

I'm Mr. Beat

I'm here at Zion, the place where some people believed Jesus Christ would return to the earth. Now, how do we KNOW this is where the Second Coming of Jesus would be? Well, this dude said that God told him it was.

Where am I? Well before I tell you exactly where I am, let me give you a clue. I'm somewhere in the United States. Which means this video is about yep...you guessed it...the Mormons.

Mormonism describes the beliefs and traditions of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Well, MOST of them. Mormons are both a religious and cultural group related to Mormonism. Some of them don't like to call themselves "Mormon" I should mention.

And some of the nicest people I have ever met in my entire life are Mormon. Look, I know it's a stereotype, but the stereotype is absolutely true. They're darn good people. I love them.

That said, you might be surprised to hear that the Latter Day Saint movement is one of the NEWEST religions. It's only been around less than 200 years...so not that much longer than I'VE been around, yo, and I've been around. But DESPITE only being around for less than 200 years, more than 17 million people around the world currently follow the Latter Day Saint movement.¹² Whether it's because of the Book of Mormon musical that the South Park guys created or the common site of missionaries like these guys knocking on your doors, you have probably already heard of Mormonism, especially if you're an American. So why did Mormonism become such a big deal? Well, it can all be traced back to THIS one, smooth-talking, dude. More on him in a bit.

Here's the story of Mormonism, a uniquely American religion.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thsyoUZW9vE>
(clip) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3BqLZ8UoZk>

But before we get into it, this video is once again sponsored by Ground News. Ground News has been a constant sponsor of my channel over the years because I'm constantly using it to get out of my echo chambers and easily see how different media outlets are spinning stories. Let me show you an example.

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¹ <https://www.slttrib.com/religion/2023/04/01/global-lds-membership-reaches-new/>

²

https://s3.amazonaws.com/monkdev.mnk.26072/uploaded/a/0e13535791_1641229532_audit-report-for-fiscal-year-2020.pdf

(clip) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3BqLZ8UoZk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4NemVO4JL0> (wrote out of the hat)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaRsv1xNT3A> (kooky Joseph Smith)

-The Early Years-

As I said earlier in this here motion picture, Mormonism began with this guy here. Oop. Over there. Joseph Smith. Without Joseph Smith, there is no Latter Day Saint movement. Smith. What kind of last name is that?

Anyway, Smith was born on December 23, 1805 in Vermont, one of 11 children to Lucy Smith and Joseph Smith, Sr. He grew up on a farm. After years of crop failures and failed business investments, the family moved west...specifically to Western New York state. Historians later called this area the “Burned-over district” in reference to all the passionate religious revivals that took place in the area that marked the Second Great Awakening, a time when a bunch of people got excited about Protestant Christianity after going to camp meetings and listening to emotional preachers. There is evidence that the Smith family got caught up in the Second Great Awakening after moving to the Burned-over district. Joseph’s mom, Lucy, especially got into it, although the Smiths apparently never fully dedicated themselves to just one religion. Joseph’s dad, Joseph Sr., apparently made money as some sort of wizard. I’m not exaggerating here. He’d claim he could see things all other people couldn’t see and had the ability to find treasures. And people actually believed him, and they’d actually pay him to help them find these treasures. They even called it treasure hunting. Now, did Joseph Smith, Sr. actually ever find any treasure? Nah, but that didn’t matter. He was making money, baby. Joseph Sr. taught his son to hustle people just like he did, and soon Joseph Jr. was doing his own treasure hunts.

When Joseph was about 12, he became interested in different religions, but wasn’t fully satisfied with any one of them. In 1820, he told a Methodist minister that he had been praying in the woods near his home when both God and Jesus Christ appeared to him and told him his sins were forgiven. Oh, and that all Christian churches of the time had “turned aside from the gospel.”³ Well, the minister dismissed the story, basically telling Joseph he was full of crap. Also, I should add that this “First Vision” story has had multiple versions over the years. The version I gave you is the “official” church version.

Flash forward to September 21, 1823, (yes we actually have a specific date for this) That’s the day Joseph said that the angel Moroni visited him and told him of a book made of golden plates, as well as a bunch of other really cool old stuff, was buried in a hill near his house. [Yeah, that’s the hill.](#) Over the next four years, Joseph supposedly tried to find this buried book made of golden plates, but couldn’t locate them. Meanwhile, Joseph got much better at pretending to find lost treasure to a point where he was able to make money for his family who was once again

³ Bushman, Richard Lyman (2005). *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf. ISBN 1-4000-4270-4.

financially struggling by this time. In 1825, a dude named Josiah Stowell hired Smith to find a lost Spanish silver mine that he believed existed near Harmony, Pennsylvania. After finding absolutely nothing, Stowell's nephew, Peter Bridgeman, sued Joseph Smith.

What's crazy, though, is that Stowell himself was still a true believer in Joseph Smith. In fact, Stowell even testified at the trial to defend Smith.

It was around that time that Smith met Emma Hale while staying with her family in Harmony as he helped Stowell try to find treasure. The two fell in love. However, after Smith proposed to Emma, her father did not approve of them getting married because he didn't trust him. Well, they got married anyway, eloping on January 18, 1827. Only after Smith promised to stop treasure hunting did Emma's dad start to come around, letting them live on his property and helping Smith start a legitimate business.⁴

But what about the golden plates? Did you forget about the golden plates? Let's once again talk about those golden plates.

Supposedly, and this is obviously a pretty big supposedly, Smith returned to that hill near his old house on September 22, 1827 and finally was able to dig up that book of golden plates. Smith began telling everyone all about the golden plates and apparently caused a big fuss. Smith said the golden plates had "Reformed Egyptian" written on them that he'd translate into English. Uh, but no one could see the golden plates. Nor could they see Smith translating the plates. Well, that's convenient. Later, Smith claimed he could translate the golden plates without even seeing them. He could just put his handy seer stone in his hat, bury his face in it, and the stone would light up with the words to translate.

One person incredibly impressed with Smith's news of the golden plates and his ability to translate them was a rich neighbor of his back in New York named Martin Harris. Harris traveled to Harmony and began helping Smith write down the translations in April 1828. One person NOT impressed with Smith's translations? Harris' wife, Lucy. She asked to see the translations for herself. Harris convinced Smith to take 116 pages of the translations to show Lucy to convince her, but it was at the Harris house that the translations somehow mysteriously DISAPPEARED. (clip) Ok, that's speculation, now, but regardless, when Smith heard about the translations missing, this devastated him. You see, he apparently was NOT able to translate those first 116 pages again. Smith then said Moroni returned to him and took the golden plates away from him as punishment for letting the translations get away. Conveniently, Moroni returned the golden plates to him a few months later and said he no longer had to translate from the first 116 pages again, and after that both Emma and a dude named Oliver Cowdery helped him translate new stuff.

The new stuff began "thou deliveredst up that which was sacred, into the hands of a wicked man, who has set at nought the counsels of God, and has broken the most sacred promises,

⁴ Bushman, Richard Lyman (2005). *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf. ISBN 1-4000-4270-4.

which were made before God, and has depended upon his own judgement, and boasted in his own wisdom." Yes, that was in reference to Harris losing the first translation. And yes, despite the new revelations trash talking him, Harris remained steadfastly loyal to Joseph Smith and the church.

This new stuff ultimately ended up being what we now call the Book of Mormon, the first important holy book of the Latter Day Saint movement. And yes, later there was a famous musical making fun of it. The golden plates, by the way, just went back to heaven after Smith was done translating.

By June 1829, the Book of Mormon was complete.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-yfi5Nilrg> Smith got a publisher to make copies of it, all financed by...you guessed it...Martin Harris, who mortgaged his farm to the publisher to pay for printing costs, then later sold his farm to pay off the mortgage. Poor guy. Ever since, more than 200 million copies of the Book of Mormon have been printed.

Around this time, Smith said he got another revelation from God -hold up, I think I'm getting a revelation from God, too. Ope. Nevermind. I think that was just my stomach growling- Anyway, Smith said God told him that only three dudes would know first hand about the existence of the golden plates. David Whitmer, the aforementioned Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris obviously...I mean the guy has money. They'd be known as The Three Musketeers. Er, I mean, the Three Witnesses.

-You Could Make a Religion out of This-

Smith, who many already viewed as a prophet, officially founded his new church at various locations in the Burned-over district on April 6, 1830. At that time it was simply called The Church of Christ. Smith and the Three Witnesses claimed that Native Americans had believed in Jesus Christ hundreds of years before he was even born, and that he later appeared to them after his resurrection. They also claimed that their church held the only true form of the Christian religion that went directly back to Jesus Christ. Harris said that anybody who didn't become a Mormon within two years would be kicked off the planet. No big deal. Now, while Smith was able to quickly attract new followers to be baptized into his young church, he also attracted a lot of criticism from other Christians who said he was a charlatan. After all, many knew about Smith's earlier treasure hunting schemes. Not only that, Smith's authority began to be undermined after Cowdery, a dude named Hiram Page, and other members started to ALSO claim to be getting revelations directly from God. In response, Smith said that only HE had the ability to get revelations and all those other revelations came from the devil! Hmm

Soon Smith's followers were threatened with mob violence, and Smith himself kept getting arrested. On June 30, 1830, he got arrested for being a "disorderly person." After being found innocent, he was arrested again right after his release. Due to all this, Smith decided to move his family and followers west to Kirtland, Ohio, getting there in February 1831.

Meanwhile, Smith had sent Cowdery and others to Missouri to convert Native Americans to Mormonism. On the way there, Cowdery came upon a preacher named Sidney Rigdon and his more than 100 followers in northeastern Ohio. Rigdon was impressed with the Book of Mormon, and within a couple weeks had declared Smith's religion the Truth with a capital "T" and he and his followers all became Mormons, just like that man.

Back in Kirtland, Smith still kept getting arrested and still kept facing violent mobs. On March 24, 1832, a mob broke into his house in the middle of the night, dragged him from his bedroom, tore his clothes off, beat him up, tried to poison him, and even tarred and feathered him. But Smith survived, and after that had lots of success growing his church. By the middle of 1835, there were nearly 2,000 practicing Mormons in the area.⁵ It was in Kirtland that Smith began to become interested in polygamy, or the act of having more than one spouse at one time. Smith's friend Isaac Morley had multiple wives, and Smith was like, "huh, maybe I could pull that off, too, eh?"

-Searching for Zion-

It was also in Kirtland that Smith decided he wanted to build the City of Zion, a New Jerusalem, or a holy city where they could worship freely and await the return of Christ.

And where did he want that City of Zion to be? Why in Missouri, of course. Specifically Jackson County, which is where I am right now.

Smith sent hundreds of Mormons to settle in Jackson county, but this freaked the locals out and they formed militias to prevent settlement. Plus, many Mormons ended up dying of cholera there. Long story short, this City of Zion didn't work out, and many Mormons fled to nearby Clay County. In March 1836, back in Kirtland, Smith led a dedication of Kirtland Temple, the first Mormon temple. In January 1837, Smith and other church leaders created the Kirtland Safety Society, a company that at one time issued currency. Well, Smith and several Kirtland Safety Society associates later got accused of fraud, and once again the locals were mad at Smith for stealing their money. Not only that, but Smith and Cowdery were now bitter enemies, especially after Cowdery said Smith was having an affair with his teenage maid. So it was time for Smith to bail again!

This time, Smith headed to Missouri himself, along with Sidney Rigdon and a new group of Mormons, settling in Caldwell County. Specifically, in a place called Far West. It's where I'm at now, by the way. That's right. I've been here the whole time and you didn't even notice! Caldwell County was supposed to be a safe haven for Mormons, but some of them still lived outside the county, leading to more tensions with non-Mormon settlers. After non-Mormons wouldn't allow Mormons to vote on August 6, 1838, a big fight broke out, leading to a siege of the town of DeWitt, ultimately leading to all Mormons living there getting kicked out and a wider conflict known as the 1838 Mormon War. It was during this war that the Missouri government arrested

⁵ Arrington, Leonard; Bitton, Davis (1979). *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf. [ISBN 0-394-46566-0](#).

Smith and charged him with treason. He spent four months at this here jail, with his brother Hyrum and others, here in Liberty, Missouri. Well, this is a reconstruction of the jail. Smith and his crew supposedly were able to escape after bribing the guards with whiskey. Oh yeah, we're in Liberty now. Look at that. Freedom.

The 1838 Mormon War culminated with Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs issuing Missouri Executive Order 44, aka "The Extermination Order," which kicked all Mormons out of the state. If they didn't leave they'd be killed. 21 Mormons died during the war, including 17 at what became known as Haun's Mill's massacre. The Mormon refugees fled back east to Illinois. They soon established a new settlement along the banks of the Mississippi River, calling it Nauvoo. Smith became the town's mayor, of course. One of the notable settlers of Nauvoo? Brigham Young. He had been with the Latter Day Saint movement since Kirtland, and by now was one of the church's most influential leaders.

At Nauvoo, the Mormon Church prospered and gained national attention. Not all of it good. Smith was also able to attract a few more rich and influential converts, like THIS dude, John Bennett. Smith planned the construction of the church's second temple, the Nauvoo Temple. It wouldn't be completed until 1846, and even then was only actually used for less than three months. More on that in a bit.

It was also in Nauvoo that the church began to change some of its doctrines. One of those doctrines? Uh yeah, plural marriage. Yep, polygamy was now more accepted among Mormons, and Brigham Young, who had at one time had as many as 56 wives and 57 children, led the wedding ceremonies, which Mormons called sealing ordinances, of two of Smith's plural wives in 1842. Smith would have as many as 49 wives himself before his death, with some getting married to him as young as 14 years old.⁶ Ugh.

Perhaps due to all the polygamy, by the end of 1842 popular opinion in Illinois had turned against Mormonism. Oh here we go again. As more and more of the locals turned against Nauvoo's residents, Smith went to the United States Congress to try to get it to make Nauvoo an independent territory with the right to get protection from federal troops. After Congress didn't respond, he was like, "fine, I'll run for President of the United States," running in the election of 1844. No joke. Not only that, he started his own militia and a group called The Council of Fifty, established to decide which national or state laws Mormons should obey, and which ones they should ignore. It also set the framework for a Mormon government. By the time of Joseph Smith's presidential campaign, the population of Nauvoo had swelled to 12,000, making it the second most populous city in Illinois after Chicago.

However, Smith's presidential campaign ended...uh...because he died.

After newspapers published negative stories about Smith and Mormons, Smith ordered his militia to destroy one newspaper's printing press. Well, this led to more people getting upset, and, long story short, Smith and his brother Hyrum got in trouble for inciting a riot and eventually

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Joseph_Smith%27s_wives

were charged with treason in Carthage, Illinois. On June 27, 1844, an armed mob stormed the jail Smith and Hyrum were in and killed them. Mormons everywhere...and by this time they were expanding into Europe...were devastated by the news of Smith's death. Their prophet had died. Most non-Mormon newspapers, however, described Smith as a religious fanatic. Not only that, there was no clear person to take Smith's place as the leader of the church, leading to a power vacuum. Well, Brigham Young seized the moment, making HIMSELF the new leader of the church, and most everyone pretty much went along with it.

That said, not EVERYONE went along with Young, and after Smith's death several groups splintered off to form their own denominations. The largest of these was the Community of Christ, which today is based in Independence, Missouri. That's their temple. Just a couple blocks from Harry Truman's house, as a matter of fact.

-This Is The Place-

Anyway, by 1846, the violence on Mormons was only getting worse. Due to the escalation of conflicts between Mormons and other Illinois residents, Brigham Young decided to lead his followers west to a place where they could practice their religion in peace. As it so happens, the United States was about to win a war with Mexico and gain all of THIS territory...holy crap. Yeah, Young figured some of the land should work as a new place for them to settle.

And so, they headed west. Following what is today simply known as the Mormon Trail, they traveled 1,300 miles (2,100 km) into the western frontier. When they arrived in what is now Utah in the summer of 1847, the Mexican-American War was still going on. The land still belonged to Mexico, but it might have been obvious that the land would soon be under American control as Mexico's capital was about to be captured. The first Mormon scouts arrived at what's now called the Salt Lake Valley on July 21, 1847. When Brigham Young first came upon the valley three days later, he supposedly said "This is the right place."

Over the next few years, tens of thousands of Mormon pioneers would pass by the same spot to see their new home. Young planned a city there, naming it "The City of the Great Salt Lake" after the giant lake nearby. But that was a mouthful, so eventually people just called it "Salt Lake City." Yep, that's how it looks like today. I got to spend some time here earlier this year with Mr. Terry, M.Laser, and the Cynical Historian. It's an awesome city.

In the early years, though, it was a fairly isolated, tight-knit community where people shared most of their crops. Dang communists. Of course, Young planned a big, beautiful temple. It only took 40 years to complete. That's how it looks like today. It's currently under renovation, in case you couldn't tell.

Between 1847 and 1869, approximately 80,000 settlers moved to the Salt Lake Valley, most of them Mormons. Now, keep in mind that the Ute, Goshute, and Shoshone nations all had claims in the area as well, and as more and more Americans came, there were more and more skirmishes between the two groups. Regardless, the Mormons branched out to settle far outside

of Salt Lake City, dreaming of creating their own Mormon state called Deseret. Today, many of the Mormons who live in what's known as the "Mormon corridor," can directly trace their ancestry to the first Mormons who settled here in the second half of the 1800s.

Congress created Utah Territory as part of the (sing) Compromise of 1850 (sing) and President Millard Fillmore made...you guessed it...Brigham Young the territory's first governor. Wait, and he also made him superintendent of American Indian affairs? Ouch. Keep in mind Young was already still the leader of the LDS Church, so we had a little bit of mixing of church and state going on here. Yeah, with Young in charge of both the church and the state, it was basically a theocracy. Young supported legalizing slavery in Utah...and polygamy, of course.

And there was the Utah War, aka the "Mormon Rebellion," a clash between Mormon settlers in Utah and the federal government lasting from May 1857 to July 1858. Well, it wasn't much of a war. Or even much of a rebellion, for that matter. 150 people did die during the conflict, but 120 of those died during the Mountain Meadows Massacre, a paranoid attack on innocent people who just happened to be traveling through Utah. Not a good look, man, when Mormons are killing random people. After the tragedy, Young stepped down from being governor, but would continue to lead the church until his death in 1877.

Utah didn't become a state until 1896, mostly because that's how long it took before the Mormons finally agreed to ban polygamy. That said, less than 30% of Mormons actually practiced it before then, and several continued to secretly practice it afterward.⁷ By that time, many non-Mormons now lived in Utah. Today just around 42% of Utah residents are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁸ Still, there is no denying the BIG influence Mormonism has had on this state.

Today, there are more than 70 branches of Mormonism. [This map](#) shows every country you find Mormons. That's pretty impressive, especially considering how it all got started.

There's no need to sugarcoat this. Joseph Smith was basically a con artist. And anyone who says otherwise is trying to whitewash history. Before his untimely death, he had been arrested at least 42 times, according to one source.⁹ Everywhere he went, he seemed to attract mob violence and controversy. Still, I argue Smith had the last laugh. Mormonism is arguably the most successful American-made religion. In fact, today the Latter Day Saint movement is one of the FEW religious movements GAINING members, not losing them.

Due to the success of Mormonism, in fact, you could argue that Joseph Smith was one of the most successful con artists in American history.

⁷ Phipps, Kelly Elizabeth (2009). "Marriage and Redemption: Mormon Polygamy in the Congressional Imagination, 1862–1887". *Virginia Law Review*. **95** (2): 435–487. ISSN 0042-6601. JSTOR 25478708.

⁸ <https://religionnews.com/2023/12/28/study-utah-is-no-longer-a-majority-mormon-state/>

⁹ Cullimore, James (January 4, 1977), "Devotional, Brigham Young University", *Speeches.BYU.edu*, Brigham Young University

I did a ton of research for this one, but please check out my sources in the description. Two books, in particular, you ought to check out are American Zion by Benjamin Park and American Crucifixion by Alex Beam. Thanks to Mr. Terry and the Cynical Historian for contributing to this video. Especially Mr. Terry...he went above and beyond taking me around teaching about Utah history and he read over my script. Be sure to check out both of their channels. But I know there's more to the story. What did I leave out? You bet your bottom dollar you had better comment to let me know all about it. Thanks for staying curious.

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American Crucifixion: The Murder of Joseph Smith and the Fate of the Mormon Church by Alex Beam

Purchase here: <https://amzn.to/3YEi1qO>

First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins by Steven Harper

Purchase here: <https://amzn.to/48DARmC>

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Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet (A Biography) by Dan Vogel

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<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2007/04/god-is-not-great-mormonism-a-racket-becomes-a-religion.html>

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