

The Role of “Prophet, Seer and Revelator” in Mormonism



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*For false christs and false prophets will rise
and show great signs and wonders to deceive,
if possible, even the elect.
(Matthew 24:24 NKJ)*

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are
of God; because
many false prophets have gone out into the world.
(I John 4:1 NKJ)*

At the April, 2009 annual conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Thomas Monson was formally set apart as the “Prophet, Seer and Revelator” of the church.¹

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¹ Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Sustaining of Church Officers,” *Ensign* (May 2009): 27.



Fig. 1: LDS President Thomas Monson

But what does this title mean and how does it function in Mormonism? Do the LDS leaders claim their revelatory process is distinct from the spiritual guidance received by a minister in answer to his prayers?

Joseph Smith founded his church on April 6, 1830. However, at that time it was called the Church of Christ, not receiving its current name until 1838. On that spring day in 1830 Smith announced that through revelation he had been designated as God’s prophet, seer, translator, revelator, and apostle.² Today Mormon literature usually shortens those titles to simply “prophet, seer and revelator.” Verse five of that early revelation instructed Smith’s followers to accept his words as if from God’s “own mouth.”

Today I want to focus on each of the three designations given to the president of the LDS Church.

I. PROPHET

First, let us look at the claim of Prophet. Throughout the Old Testament we see prophets called by God to declare His will, to call Israel to repentance, and to warn of God’s judgment. They were usually not very popular and were often opposed by the leaders and people. These men were forerunners to the final prophet, the Messiah as mentioned in Deuteronomy 18:15. Moses declared:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me [Moses] from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear. (NKJ)

² *Doctrine & Covenants* (hereafter D&C) 21:1; 124:125 (1981 ed.).

Peter makes mention of the Deuteronomy passage in Acts 3:19-26, identifying the prophet who would be like Moses as Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews explained that the Old Testament role of prophet was fulfilled in Christ:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son....³

While there are men in the New Testament who are referred to as prophets they were not prophets in the same sense as those of the Old Testament. Also, they were not the top leaders in the Christian church, but part of local congregations, as seen in Acts 13.

Mormons will often appeal to Ephesians 4:11 in support of their office of prophet at the head of the church. But this passage says nothing about priesthood offices but is referring to various ministries within the church.

Speaks for God

When Mormons are asked to enumerate the doctrines that set their church apart from all others they usually mention that they have a living prophet. They believe that this gives their church a solid foundation that is lacking in others. Mormons do not hold their scriptures as the final authority on doctrine but instead they look to the teachings of the current president.

As a young person attending LDS meetings I often sang the song "We Thank Thee o God for a Prophet to guide us in these latter days."⁴ In fact, the Ward Teachers' message for June 1945 instructed members that "when the prophet speaks the thinking has been done."⁵ This attitude is currently promoted in the LDS book, *True to the Faith*. In it members are taught that "you can always trust the living prophets. . . . Your greatest safety lies in strictly following the word of the Lord given through His prophets, particularly the current President of the Church."⁶

When someone points out that this sounds like blind obedience, Mormons will often respond that the members are to pray for themselves

³ Hebrews 1:1–2; Acts 10:43 (New King James Version).

⁴ *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 19.

⁵ "Ward Teaching, Conducted under the Supervision of the Presiding Bishopric," *The Improvement Era* (June 1945): 354.

⁶ "Prophets," in *True to the Faith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 129-30.

to know the truth. They fail to see the circular reasoning behind these two concepts:

1. The prophet will never lead you astray.
2. You are to pray to know that he is speaking for God.

Of course, if you don't get a confirmation that he speaks for God then you are the one with the problem, not the prophet, because the prophet will never lead you astray.

When I tell Mormons I prayed about Joseph Smith and God showed me that he was not a prophet, they say I must not have prayed sincerely. The only answer that is acceptable to them is that the president of the church is God's prophet. Thus the answer is predetermined

Speaking in 1994, Apostle L. Tom Perry explained:

What a comfort it is to know that the Lord keeps a channel of communication open to His children through the prophet. ... The Lord surely understood the need to keep His doctrines pure and to trust its interpretation to only one source. ... In this way, conflict and confusion and differing opinions are eliminated.

Mr. Perry went on to quote from the second president of the LDS Church:

President Brigham Young has assured us we can have complete confidence in the prophets. He said: "The Lord Almighty leads this Church, and he will never suffer you to be led astray...."⁷

Those who study the history of Mormon doctrinal development are left to wonder about such a statement. Given the fact that President Brigham Young taught doctrines contrary to what is taught today, it is amazing to see Mr. Perry appeal to Brigham Young in affirming that the prophet will never lead you astray.

We will now look at three problem areas associated with LDS prophetic utterances.

Adam-God

The first one relates to Brigham Young's famous teaching that Adam is our Father and God, a view not endorsed today.

⁷ *Journal of Discourses* (hereafter: D&C) 9:289, quoted in L. Tom Perry, "Heed the Prophet's Voice," *Ensign* (Nov 1994): 17.



Fig. 2: LDS President Brigham Young

In 1873 Young claimed that God had revealed that doctrine to him:

How much unbelief exists in the minds of the Latter-day Saints in regard to one particular doctrine which I revealed to them, and which God revealed to me—namely that Adam is our Father and God.⁸

Further on in his sermon he identified Adam as the father of our spirits, which contradicts current LDS teaching. Brigham Young repeatedly taught that there was a hierarchy of gods and that the god over our earth is Adam. Brigham Young certainly believed that his sermons were true. Speaking in 1870 Young proclaimed:

I have never yet preached a sermon and sent it out to the children of men, that they may not call Scripture.⁹

However, in 1976 President Spencer W. Kimball stated:

We warn you against the dissemination of doctrines which are not according to the scriptures and which are alleged to have been taught by some of the General Authorities of past generations. Such for instance is the Adam-god theory.

We denounce that theory and hope that everyone will be cautioned against this and other kinds of false doctrine.¹⁰

⁸ “Discourse by President Brigham Young,” *Deseret News* (June 18, 1873): 308.

⁹ “Remarks by President Brigham Young, “Latter-day Saint Families, Etc.,” (Jan. 2, 1870), JD13:95.

¹⁰ Spencer W. Kimball, “Our Own Liahona,” *Ensign* (Nov 1976): 77.

But this seems to contradict a statement by President Joseph Fielding Smith:

Neither the President of the Church, nor the First Presidency, nor the united voice of the First Presidency and the Twelve will ever lead the Saints astray or send forth counsel to the world that is contrary to the mind and will of the Lord.¹¹

If one prophet claims a doctrinal revelation and then a later prophet denounces the teaching, which one is right? What are we to make of the Mormon claim that having a prophet somehow guards the church against false teaching? In a January 2002 interview, the *New Yorker* reported Gordon B. Hinckley as saying:

Brigham Young said if you went to Heaven and saw God it would be Adam and Eve. I don't know what he meant by that. ... I'm not going to worry about what he said about those things.¹²

In 1986 Pres. Gordon B. Hinckley gave instruction on how to deal with contradictory statements by their prophets:

We have critics who appear to cull out of a vast panorama of information those items which demean and belittle some men and women of the past who worked so hard in laying the foundation of this great cause. . . .

We recognize that our forebears were human. They doubtless made mistakes.¹³

But if Brigham Young's Adam-god doctrine is false, why is that not proof that he is a false prophet? Can twenty-five years of sermons on Adam-God be dismissed as simply a "mistake" or just Young's personal opinion?

¹¹ Joseph Fielding Smith, "Eternal Keys and the Right to Preside," *Ensign* (July 1972): 88, see also the same statement quoted by L. Aldin Porter, in "Search the Prophets," *Ensign* (Apr 2002): 30.

¹² Lawrence Wright, "Lives of the Saints," *The New Yorker* (Jan 21, 2002) (online).

¹³ Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Continuous Pursuit of Truth," *Ensign* (Apr 1986): 5.

God Was Once A Man?

Another concern with the claim of prophetic teaching is Joseph Smith's doctrine of God.

The cornerstone of Christian doctrine is that there is only one eternal God. The importance of this truth is seen in Deuteronomy 13 which specifies that a prophet can not lead you after a false god. Also, God instructed Isaiah: "I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me." Further on Isaiah recorded: "Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any."¹⁴

All Christian doctrine flows from this concept. Yet Joseph Smith taught that "it is necessary we should understand the character and being of God and how He came to be so; for I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea...."¹⁵

Apostle James E. Talmage discussed Joseph Smith's teaching in his book, *Articles of Faith*:

We believe in a God who is Himself progressive ... In spite of the opposition of the sects, in the face of direct charges of blasphemy, the Church proclaims the eternal truth: "As man is, God once was; as God is, man may be."¹⁶

If Joseph Smith, Brigham Young and James E. Talmage were prophets of God how are we to reconcile their doctrines with Isaiah's proclamation of one eternal God? They can't all be right. LDS Apostle Harold B. Lee declared:

I bear you my solemn witness that we have a living prophet, seer, and revelator. We are not dependent only upon the revelations given in the past . . . we have a mouthpiece to whom God is revealing his mind and will. God will never permit him to lead us astray. As has been said, God would remove us out of our place if we should attempt to do it.¹⁷

¹⁴ Isa 43:10; 44:6, 8; 46:5,9.

¹⁵ *Joseph Smith's History of the Church* (=JS-H) 6:305.

¹⁶ James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1981), 390 (1899 ed., p. 442).

¹⁷ *Teachings of the Living Prophets Student Manual* (Religion 333; Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 33 (3-7).

Joseph Smith was killed at the age of 38, a month after teaching his most famous sermon on the plurality of gods.¹⁸ Brigham Young, on the other hand, lived to be 76 and taught many doctrines not embraced by the LDS Church today.¹⁹ Why didn't God remove him for teaching false doctrine?

Mormon leaders undercut the authority of scripture and past prophets by pointing everyone to the current prophet to determine truth. But this leads to the question, how can we be sure the prophet is speaking an eternal truth? As with Brigham Young's Adam-god doctrine, is today's teaching going to become tomorrow's false doctrine?

Prophecy

Another problem with the claim that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God is that the majority of his prophecies failed. In 1832 he dictated section 84 of the *Doctrine and Covenants* in which God reportedly told the saints to gather to Independence, Missouri, build a temple and the city of New Jerusalem. However, the Mormons were driven out of the area the next year and the temple still has not been built.

In verses 114-115 of section 84 Bishop Newel K. Whitney was instructed by God to travel through the cities of New York, Albany and Boston warning the people that if they rejected the message of Mormonism, God's judgment was at the door and they would face "desolation and utter abolishment." This prophecy was obviously a failure.

In 1838 Smith tried again to gather the church, but this time to Far West, Missouri. Section 115 states that God called the church to build a temple in Far West but this failed as well. The Mormons were driven out of that area and no temple has been built on the site.

Keep in mind that these revelations had a direct impact on people's lives. Mormon families repeatedly moved, many losing their lands and possessions, following these instructions.²⁰

While Deuteronomy 18:22 declares that if a prophet's words fail he is to be judged a false prophet, Mormons have no such standard. There seems to be an unending stream of rationalizations as to why Smith's prophecies failed.²¹ Mormons say Christians have an unrealistic view of

¹⁸ For more on Smith's doctrine of God, see <http://www.utlm.org/onlineresources/josephsmithasprophetinviewofkingfollettdiscourse.htm>.

¹⁹ See <http://www.carm.org/religious-movements/mormonism/interesting-quotes-brigham-young-second-prophet-mormon-church>.

²⁰ For other examples of false prophecies, see our web site: www.utlm.org/onlineresources/falseprophecies.htm.

²¹ <http://www.fairlds.org/apol/ai065.html>.

testing prophets, insisting that prophets can make mistakes the same as anyone. Mormon apologist Jeff Lindsey defended Smith's prophetic track record in these words:

... many critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, including some members, have unreasonable expectations of Church leaders. ... In spite of his mistakes and errors in judgment, Joseph Smith was a prophet of God—... His divine calling as prophet was not based on his error-free track record or supernatural judgment, but was based on the fact that God made him prophet and put him in that office of the Church.²²

But why should anyone accept the claim that “God made him prophet”? What is the standard? Since it is the leaders who continually insist that the prophet cannot lead them astray, why is it unrealistic to hold him to that standard? One is left to wonder where to draw the line between false and true prophets? At what point would Mormons concede that their prophet crossed the line?

I once asked a Mormon how many failed prophecies it would take to determine that a man was a false prophet. Since he was already aware of many of Smith's failed prophecies he had to give Smith wide leeway. He finally said if 80 percent of his prophecies failed he could be judged a false prophet.

He felt that the December 25, 1832 prophecy about the civil war was one of the best examples of Smith's prophetic gift. I pointed out to him that it didn't require a revelation for Smith to predict the civil war in section 87, as both North and South Carolina had just threatened to leave the union.²³ That would be like me prophesying that there will be new eruptions of violence in the Middle East in the next 5 years. Some future events are pretty easy to guess.

Also the Mormons did not put that revelation into the *Doctrine and Covenants* until 1876. The fact that it wasn't put in earlier editions makes it look like they were waiting to see if there was a civil war before canonizing the prophecy.

II. SEER

Now we move to the second title given to the Mormon president, that of seer. Smith was probably influenced by such passages as 1 Samuel 9:9 where the Biblical view of “seer” is synonymous with “prophet” and

²² <http://www.jefflindsay.com/fallible.shtml>

²³ Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* (Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1987), 190-191, 195H.

refers to one who speaks for God. But Joseph Smith connected the seer's power with the use of an object sometimes referred to as "Urim and Thummim," "interpreters," or a "seer stone."



Fig. 3: Illustration from LDS.net

Joseph Smith claimed that when he retrieved the ancient record preserved on gold plates from their hiding place in a hill outside Palmyra, New York, in 1827 he also took away an object later referred to as the "Urim and Thummim" which was supposedly prepared by God to aid in the translation of the record.²⁴ This was described as two crystals set in silver bows, like large eyeglasses.²⁵

By the way, LDS Church illustrations of Smith translating never depict him using these large spectacles. He is usually shown sitting at a desk and simply looking at the plates.

Joseph borrowed the phrase "Urim and Thummim" from the Old Testament objects used by the High Priest to determine God's will.²⁶ These were possibly small pieces of stone or wood and kept in the priest's vestments. There does not seem to be any case in which they were used to translate a document.

The Book of Mormon has several references to these objects and associates them with the ability to translate unknown languages.

²⁴ Book of Mormon, Ether 3:22-28.

²⁵ *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, (ed. Scott H. Faulring; Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1989), 7.

²⁶ "Urim and Thummim," *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1988).

In Mosiah 8, we read of some records that were found but were in an unknown script so they were taken to the king,

for he has wherewith that he can look, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God. And the things are called interpreters ... And whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called seer.²⁷

Even though God had reportedly preserved the Urim and Thummim, or interpreters, for centuries and had them buried with the plates to insure their translation, Joseph only used them for the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon, which were lost by Martin Harris. All of the present Book of Mormon was evidently translated by use of a seer stone Smith found in a neighbor's well. Book of Mormon witness David Whitmer described the process as follows:

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat ... A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing.²⁸

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Fig. 4 Illustration of Joseph Smith translating

²⁷ Book of Mormon, Mosiah 8:10-13.

²⁸ David Whitmer, *An Address To All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: David Whitmer, 1887), 12.

But if God is responsible for the English text one wonders why there would have been the need for thousands of corrections to the various editions of the Book of Mormon?²⁹

Whitmer also discussed a failed revelation that came through Smith's stone. Martin Harris was having trouble selling a portion of his farm to help pay for the printing of the Book of Mormon. Joseph's brother, Hyrum, suggested that the copyright to the book could be sold in Canada to help cover the debt. Whitmer wrote:

Joseph looked into the hat in which he placed the stone, and received a revelation that some of the brethren should go to Toronto, Canada, and that they would sell the copy-right of the Book of Mormon ... but they failed entirely to sell the copy-right, returning without any money . . . Well, we were all in great trouble; and we asked Joseph how it was that he had received a revelation from the Lord for some brethren to go to Toronto and sell the copy-right, and the brethren had utterly failed in their undertaking. Joseph did not know how it was, so he enquired of the Lord about it, and behold the following revelation came through the stone: "Some revelations are of God: some revelations are of man: and some revelations are of the devil." So we see that the revelation to go to Toronto and sell the copy-right was not of God, but was of the devil or of the heart of man.³⁰

If Smith could give false revelations through the stone, why should we trust his Book of Mormon translation through that object?

As a point of interest, Smith's seer stone is preserved in the LDS Church First Presidency's vault but we have never seen any reference to its use in recent times.³¹ Why wouldn't the church leaders be proud of the object used to produce one of their books of scripture? Is it possible that they also know that it is simply a piece of folk magic?

Without the Book of Mormon plates scholars are unable to test Smith's translation. However, we can examine other instances of failed seership in Mormonism.

²⁹ Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *3913 Changes in the Book of Mormon* (2nd ed.; Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1996), Intro. (http://utlm.org/online_books/3913intro.htm).

³⁰ David Whitmer, *An Address to all Believers*, 31.

³¹ D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1998), 245-246.

Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible

Shortly after Smith published the Book of Mormon he began working on a corrected version of the Bible. Numerous sections of the *Doctrine and Covenants* refer to this work.³² While the LDS Church only prints extracts from Smith's revision in the back of their Bible, LDS apostle Bruce R. McConkie maintained that Smith's version is "one of the great evidences of the divine mission of Joseph Smith."³³ However, Smith was not translating from any ancient text, but simply revising the verses as he felt led. Consequently his work is not accepted by Bible scholars. One example of the way he expanded the text can be seen in John 1:1. The King James Version reads:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Joseph Smith, however, changed this verse to read:

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.³⁴

To our knowledge Joseph Smith's rendition of this verse is not supported by any evidence. In fact, an early Greek manuscript of John 1:1, known as Papyrus Bodmer II, Papyrus 66, is dated about 200 AD and translates like the King James Version.³⁵ Another interesting change is Smith's expansion of chapter 50 of Genesis, where he inserts a prophecy about himself. In his expanded text we read:

And again, a seer will I raise up out of the fruit of thy loins,...
And that seer will I bless, and they that seek to destroy him shall be confounded...and his name shall be called Joseph, and it shall be after the name of his father...³⁶

Again, there is no textual evidence for his expansion of Genesis. Mormons will often challenge a Christian on the reliability of the Bible,

³² D&C 35:20; 42:56; 45:60-61; 73:3-4; 93:53; 94:10; 104:58; 124:89.

³³ Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1979), 384.

³⁴ Holy Bible, published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 807.

³⁵ Tanner & Tanner, *Shadow or Reality?*, 381.

³⁶ LDS Published Bible, p. 799.

insisting that it has had numerous revisions. When they are asked about Joseph Smith's Inspired Version they will usually respond that he never completed the project, even though he stated in his history that he had done so.³⁷

Even if Smith did not complete the work, why hasn't any succeeding president taken up the project? Why was God so insistent that Smith work on this project, even commanding him to publish the work only to let it languish in some drawer for years? If each succeeding president has been a seer in the same sense as they claim for Joseph Smith, one of them should have been able to finish the Inspired Version. Researcher Ed Ashment concluded:

Shortly after publication of the Book of Mormon in March 1830, Smith's second canonical project was to correct errors and omissions in the Bible...

Smith declared that many more ancient records would come to light as part of the "restoration of all things." ... The belief that more books could be added to the canon has continued in Mormonism and become one of its most exciting and controversial calling cards. Since Joseph Smith's death, however, the opening in the heavens has become more restricted. While the Reorganized LDS church [now Community of Christ] has continued to add revelations to its Doctrine and Covenants, only four revelations and two "Official Declarations" produced since Smith's lifetime have been canonized by the Utah church.³⁸

Not only were there no new books added to Joseph Smith's Bible revision, he even left one out, the Song of Solomon.

Book of Abraham

A second area where Joseph Smith's gift of translating can be put to the test is the Book of Abraham. In 1835 a man named Michael Chandler came to the Mormon community in Kirtland, Ohio to show Smith his collection of Egyptian mummies and scrolls.

³⁷ Tanner and Tanner, *Shadow or Reality?*, 386-387.

³⁸ Ed Ashment, "Historiography of the Canon," in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History* (ed. George D. Smith; Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1992), 282.

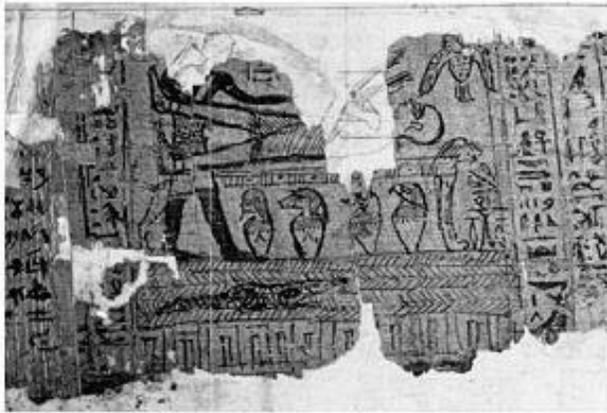


Fig. 5 Original Papyrus of Fac. No. 1, Book of Abraham

The Mormons then bought the collection for \$2400 and Smith began his work of translation. In his *History of the Church* we read:

...I commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt...³⁹

This culminated in the Book of Abraham, which is part of the *Pearl of Great Price*. The heading for that work specifically claims that it is a translation of the Egyptian scrolls:

A Translation of some ancient Records, that have fallen into our hands from the catacombs of Egypt.—The writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus.

Joseph Smith's translation was made at a time when Egyptian hieroglyphics were just beginning to be understood. LDS apostle Orson Pratt boasted:

The Prophet translated the part of these writings which, as I have said is contained in the *Pearl of Great Price*, and known as the Book of Abraham. Thus you see one of the first gifts bestowed by the Lord for the benefit of His people, was that of revelation—the gift to translate...ancient records. Have any of

³⁹ JS-H 2:236.

the other denominations got this gift among them? Go and inquire through all of Christendom and do not miss one denomination. Go and ask ... “Can you translate ancient records written in a language that is lost to the knowledge of man?” “No,” he would say, “we cannot, it is out of my power to do it.”⁴⁰

However, by the end of Smith’s life scholars were able to translate many of the hieroglyphics. Egyptologists have now translated the papyri owned by Joseph Smith and they are simply part of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, and have no relationship to Abraham.⁴¹

Mormon scholars try to dismiss this problem by either claiming that the particular piece of papyri dealing with Abraham has been lost or that Smith’s rendition doesn’t need to directly correspond to the hieroglyphics as it could be a revelation, as opposed to a literal translation. But this explanation would run counter to the specific claim made in the heading to the Book of Abraham that it is a translation from the papyrus. Smith’s claims of translating the papyri can now be put to the test and he fails.

Kinderhook Plates

Another test came to Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, Illinois. On May 1, 1843, the Mormon publication, *Times and Seasons*, announced that six ancient brass plates had been found in Kinderhook, Illinois.⁴²



Fig. 6 One of the Kinderhook Plates

⁴⁰ Orson Pratt, “The Book of Mormon, Etc,” (Aug 25, 1878), JD 20:65.

⁴¹ Tanner and Tanner, *Shadow or Reality?*, 294-369D.

⁴² *Times and Seasons*, 4.12 (May 1, 1843): 185-186.

The plates were then brought to Nauvoo for Joseph Smith's inspection. William Clayton, Joseph Smith's private secretary, recorded the event:

I have seen 6 brass plates... covered with ancient characters of language containing from 30 to 40 on each side of the plates. Prest J[oseph Smith] has translated a portion and says they contain the history of the person with whom they were found and he was a descendant of Ham through the loins of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and that he received his kingdom from the ruler of heaven and earth.⁴³

The problem is that the plates were later proven to be forgeries.⁴⁴ If Smith were truly a prophet with the gift of seership he would have known that these were fakes. Instead, he claimed that they contained the history of a descendant of Ham. How could Smith retrieve any information from fraudulent plates?

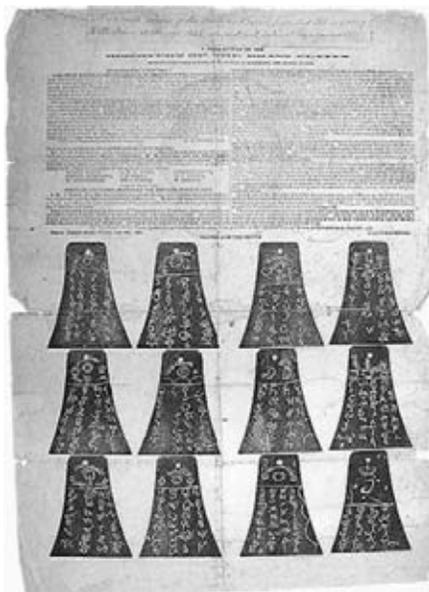


Fig. 7 Early LDS Publication showing the Kinderhook Plates

⁴³ William Clayton's Journal, May 1, 1843, as cited in James B. Allen, *Trials of Discipleship — The Story of William Clayton, a Mormon* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 117. This later became the basis of the account in the JS-H 5: 372.

⁴⁴ <http://www.utlm.org/topicalindexb.htm#Kinderhook%20Plates>

Hofmann's Documents

This leads us to the modern day test of the Mormon president and his claim of being a seer; the Mark Hofmann documents. The May 3, 1980, *Deseret News* announced that document dealer Mark Hofmann had discovered “A hand-written sheet of paper with characters supposedly copied directly from the gold plates in 1828, and also bearing other writing and the signature of Joseph Smith...”. The paper went on to state “This would make it the oldest known Mormon document as well as the earliest sample of the Prophets handwriting.”

The article was accompanied by a photograph showing Mark Hofmann and the LDS First Presidency examining the document referred to as the Anthon transcript.⁴⁵



Fig. 8 *Deseret News* Photo, May 3, 1980, of Hofmann with LDS First Presidency Examining his document

⁴⁵ *Deseret News*, Church News Section (May 3, 1980): 3.

Unfortunately, this was the beginning of the greatest fraud scheme to hit the LDS Church, which would end with many investors losing their money and the murder of two Mormons by Mr. Hofmann. If President Kimball was truly a “prophet, seer and revelator” one wonders why he was not able to discern that the document was a forgery.

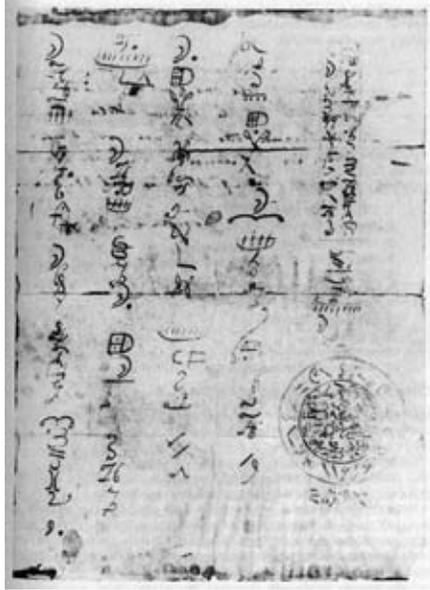


Fig. 9 Hofmann's Fake Anthon Document



Fig. 10 Original Anthon Document Owned by the RLDS Church

Had Mr. Hofmann been exposed at that time two Mormons would not have been killed.

Less than a year after the LDS Church leaders met with Hofmann regarding the Anthon transcript, the church bought a copy of a revelation

given to Joseph Smith designating his son as his successor.⁴⁶ The document even carried the wording “thus saith the Lord.” This too turned out to be a forgery of Mr. Hofmann’s and an embarrassment to the LDS Church leaders’ claim of prophetic discernment. Whatever gift of translating that Smith possessed it evidently doesn’t function in the LDS Church today.

III. REVELATOR

The third title given to the LDS president is that of Revelator. Apostle Bruce R. McConkie declared that “the Lord’s Church must be guided by continuous revelation. ...The presence of revelation in the Church is positive proof that it is the kingdom of God on earth.”⁴⁷ However, the number of “Thus Saith the Lord’s” has certainly diminished since Joseph Smith’s day.

Even before he established the Mormon Church in April of 1830, Smith had received numerous revelations. Over one hundred of his revelations are canonized in the *Doctrine and Covenants*.

By the way, not all of his revelations have been placed in the *Doctrine and Covenants*. For instance, the LDS Church has a copy of the failed Canadian revelation, but is only now preparing to make it public in their new series, *The Joseph Smith Papers*.

If revelations came so plentifully to Joseph Smith, why has there been such a dearth of published revelation since his death? Bruce R. McConkie admitted that,

It is true that not many revelations containing doctrinal principles are now being written, because all we are as yet capable and worthy to receive has already been written. But the Spirit is giving direct and daily revelation to the presiding Brethren in the administration of the affairs of the Church.⁴⁸

First, by using McConkie’s reasoning, one could argue there was no need for Joseph Smith’s revelations as we are still not able to live up to the teachings in the Bible.

Second, if revelation now comes through the less spectacular means of inner conviction, how is this any different from a Christian pastor praying about an issue and feeling the Holy Spirit leading in a particular direction? In fact, when their sixth prophet, Joseph F. Smith was

⁴⁶ *Deseret News* (March 19, 1981).

⁴⁷ McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 650 (1979 ed.).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

questioned in 1904 during the Reed Smoot Senate hearings, regarding the revelatory process in Mormonism he answered “I have never pretended to nor do I profess to have received revelations.” He went on to state:

I am susceptible, I think, of the impressions of the Spirit of the Lord upon my mind at any time, just as any good Methodist or any other good church member might be. And so far as that is concerned, I say yes; I have had impressions of the Spirit upon my mind very frequently, but they are not in the sense of revelations.⁴⁹

If Joseph F. Smith was only susceptible to the impressions of the Spirit of the Lord as “any good Methodist,” then why should his word be trusted above that of any other good minister?

In 2002 a reporter for the *New Yorker* asked President Gordon B. Hinckley if he had any communications from God:

When I asked him to describe his own revelations, Hinckley demurred. “They’re very sacred to me. They’re the kind of things you don’t want to put before the world,” he said. But he added, “There’s no doubt in my mind we’ve experienced a tremendous undertaking in the building of temples across the world, having just dedicated the hundred-and-second working temple of the Church. I believe the inspiration to move that work forward came from the Almighty.”⁵⁰

Notice that he used the word “inspiration,” not “revelation.” Since Joseph Smith published accounts of his visions and revelations, one is left to wonder why President Hinckley would not do the same if he had received any revelations.

Book of Commandments

While the Mormons continually criticize the preservation of the Bible, it is the LDS scriptures that have sustained deliberate alterations.

⁴⁹ Proceedings Before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate in the Matter of the Protests Against the Right of Honorable Reed Smoot, a Senator from the State of Utah, to Hold His Seat. [Commonly referred to as the Reed Smoot Case] (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1904) 1:99, 483-84.

⁵⁰ Wright, “Lives of the Saints.”

Joseph Smith's revelations were first compiled in a book in 1833, under the title *Book of Commandments*. In the first revelation in that book God is reported as saying "Search these commandments, for they are true and faithful, and the prophecies and promises which are in them, shall all be fulfilled."⁵¹

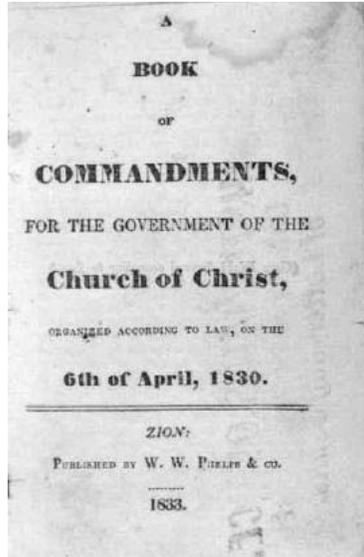


Fig. 11 Title Page of 1833 *Book of Commandments*

However, just two years later a new edition was printed, called the *Doctrine and Covenants*, where dozens of words were changed in the revelations. David Whitmer, one of the Book of Mormon witnesses, objected to the revisions:

Some of the revelations as they now appear in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants have been changed and added to. Some of the changes being of the greatest importance as the meaning is entirely changed on some very important matters; as if the Lord had changed his mind a few years after he give [sic] the revelations, and after having commanded his servants (as they claim) to print them.⁵²

⁵¹ *Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ* (Zion [Independence, MO]: W. W. Phelps, 1833), 6 (chap. 1).

⁵² Letter of David Whitmer, *Saints' Herald* (Feb. 5, 1887).

Chapter four of the *Book of Commandments* specifically stated that the only gift God had given Joseph Smith was to translate the plates of the Book of Mormon. Yet two years later this revelation was reworded to state that translating the plates was only Joseph’s first gift, thus reversing the original statement. If we are to believe that the revelations were from God and printed in 1833 by His direction, why would there be a need to rewrite many of the revelations just two years later?



Fig. 12 Book of Commandments, chapter 4, showing the additions that have been made to the text

Besides the changes in Joseph Smith’s revelations, textual revisions have been made in the Book of Mormon, Book of Moses and Book of Abraham. Each of these books is claimed to have come through divine revelation.

Plural Marriage

Our next example of changing revelations is the LDS doctrine on marriage. Section 101 of the 1835 *Doctrine and Covenants* stated that the LDS Church denounced polygamy and believed a man should have only one wife. However, Joseph Smith was secretly teaching that God revealed to him the doctrine of plural marriage, even sending an angel

with a drawn sword to press him into obedience to the command.⁵³ This doctrine was considered so important that Smith secretly married thirty-seven women in this new order.⁵⁴

His revelation on plural marriage is printed in the current *Doctrine and Covenants* as section 132. In it God instructs Smith that once this doctrine is revealed to a man he must live it or be damned.⁵⁵

Smith soon introduced the doctrine to his close associates and by the time the Mormons left Nauvoo in 1846 there were 196 men and 719 women secretly living in polygamy.⁵⁶ The fact that plural marriage was illegal in Illinois shows how important the practice must have been to the early Mormons. They considered it a command of God. Yet today the LDS Church has changed the emphasis of section 132 and teaches that only temple marriage, not polygamy, is necessary for eternal life. In fact, references to Joseph Smith's and Brigham Young's plural wives are carefully edited out of current LDS teaching manuals. Brigham Young took this doctrine so seriously that he eventually married fifty-five women in plural marriage.⁵⁷ After the Mormons settled in Utah territory Brigham Young proclaimed, "The only men who become Gods, even the Sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy."⁵⁸ In response to the growing pressure from the government to abandon polygamy in 1865 the LDS magazine *Millennial Star* proclaimed:

We have shown that in requiring the relinquishment of polygamy, they [the US Government] ask the renunciation of the entire faith of this people. . . . There is no half way house. The childish babble about another revelation is only an evidence how half informed men can talk.⁵⁹

This was the position of the LDS Church up until 1890. After federal laws had been enacted against polygamy, years of arrests and resisting the government's demand that the practice be stopped, the president of the LDS Church issued the 1890 Manifesto instructing the Mormons to cease entering into plural marriages.⁶⁰ When one reads

⁵³ Joseph F. Smith "Plural Marriage, Etc." (July 7, 1878), JD 20:29.

⁵⁴ George Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 2008), 621-623.

⁵⁵ D&C 132:3-4.

⁵⁶ Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 310.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 635.

⁵⁸ Brigham Young, "Beneficial Effects of Polygamy," (Aug 19, 1866), JD 11:269.

⁵⁹ *Millennial Star* (Oct. 28, 1865): 27:675-676.

⁶⁰ D&C, *Official Declaration 1*.

Declaration-1, in the *Doctrine and Covenants*, it comes across as a decision made to keep the leaders of the church out of jail.

Even though the suspension was claimed to come by way of revelation, no such document has been published, only a statement that such a revelation was given. Evidently the top church leaders didn't feel bound by the Manifesto as at least 220 of them secretly took additional wives after 1890. It wasn't until the Smoot hearings that the church genuinely made an effort to end plural marriage.⁶¹

But how does one reconcile the change? Section 132 is presented as a revelation from God on the "new and everlasting covenant" which included plural marriage. Then how can the church change it? Does God bow to political pressure? If baptism were outlawed would the Mormons give that up as well? How could both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young declare that polygamy was necessary for eternal life only to have a later prophet state just the opposite? How does this give a person a firm foundation regarding doctrine?

Blacks

Another problem in relation to LDS revelatory claims is their changing position on blacks. Even though a few blacks were allowed to be ordained to the priesthood during Joseph Smith's life-time, there was no clear teaching regarding their ordination. Smith's writings gradually moved toward viewing blacks as unqualified.

The Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham carry statements relating to those who are black and who can't hold the priesthood.⁶² From these Brigham Young concluded that all blacks were to be denied the priesthood until the return of Christ. In 1854 Young preached:

When all the other children of Adam have had the privilege of receiving the Priesthood...and have received their resurrection from the dead, then it will be time enough to remove the curse from Cain and his posterity. ...he is the last to share the joys of the kingdom of God.⁶³

This was the church position for over one hundred years. Now there is a division among Mormon apologists as to whether the restriction on blacks was a matter of doctrine or a practice.

⁶¹ B. Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (Urbana & Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 130, 169, 182, 206, 251, 260, and Appendix 2.

⁶² *Pearl of Great Price*, Abr. 1:20-27; Moses 5:16-41; 7:8, 22.

⁶³ Brigham Young, "Spiritual Gifts, Etc.," (Dec 3, 1854), JD 2:143.

In a 1954 interview with Dr. Sterling M. McMurrin, of the University of Utah, President David O. McKay stated:

There is not now, and there never has been a doctrine in this Church that the Negroes are under a divine curse.⁶⁴

However no such public statement was issued and the rank and file of the church continued to believe the ban was based on revelation. For instance, in the 1966 edition of *Mormon Doctrine*, Apostle Bruce R. McConkie wrote:

Negroes in this life are denied the Priesthood;... It is the Lord's doing, is based on his eternal laws of justice, and grows out of the lack of Spiritual valiance of those concerned in their first estate.⁶⁵

Then, in June of 1978, President Spencer W. Kimball issued what is now referred to as Declaration-2 in the *Doctrine and Covenants* lifting the ban.

In September of 1978, three months after the ban was lifted, McConkie made this explanation about the contradiction between prior statements by LDS prophets and the new position on blacks:

There are statements in our literature by the early Brethren which we have interpreted to mean that the Negroes would not receive the priesthood in mortality. ...Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world. ...It doesn't make a particle of difference what anybody ever said about the Negro matter before the first day of June of this year, 1978.⁶⁶

If past prophets could speak from "limited understanding" and without "light and knowledge," couldn't this apply to the president of the church today? By this reasoning a future prophet could conceivably

⁶⁴ Gregory A. Prince and W. R. Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Early Mormonism* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2005), 79.

⁶⁵ McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 527-528 (1966 ed.).

⁶⁶ Bruce R. McConkie, "All Are Alike Unto God," *CES Religious Educators Symposium* (BYU, Aug 18, 1978) (<http://speeches.byu.edu/reader/reader.php?id=11017>).

reverse the whole position and go back to restricting blacks from holding the priesthood or reinstitute plural marriage.

But if the restriction against blacks was a practice, and not a doctrine, why did it take a revelation to change it? And why didn't God give the revelation during Brigham Young's era? Why wait until after the civil rights movement had gained popularity and civil rights legislation had been passed?

President Spencer W. Kimball announced that a revelation had been received to end the ban but didn't publish the actual revelation, just a statement about a revelation. But the actual process seems to have been more a matter of the top leadership having countless meetings to discuss and pray about the possibility of a change.

When they finally gained unanimous consensus among the First Presidency and the entire Twelve Apostles, they formulated the statement printed in the *Doctrine and Covenants* as Declaration-2.⁶⁷ Their statement reads in part:

...we have pleaded long and earnestly in behalf of these, our faithful brethren, spending many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance.

This whole process seems to put the burden of prejudice on God with the lofty-thinking brethren pleading with God to change His mind.

Modern Day Revelation

Since 1876, revelation seems to be more a matter of modifying past revelation than giving new instruction. In 1876 the church removed from the *Doctrine and Covenants* the section on marriage that denounced polygamy, replacing it with section 132 commanding polygamy. Then in 1890 the church reversed its stand on polygamy, and issued the Manifesto. However, section 132 remains in the *D&C* to this day.

Then in 1921 they removed the Lectures on Faith from the *Doctrine and Covenants*, which were first added in 1835. It was evidently decided that they contained defective teaching on the nature of the Godhead. Throughout the twentieth century the temple ceremony, supposedly given by revelation, was modified. Then in 1978 the priesthood ban on blacks was reversed. But these all seem to be reversing past doctrine, not giving further light.

⁶⁷ D. Michael Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1997), 15-16.

If revelation today is more a matter of spiritual impressions not needing canonization, how does that differ from any pastor seeking divine guidance for his congregation?

In Declaration-1 President Wilford Woodruff is quoted as saying:

The Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as President of this Church to lead you astray...If I were to attempt that, the Lord would remove me out of my place...

If the brethren cannot lead us astray, how could Joseph Smith have been wrong about selling the Book of Mormon copyright? How could Brigham Young have taught false doctrine? How could Spencer W. Kimball be fooled by Mark Hofmann?

As a Mormon I often heard people refer to 2 Nephi 4:34 in admonishing someone not to put their trust in the arm of flesh. Yet the brethren continually tell the Mormons to trust them, they will not lead them astray. How is unquestioning obedience not trusting in the arm of flesh?

Christians test doctrine on the basis of its agreement with the Bible, not man. Once I put the Bible before the words of men, I realized that I must reject the Mormon prophets.

As we have the opportunity, let us reach out in love to our LDS friends and neighbors, sharing with them the good news that Christ is the only prophet we need today. He, alone, is the one who will never lead us astray.