

WHY I AM NOT A MORMON

Consistency takes front and center stage in any trial. I am constantly examining people and their claims under a microscope for consistency. There are even specific rules of evidence based on consistency because it is that important to establishing the truth. An example might be helpful.

Under the Federal Rule of Evidence 404, evidence of a person's character or character trait is not admissible to prove that on a particular occasion, the person acted in accordance with that trait. There are some exceptions, especially in a criminal case, but the lawyer who utilizes those exceptions had best beware!

There is a follow-up rule (number 405) that provides that if a person's character or a character trait is admissible, then on cross-examination, the court may allow inquiries into relevant specific instances of the person's conduct. In other words, if a party puts into evidence the good character of a witness or party, then the other side is allowed to delve into areas of testimony that might show inconsistency with the offered character evidence.

I had an important trial where this issue took front and center. The company on trial was a large multi-national company that most everyone would have heard of. That in itself should have been enough for the defense attorneys to have with the jury, letting the jury carry into their deliberations the fairly good public image of this company. Yet the lawyers pushed it further.

With a man on the stand who had served the company in many roles over the decade, including president, the lawyers delved into the company's reputation. They discussed how the company was an amazing corporate citizen, with roots in small-town Americana. The company's headquarters was set before the jury complete with pictures of the local high school football stadium, a seminary that was in the neighborhood, and a picture of Main Street that looked straight out of a 1950's movie. Of course the case (and the company) had nothing to do with the seminary, the high school, or even Main Street, but the lawyers liked the impression it left of the company.

Still, the lawyers weren't finished. They put up photographs from inside the corporate offices, including a massive one of the "Patriotic Wall," as it was described. This was had a larger than life American flag painted on it, along with pictures of all the employees who had served America in the armed forces in the Iraqi war. The president spoke of how proud the company was of its service women and men, and how being good patriotic Americans was near and dear to the company's corporate heart.

I asked the judge to allow me to probe this patriotic, small-town, apple-pie character with specific instances of conduct that seemed inconsistent with the portrayal. Over strenuous

objection, the court granted my right to go into areas that I otherwise would not have been allowed. The main one was the “patriotic” company’s admission that they had violated the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act by bribing public officials in other countries to use their products. This included violating the Oil for Food economic sanctions assessed against Saddam Hussein and his regime leading up to the Iraqi war. The “Patriotic Wall” company displaying the pictures of those who fought in the Iraqi war had illegally financed Saddam’s henchmen leading up to the war.

The evidence of the corporate character was not consistent with the image of the corporate character put before the jury. The company had paid over a million dollars in fines, admitting its wrong-doing. It was a stinging indictment that illustrated behavior quite different from that wanted shown to the jury.

Inconsistency isn’t always so glaring, but it is always important in examining the truth. This lies at the heart of why I am not a Mormon. I find the Mormon faith inconsistent in core areas of teaching and practice with that of the Bible.

This might not seem a problem to some because they might say, “Well, maybe the Book of Mormon has it right and the Bible has it wrong!” But it doesn’t work that way. The Book of Mormon, and other Mormon Scriptures, are not supposed to be at odds with the Bible. They are meant to be completions of the Bible, fully consistent with Biblical teachings. Yet I find they are not, and therein lies my problem.

To analyze this, it helps to place Mormonism into its historical context first. Then I will examine the core teaching of Mormonism on the authority of the Bible. Finally, I will dissect several core teachings of Mormon doctrine and compare them to the related Christian doctrines, looking for consistency or inconsistency.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MORMONISM

Mormonism arose during an interesting time in American history. The United States was young, and because America, unlike England, had no national church, there was an interesting pluralism developing on the religious scene. The United States had the Catholic and Anglican churches associated with England. There were the Methodists, a movement also hailing from England and arising out of the Anglican church. The United States had a Calvinists/Presbyterians presence like portions of continental Europe.

There were also separatist groups that were seeking to make themselves known, often claiming no affiliation with any known church group. Among these was a movement known still today as the “restoration movement.” Associated with key figures like Alexander Campbell, the restoration movement sought to distance Christianity from the creeds and doctrines that had accumulated over the centuries, often bringing division to the

church. Instead, the plea of Campbell and others was to return to the Bible and follow Scripture alone, leaving out any church additions. Campbell and others became the genesis of what was later called the “Churches of Christ” and the “Disciples of Christ.” The debates of the day included church structure, forms of baptism (sprinkling, pouring or immersion), activity of the Holy Spirit, and levels of authority in churches. There was an inherent distrust of any church traditions that were not found clearly in Scripture.

It was a time when the country was smaller, and the territories not fully known. Society was expanding west into Native American territories, and there was a lot unknown about the “Indians,” as they were called. The white people knew were aware of their own arrival from Europe. The black people were brought in from Africa. Asian peoples were known as well, but serious questions were asked about the Native Americans. Where did they come from? A number of intellectual articles proposed the idea that the Native Americans must have been from the lost tribes of Israel, or some other group of Jewish people.

A New York newspaperman named Joseph Noah wrote in 1823 that there were those “strongly” of the opinion that the Indians were “the lineal descendants of the Israelites,” and Noah shared those opinions, citing a number of reasons, including his belief that their language was like ancient Hebrew!¹ (By the way, it isn’t!).

Science was not then what it is now, and there were large groups of people who believed in divining rods for finding water, magical stones that gave people an ability to find buried treasure, and more. Often, the buried treasure was believed guarded by spirit beings, and only certain people had the ability or insight to get past these beings. It might take an incantation or some spell, maybe secret words of knowledge or insight, or even the powers associated with some relic. Treasure hunting was often ways that swindlers and others could make a mark. They would set up partnerships, getting others to fund the searches, only to come up dry and moving on to the next opportunity.

People commonly reported visions from God along with private messages. Frequently these private messages included averments that the contemporary churches were corrupt and had left the true Christian faith.²

¹ *Wayne Sentinel*, Oct. 11, 1825.

² *Wayne Sentinel*, Oct. 22, 1823. See also, Elias Smith, *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith* (Beck & Foster, 1816), 1:56, 59; B. Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard* (Self-published in New York, 1825), 22-24, along with other citations in Marquardt, H. Michael, *The Rise of Mormonism 1816-1844*, (Xulon Press 2013), at 68ff. Marquardt came out of the Mormon church and has written a carefully documented early history of the church. He does a superb job at placing the early days of the church into their immediate context.

Into this time and place was born Joseph Smith, Jr. (born December 23, 1805). Both of Smith's parents were Bible readers, but they followed their own interpretations, not agreeing with those of the churches around them.³

Smith also came from a family believing God visited them in dreams. Smith claimed to start having his own visitations and revelations by the age of 14. In that vision, Smith was told,

that the true Church of Jesus Christ that had been established in New Testament times, and which had administered the fullness of the gospel, was no longer on the earth.⁴

Over his early years and into his early adulthood, Smith was associated with using a rock as a relic to aid in finding buried treasure, called a “money-digger” in its day. Marquardt cites sources pointing out that Smith “was thought to be able to locate lost goods with a special seer stone and magical religious ceremonies.”⁵

Some early Mormon accounts credit the same stone with Smith finding the gold tablets that subsequently formed the basis of his Book of Mormon. Smith's accounts varied over the years, but basically he claimed that in his late teens, a spirit appeared to him and told him where to dig and find the tablets in a stone box. Smith was only allowed to take the tablets if he followed precise instructions, and his failure the first time caused him several years of delay before he could again access the plates.

Smith took possession of the book of plates, but would not let others see them, although eventually eleven witnesses claimed to have seen them and attested to such. Smith went to work “translating” the plates, but this was not done in any sense we might think of today. Smith did not look at the plates and work through them word by word. Instead, he was able to “translate them” without taking them out of the box where he had kept them safe. In a sense, he was being told what to say or write. He put his seer's stone into his hat, then buried his face in the hat and was able to discern the right translation.

A neighboring farmer helped Smith get the text written and printed up copies for sale. The first edition of the book of Mormon was published in 1830, and part of the sales pitch included the background that this book was a message from God. The books contained a great number of quotations from the King James Bible, buried around narratives, characters

³ Marquardt, at 68ff.

⁴ Excerpt from the Introduction to *The Pearl of Great Price*.

⁵ Marquardt, at 91ff.

and events not contained in the Bible. The books were sold for fourteen shillings a piece, a price allegedly set by God.

The reports vary on what happened to the plates. Some say they were taken back by a spirit, some say Smith reburied them, and some say they were placed in a cave. Ultimately Smith continued to “receive messages” from God that became additional Mormon scriptures, even without any kind of tablet as the source. These later books are called *The Doctrine and Covenants* and *The Pearl of Great Price*.

Over time, Smith and his compatriots moved from place to place, selling the Book of Mormon and finding others who would agree with the premise that Smith had been given a direct word of revelation, bringing truth back into a world of fraudulent and wayward churches.

THE BOOKS

The Book of Mormon

In its introduction, *The Book of Mormon* claims to be,

a record of God’s dealings with ancient inhabitants of the Americas and contains the fullness of the everlasting gospel.⁶

The book claims to be a history that sets out the heritage of the American Indians as including in their ancestry the “Lamanites,” who were supposedly Jews who fled Jerusalem in 600BC.

The books also relate that Jesus came to North America and preached his gospel to the displaced Jews after his resurrection. The history was written by a prophet historian named Mormon, who gave them to his son Moroni. Moroni added a few words, then buried the tablets on Hill Cumorah in New York where Smith found them almost 1800 years later. By the time Smith got to them, Moroni had become a “glorified, resurrected being” who gave Smith his instructions.

The book of Mormon is considered “another testament of Jesus Christ,” and it carries that denotation as part of its subtitle.

The Doctrine and Covenants

⁶ Excerpt from the Introduction to *The Book of Mormon*.

These writings are from Smith as well as later prophets. They are not ancient translations, but claim to be contemporary revelations to guide the church. In the introduction, we read of the material as,

a collection of divine revelations and inspired declarations given for the establishment and regulation of the kingdom of God on the earth in the last days.

Much of this material contains core areas of Mormon theology. It speaks to the nature of God, of humanity, of Satan and evil, salvation, marriage, church structure and more.

The Pearl of Great Price

This book contains many more sayings and teaching of Smith, including a number that were published in newspapers and church periodicals in Smith's day. Like the other books, this one has received edits over the years, getting additions, and subtractions.

It includes some work by Smith claiming to be a "translation" of different parts of the Bible. I use quotation marks around "translation" because Smith was not proficient in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, such that he could translate the Bible. Smith worked off the King James Version and made certain adds and alterations as he was "inspired" to do. So, his work is not one where he was translating the Scriptures. It was one where he would take a translation and modified it. It seems he might better claim it was the "corrected Scriptures" rather than a translation.

The book also contains a good bit of Smith's own recollection of the history behind his movement. There is also a record of "The Articles of Faith of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" that Smith sent in to a questioning newspaper who wanted to know what the Mormon people believed.

MORMONISM AND THE BIBLE

Mormons claim the Bible as an authoritative word of God, but only if it is rid of the errors that have allegedly crept in over the centuries through human error and a corrupt church. Smith is quoted as saying, "I believe the Bible as it is read when it came from the pen of the original writers."⁷

In the Articles of Faith (1:8), we read similarly,

⁷ See the official LDS website at: <https://www.lds.org/topics/bible-inerrancy-of?lang=eng>.

We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.

It is this view of the Bible that is one of the reasons I could never be a Mormon. If the Mormons are right, then their doctrines should not conflict with core doctrines or teachings of Scripture, at least when Scripture is reliably translated. Yet there are many distinctions that cannot be explained away as simply one where the Bible has been corrupted.

While this will be probed much more carefully in the follow-up lesson, a sample is useful here.

Looking at John 1:1 reads,

English Standard Version	Joseph Smith Translation	Greek Text
"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."	"In the beginning was the gospel preached through the Son. And the gospel was the word, and the word was with the Son, and the Son was with God, and the Son was of God."	"ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος"

Admittedly, it helps in this discussion to have taken years of Greek, but I can safely say that even mid-way through my first-year of studies, there could be no way to mistranslate this as Joseph Smith has done.

There is a Greek word for "gospel" that is used over and over in the New Testament. It is *εὐαγγελιον*, and even a non-Greek reader can see it is not used once in John one, much less twice! Furthermore, there is no verb in the passage for "preached." There is no usage of the word "Son." The Greek text plainly says exactly what the English Standard Version translates. Even the idea of the Son being "of God" couldn't be found in the Greek. There is no usage of the word "Son." The word is clearly "Word." Even if one wanted to translate "Word" as "Son," you still couldn't get to Smith's translation. The form of "God" in the last phrase is not in the "genitive," which would be necessary for the "Word" or "Son" to be "of God."

This is not a translation of the Greek. Smith is giving an entirely different passage, which radically changes the meaning of the Greek. It fits Mormon theology, which has Jesus as someone less than God the Father, but it doesn't fit the Greek.

The Mormon response might be, "Well, the Greek from John's pen must have been altered." Even that defies common sense though. We have *many* manuscripts of John's gospel dating back over 1500 years. Not one single manuscript suggests in any way, shape, or form that this passage was altered. The alteration to get to Smith's translation would

have to be massive, not only in verse one, but in later verses as well. It simply isn't found anywhere.

DIFFERENCES IN CORE TEACHINGS AND THEOLOGY BETWEEN MORMONISM AND THE BIBLE

This is the rea of teaching for next week, so this lesson will be supplemented here. For now, we set out the areas we will consider with a brief explanation.

Creation

Mormonism teaches that creation was done by Jesus under God's oversight, but the creation was not out of nothing. Jesus created from the elements already in existence. The purpose of creation was to provide a forum where the spirit children of God (you and me) could become physical in form. This also provides an avenue for people to be eternally physical, inhabiting earths and propagating in their families.

Humanity

People are gods. We were God the Father's spiritual embryos who have come into earth given human forms. This is our step toward becoming a physical God for eternity.

God the Father

Mormons believe that God the Father is also in human form, complete with skin and bones. To think otherwise, is to accept the influence of Greek thought on what the early church first understood.

Satan

Satan is part of Father God's big family as well. He is ultimately a sibling of sorts to other humans as well as to Jesus. Satan disagreed with Father God's decision about Jesus' role to atone for Adam and Eve's sin, wanting to do it himself. This set up the cosmic disagreement that pends a later resolution.

Universalism

By and large Mormonism is a universalist faith. Since we are all God's children, we will all enjoy eternity, it's just that some will enjoy it more than others! It is believed that there are three degrees or kingdoms in heaven, with the "Celestial Kingdom" being the highest where certain people as gods will get to dwell in the presence of the Heavenly Father and Jesus.

Conversion

The Mormon faith teaches that conversion is a process, not an event. The process includes a strong legalistic element. Ultimately, the success of the human in Mormon thought is based on deeds done and obedience to the “laws and ordinances of the gospel.” The gospel, similarly, is not one of salvation by grace through faith but rather one of faith, repentance, baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit, and “enduring” to the end.

THE SOURCES OF MORMONISM

Because of the differences in Biblical teaching, I couldn't be a Mormon. If the church taught that the Bible was not authoritative, I would have different analysis. But since the Bible is accepted, and in fact quoted over and over in the Book of Mormon and other Mormon scriptures, I have no choice but to see Mormonism as false. One or the other *must be* false.

To further my conviction, however, I can turn to history, where this lesson began. The Book of Mormon fits itself nicely into history in a way that explains its non-divine origins. The book was “discovered” in ways that treasures were believed to be rather commonplace. Smith held the status of a “seer” with a divine stone to give him that ability. The finding was not verified by immediate people, but was secreted for a long time. The few that did claim to see some semblance of plates were already “believers” at the time. None of them made a copy of any actual writings on the plates such that they could be examined.⁸

There are many other ways that the writings reflect the conventions and concerns of Smith's day. The issues on church structure, the idea that Native Americans are of Jewish ancestry, the exclusion of African Americans from certain roles, the views on women and more reflect not a God seeking to restore the New Testament church, but rather the views of one untrained in proper Bible study trying to make of Christianity what he (or they) thought it should be.

To be continued...

⁸ There are alternate stories about William Harris, Smith's funder of the original publication of the Book of Mormon, taking a few copied notes to Professor Charles Anthon, a linguist at Columbia. According to Harris, Anthon confirmed the writings as Egyptian, Chaldean, and Arabic. Anthon went on record saying such claims were fraudulent, and that he had verified only that the notes showed a clumsy effort at a hoax. Full cited details of this account are found in Marquardt at 193ff.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn. 1:1).*

There is an age-old problem that goes back to the Garden. We humans want to be like God. Eve was beguiled by the serpents offer, “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Gen. 3:5). The truth is that we are NOT Gods or even gods. We are humans. Created by God and living in opposition to him until we find his mercy in the cross of Christ. I need to remember that and stand in it daily.

2. *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:6-7).*

There is another age-old problem that goes back to the New Testament church. People claim to come forward with a new and different gospel. Judaizers tried to do it. Gnostics tried. Over and over we read in our history books of those who had the “new,” “clean,” or “restored original” gospel. Yet we should never abdicate that which is taught in Scripture unless we are given solid proof it is wrong. May I bury myself in God’s apostolic teaching of those hand-selected by Jesus. May it inform my faith and my life.

3. *“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved” (1 Cor. 15:1-2).*

There is a third age-old problem that goes back thousands of years. We want to be able to rely on our own goodness for something. It is as if we are ashamed to admit that we are thoroughly inadequate and fully in need of God’s rescue. There is a saving act by Jesus which comes to those who put their faith in him. This does not come to me because of my pre-creation existence as a god. It doesn’t come because I live this life adequately. I stand and am saved by the good news of Christ dying in my stead. It is that simple, and it won’t change.