

Happy Birthday Joseph Smith!

bob mccue

October 18, 2005

<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

Joseph Smith Jr., Mormonism's founding prophet, would have turned 200 years old on December 23, 2005 which accounts for the current flurry of Mormon news articles. Most of this shows Mormons at their clean-cut best, and Mormons generally deserve a hardworking, pleasant image. However, the more we know about history, the better we can understand the present. This makes examining Mormonism's foundation important.

In the early 1800s, Joseph Smith claimed that God appeared to him and commanded him not to join any church because all were "abominations". We are told that Peter, James and John gave Smith God's exclusive authority and angelic visitors and the voice of God guided Smith as he led God's Kingdom on Earth. Add to this lots of sex, deception, a run for the U.S. Presidency, a claim to be "King of the Earth", several mass migrations and millions who today revere Smith as second in importance to only Jesus Christ, and we have quite a story.

While there are many ways to interpret Joseph Smith, one simple question takes his and Mormonism's most important measure: Was he reliable?

Smith was a convicted con man. Among other things, he claimed to see buried treasure by looking into a small brown stone. People then paid him to find the treasure and some were unhappy enough with the results to take him to court where he was convicted on fraud related charges. This cooled his enthusiasm for treasure seeking. He then began his prophetic career.

Smith reported that an angel gave him golden plates from which he translated the Book of Mormon. He used his treasure seeking stone to do this, mostly without the golden plates present.

Smith's stature as prophet helped him to seduce many women. What he eventually called polygamous marriages were often little more than clandestine affairs. Several of Smith's over thirty "wives" were young girls; others were already married and remained so while secretly seeing Smith. In a few cases, Smith sent husbands out of town on Mormon business before propositioning their wives.

Rumors of adultery and polygamy swirled around Smith as he allowed other Mormon leaders to join him in his secret practice. Meanwhile, for over a decade, Smith and the others denied their involvement.

Smith claimed to translate ancient records, but none of his work has been validated. For example, his mistranslation of the "Book of Abraham" from Egyptian papyri became apparent when scholars developed the ability to read Egyptian. And over a century of Book of Mormon scholarship has produced mountains of evidence that disconfirms what Smith said about it.

While Smith sometimes admitted error, he excused his most serious deceptions on the basis that God told him to lie. And in his purported revelations from God, Smith said that God also deceives us when this is for our good.

Disillusioned Mormons left Smith in droves as reality collided with his grandiose claims. However, his emphasis on secrecy hid his deceptions until many were too entrenched to leave. And as great salesmen do, he continued to attract new followers. Then as Mormonism began to stumble over public disclosure of polygamy and other excesses, Joseph Smith was murdered.

Was Joseph Smith reliable? Apparently not. Yet millions of lives are based on his word. How can this be?

After his death Smith's followers splintered as his associates fought to be his successor. Brigham Young led one group to the Utah desert where they grew into mainstream Mormonism in a harsh environment where the Mormon hallmarks of good neighbourliness and hard work were essential to survival.

For Mormon leaders like Young, a mythologized Smith was useful and history was troubling. So inconvenient facts were suppressed and Smith's deceptions were not understood until long after Mormonism reached critical mass as an American subculture that mere historical scandal would not derail. Mormonism's momentum today includes over a century of tithing that has made it a financial juggernaut that would rank well up the Fortune 500 were it a corporation. This enables Mormons to purchase first class public relations expertise. Madison Avenue supercharges Mormon myth-making.

Even great advertising, however, cannot resolve the painful tension between the stories that underpin Mormon life and historical reality available at a few mouse-clicks. Mormon leaders emphasize that Mormons should avoid information that questions their faith and rely instead on the warm feelings felt while worshipping that confirm Mormon beliefs. The certainty that such feelings are God's voice and hence the most trustworthy evidence of reality

leaves Mormons susceptible to many kinds of emotional manipulation and is likely responsible in part for Utah's high rate of anti-depressant consumption, personal bankruptcy, suicide and other dysfunctional social behaviors. Non-Mormons living in Utah have particularly poor statistics in some of these categories.

Today's Mormon leaders are accomplished, sincere men and Gordon Hinckley, Mormonism's prophet, is particularly impressive in this regard. However, they seem to suffer from Joseph Smith's principal flaw – they systematically deceive when telling Mormonism's story and use belief based on false premises to extract enormous amounts of time and money from their followers. This is a modern version of Plato's "noble lie" – the lie told by wise leaders to get followers to do what is best for them – in this case, to follow God's chosen leaders.

Joseph Smith's shadow still falls heavily on Mormonism. And while his followers are noted for their sincerity, strong moral and family values, community spirit, and other good things, their word about Mormonism's reality is like Smith's – unreliable.