smith-History.)

In the vision, Smith claimed, the heavenly visitors informed him that the genuine church founded by Jesus Christ had been corrupted in the centuries after the deaths of the original apostles. That total debasement of the true faith is what Mormons refer to as the "Great Apostasy." So, Smith said, authentic Christianity needed not just a reformation, but a total restoration. Over the course of the next 23 years, Smith's "restored church" grew under his leadership until his assassination by a mob in 1844.

Actually there are numerous problems historically with the story of Mormonism's beginning as told by Joseph Smith and those who came after him. For instance, the first handwritten account by Joseph Smith of his "First Vision" was not done until 1830. That account is still extant and has been authenticated by various experts, including LDS scholars. It is quite different from the official canonized version in the Pearl of Great Price. In that earliest account Smith said he was 16 years old (so it would have occurred in 1818), and he only saw one divine person, "the Lord" (apparently Jesus Christ) but no other (BYU Studies, Summer 1971, pg. 462).

A second version of the story was dictated by Joseph Smith in 1835. In that account Smith said that he was 14 years old when he saw a vision of many angels and a single personage, presumably God, who appeared in the midst of a flame. That personage was soon joined by another, Jesus Christ (BYU Studies, Spring 1969, pg. 283). That account, like the earlier one, does not correspond in its details with the official version. It

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is obvious Smith's memory of the event "evolved" over time until he got it exactly right.

It also seems strange, since this "First Vision" was of such vital importance for the restoration of the true faith, that most of Smith's church members were unaware of it until it was published in the church's magazine, *Times and Seasons*, in 1842. The vision was not even mentioned in Oliver Cowdery's (Smith's closest cohort) history of the Mormon church written in 1834-35.

Smith also claimed to have experienced a "Second Vision" of an angel named Moroni in 1823. Moroni allegedly revealed to Smith the existence of golden plates containing an ancient history of people in the Americas. The angel showed Smith where the plates were hidden beneath a rock on a hill near his home in Palmyra, NY. In 1827, according to Smith's story, he was able to begin miraculously translating the plates into English from a language he called "Reformed Egyptian." In 1830, Smith published his translation as the Book of Mormon. Remarkably, his translation, done in the 19th century, was written entirely in archaic 17th century Elizabethan English, as was the King James Bible. In fact, many passages in the Book of Mormon read exactly or nearly the same as many passages in the King James Bible.

Problems with Smith's story and the legitimacy of the Book of Mormon are multi-faceted. To begin with, his story of the vision of Moroni and the golden plates has never been objectively verified. Granted, the preface of all Book of Mormon editions have two testimonials signed by eleven men who claimed to have seen the plates. However, those testimonials (both written by Smith) have serious questions as to their

validity. For instance, several of the men later turned against Smith and left the LDS church. Also, it was reported that some later admitted they had seen the plates only with their "spiritual eyes" and not in actual fact. The most likely fact is that only Joseph Smith himself witnessed the events or actually saw the plates, so it really rests entirely on his integrity. In any case, the accuracy of Smith's translation could not, and cannot, be analyzed since Moroni took the golden plates to heaven when he had completed the work, so Smith explained.

Note also: this account of Smith's two visions, published as "Joseph Smith-History," was not put into its current official form until 1902, about the time it was added to the Pearl of Great Price.

Another problem that has plagued Mormon history regarding Joseph Smith was his claims that he possessed the ability to find hidden treasures, an occult divination practice called "Glass Looking." Smith used a small "seer stone" he found as a youth which he said supernaturally directed him to the locations of buried objects.

For decades the LDS denied that Smith was involved in the occult. Yet, in recent decades, as more documentary evidence has come to light, the church had to acknowledge Smith's dabbling in magic arts. For instance, it is documented that in 1826 he was even arrested and fined \$2.68 by a justice of the peace in Bainbridge, NY, for "glass looking." In 2015 the Church finally acknowledged that it still possesses several of Smith's seer stones. The LDS also admitted he actually used it supposedly to translate the Book of Mormon from the golden plates.

In addition, the events in the Book of Mormon supposedly covered a thousand years of ancient American history from about 600 BC until about AD 400 (with one section dated about

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2000 years earlier). However, researchers have demonstrated that its historicity is without foundation. It contains numerous internal problems and anachronisms. For example, it reports the presence of horses and other animals not found in the Americas in pre-Columbian times. Likewise, not one single piece of authentic archaeological evidence has ever been discovered to substantiate the events recorded in the Book of Mormon. For more information on the Book of Mormon go to <http://www.marketfaith.org/the-book-of-mormon-is-it-another-testament-of-jesus-christ>.

2. The Authority Problem

For nearly 200 years, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints audaciously has proclaimed that it is the only true church on the face of the earth, and that all other Christian denominations are devoid of spiritual power. They based this assertion on the claims of Joseph Smith, Jr., that, through him, God restored the true church of Christ and the true Gospel to the earth in the 1820s and 30s. He argued that the two divine priesthoods ordained in the Bible, the Aaronic and the Melchizedek, were lost in the Great Apostasy. Thus, the real authority invested in the Apostles by Jesus were no longer in effect, and thus true Christianity disappeared with them.

As Smith began "the restoration" in the 1820s, he claimed that, in 1829, he and Oliver Cowdery were ordained by the spirit of John the Baptist to the Aaronic priesthood, and by the spirits of Peter, James, and John to the Melchizedek priesthood. They could then ordain all other "worthy men" to those positions. Today, all Mormon men in good standing with the church are ordained to the Aaronic priesthood about age 12, and the Melchizedek priesthood at age 19 (usually prior to going on a mission).

The problems with this assertion are numerous. First, the LDS concept of the Aaronic priesthood has no basis in the Bible. According to Scripture, God appointed Aaron's (Moses' brother) descendants, who were of the tribe of Levi, as priests to make sacrifices in the tabernacle, and eventually the temple (see: Num. 3:1-10; 8:5-22). There is no indication it was given to everyone. Also, God set the minimum age for that priesthood at 25, not 12 (see Num. 8:23-25).

Actually, the Aaronic priesthood is not even necessary in the New Testament era. The temple sacrificial system was abrogated by the death of Christ on the cross, and the Jerusalem temple no longer stands (no sacrifices are performed in LDS temples). In any case, the New Testament indicates that all believers in Christ are priests in the sense that they have direct access to God. Christ is the true "High Priest" (Heb. 8), and those who believe in Him are of a "royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:5-10; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Likewise, the LDS claims to the Melchizedek priesthood are without biblical substantiation. Melchizedek was a somewhat mysterious figure, mentioned in Genesis 14:18-20, who blessed Abraham. He is referred to as the King of Salem (Jerusalem) and priest of "God Most High" (El Elyon). In Psalm 110:4, a promise was given that his priesthood would be forever: "The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'" (NASB). Mormons say that their priesthood fulfills that promise. However, Hebrews 5:6-10; 6:20; and 7:21 indicate that the promise of Psalm 110:4 was fulfilled only and completely in Jesus Christ. No one else needs, can, or ever will have the Melchizedek priesthood.

All LDS ecclesiastical claims of authority rest on the validity of their two priesthoods. Its leadership, including its President (who is considered a living prophet), its Apostles, its other General Authorities, and all regional and local officials base their legitimacy on Smith's dubious assertions. As we have seen, the LDS's claims to have restored those priesthoods are contrary to biblical teaching and spurious. Therefore, given these facts, the LDS's claims to possess unique spiritual and ecclesiastical authority are invalid.

3. The Cosmological Problem

In a previous article on the MarketFaith Ministries website, we related the story of the discovery, in the 1960s, of what is called Cosmic Background Microwave (CBM), and its impact on the science of cosmology (we will repeat some of that information here). Cosmology is the study of the universe. That is to say, cosmologists investigate the laws of physics, how and when the universe began, and how it has developed over time.

Cosmology is closely related to the science of astronomy. Astronomy, of course, is the science of observing objects in space. Planets, stars, galaxies, comets, and the Moon are all objects of interest to astronomers who peer deep into the sky to observe their movements and characteristics. Some space phenomena they watch are literally billions of light-years away. That means they are actually peering far into the past: some astronomers say almost to the beginning of time, and to the edge of the universe!

In 1964, one of the most revolutionary scientific discoveries of the 20th century occurred by serendipity (as have many great discoveries). Two astronomers at Bell Laboratories, Robert Wilson and Arno Penzias, were scanning space with a newly built radio telescope. As they processed their data, they noticed something quite unexpected in their findings. Their instruments recorded an extremely low level of microwave radiation noise everywhere and anywhere they pointed their radio telescope. At first they thought it was a flaw in the equipment. However, after checking every system in the radio telescope, the unexplained microwave noise remained. Soon, other radio telescopes around the world confirmed what Wilson and Penzias had discovered.

So what was it they were hearing? The answer had actually been suggested in the 1950s by several astrophysicists. Those scientists had predicted, theoretically, that just such a phenomenon might exist.

They called it Cosmic Background Microwave (CBM) radiation. The CBM, they postulated, would exist as a remnant echo of the beginning of the universe, later called the "Big Bang." Many astronomers and physicists rejected the Big Bang theory saying the universe was eternal, a theory known as the "Steady State." However, Wilson's and Penzias' accidental discovery, and its later confirmation, provided indisputable proof that the universe, including all time, space, matter, and energy, had a beginning point from nothing, and came into existence in an instant.

That discovery only confirmed what the Bible, in Genesis and other passages, asserted all along, and what orthodox Christianity (and Judaism) has taught since its founding. That is, God created the universe from nothing (ex nihilo) (see Gen. 1:1; Neh. 9:6; Psalm 33:6; Acts 17: 24; Rom. 1:20; Col. 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:2, Rev. 3:14; 4:11) .

The discovery of the CBM radiation was a hard pill for many naturalistic and atheistic scientists to swallow because of its theistic metaphysical implications. Some even went to their graves rejecting it, for that reason alone. On the other hand, that fact, and the evidence of intelligent design in the fabric of the universe and biology, changed the minds of some atheists and influenced them to embrace theism (e.g.: famous English atheist philosopher Anthony Flew).

The CBM was also a problematic discovery for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. You might ask, "Why? Aren't Mormons Theists?" In a most general sense, perhaps. But the truth is, Mormonism teaches that God (Heavenly Father) did not create the universe or the world. Official Mormon cosmology asserts that the universe of time, space, matter, and energy is eternal and infinite. The LDS says Heavenly Father only formed this world (or this corner of the whole universe) out of pre-existing matter. This process was done, and is still done, by innumerable other gods in other parts of the universe. Mormonism is undeniably polytheistic, as we will see when we analyze LDS theology in the second installment.

So we can see how Mormon cosmology is clearly out of sync with biblical truth. Not only that, it is contrary to the growing scientific evidence that the universe is not eternal or infinite, but had a beginning and is finite. One reason the LDS holds on to its doctrinal position is that it is the only one that fits the essential

tenets of its theology, as we will see in the next installment.

Part 2 will examine three more major problems of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: its unusual theology (beliefs about God); its anthropology (beliefs about the nature of humanity); and its soteriology (beliefs about salvation and life after death).

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