

C. Mormons

The Mormon movement owes its inception to one man: Joseph Smith, Jr., who was born in Vermont late in 1805. The Smith family found it difficult to earn a living on the frontier. So in 1816, they moved to Palmyra, New York, which was their twentieth move since Joseph's birth. His father was often off on treasure-hunting expeditions, taking his likeable son with him. His mother Lucy Mack Smith, who believed in magic and had spiritual visions, opened a cake-and-beer shop.

Joseph Smith Jr. was a product of all the currents of thought pervading western New York during this period. A popular topic of conversation was the identification of the "true" church. Most believers were convinced their system of faith was correct and would not hesitate to begin a new splinter group to prove their point. Joseph set about to solve the problem.

At age fourteen Smith saw a vision: "I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all descriptions, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name, and said, pointing to the other - 'This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!'" (Pearl of Great Price, 2:17). In 1823, Smith declared, the angel Moroni appeared to him and disclosed the location of a partially buried box containing golden plates in the "reformed Egyptian tongue," together with "two stones in silver bows" for translating the plates.

Not until 1827 was Smith directed to remove the plates from their place in the Hill Cumorah near Palmyra. Taking three years to translate the book by dictating through a curtain, Smith finally published the Book of Mormon in 1830. The angel then recovered the plates, and they are no longer to be seen. Less than two weeks after the publication of the Book of Mormon, on April 6, 1830, in Fayette, New York, the "Church of Christ" was started with six members. Joseph was designated "Seer, a translator, a Prophet, an Apostle of Jesus Christ."

When persecution evicted the tiny church from New York, they fled to Kirtland, Ohio, their headquarters from 1831 to 1837. Consolidation and growth took place, and they erected a large temple. Completed in 1836, this temple still stands. Today the Reorganized branch owns it. In 1831, Joseph Smith dedicated the plot of ground upon which Mormons still believe a great temple will be erected. It is located in Independence, Missouri. The temple lot is shared by three separate groups giving allegiance to Joseph Smith as their founder. Through hostile persecution and finally governmental force, the Mormons were pushed out of Missouri.

Arriving on the swampy banks of the Mississippi 45 miles north of Quincy, Illinois, the Mormon settlers by 1844 had erected a complete city of 20,000 inhabitants including its own military and judicial system. A million-dollar temple was erected that was later destroyed by fire.

The Mormons lived in relative peace until 1844 when a group became disgruntled or disillusioned with Smith's pronouncements and practices. They founded a newspaper, the "Nauvoo Expositor," in which they attacked Smith, accusing him, among other injustices, of the practice of polygamy. Joseph denied the charges, had the newspaper office destroyed and all available copies of the "Expositor" burned. Illinois Governor Ford arrested Joseph and several of his followers to stand trial for the charges brought by the editors of the newspaper. They were taken to Carthage, Illinois, to await trial. Joseph and his brother Hyrum were jailed. On June 27, 1844, the two were killed while defending themselves from an irate mob who stormed the jail. This martyrdom, while it was followed by a brief period of confusion and disorganization, became a rallying point for the Mormons. Their leader had died for his faith.

Brigham Young was chosen as their new president. One group, led by Smith's widow, thought the mantle should be placed on Joseph Smith III, then only 12 years old. It was Young who led the westward trek. Young's leadership was very important for the overcoming of the despondency, cold, poverty and Indians. He led in transforming the Valley of the Great Salt Lake into a flourishing agricultural area. At the time of his death, there were over 140,000 Mormons.

Authorization of polygamy was officially announced at the Mormon conference in 1852, and soon new polygamous settlements appeared as far away as Mexico and Canada. The Salt Lake City Tabernacle was completed in 1867.

John Taylor served as president of the church from 1880-1887. His successor was Wilford Woodruff, who served from 1889 to 1898 and suspended the law of polygamy in 1890, although it remained a divine Mormon doctrine. The presidents following Woodruff were Lorenzo Snow, Joseph Fielding Smith, Heber J. Grant, George Albert Smith, David O. McKay, Joseph Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, Spencer W. Kimball, Ezra Taft Benson, Howard W. Hunter and Gordon B. Hinckley, 1995 - the 15th President of the church.

This brief history was taken from "The Christian Confronting the Cults" (pp. 11-13) and "The Cults Exposed" (pp. 64-67).