

Mormonism and the Bahá'í Faith

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Mormonism, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is a new religious tradition that emerged from American Protestant Christianity in the early nineteenth century through the teachings of the Mormon “prophet” Joseph Smith (1805–1844). During a period of religious revival in western New York state in the 1820s, Smith claimed to have received visitations from an angel who showed him buried golden plates bearing the record of inhabitants of the American continent, descended from Jews who migrated to the new world about 600 B.C. These Joseph Smith proceeded to “translate” and then publish in 1830 as *The Book of Mormon*.

In his youth, Smith experienced spiritual visions in which he was told by Jesus Christ not to join any of the then competing sects as these had all arisen from a Christianity that had apostatized from the “true Gospel.” With the release of *The Book of Mormon*, those who recognized it as a divine book felt the need to have a church that would embody the doctrines of a new and authentic Christianity. In April, 1830, Joseph Smith and a few associates founded the Church of Jesus Christ, later known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Latter-day Saint or Mormon movement now encompasses two major denominations (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with over 7 million members and, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints with some half-million members) and scores of small groups that descend from the visionary ideals of Joseph Smith.

Smith received, during the fourteen years of his leadership of the Mormon Church, many “revelations” on doctrine and organization. These became part of a second volume of scripture entitled *The Doctrine and Covenants*. He also “translated” an Egyptian papyrus, which he claimed to be the memoirs of Abraham and Moses. (The original papyri were discovered in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and presented to the Mormon Church in 1967; the papyri are, according to Egyptologists, ordinary funeral papyri with no reference to Abraham.) These together with a selection of other statements from a third standard work of Mormon holy texts known as *The Pearl of Great Price*. Mormons consider the Bible their fourth standard sacred text.

Smith was an innovator in religious doctrine, as evidenced in the Mormon views of God as a physical being, limited in time and space; of God as an exalted man, and of men as gods in embryo; of matter as having eternal uncreated existence; and in special ceremonies for the salvation of the dead and the solemnization of plural marriage (no longer officially practiced) and celestial marriage.

Mormonism played an important role in the development of the American frontier in New York, Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and the intermountain West throughout the nineteenth century. Smith was assassinated in an Illinois jail by an anti-Mormon mob in June, 1844. The main branch of Mormonism, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, has developed under the guidance of Brigham Young and succeeding church presidents into an international movement with increasingly large membership in Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America.

Historical Contacts between Bahá'ís and Mormons

On a personal level there have been important exchanges. Ali-Kuli Khan, Persian chargé d'affaires in Washington and a Bahá'í, attended the International Dry-Land Congress in 1912. John A. Widtsoe (1872–1952), president of the Utah State Agricultural College and later a member of the Mormon Church's Quorum of Twelve Apostles, also attended. The two established a friendship that led to enrollment of Iranian students in Utah schools and the offer of agricultural assistance to Iran.

In September, 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spent two days in Salt Lake City during his missionary tour of North America. He attended a session of the National Irrigation Congress in the Mormon Tabernacle, at which he was offered a seat on the speakers' platform. Mahmúd Zarqání records in his diary that while speaking to the press, 'Abdu'l-Bahá contrasted the National Irrigation Congress with the “congress” created by Bahá'u'lláh in Persia, stating that whereas the former was under the aegis of a particular church, the latter was under the tent of the unity of humankind and international peace.

Xorol Robinson Oliver, daughter of Alice Walter Smith and Oliver LeGrand Robinson, came from a well-known Mormon family. Her aunt Alice Robinson Richards was Salt Lake City temple matron and her uncle George Franklin Richards, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Oliver's given name is not known for certain. Genealogical records show no Xorol in the family. Her letters to Shoghi Effendi and to the National Spiritual

Assembly claim the descent noted here and confirm details of family records available at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. She began a search for the promised Christ in 1911 after the death of her mother, who began appearing to her in dreams and visions. Oliver established a friendship with a Bahá'í, Orcella Rexford, in the 1920s, leading to Oliver's becoming a Bahá'í in 1934. Oliver was the center of a number of controversies in the Bahá'í community because of her attempts to have the "revelations" from her deceased mother taken as guidance. In her correspondence with Shoghi Effendi, she wrote of having attempted contact with the Mormon Church President Heber J. Grant during 1936. She reported that Grant's secretary refused her access to the president because she was promoting a "false prophet." On 21 March 1938, David O. McKay, second counselor in the church presidency (and later president of the church), wrote a letter in reply to Oliver's request that she be permitted to present the Bahá'í Faith from the platform of the Church General Conference:

There will be no opportunity for such a message to be presented to the Church during the approaching General Conference, nor, so far as I know, at any other time. All the truths contained in the Bahá'í Message are fully incorporated in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which members, and particularly missionaries, are devoting their time, talents and means to promulgating.

Oliver stated in her 5 July 1938 and 27 August 1940 letters to Shoghi Effendi that she presented a written statement of proofs from the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* to the Bishop (presumably, LeGrand Richards, Presiding Bishop of the Church 1938–1952, Oliver's first cousin), and then was later asked by him to preset her dead mother's statements about the Second Coming and supporting statements of her own. He would then present these to the upper echelons of the Mormon priesthood.

In October, 1987, representatives of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States presented to Mormon Church President Ezra Taft Benson a copy of "The Promise of World Peace" by the Universal House of Justice. At a press conference later, Judge James Nelson, on behalf of the Bahá'ís, described the contents of the peace statement. The Mormon spokesperson noted that "the First Presidency has expressed appreciation for the thoughtful presentation by the representatives of the Bahá'í Faith, and share their hopes and concern for world peace."

Mormon Views of the Bahá'í Faith

The members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints tend toward conservative, exclusive view of their relationship to other religions, seeing the church as "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth with which he, the Lord, is well-pleased"; "true religion... is found only in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." There are less doctrinaire view available, such as 2 Nephi 29: 7–14 in *The Book of Mormon*. The above-quoted letter from Second Counselor David O. McKay to Xorol Oliver is the closest an official Mormon pronouncement on the Bahá'í Faith that has appeared.

Bahá'í Views of Mormonism

Joseph Smith is not considered by Bahá'ís to be a Manifestation of God or Lesser Prophet:

Regarding your question concerning Joseph Smith and the 'Book of Mormon'; as the Bahá'í Teachings quite clearly outline the succession of Prophets from the day of Christ as being Muhammad, the Báb, and finally Bahá'u'lláh, it is obvious that Joseph Smith is not a Manifestation of God. (*Bahá'í News* 416 [Nov. 1965]: 15)

Regarding your questions: we cannot possibly add names of people we (or anyone else) think might be Lesser Prophets to those found in the Qur'án, the Bible and our own Scriptures. For only these can we consider authentic Books. Therefore, Joseph Smith is not in our eyes a Prophet. (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to individual, 13 March 1950)

Joseph Smith we do not consider a Prophet, minor or otherwise. Certainly no reference he made could have foretold the Coming of this Revelation in his capacity as a Prophet. (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 21 Feb. 1942)

Smith may, however, have been a "seer"—someone of unusual spiritual insight—who was attuned to the spiritual currents of the time. Ramona Brown records in her notes that Shoghi Effendi remarked, "Joseph Smith was a seer, not a Prophet of God, neither major nor minor Prophet." The Universal House of Justice writes of Joseph Smith that

“he was a religious teacher sensitive to the spiritual currents flowing in the early 19th century” (from a letter written on its behalf, 7 Feb. 1977).

The Book of Mormon is not considered an authentic revealed scripture. Its supposed historicity is, according to Shoghi Effendi, “a matter for historians to pass upon” (*High Endeavours* 71).

Bahá’í Interaction with Mormons

Shoghi Effendi exhorts Bahá’ís to bring the Bahá’í Faith to the attention of Mormons by emphasizing points of common interest and the fulfillment of Christian prophecies. He cautions Bahá’ís to understand that Mormons have a high level of commitment to their own faith and will likely not respond in large numbers.

He appreciates indeed your efforts for the spread of the Bahá’í Teachings among the Mormons. But while he would approve of your maintaining your teaching work with them, he does not consider it advisable that you devote all your time and energies to this service, specially if you do not find that your efforts awaken much response. (Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 30 May 1937)

With regard to Joseph Smith and his activities; the Guardian would advise the friends not to attach any importance to such individuals. The less they direct their attention to such things, the better it is for them and for the Cause, as in this way they will avoid getting involved in activities, which no matter how praiseworthy they may now appear to be, are nevertheless doomed to failure. (Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 9 Feb. 1937)¹

The Guardian would advise you to teach the Mormons, like everyone else, the Faith, when you find them receptive. They have many good principles, and their teachings regarding chastity, not drinking or smoking, etc., are quite similar to ours, and should form a point of common interest. (*Bahá’í News* 416 [Nov. 1965]: 15)

The Mormons are a people with high principles and ideals, and the step into the Cause is not as difficult for them as for many others not possessing their faith and devotion. However, the very zeal with which they serve their own Faith makes it difficult for them to grasp the greater vision of our Holy Cause. He hopes that Mr..., so obviously a devout Christian, will, through studying the Bahá’í teachings on Christ and the prophecies in the Bible concerning His Second Coming, and through a study of the life and spirit of Bahá’u’lláh, come to see that Christ, far from being lost to Bahá’ís, is enthroned in their hearts mote deeply than ever through recognizing Him in this new Manifestation. (Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 30 Mar. 1944)

Literature on Mormons and Bahá’ís

Early attempts to deal with Mormonism from a Bahá’í viewpoint were by converts from Mormonism and generally followed a proof-text method with emphasis on certain passages from Mormon standard works (especially *Doctrine and Covenants* 85:7 and 130:12–15, and 2 Nephi 29:7–14) (see Lamb and Stevens). Recently, there have been attempts to understand pore fully the differences in the two religions and to obtain a clearer grasp of the overall Bahá’í perspective, divorced from any former allegiance to the Mormon belief system (see Collins).

Notes

1. It is not known to what question Shoghi Effendi is responding, and we should therefore be cautious about concluding that teaching Mormons is “doomed to failure.”

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- Unpublished letters of Shoghi Effendi, Xorol Robinson Oliver, and enclosure from David O. McKay are from the International Bahá’í Archives, Haifa, Israel.