

## Praise to the man by Ron Cappelli

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 29 April 2010 17:39 - Last Updated Monday, 17 May 2010 08:46

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"Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah! Jesus anointed that Prophet and Seer. Blessed to open the last dispensation. Kings shall extol him and nations revere" (LDS hymn #27, Praise to the man).

There are those outside the LDS faith who have the erroneous impression that we worship Joseph Smith in much the same way Catholics worship the Virgin Mary. Worse yet, there are some who believe that we honor and revere Joseph Smith more than we do Jesus Christ. As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints we find such opinions misinformed at best and viciously ignorant at worst. Yet when we try to explain that we view him as a prophet, in the same way we do many of the great Biblical giants, such as Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Peter and Paul, it becomes difficult for others to understand how we can equate this nineteenth century man with the likes of those ancient holy men of God.

What makes this comparison seem even more puzzling to many is that when they study the life of Joseph Smith it doesn't seem to fit their image of what a prophet is supposed to be like. Joseph was born in the small rural town of Sharon, Vermont on December 23, 1805 into a family who basically were poor farmers. When he was thirteen years old (which is the same as him being in his fourteenth year) he was living on a farm in another small town called Palmyra in upstate New York. It was while there he claims that, in response to a prayer, he saw both God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ in a grove of trees on his father's farm. With little formal training, he further claims that while living in Harmony, Pennsylvania, he translated an ancient record inscribed on gold plates which were written in reformed Egyptian. By the time he was in his mid-twenties, he organized and established a church of his own in Fayette, New York.

Critics claim there are several points in this history which show that Joseph couldn't possibly be a prophet of God. First, he was only a mere boy (just barely in his teens) when he had his first vision of God. More than that, he was just a farm boy with very little formal education. He never attended high school, let alone had any college or seminary training. In addition to that, Sharon, Vermont, Palmyra, New York, Harmony, Pennsylvania, and Fayette, New York are not well known centers of intellectual and religious study. In fact, each of them are small towns with little or no cultural significance. Therefore, how is it possible that a person who was raised all of his life on a farm with just the barest essentials of education, could have any credibility to form a church whose doctrines and practices dare hope to accurately represent the rich and complex teachings found in the Bible? When compared to those who have started other Christian denominations, Joseph Smith can't hold a candle to them.

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It is widely accepted that in order for a man to adequately preach the gospel, he must have gone to college, studied theology and have been trained for the ministry. It is believed that without such a background, a person has no qualifications or fitness to teach others the word of God. For example, Martin Luther, who started the Lutheran Church, was a professor of theology at Wittenburg University in Germany.

Huldrych Zwingli followed Luther's Protestant Reformation in Switzerland. As a boy he "was well educated at Swiss schools and at the University of Vienna. He became a priest in 1506 and served at Glarus. There he was influenced by the writings of the Dutch theologian Erasmus... In 1518 he was appointed preacher at the Grossmünster Cathedral in Zürich [where] he began to institute gradual reforms in the church" (Compton's Encyclopedia).

John Calvin, who started the Presbyterian faith, studied theology at the University of Paris, then studied law at the University of Orleans in France, and studied Greek at the University of Bourges, also in France. He was part of the French Protestant Reformation movement and was a publisher of a paper known as the "Institutes of the Christian Religion" before forming his own church.

John Wesley, who founded the Methodist church was the son of the Reverend Samuel Wesley who was an Anglican Rector at Epworth, England. John attended Oxford University and then afterwards studied theology for six years at Christ Church in London, England. Upon completion he became an Anglican Priest. It was while he was thus serving in this capacity that his studies led him to a new method of studying the scriptures, and, hence the name for which his church is known - the Methodists.

But what qualifications does Joseph Smith have upon which he can claim the right to understand the Bible, and, more importantly, to guide others into salvation? The critics say he has none! Therefore, how can Mormons claim to revere him as a prophet and be taken seriously?

Before we can adequately answer that question, perhaps it would be helpful if we first studied the lives of those in the Bible whom Christians do revere and honor as prophets.

The first mention of a man of God in the Bible is found in the fifth chapter of Genesis. His name

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was Enoch, the son of Jarad. Beginning in verse 21 we read, "And Enoch lived sixty and five years, and begat Methuselah: And Enoch walked with God after he begat Methuselah three hundred years, and begat sons and daughters: And all the days of Enoch were three hundred sixty and five years: And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him."

Notice that the scriptures state that "Enoch walked with God." It doesn't say that he walked in the ways of God. It specifically states that he walked **with** God. All other versions of the Bible translate it exactly the same way. According to one commentary, we're told that the term "walked with God" is "a common phrase in Eastern countries denoting constant and familiar intercourse" (Commentary on the Whole Bible, by Jameson, Fausset and Brown). Enoch didn't just follow the ways of godliness throughout his life, he literally walked with and talked to God directly.

When he was 365 years old, Enoch was translated (taken from the earth without tasting death). According to the apostle Paul, the reason for this great honor was because his righteousness was so great that he pleased God (Hebrew 11:5). Furthermore, we also know that Enoch made several prophecies (Jude 1:14), which is one of the definitions of a prophet.

According to the scriptures, Jarad was 162 years old when he begat Enoch and died at the age of 962. Enoch begat Methuselah when he was only 65 years old, "and Enoch walked with God after he begat Methuselah." That means Enoch was 65 years old when he began to walk and talk with God. To us that may seem like Enoch was an old man, but when we realize that people lived closed to a thousand years back then, Enoch was just a child by contrast.

If we were to make a comparison, we could rightly equate one thousand years of life back then to being equivalent to one hundred years today. That means, in comparison to our modern life span, Enoch was only six and a half years old when he began to walk and talk with God. It also means that he was about thirty-six years old when God took him from the earth.

But the question we need to ask ourselves is: How did Enoch become so righteous at such a young age? Even Bible commentators agree that Enoch was quite unique in his relationship with God among all the other inhabitants of the earth at that time. Then how did he get that way? Did he attend some sort of theological training program that prepared him to achieve this level of righteousness? If so, who was it that trained him? We know he made several prophecies. Where did this information come from? Was it through his intellectual studies of the scriptures, or was it from God?

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The Christian world agrees that men prophecy, not through any power of their own, but through the inspiration of God. With that admission, we must conclude that Enoch received his instructions directly from God during the time he walked and talked with Him. Joseph Smith was thirteen years old the first time he saw and talked with God. If the critics think that's too young an age for someone to be taken seriously, imagine if Joseph had been six and a half years old when that event took place, as Enoch did? Like Enoch, Joseph also walked with God throughout his life and prophesied in the name of the Lord. Like Enoch, Joseph found favor in the sight of God because of his righteousness. By way of comparison, God took Enoch from off the face of the earth when he was thirty-six and a half years old. Joseph Smith was taken from the earth when he was thirty-eight and a half years old.

Abraham is another man of God. In fact, he is the only person spoken of in the Bible who is referred to as "the friend of God" (James 2:23), and this was because of his righteousness. Even to this very day, two nations still revere him as their ancient father -- the Jews and the Arabs -- and three religions pay honor to him as one of the greatest men of God -- the Jews, the Muslims, and the Christians. But who is Abraham and what is his background and lineage? What we do know is that his father, Tehrah, was an idol worshipper. We also know that when Abram was still a relatively young married man, the Lord commanded him to leave his father and travel to a place that would be given him for an inheritance throughout all time.

Imagine what the critics would say about Joseph Smith if his father was an idol worshipper? They would loudly complain, "How can you believe anything he says about God? Look at what kind of person his father was?" And yet, these same people will ignore the life of Tehrah when talking about what a great man of God Abraham was. Also, imagine if Joseph Smith had left his family in repudiation of their way of life and never returned to them. It's doubtful that his critics would have lauded such a move as they do with Abraham.

However, like Abraham, Joseph was called by God when he was still a relatively young married man to fulfill another promise. The Lord told him to start a church that was foretold would fill the entire earth and last forever. But, unlike Joseph, Abraham never preached the gospel of God to anyone except his own household. There is no record of him proselytizing people of other religious beliefs and converting them to his faith. In fact, he never became the head of anything except his family. Then what makes Abraham so revered by so many people? The answer is simple -- his faith in God.

It wasn't that he wrote great words of wisdom or because he was a great Biblical scholar or

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preached memorable sermons that nations revere him and religions exalt him. Then why do we pay reverence to him? Because of the way he lived his life! Whatever the Lord ask of him he did it without hesitation, he did it in faith and he did in it righteousness. The reason Abraham is great in the sight of man is because he was great in the eyes of God.

If that is true, then where did Abraham learn about having faith in God? He certainly didn't receive instruction from his father. There's no evidence in the scriptures that he attended any theological school for training. There's no mention of him studying about God at the feet of learned holy men. Then how did he come to know about God? From the numerous verses in the Bible, we know that God spoke to him and that angels visited him. Is this where he gain his knowledge and faith?

As we study the lives of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Wesley we see that they are well known mostly because of the things they wrote, and the doctrines they taught rather than the way they lived their lives. Is that why Mormons honor Joseph Smith? It's true that he translated the Book of Mormon and that he gave us great revelations found in the Doctrine and Covenants, but that's not why we revere him. It isn't his teachings that inspire our faith in him. It's the way he lived his life.

Like Abraham, what makes Joseph Smith great in the eyes of those who know him is that he was great in the sight of God. God was always with him. From the very beginning, Joseph was taught directly from God and from angels. He didn't need to attend seminary because it was Theo (Greek work for God) Himself who taught him all he knew. (The Greek word "ology" means a course of study). In other words, his theology came directly from the source of all knowledge about God. But what inspires us is not his writing so much as the faith he had. His faith was such that, like Abraham and Enoch, he walked and talked with God in a way that most people never will.

Perhaps the most honored of all prophets is Moses, the lawgiver. He is revered by both Jews and Christians, and the Ten Commandments which he received from God is still the standard by which the world in general judges proper conduct. It was under his direction that the twelve tribes became a united nation. His accomplishments included leading his people to the land promised to their father Abraham, establishing the use of a temple with it's attending ordinances, and establishing a written record of God's dealing with man by writing the first five books of the Bible.

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But where did Moses get his training in theology that gave him the authority to be a spiritual leader to an entire nation? It certainly wasn't from his studies in the idolatrous Egyptian palace. As we look closer at the life of Moses, we see a different side that isn't so glamorous. In a fit of rage, he murdered an Egyptian, hid the body to keep from being discovered, and then fled to keep from being punished (Exodus 2:12-15). Joseph Smith was falsely accused of many crimes, but murder was never one of them. Furthermore, he faced his accusers instead of running from the law. Yet even today these false allegations continue to be used against him as proof of his unworthiness to be called a man of God.

After fleeing into the desert, Moses spent the next forty years tending the flocks of his father-in-law. There's no indication that during this time he received any theological training to prepare him for his ministry. Instead, the Bible seems to clearly indicate that it was God Himself who taught Moses all he knew. The scriptures declare that, "the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Exodus 33:11).

But how do we know this really happened? If Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, then it's obvious we only have his word to go by to confirm that he actually did speak so personally and intimately with God. And yet, without any other evidence we fully accept his account. However, when Joseph Smith claims to have seen God in a vision, the critics demand proof, and they totally discount any claims that he could possibly have talked to God face to face as one man speaketh to another.

To Christians, the greatest of all prophets is Jesus Christ. We believe He is the Son of God, but according to secular records, he was the son of Joseph and Mary. And who was Joseph? Was he a great Rabbi? Was he even a priest? No, he was a simple, ordinary man who worked as a carpenter for a living. And who was Mary? Was she a prophetess? Was she a community leader whom other women look to for spiritual guidance and direction? Quite the contrary. It must be remembered that to the people of her day Mary would have been a woman who had conceive a child out of wedlock! (Imagine what the critics would say if this had happened to even one of the children of Joseph Smith's mother?) As such, Mary kept these things to herself and for good reason. Therefore, out of necessity, she was a quiet and unassuming person. And where did they live? Was it in the holy city of Jerusalem? Was it in one of the intellectual cities of Egypt or Israel? No, it was in some obscure town called Nazareth.

And what training did Jesus receive to prepare Him for His ministry? Did He attend the equivalent of a Rabbinical Seminary college? Did he study the Torah at the feet of some great astute scholar of the scriptures? There's no Biblical evidence to support such a conclusion. Christians generally believe that Jesus didn't need anyone to teach Him because He was the

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Son of God and knew everything at the time of His birth. They point to when He was twelve years old and was teaching in the temple as proof of this assertion.

However, that's not exactly what the Bible says happened. In Luke 2:46,47 we read, "And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers" ). In other words, young Jesus was sitting in the midst of the doctors of divinity "both hearing them and asking them questions." That doesn't sound like He was educating them. It sounds more like He was trying to learn from them. It's true that "all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers," but that doesn't mean he was teaching them. There's no doubt that His understanding of what they were telling him and the answers He gave in response were far beyond what a twelve year old is capable of giving, which astonished the doctors, but that doesn't mean He was lecturing them. In fact, a little later on in the same chapter, we read that as He grew older "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (vs 52).

That seems to contradict the notion that Jesus had all knowledge at the time of His birth. If that is true, then, when and how did Jesus come to gain His unique perspective on the scriptures and a knowledge of His role as the Savior? According to the Bible, He didn't start preaching the gospel until after He had spent forty days fasting and praying in the wilderness. And to whom did He pray? The scriptures state, "For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel" (John 5:20). It is clear that Jesus, like all the prophets before Him, gained His theology directly from God.

Jesus taught a doctrine that was not accepted by the religious leaders of his day. In fact, the more he preached and the more converts He attracted, the more agitated the Jewish religious community became. Rather than belonging to and working within the traditional framework of the Jewish church system, Jesus established His own organization outside of and in direct competition to all others Jewish sects. It was comprised of Himself as the head, with twelve apostles and seventy missionaries. Later it would include such positions as prophets, bishops, elders, and deacons.

In an effort to stop Him, the Pharisees accused Jesus of being of the devil, of doing away with the Law of Moses, of teaching false doctrine and of distorting the word of God. They argued with Him out of the scriptures, they detailed how He broke the Law, and they even plotted to entrap Him with cunning logic in an effort to discredit him in front of the people. But, each time Christ successfully answered their charges and foiled their plans, the more incensed and the

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more determined they became to get rid of him.

In the end, their only recourse was to accuse Him of blasphemy -- as they interpreted the word. Filled with contempt for a man who had only done good to others but who posed a serious threat to their power and authority, the religious leaders of His day deliberately saw to it that Jesus was put to death. Knowing what they were up to, Jesus still allowed Himself to be taken like a lamb to the slaughter and let his accusers shed His innocent blood.

Joseph Smith taught a doctrine that was not accepted by the religious leaders of his day. And the more he preached and the more converts he attracted, the more agitated the Christian community became of him. What made it even more infuriating for them was that Joseph didn't belong to nor worked within the traditional church framework. He established a different form of organization, one that was patterned after the manner Jesus had created, with Christ as the head and included apostles, prophets, bishops, elders and deacons

Outraged over this new faith, the Christian leaders in particular did all they could to stop it. They claimed that Joseph's Smith's visions were of the devil. They accused him of distorting the word of God and teaching "a different gospel" than the one they had accepted. They threatened him with bodily harm. They accused him of all kinds of crimes. They published false stories about his character. But each time he successfully weathered these assaults and the more followers he attracted, the more determined the religious community became to get rid of him.

Filled with contempt for a man who had only done good to others but who posed a serious threat to their power and authority, they plotted every way they could to eliminate his influence. In the end, they had him arrested on false charges with the deliberate intention of assassinating him before he could be brought to trial and be acquitted. Joseph knew the anger of those who had accused him, yet he allowed himself to be imprisoned. Two days after turning himself in, a mob of men stormed the jail and murdered Joseph and his brother Hyrum, leaving their innocent blood to be shed upon the ground where they lay.

The most prolific writer of all the followers of Jesus was the apostle Paul. Of the thirty-three books of the New Testament, he wrote twenty-seven of them. He had been raised in the Jewish faith as a devout Pharisee, but because of a vision he had on the way to Damascus, he soon learned that his long held religious faith was incorrect. Did he therefore begin his ministry only after he had gone to a Christian theology school or only after studying at the feet of those who had personally known and been taught by the Lord? Paul stated, "Immediately I conferred not

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with flesh and blood; neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me... For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but [except] by the revelation of Jesus Christ." (Galatians 1:16,17, 12). We know that Paul also received knowledge of heavenly things through visions (2 Corinthians 12:1).

Joseph Smith was raised in the traditional Christian faith, but, because of a vision he had, he too learned that his former religious beliefs were incorrect. Like Paul, he gained his knowledge of God, not through man nor by conferring with flesh and blood, but through revelations and visions from Jesus Christ. And like Paul's writings, it is from those revelations that he has given us additional scriptures known as the Doctrine and Covenant.

During Paul's ministry he traveled extensively, establishing churches everywhere he went. Yet, despite this, he endured great difficulties because of his faith. Five times he was whipped with a lash, three times he was beaten with a rod, once he was stoned, and three times he suffered through shipwrecks. He was in peril by robbers, by his own countrymen, by heathens and even by members of his own faith (2 Corinthians 1:24-26).

There were some Christians who criticized him for the things he preached (Galatians 5:11). Even as an apostle, there were some in the church who questioned his authority (1 Corinthians 9:2,3). Twice he was brought up on civil charges stemming from his beliefs, and was kept in prison for an extended period of time. Although he was allowed to have visitors and write letters while in jail, yet his living conditions there were anything but pleasant. Eventually he submitted himself to a sentence of death by a Roman court rather than renounce his beliefs.

During Joseph Smith's ministry he sent missionaries out to establish the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints everywhere they could. Yet, despite his claim of being a prophet of God, he was beaten, tarred and feathered by his enemies, once they even attempted to pour a vile of poison down his throat, several times he was forced to live in hiding to avoid death threats, and he was falsely accused and arrested of civil crimes on several occasions. On one such incarceration, he languished in Liberty Jail for almost five months in deplorable living conditions and made to suffer humiliating and degrading treatment at the hands of his captors.

He was hated by his own countrymen and by those who claimed to believe in Jesus Christ. Everywhere he went, his enemies ruthlessly pursued him. Even among some of the most trusted members of the church there were those who vilified him and sought to undermine his authority in an effort to establish their own. In the end, he allowed himself to be taken prisoner

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once again on false charges, even though he knew of their intention to kill him. Yet to avoid this kind of persecution all he had to do was renounce his convictions. Failing to do so meant he willingly gave his life for what he believed.

When we compare the life of Joseph Smith to that of the greatest prophets in the Bible, he measures up in every way. To paraphrase the words of Paul, Joseph Smith is not a whit behind the very chiefest prophet (2 Corinthians 11:5). His life was lived like a prophet of God. His life exemplified that of a prophet. His life patterns that of the prophets. What they suffered for their beliefs, so did he. What they did with their beliefs, so did he. Where they gain their beliefs from, so did he. If we compare the life of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Wesley or any other Christian church founder to those of ancient prophets, none would come close to their example. Even the succeeding presidents of the Mormon faith, as righteous as they are, do not compare with the greatness of Joseph Smith as a prophet of God. And it is for this reason that we give special praise to the man who communed with Jehovah, for Jesus did indeed anoint him as a prophet and seer.

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