

# Modern Mormons

The strange belief of a growing faith

Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney ended his campaign in February for the Republican Party nomination for the US presidency when it was clear he was failing to break his rival John McCain's domination of the contest.

Before he waged a fervent campaign for the GOP presidential nomination Romney had a diverse career as a businessman, the organiser of the 2002 Winter Olympics and governor of the state of Massachusetts. However, a lot of the attention Romney attracted in his campaign was based on his religion — Mormonism.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly known as the Mormon Church, despite its slow steady growth, wealth and carefully groomed family image has always been considered unusual by the general public. In the case of Mitt Romney the heavy scrutiny his religion received was clearly a hindrance, not a blessing.

The pugnacious, iconoclastic Christopher Hitchens, author of *God Is Not Great*, believed that Romney needed to openly discuss his faith, considering Mormonism's strange theology and a past stained by racism and polygamy.

Mormonism received further major international media attention in April. The Texas Child Protective Services and heavily armed police units raided and removed all children from an isolated compound

owned by a renegade polygamist Mormon sect, known as the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, in West Texas. The raid was in response to a phone call to an abuse hotline from someone claiming to be a 16-year old child bride being abused by her older husband. Admittedly, the mainstream Latter-Day Saints vigorously, and repetitively, distanced itself from the odd sect — yet the Mormon faith remained in the public spotlight.

The familiar image of proselytising yet pleasant, mild mannered male missionaries, called "Elders", in white shirts and black suits door knocking is known to all. In spite of this sugary, earnest (almost naive) appearance the Latter-Day Saints are viewed cautiously.

So what are the common issues and objections to the Mormons? Let's examine the controversy that looms around this religion.

## Controversy

Firstly, the credibility of Mormonism certainly relies heavily on the credibility of its American founder — Joseph Smith. Born December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Vermont, Joseph Smith Jr. was the fifth of eleven children of Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack. In 1820 at Palmyra, New York, Joseph Smith claimed he saw God and Christ in a vision. They told him that all the churches at that time were corrupt, and that he, Joseph, would bring forth the true church.



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Joseph claimed that several years later an angel, named Moroni, guided him to some gold plates on a nearby hill. On those plates, engraved in a reformed Egyptian dialect, was the sacred history written by ancient Hebrews in America. By the spirit of God and the use of a sacred instrument accompanying the plates called the “Urim and Thummim” (seer stones bound by silver bows into a set of spectacles); Joseph translated the plates into English. The translation was published in 1830 as *The Book of Mormon*, which Smith asserted was an historical book of divinely inspired scripture, of equal authority to the Bible.

*The Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on Earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book* Joseph Smith said — However, just how correct is it?

*The Book of Mormon* teaches that Native Americans and Polynesians are descended from ancient seafaring Israelites. Dr Simon Southerton, an Australian molecular scientist and ex-Mormon bishop, in his book *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church*, shows that current DNA evidence severely contradicts Mormon belief. DNA genealogy shows that Native Americans are originally from Siberia and Polynesians from Southeast Asia, not the Middle East.

Thomas W. Murphy, an anthropologist, also came to the same conclusions after he completed his analysis of the implications of genetic research for *The Book of Mormon* in his article, “Lamanite, Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics”. “I think it’s fair to conclude that the Book of Mormon is a work of fiction”, Murphy stated in an article in the *Seattle Post*.

The Smithsonian Institution has also issued a statement stating it “considers the *Book of Mormon* a religious document and not a scientific guide”<sup>2</sup>. The National Geographic Society has also stated it hasn’t found anything either to

substantiate the *Book of Mormon*. If Mormon scripture is supposed to be a factual history of the ancient Americas, with large, flourishing Pre-Columbian civilisations existing — where is the supporting evidence?

American writer Fawn McKay Brodie, in her biography *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, widely popularised the notion of Joseph Smith as a possible religious huckster. Brodie, who was raised in a Mormon family, was (not surprisingly) later excommunicated by the Latter Day Saints.

Naturally, Mormons seldom criticise their founding prophet, teacher, and venerated leader. An historical examination of Joseph Smith’s life certainly paints a picture of an enigmatic and dubious figure. Historian Todd Compton, in his book *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, believed that Smith was married to at least thirty three women, possibly even more. One of the most disturbing elements of Joseph Smith’s polygamy was his penchant for marrying petite teenage girls. Indeed, the prophet’s love knew no boundaries.

Joseph Smith came from a poor family, after Smith’s alcoholic father lost the family fortune in bad business decisions. Smith’s education was minimal, yet he discovered early on his talent for public speaking. Interestingly, Smith learnt from his father and others the mystical art of finding buried treasure with seer stones. However, these magical meanderings saw Smith arrested in New York in 1826 for, though the details are shady, fraud.

### **Evidence**

The most clear and documented evidence that seriously questions Joseph Smith’s credibility relates to *The Book of Abraham*. *The Book of Abraham* is part of the *Pearl of Great Price*, one of the revered canonical books of Mormon scripture. Joseph Smith claimed to have divinely translated the lost *Book of Abraham* from some Egyptian papyri he purchased in 1835. At that

time Egyptology was a haphazard enterprise and as Jean-Francoise Champollion had only recently completed his translation of the Rosetta Stone, hieroglyphics were largely unreadable, so there was no way to validate Smith’s translation. But it is interesting to speculate that the news of Champollion’s work might have given him the idea in the first place.

After Joseph Smith’s death, the Egyptian papyri were given to his widow, Emma, who later sold them. For many years the papyri were considered lost, until 1966 when they were found again in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. Numerous Egyptologists examined the papyri and translated what it really said. It didn’t coincide at all with Joseph Smith’s translation in the *Book of Abraham* — *it had absolutely nothing to do with Abraham*. This appears to be a smoking gun that proves that Smith intentionally committed fraud, yet Mormon apologetics engage in some astonishing mental gymnastics by claiming it wasn’t a literal translation of the papyri, but a “spiritual translation”.

Whilst struggling through the tedium of *The Book of Mormon*, which I agree with Mark Twain’s assessment is “chloroform in print”, I was reminded of a statement by Michael Shermer in his book *Why People Believe Weird Things*. Shermer wrote “More than any other, the reason people believe weird things is because they want to. It feels good. It is comforting. It is consoling”<sup>3</sup>.

Mormon theology teaches the God of Earth was once a man, who now lives on a planet near the star Kolob. We can become Gods, by following the teachings of Mormonism, and rule over our own universe — naturally, very appealing.

Latter-day Saint apostle, Orson Pratt, once wrote “convince us of our errors of doctrine, if we have any, by reason, by logical arguments or by the word of God, and we will ever be grateful for the information”. This sentiment realistically rings hollow

as challenges to Mormonism scriptures and teachings are ignored, or simply dismissed as pointless, because Mormonism should be accepted on faith.

The current president, prophet, seer, revelator and general mouth-piece of God for the Latter-day Saints, Thomas S. Monson, remarkably stated in a Mormon magazine:

*Should doubt knock at your doorway, just say to those skeptical, disturbing, rebellious thoughts: 'I propose to stay with my faith. I accept God's word. I wasn't with Joseph, but I believe him. My faith did not come to me through science, and I will not permit so-called science to destroy it'".<sup>4</sup>*

In conclusion, it's not difficult to agree with Richard Dawkins' view that "Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence".

Mormons often provide completely inadequate and weak responses to serious questions. When missionaries next knock on your door, and if you decide to speak with them, plant a seed of doubt but don't expect any instant results. Earnest young Mormons will ask you to accept a copy of the *Book of Mormon*, read it, and pray about it. As skeptics all we can hope they do is listen to the information we provide, and *think* about it.

**References:**

1 "Church put to DNA test" *Seattle Post* / Rick A. Ross Institute 13 Jan. 2003 [www.rickross.com/reference/mormon/mormon95.html](http://www.rickross.com/reference/mormon/mormon95.html)

2 "Smithsonian Institution Letter" Rick A. Ross Institute [www.rickross.com/reference/mormon/mormon16.html](http://www.rickross.com/reference/mormon/mormon16.html)

3 Shermer, Michael *Why Do People Believe Weird Things?* p. 275

4 "The BITE Model Applied Toward Mormonism's Two-Year Missionary Program" Steven Alan Hassan's Freedom of Mind Center [www.freedomofmind.com/resourcecenter/groups/m/mormon/BITE-missionary.htm](http://www.freedomofmind.com/resourcecenter/groups/m/mormon/BITE-missionary.htm)



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