

EXTRACTS FROM THE HISTORY OF JOSEPH SMITH

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: JosephSmith-History | VOLUME: Pearl Of Great Price | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

This narrative serves as the foundational origin story for the Latter-day Saint movement. Written by Joseph Smith, it details his early life in New York during a period of intense religious revivalism (c. 1820). Distressed by the 'war of words' between Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists, Smith seeks divine wisdom based on James 1:5. He reports retiring to a grove where he is visited by two personages (God the Father and Jesus Christ), who forbid him from joining any existing sect, declaring all their creeds an abomination and their professors corrupt. The narrative jumps to 1823, where Smith is visited by an angel named Nephi (identified as Moroni in later editions) who reveals the location of gold plates containing the Book of Mormon. The text chronicles the retrieval of these plates in 1827, the persecution Smith faced, the translation process using the Urim and Thummim, and the validation of the characters by Professor Anthon. It culminates in the visitation of John the Baptist in 1829, who restores the Aaronic Priesthood to Smith and Oliver Cowdery, authorizing them to baptize one another for the remission of sins, thereby re-establishing divine authority on earth which Smith claims had been lost.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith, God the Father, Jesus Christ, Nephi (identified as the angel in this 1851 text), Oliver Cowdery, John the Baptist, Martin Harris, Professor Anthon

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. UNIVERSAL APOSTASY

Assertion: All Christian sects are wrong, their creeds are an abomination, and their professors are corrupt.

"I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong... that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical Christianity holds that while the visible church may err, the gates of hell shall not prevail against the true Church (Matthew 16:18) and that the faith was 'once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 1:3). Smith's assertion that all creeds (including the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds) are an 'abomination' is a total rejection of historic Christian orthodoxy. It necessitates a 'Restoration' of something completely lost, whereas Evangelicals believe in the continuity of the body of Christ throughout history.

2. RESTORATION OF PRIESTHOOD AUTHORITY

Assertion: Authority to baptize and administer ordinances was lost and had to be physically restored by John the Baptist.

"Upon you, my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah, I confer the Priesthood of Aaron... which holds the keys... of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelicals believe in the 'Priesthood of all Believers' (1 Peter 2:5, 9), meaning every Christian has direct access to God through Jesus Christ, the sole Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). This text claims that specific ritual authority (Aaronic Priesthood) is required for valid baptism and remission of sins, and that this authority is hierarchical and exclusive to Smith's movement. This re-introduces a Levitical/mediatorial system that Hebrews 7 argues was fulfilled and superseded by Christ.

3. THE NATURE OF GOD (PLURALITY)

Assertion: The Father and Son are two separate, distinct personages.

"I saw two personages... One of them spake unto me, calling me by name, and said (pointing to the other) 'This is my beloved son, hear him.'"

Evangelical Comparison: While the text uses the titles Father and Son, the visual description of 'two personages' appearing separately and distinct from one another lays the groundwork for Mormonism's rejection of the Trinity (one Being, three Persons). In Evangelical theology, God is spirit (John 4:24) and the Father is not

a separate physical being from the Son in the way humans are separate. This vision presents a henotheistic or tritheistic trajectory.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental theological gap is the doctrine of the 'Great Apostasy.' Joseph Smith-History premises its entire narrative on the claim that all Christian sects are 'wrong,' 'corrupt,' and 'abominable.' This necessitates a 'Restoration' of authority and truth. Evangelical Christianity holds to a 'Reformation' model where the church may need correction but never ceased to be the Body of Christ. Furthermore, the text redefines salvation to include necessary rituals (baptism) administered by a specific human hierarchy, moving from Sola Fide (faith alone) to a system of authorized works and ordinances.

Shared Values:

Belief in the Bible as the Word of God (though insufficient).; Jesus Christ is the Son of God.; Necessity of repentance and baptism.; Desire for wisdom from God.

Friction Points:

- 1. [Critical] Theology Proper (Ecclesiology) – Claims the gates of hell prevailed against the church (Total Apostasy).
- 2. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Adds new scripture (Book of Mormon) and claims the Bible is insufficient for truth.
- 3. [Critical] Sola Fide – Makes remission of sins dependent on a ritual (baptism) performed by a specific human authority.
- 4. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Re-establishes a mediating priesthood class necessary for access to ordinances.
- 5. [Critical] Theology Proper (Trinity) – Depicts Father and Son as separate personages, denying the ontological unity of the Trinity.

Semantic Warnings:

"Priesthood"

In Text: The exclusive authority and power of God delegated to man to act in His name for the salvation of the human family.

Evangelical: The status of all believers who have direct access to God through Christ (1 Peter 2:9); or Christ's specific role as High Priest (Hebrews 7).

Example: *In this text, Smith and Cowdery cannot baptize until they receive 'Priesthood.' In the Bible, Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch without a recorded ordination ceremony.*

"Church"

In Text: A specific institutional organization established by Joseph Smith with restored keys.

Evangelical: The invisible body of all true believers in Christ across all denominations (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Example: *Smith is told to join 'none' of the churches, implying the true Church was absent from the earth.*

"Salvation/Remission of Sins"

In Text: Contingent upon baptism by proper authority.

Evangelical: Contingent upon faith in Christ's finished work (Acts 10:43).

Example: *The text states baptism is 'for the remission of sins' and requires the Aaronic priesthood to be valid.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: In this text, salvation is linked to the 'remission of sins' which is obtained through baptism.

How Attained: By repentance and baptism by immersion, performed by one holding the restored Aaronic Priesthood.

Basis of Assurance: Assurance comes from the validity of the administrator's authority (Priesthood) and the sensory experience of the Holy Ghost.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text explicitly rejects Sola Fide by making the ritual of baptism (and the authority to perform it) a prerequisite for the remission of sins. In contrast, Romans 10:9 states that confession and belief bring salvation.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Join none of the existing Christian sects.
2. Ask God for wisdom if lacking.
3. Baptize by immersion for the remission of sins (requires authority).
4. Listen to the prophet (Joseph Smith).

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept the Book of Mormon as scripture.
2. Accept Joseph Smith's role as the Restorer.
3. Reject the validity of all other Christian baptisms.
4. Endure persecution as a sign of truth.

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism by immersion performed by one holding the restored Aaronic Priesthood.
2. Ordination to the Priesthood (for men).

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In this 1851 text, Joseph Smith identifies the angel who visited him as 'Nephi.' I noticed modern versions say 'Moroni.' Why do you think the name changed?
2. The text says all Christian creeds are an 'abomination.' Do you believe that includes the Apostles' Creed which simply affirms belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
3. If the Bible is insufficient because people interpret it differently, how does the Book of Mormon solve that problem if people also interpret it differently today?
4. Does the requirement of a specific priesthood for baptism mean that no one was truly saved or forgiven of sins between the Apostles and Joseph Smith?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Quest for Wisdom – We all lack wisdom and feel the confusion of the world. God does desire to answer us. [James 1:5 is true, but the answer God gives is found in His Son, who is the Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24), not in a new organization.]
2. The Desire for Forgiveness – Joseph's anxiety about his standing before God is a universal human experience. We all need assurance. [Romans 5:1 - 'Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.']

Spiritual Weight:

1. Isolation/Us vs. Them [Severe] – The text creates a heavy burden of isolation by framing the believer as part of a persecuted minority against a 'corrupt' world. This generates fear of leaving the group, as the outside world is seen as spiritually dangerous and antagonistic.
2. Uncertainty/Confusion [Moderate] – By undermining the Bible's clarity, the text creates a dependency on the Prophet/Church for truth. The believer cannot trust their own reading of Scripture but must rely on the 'restored' interpretation.
3. Legalism/Ritual Anxiety [Severe] – The insistence that ordinances are only valid if performed by specific authority creates anxiety. 'Did I have the right priest? Was the prayer said perfectly?' Salvation becomes a matter of technical validity rather than faith in Christ.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Subjective spiritual experience (feelings/visions) validated by sensory experience (seeing plates/angels).

Verification Method: The 'James 1:5 Method': Praying to God to receive a personal revelation or manifestation to solve confusion.

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelical epistemology relies on the objective, finished revelation of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17). While the Holy Spirit illumines Scripture, He does not provide new doctrinal content that contradicts the written Word. Smith's epistemology elevates personal experience above the historic understanding of Scripture.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Published in 1851 (Pearl of Great Price), events described 1820-1829.

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated/written 1838).

Textual Issues: A significant textual variant exists in this 1851 version: The angel is identified as 'Nephi' ('his name was Nephi'), whereas modern editions of the Pearl of Great Price have emended this to 'Moroni.' This suggests fluidity in the early historical memory of the movement.