

Chapter 1

A New World Religion

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Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, traditional branches of Christianity — and Mormonism? If you ask some demographers and sociologists, the idea of Mormonism emerging as the newest major world religion isn't far fetched. In the Christian sector, although Protestantism grew out of Catholicism, Mormonism bills itself as a completely fresh start, with enough distinctive beliefs and practices to back up that claim.

Mormonism isn't the newest kid on the religious block, but its start during the 1820s seems relatively recent — in fact, compared to other world religions, Mormonism is a toddler, still maturing in terms of culture, identity, growth, government, and other aspects. As a blueprint for the rest of the book, this opening chapter gives an overview of what it means to be a Mormon.

Why Know about Mormonism?

If you ask Mormon missionaries why you should find out more about Mormonism, they'll tell you that the LDS Church is the restoration of the Savior's true church, and he wants you to convert. However, we suspect this answer won't satisfy many of our non-Mormon readers, so here are some other reasons:

- ✔ **It's the quintessential U.S. religion.** Increasingly, historians are acknowledging that Mormonism is the most successful, significant homegrown U.S. religion, founded just 54 years after the Declaration of Independence. In many ways, the story of Mormonism mirrors the story of the United

States, and the faith reflects many American ideals and traits. In fact, Mormons believe God inspired the formation of the U.S. partly as a suitable homeland for the gospel's restoration. (For an overview of early Mormon history, see Chapters 4, 11, 12, and 13.)

- ✔ **It's one of the fastest-growing religions.** Chances are that one or more of your friends, neighbors, or relatives has already joined the LDS Church or soon will. Consider these statistics:
 - At the end of 2003, the Church had 5.5 million members in the U.S. and nearly 12 million members worldwide, almost triple its total in 1978. For several decades, the Church has added about 300,000 new converts every year. (For more on missionary work and Church growth around the world, see Chapter 14.)
 - The National Council of Churches reported in 2004 that the LDS Church was the fifth-largest U.S. religious body, after the Roman Catholic Church, Southern Baptist Convention, United Methodist Church, and Church of God in Christ. The LDS Church is now larger than any of the mainline Protestant denominations, such as Lutheran, Presbyterian, or Episcopalian, in the U.S.
 - The *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 2004* (Abingdon Press) reports that the LDS Church had the highest rate of growth (1.88 percent per year in the United States) among the 15 largest U.S. Churches. The growth rate abroad is even higher.
- ✔ **It teaches good principles and practices.** Even for those people who don't embrace Mormonism as a religion, the faith yields many useful ideas that you can adapt to fit any worldview. Following are some highlights:
 - **Strengthening families:** Mormons are known for their large, tight-knit, superfunctional families. One main reason is that Mormons believe families can be together forever (for more on this idea, see Chapter 5). Also, the LDS Church teaches practical techniques for strengthening families, such as family home evening (for more info, see Chapter 17).
 - **Providing for the needy:** Marshalling its organizational might, the LDS Church has created one of the world's most admired systems for helping people provide for their own material needs. Church-owned farms, ranches, canneries, storehouses, and other enterprises provide not only essential goods but also employment. Increasingly, the Church shares its bounty with people outside the faith. (For more on the Church's welfare program and humanitarian efforts, see Chapter 8.)
 - **Maintaining health:** When founding prophet Joseph Smith introduced Mormonism's health code, known as the *Word of Wisdom*, little did he know that science would validate many of these teachings more than 100 years later. Likewise, the Mormon law of chastity helps reduce a host of physical, emotional, and spiritual

ills. Today, Mormons are known for enjoying some of the most favorable health rates of any demographic group. (For more on these teachings, see Chapter 16.)

The Mormon Worldview



The following equation best sums up how Mormons understand the universe and the purpose of life: As humans are, God used to be; as God is, humans may become.

One main key to getting the gist of Mormonism is the belief that a person's existence doesn't begin with birth on this earth. Rather, Mormons believe that all people lived as spirits before coming here. For Mormons, this belief helps explain a whole lot about the conditions and purposes of this earthly life, which they view as God's test of his children. In addition, Mormons hold some unusual views about the afterlife, particularly regarding what human beings can become. (For a more detailed treatment of these beliefs, see Chapter 2.)

Life before mortal life

If life doesn't start with conception and birth, when does it start? For Mormons, it *never* really started, because each person has an eternal essence that has always existed. However, Mormons believe that God created spiritual bodies to house each person's eternal essence, so he's the spiritual father of humankind. All human spirits were born before the earth was created.

Sitting at the knee of God and his wife, many spirit children expressed a desire to grow up and become like their Heavenly Parents (for more on them, see Chapter 3). So God set up the *plan of salvation*, which involved creating an earth where his children could gain physical bodies and go through a challenging test of faith and obedience. Those who pass the test with flying colors get the chance to eventually start an eternal family like God's.

In *premortality*, as Mormons call this stage, two of the oldest spirit siblings made a big impression. The first spirit, named Jehovah, volunteered to help everyone overcome the sin and death they'd unavoidably encounter during the earthly test, and this brother was eventually born on earth as Jesus Christ (for more about him, see Chapter 3). Mormons believe he's their Savior and strive to be like him. The other spirit, named Lucifer, rebelled against God's plan of salvation, convincing a bunch of siblings to follow him and start a war. God banished Lucifer and his followers to the earth without bodies, and Mormons believe that these spirits are still trying to win humans to their side and thwart God's plan (for more about the devil, see Chapter 2).

Life on earth

Good news: In the Mormon view, everyone who's born on this earth chose to follow God's plan of salvation and come here. Even those who give in to evil during earthly life will still receive an eternal reward for making the correct choice during premortality. Mormons don't believe that humans are born carrying the stain of Adam's original sin, as Catholics and some Protestants do. But they do believe that each individual's circumstances in this life are at least partly influenced by what that person did in premortality.

One of the most difficult aspects of this mortal test is that humans can't remember what happened in premortality, so they must rediscover their divine origins through faith. However, God sent Jesus Christ not only to overcome sin and death but also to establish the gospel, which serves as a road map back to God. Two kinds of messengers help people understand and follow this gospel: prophets and the *Holy Ghost*, a spiritual being who speaks directly to the human spirit (for more on him, see Chapter 3). By listening to these guides, people can figure out the puzzle of life. Unfortunately, the devil strives to fill the world with distractions and counterfeits.

Another hard aspect of the earthly test is that God generally won't interfere with people's freedom to act, even when they do terrible things to each other or fail miserably. In addition, God allows accidents, natural disasters, illnesses, and other difficulties to challenge his children and prompt them to seek him out. For Mormons, it helps to remember that these temporary trials represent a mere blink of the eye on an eternal scale, and they exercise faith that God will comfort and protect those who ask for his help to endure suffering.

During mortality, Mormons believe that everyone needs to participate in certain rituals in order to live with God in the afterlife and become like him. Someone holding God's priesthood authority, which Mormons believe currently comes only through the LDS Church, must perform these rituals. If a person dies without receiving these ordinances, Mormons perform the rituals in temples on behalf of the deceased person, whose spirit then decides whether or not to accept (for more info, see Chapter 7). These ordinances are

- ✓ Baptism (see Chapter 6)
- ✓ Confirmation, which includes receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost (see Chapter 6)
- ✓ Priesthood ordination (for all worthy males; see Chapter 4)
- ✓ Washing and anointing (see Chapter 7)
- ✓ Endowment (see Chapter 7)
- ✓ Sealing, including celestial marriage for those wedded on earth (see Chapter 7)

Life after mortal life

Mormons believe that when humans die, they slough off their physical bodies and return to the spiritual state. Some go to spirit paradise, and some go to spirit prison. Mormons believe that the spirits in paradise visit the spirits in prison and teach them the gospel, and some choose to accept it and cross over into paradise. Whether they're in paradise or prison, the stopover in the spirit world is only temporary, because God has greater things in store.

Eventually, after God's spirit children have experienced their earthly tests and paid for their sins either by receiving the Savior's Atonement or suffering themselves, he'll resurrect everyone with perfect physical bodies that will last forever. Then he'll sort people into three heavenly kingdoms:

- ✔ **Telestial kingdom:** Those who live in sin, die without repenting, and never accept the Savior's Atonement go here, after suffering for their own sins in spirit prison.
- ✔ **Terrestrial kingdom:** Those who live good lives but don't embrace the full gospel will inherit this kingdom. Jesus pays for their sins.

(Both the telestial kingdom and the terrestrial kingdom are glorious paradises, not hell or places of torture. For more on the three tiers of heaven, see Chapter 2.)
- ✔ **Celestial kingdom:** This highest kingdom is reserved for those who live the full gospel and receive the proper ordinances. This kingdom is where God lives and where his children can become like him.

Joseph Smith and Mormonism's Beginnings

To Mormons, the term *gospel* means the "good news" that Christ died to save humanity and also refers to a very practical package of tools and instructions that the Savior provides for getting humans back home to God. That package includes doctrines, commandments, ordinances, continually updated revelations, and the priesthood authority to act in God's name (for more on the Mormon priesthood, see Chapter 4). Remember, Mormons believe that the Savior was God's first spirit child way back before the earth was formed, so he's been on deck to reveal his gospel to prophets from Adam onward.

In the Mormon view, the timeline goes like this: First the Savior gave his gospel to Adam, but Adam's descendants eventually lost it through disobedience and corruption. Then the Savior gave it to other prophets, such as Noah and Abraham, but their people gradually lost it, too. Finally, when the Savior

was born on the earth to accomplish his mission of overcoming sin and death for all humankind, he reestablished his gospel. However, within a few decades after his resurrection, humans fumbled it away yet again.

During the 1,700-year religious dry spell that Mormons say started after the Savior's New Testament apostles died, he worked behind the scenes and prepared the earth to eventually receive his gospel again. In 1820 he began the process of restoring it for the final time. When a teenager named Joseph Smith knelt in prayer to ask God which church he should join, God the Father and his son Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph and told him that none of the existing churches were true. Within ten years, Joseph Smith launched the Savior's restored gospel in the form of what people now know as the Latter-day Saint religion. (For a more detailed account of Mormonism's founding, see Chapter 4.)

Translating additional scriptures

After Joseph Smith's answer to prayer in 1820, which Mormons refer to as his *First Vision*, an angel began regularly appearing to prepare him for his prophetic calling. Finally, the time arrived for him to perform one of the most important steps in restoring the gospel: bringing forth additional scripture that helped restore correct principles and could serve as a witness and testament of the new faith.

As Mormons understand it, something very special happened in the New World between 600 B.C. and A.D. 400. At the beginning of this 1,000-year time period, God instructed a prophet named Lehi to leave Jerusalem with some other families and move to the Western Hemisphere. Over the centuries, this little tribe grew into to a major civilization that underwent continual cycles of faith and wickedness, prosperity and destruction. In his usual way, the Lord sent prophets to teach these people and call them to repentance.

Soon after the Savior's resurrection, he dropped by to spend a few days with about 2,500 of his followers in the Western Hemisphere, ministering to his "other sheep" (John 10:16). Before the Savior ascended to heaven, he called 12 additional apostles to carry out his work in this part of the world. Under apostolic leadership, the people managed to hold onto the gospel for another 400 years after the Savior's momentous visit. Eventually, however, their lack of faith led to their corruption and extermination, and that was the end of the Book of Mormon civilization.

The New World prophets and apostles kept records on metal plates. A prophet named Mormon made a *For Dummies*-style compilation of the people's spiritual history — well, a shortened version, anyway — and his son Moroni buried it in a hillside. About 1,400 years later, Joseph Smith's family settled

near this same hillside in upstate New York. With the help of God, who helpfully provided interpreting devices to go along with the metal plates, Joseph translated and published the ancient record, and today the LDS Church distributes millions of copies each year in over 100 languages. If the proof of Mormonism is in the pudding, then the Book of Mormon *is* the pudding. (For more about the Book of Mormon, see Chapter 9.)

Establishing the Church

While translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith and his helpers came across passages that prompted questions, such as how to properly baptize someone. The questions that Joseph asked Heavenly Father triggered the following key events:

- ✔ In 1829, John the Baptist appeared to Joseph and his chief scribe to restore the *Aaronic Priesthood*, the preparatory priesthood authority necessary to perform basic ordinances, including baptism.
- ✔ Soon after John the Baptist's visitation, the New Testament apostles Peter, James, and John appeared on earth to give Joseph the *Melchizedek Priesthood*, the full authority to act in God's name within the Church organization. (For more on the two Mormon priesthoods, see Chapter 4.)
- ✔ In 1830, Joseph Smith officially organized the Church, which Mormons believe the Savior recognizes as his only "true and living" church.
- ✔ Until Joseph's assassination in 1844, he received numerous additional revelations, scriptures, and ordinances that helped fully establish the new religion (for an overview of these additions, see Chapters 10 and 11).

Coming to terms with the M-word

As a prophet who lived somewhere in North or South America around A.D. 400, Mormon was just one of dozens of important figures in LDS history. Nevertheless, he's the man whose name became the nickname for this whole religious movement. Unfortunately, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a tad frustrated with the nickname.

As we say earlier in this section, the prophet Mormon's claim to fame was compiling and abridging the ancient records that became the Book of Mormon, titled that way because of Mormon's central editorial role. After Joseph Smith translated and published the book, it didn't take long for detractors to start calling his followers *Mormonites*, because of their belief in the book. The Mormons got rid of the "ite" part of the nickname, and eventually the term stuck and lost most of its negative connotations.



Still, *Mormon* is just a nickname. What would Mormons rather be called? Although the Church hasn't completely ruled out the terms *Mormon* and *Mormonism* at the cultural level, it asks the media to use the Church's full name on first reference in a story — in other words, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — and then say “The Church of Jesus Christ” on each subsequent reference. However, that lingo hasn't exactly caught on, even at the daily Salt Lake newspaper owned by the Church.

At Church headquarters, use of the term *Mormon* has been gradually phasing out, with one notable exception: the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. What usually takes the place of *Mormon* is the term *Latter-day Saint*, or *LDS* for short. The Church doesn't exactly love being called the LDS Church, but the leaders like it a heck of a lot better than *Mormon Church*, which they strongly discourage.

Throughout this book, we use the terms *Mormon*, *LDS*, and *Latter-day Saint* interchangeably to refer to the doctrine, teachings, practices, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Some Mormons joke that LDS really stands for “Let's drink Sprite,” in reference to many Mormons' decision to keep away from cola (see Chapter 16). Within the Church, some hipsters — yes, Mormon hipsters do exist — have started using the word *Mo* to refer to things Mormon, but we won't go that far.

Day-to-Day Mormon Life

Viewing this mortal life as a time of testing, Mormons see their faith as the textbook for an A+, and they strive to live the religion 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In fact, one of the primary virtues in Mormonism is obedience to the commandments and counsel of the prophets, as well as to the spiritual promptings of the Holy Ghost. The religion provides standards that Mormons believe will help them become pure and righteous enough to reenter God's presence, with the Savior's crucial help to overcome sin and death.

Following is an overview of what daily life is like for Mormons all over the world. Not everyone lives up to all these standards, of course, but this is pretty much what practicing Mormons believe they ought to be trying to do:

- ✔ **They follow a disciplined routine.** Each day, most Mormons pray individually, pray as families, and spend time reading the scriptures (for more on these practices, see Chapter 17). They may also devote time on one or more weekdays to fulfilling volunteer Church assignments, such as preparing a Sunday school lesson or helping clean the local meeting-house (see Chapter 6).
- ✔ **They embrace a G-rated lifestyle.** To avoid addictions and maintain spiritual purity, Mormons abstain from coffee, tea, tobacco, alcohol, and harmful drugs. In addition, they keep sex strictly within the bonds of

heterosexual marriage and shun anything “unholy or impure,” including immodest clothes, pornography, profanity, and gambling. Some Mormons even refrain from cola drinks and R-rated movies. (See Chapter 16.)

- ✔ **They seek a change of pace on Sunday.** On Sundays, Mormons spend the day resting and worshipping with their families, and they attend a three-hour block of classes and meetings at their local meetinghouse, which is open to the public. On the Sabbath, most Mormons avoid work, shopping, sports, and other worldly distractions. (See Chapters 6 and 17.)
- ✔ **They kiss Monday-night football goodbye.** Mormons devote Monday evenings to spending time and studying the gospel with their families (see Chapters 5 and 17).
- ✔ **They take part in rituals.** Mormons regularly attend the *temple*, a special building set aside for the faith’s most sacred ordinances, such as celestial marriage. Temples aren’t open on Sunday or to the public, and most of the ordinances performed there are on behalf of the dead. Mormons who’ve gone through the temple wear special undergarments each day to remind them of their covenants with God and to provide spiritual protection. (See Chapter 7.)
- ✔ **They occasionally sacrifice food and money.** Each month, Mormons fast for two meals (about 24 hours) to increase their spirituality, spending that time praying, reading the scriptures, attending church, and otherwise trying to get closer to God. They donate money saved from those meals — and more, if possible — to the Church’s fund for helping the needy. In addition, Mormons tithe a full 10 percent of their income to the Church. (See Chapter 16.)

What Makes Mormonism Different?

Although Mormons share a lot in common with other Christian and non-Christian faiths, they hold several uncommon beliefs, especially when compared to Protestant Christianity. Here’s a brief overview of some key points where Mormons differ from the norm:

- ✔ **Premortality:** No other mainstream Christian denomination agrees with Mormons that the essence of each human has always existed and that humans were born spiritually to Heavenly Parents before being born physically on earth. Although people who believe in reincarnation can easily relate with the concept of a life before this life, Mormons believe that everyone gets only one shot at mortality. (See Chapter 2.)
- ✔ **The Trinity:** Most Christians think of God as a universal spirit that manifests as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (check out *Christianity For Dummies*, written by Richard Wagner and published by Wiley, for more on that idea). By contrast, Mormons see these deities as three separate, individual beings who are united in purpose. (See Chapter 3.)

- ✔ **God's nature:** Mormons believe that God the Father underwent a test much like this earthly one, which they argue doesn't deny his eternal nature because *all* individuals have always existed, in one form or another (see "Life before mortal life," earlier in this chapter). Today, God has a glorified body of flesh and bones, and he possesses all possible knowledge and power throughout the universe. (See Chapter 3.)
- ✔ **The Savior:** Mormons believe that Jesus Christ was God's firstborn spirit child, which means he's the oldest spiritual sibling of all humans. However, Jesus is God's only *earthly* child, which means that he's the only perfect mortal who ever lived. Mormons believe that the name *Jehovah* in the Old Testament refers not to God but to his son, who's taken the lead role in saving humankind since before the earth was formed. (See Chapter 3.)
- ✔ **The devil and hell:** Mormons believe that God didn't create evil but that each individual being has the ability to choose good or evil. The devil was God's first, most powerful spirit child to choose evil, and he tries to persuade others to do the same, but evil could still exist without him. As far as hell is concerned, Mormons believe that wicked people will suffer consequences for their sins, but only those who personally know God and still rebel against him will go to an eternal hell, which Mormons call *outer darkness*. (See Chapter 2.)
- ✔ **Adam and Eve:** In the Mormon view, Adam and Eve were heroes who consciously took the steps necessary to begin mortality. Mormons view mortality as an essential test for eternal progression. Without this physical experience in a fallen world, humans can't learn and grow enough to eventually become like God. (See Chapter 2.)
- ✔ **Grace versus works:** Although many other Christians emphasize salvation solely by God's grace through faith, Mormons believe that people are saved by grace after they've done all they can to obey God and be righteous. Good works alone don't save people, but they do nourish people's faith and make them more open to receiving the grace that saves them. As far as bad works go, all sins require repentance before grace can kick in. (See Chapter 2.)
- ✔ **The Atonement:** Mormons believe that Jesus Christ paid for humankind's sins not just on the cross but also in the Garden of Gethsemane, where his pain was so great that he sweat blood. Christ pays the price of the sins of anyone who repents and obeys his gospel, but those who refuse will suffer for their sins. Mormons don't use the sign of the cross, as some Christians do, but they believe that Christ broke the bonds of death through his resurrection. (See Chapter 3.)
- ✔ **Salvation:** In contrast to many Protestant Christians, who believe you're either saved or you're not, Mormons believe all humans will be resurrected and will receive an eternal reward depending on individual worthiness. Although pretty much everyone will receive a measure of

salvation in one of three eternal kingdoms, only those who at some point accept the Savior's complete gospel — the same one currently preached and practiced by the Mormons — will receive *full* salvation, which means returning to live with God. In addition, Mormons use the term *exaltation* to refer to humankind's potential to become like God, which happens only for people who reach the highest level of the highest eternal kingdom. (See Chapter 2.)

- ✔ **Priesthood:** In the Mormon view, the *priesthood* is the authority to act in God's name for the salvation of his children, within the bounds of the LDS Church organization. Instead of ordaining professionals who've completed special training, the Church ordains all worthy and willing Mormon males from age 12 on up, via the laying on of hands by someone already holding the priesthood. Any adult priesthood holder can perform ordinances such as baptism and healing or be called to lead a congregation. In contrast with the traditions of some other churches, Mormon priesthood holders don't get a nickel for their service. (See Chapter 4.)
- ✔ **Ordinances:** In some Christian denominations, ordinances such as baptism are outward expressions of commitment, not requirements for salvation. Mormons, on the other hand, believe that each individual must receive certain physical ordinances in order to return to God's presence, and authorized priesthood holders must perform them. In addition, Mormons hold the unusual belief that if a person dies without receiving an essential ordinance, a living Mormon can perform it in a temple on the deceased person's behalf, and his or her spirit will decide whether or not to accept it. (See Chapters 6 and 7.)
- ✔ **Apostles and prophets:** Mormons believe that the Savior issues revelations to whatever prophet is currently leading the LDS Church. These revelations instruct how the leaders should administer the Church under current earthly conditions. In addition, Mormons believe that the Savior calls modern apostles to serve as his special witnesses, similar to the New Testament apostles. (See Chapter 8.)
- ✔ **Scriptures:** Most Christians believe the Bible is God's only authorized scripture. Although Mormons uphold the Bible and prayerfully study its teachings, they believe it contains some translation errors and omissions. In addition, they believe that other civilizations recorded scriptures equally as valid as the Bible, most notably the New World civilization that gave rise to the Book of Mormon. In fact, they believe that God is still revealing scriptures in this day and age. (See Chapters 9 and 10.)
- ✔ **God's only true church:** Although most other Christians accept each other's churches as valid in God's sight, Mormons believe their own church is God's only "true and living" church currently on the face of the earth. Mormons respectfully acknowledge that many religions contain elements of God's eternal truths, but they believe that only the LDS Church possesses the full package of God's authorized priesthood,

ordinances, and revelations. Mormons see the LDS Church as the complete modern restoration of the same true religion that other groups and civilizations have possessed throughout human history. (See Chapter 4.)

- ✓ **Family and marriage:** Some people believe that earthly family relationships, including marriage, end at death. Mormons believe that specially ordained temple workers can seal earthly families together for eternity and that couples can keep progressing together to become Heavenly Parents. (See Chapters 2, 5, and 7.)