

LEARNING MADE EASY



2nd Edition

Mormonism

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Explore the history of
the Latter-day Saint faith

Understand stances on race,
women, LGBTQ+, and polygamy

Discover core beliefs
and practices

Christopher Kimball Bigelow
LDS book and magazine editor
Jana Riess, PhD

Mormonism

**for
dummies[®]**
A Wiley Brand



Mormonism

2nd Edition

**by Christopher Kimball Bigelow
and Jana Riess, PhD**

**for
dummies[®]**
A Wiley Brand

Mormonism For Dummies®, 2nd Edition

Published by: **John Wiley & Sons, Inc.**, 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774, www.wiley.com

Copyright © 2025 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved, including rights for text and data mining and training of artificial technologies or similar technologies.

Media and software compilation copyright © 2025 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved, including rights for text and data mining and training of artificial technologies or similar technologies.

Published simultaneously in Canada

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning or otherwise, except as permitted under Sections 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without the prior written permission of the Publisher. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

Trademarks: Wiley, For Dummies, the Dummies Man logo, Dummies.com, Making Everything Easier, and related trade dress are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

LIMIT OF LIABILITY/DISCLAIMER OF WARRANTY: THE PUBLISHER AND THE AUTHOR MAKE NO REPRESENTATIONS OR WARRANTIES WITH RESPECT TO THE ACCURACY OR COMPLETENESS OF THE CONTENTS OF THIS WORK AND SPECIFICALLY DISCLAIM ALL WARRANTIES, INCLUDING WITHOUT LIMITATION WARRANTIES OF FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE. NO WARRANTY MAY BE CREATED OR EXTENDED BY SALES OR PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS. THE ADVICE AND STRATEGIES CONTAINED HEREIN MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR EVERY SITUATION. THIS WORK IS SOLD WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT THE PUBLISHER IS NOT ENGAGED IN RENDERING LEGAL, ACCOUNTING, OR OTHER PROFESSIONAL SERVICES. IF PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE IS REQUIRED, THE SERVICES OF A COMPETENT PROFESSIONAL PERSON SHOULD BE SOUGHT. NEITHER THE PUBLISHER NOR THE AUTHOR SHALL BE LIABLE FOR DAMAGES ARISING HEREFROM. THE FACT THAT AN ORGANIZATION OR WEBSITE IS REFERRED TO IN THIS WORK AS A CITATION AND/OR A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF FURTHER INFORMATION DOES NOT MEAN THAT THE AUTHOR OR THE PUBLISHER ENDORSES THE INFORMATION THE ORGANIZATION OR WEBSITE MAY PROVIDE OR RECOMMENDATIONS IT MAY MAKE. FURTHER, READERS SHOULD BE AWARE THAT INTERNET WEBSITES LISTED IN THIS WORK MAY HAVE CHANGED OR DISAPPEARED BETWEEN WHEN THIS WORK WAS WRITTEN AND WHEN IT IS READ.

For general information on our other products and services, please contact our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 877-762-2974, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3993, or fax 317-572-4002. For technical support, please visit <https://hub.wiley.com/community/support/dummies>.

Wiley publishes in a variety of print and electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some material included with standard print versions of this book may not be included in e-books or in print-on-demand. If this book refers to media that is not included in the version you purchased, you may download this material at <http://booksupport.wiley.com>. For more information about Wiley products, visit www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025933259

ISBN 978-1-394-31576-5 (pbk); ISBN 978-1-394-31578-9 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-394-31577-2 (ebk)

Contents at a Glance

| | |
|---|-----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Part 1: What the Mormon Faith Is All About | 5 |
| CHAPTER 1: A New World Religion | 7 |
| CHAPTER 2: The Mormon Plan of Salvation | 19 |
| CHAPTER 3: Heavenly Parents, Savior, and Holy Ghost | 41 |
| CHAPTER 4: Restoring the Priesthood and the Church | 61 |
| CHAPTER 5: Together Forever: The Eternal Importance of Family | 77 |
| Part 2: Eternal Rituals and Endless Meetings | 93 |
| CHAPTER 6: Welcome to the Meetinghouse! | 95 |
| CHAPTER 7: Sacred, Not Secret: Inside Mormon Temples | 117 |
| CHAPTER 8: In and Around Church Headquarters | 137 |
| Part 3: Holy Books and Sacred History | 155 |
| CHAPTER 9: The Bible and the Book of Mormon | 157 |
| CHAPTER 10: Mormonism's Other Scriptures | 177 |
| CHAPTER 11: Searching for a Home | 193 |
| CHAPTER 12: Moving on to Utah with Brigham Young | 209 |
| CHAPTER 13: Building the Kingdom in Utah | 219 |
| Part 4: Mormonism Today | 235 |
| CHAPTER 14: Called to Serve: Missionaries and International Growth | 237 |
| CHAPTER 15: Hot-Button Issues for Latter-day Saints | 251 |
| CHAPTER 16: Earthly Sacrifices for Heavenly Blessings | 267 |
| CHAPTER 17: Connecting with God and Each Other | 283 |
| CHAPTER 18: <i>In</i> the World but Not <i>of</i> the World | 295 |
| Part 5: The Part of Tens | 309 |
| CHAPTER 19: Quick Answers to Ten Common Questions About Mormonism | 311 |
| CHAPTER 20: Ten Mormon Places to Visit | 321 |
| CHAPTER 21: Ten Famous Latter-day Saints You've Probably Never Heard Of | 329 |
| Index | 335 |

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|--------|
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| About This Book | 1 |
| Foolish Assumptions | 2 |
| Icons Used in This Book | 3 |
| Beyond the Book | 3 |
| Where to Go from Here | 3 |
| PART 1: WHAT THE MORMON FAITH IS ALL ABOUT | 5 |
| CHAPTER 1: A New World Religion | 7 |
| Why Know about Mormonism? | 7 |
| The Mormon Worldview | 9 |
| Life before mortal life | 9 |
| Life on earth | 10 |
| Life after mortal life | 11 |
| Joseph Smith and Mormonism's Beginnings | 12 |
| Translating additional scriptures | 12 |
| Establishing the Church | 13 |
| Coming to terms with the M-word | 14 |
| Day-to-Day Mormon Life | 15 |
| What Makes Mormonism Different? | 16 |
| CHAPTER 2: The Mormon Plan of Salvation | 19 |
| Mormon Karma: The Premortal Life | 20 |
| From intelligence to spirit | 21 |
| Relax, you've already passed the first test | 22 |
| Premortality in the here and now | 23 |
| Acing the Test of Mortality | 25 |
| Adam and Eve: Heroes of humanity | 26 |
| Satan: A necessary evil | 28 |
| It ain't over till it's over: Enduring to the end | 29 |
| The Afterlife: Eternal Progression | 31 |
| A waiting room for spirits | 31 |
| Reaching the three degrees of glory . . . or outer darkness | 33 |
| CHAPTER 3: Heavenly Parents, Savior, and Holy Ghost | 41 |
| The Head Honcho: God the Father | 42 |
| What if God were one of us? | 42 |
| God the organizer | 44 |
| Why does God go to all this trouble? | 44 |
| Differences in beliefs about God | 45 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Second Mate: Christ the Son | 46 |
| First and best | 46 |
| Both mortal and divine. | 47 |
| The Savior's post-crucifixion checklist | 48 |
| When he comes again. | 49 |
| Differences in beliefs about Jesus Christ | 51 |
| God's Whisperer: The Holy Ghost | 53 |
| The Spirit who never got a body | 53 |
| The gift of the Holy Ghost | 54 |
| The Holy Ghost's many roles | 57 |
| The unforgivable sin | 59 |
| CHAPTER 4: Restoring the Priesthood and the Church | 61 |
| Gospel Comings and Goings | 62 |
| Beginning the Restoration | 63 |
| Joseph Smith's early years | 63 |
| Kneeling in the Sacred Grove. | 65 |
| After the vision. | 66 |
| Bringing Back the Church Step by Step | 66 |
| A parade of heavenly messengers | 67 |
| Continuing the gospel tradition. | 67 |
| Understanding the Priesthood | 69 |
| For boys: The Aaronic Priesthood | 69 |
| For men: The Melchizedek Priesthood. | 71 |
| Performing priesthood ordinances. | 73 |
| What about women and the priesthood? | 74 |
| CHAPTER 5: Together Forever: The Eternal Importance of Family | 77 |
| The Eternal Family Unit. | 78 |
| Why families are so important | 78 |
| "Till never do you part": Eternal sealing | 79 |
| Breadwinning and homemaking. | 80 |
| Populating the earth. | 81 |
| Shaking the Family Tree: Family History Work | 83 |
| The reason for the fuss. | 83 |
| Using FamilySearch — whether you're Mormon or not | 85 |
| God's People: The Family of Israel | 86 |
| Abraham and God shake on it. | 87 |
| The house of Israel in Mormon scriptures. | 87 |
| Gathering God's children | 88 |
| Becoming adopted into Israel | 88 |
| Personal Prophecy: Patriarchal Blessings | 89 |
| Discovering personal lineage. | 89 |
| Other aspects of a patriarchal blessing | 89 |
| Understanding a patriarchal blessing | 91 |

PART 2: ETERNAL RITUALS AND ENDLESS MEETINGS..... 93

CHAPTER 6: Welcome to the Meetinghouse!..... 95

| | |
|--|-----|
| What's a Ward?..... | 96 |
| Specialty wards | 97 |
| Wards in the making: Branches..... | 97 |
| Participating in the Ward | 98 |
| Get to work! Every member has a job | 98 |
| What to do when you're in the pew: Sacrament meetings | 100 |
| Getting dunked | 105 |
| Confirmation: Installing a direct line to God | 108 |
| Baby blessings: Welcoming a new lamb into the flock | 109 |
| Funerals: Saying farewell, for now | 110 |
| Meetinghouse weddings: For time only..... | 110 |
| Other Sunday meetings | 111 |
| Weekday events..... | 114 |
| Participating in the Stake | 114 |
| Twice a year: Stake conference | 115 |
| Finding Grandpa's grandpa: Stake family history centers..... | 115 |
| Stake 'n' shake: Stake activities | 116 |

CHAPTER 7: Sacred, Not Secret: Inside Mormon Temples..... 117

| | |
|--|-----|
| Distinguishing the Temple from the Meetinghouse..... | 118 |
| Temple Ordinances — Why Latter-day Saints Go to the Temple | 119 |
| Understanding the essential ordinances..... | 119 |
| Why perform ordinances for the dead?..... | 120 |
| Becoming Eligible for Temple Ordinances..... | 123 |
| Getting a temple recommend | 123 |
| Performing baptisms for the dead | 124 |
| A preparation checklist..... | 126 |
| Finally! Receiving Your Own Endowment..... | 128 |
| Receiving part one of the endowment (the initiatory)..... | 128 |
| Receiving part two of the endowment..... | 130 |
| Sealing Families for Eternity..... | 132 |
| Temple sealings for the living | 132 |
| When sealing relationships get complicated..... | 135 |

CHAPTER 8: In and Around Church Headquarters..... 137

| | |
|---|-----|
| A Tour of Church Headquarters | 138 |
| Governing the Church: General Authorities | 139 |
| Following the prophet..... | 140 |
| Apostles and seventies and bishops — Oh my! | 143 |
| A Two-Day Marathon: General Conference..... | 145 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| LDS Welfare and Humanitarian Relief | 147 |
| Taking care of their own: The Church's welfare program | 147 |
| Taking care of others: LDS humanitarian relief | 148 |
| Survival of the Smartest: Latter-day Saint Education. | 149 |
| A daily dose of the gospel | 151 |
| Stone-cold sober: Brigham Young University | 152 |
| PART 3: HOLY BOOKS AND SACRED HISTORY | 155 |
| CHAPTER 9: The Bible and the Book of Mormon | 157 |
| The Bible: True, with a Few Tweaks | 158 |
| Thus saith the King James Version | 158 |
| Not enough by itself | 160 |
| Joseph Smith's corrections to the Bible | 160 |
| So, where are Joseph's corrections? | 161 |
| Getting Acquainted with the Book of Mormon. | 162 |
| Hitting the highlights. | 162 |
| What a long, strange trip: Lehi's journey to the New World | 164 |
| Can't we all just get along? The Nephites and the Lamanites. . . | 165 |
| The crowning event: Christ's appearance | 166 |
| Biting the dust: The end of the Nephites. | 167 |
| How the Book of Mormon Came to Be | 169 |
| An angel in the night. | 169 |
| Seer stones and scribes: Translating the golden plates | 170 |
| "You believe what?!" Reactions to the book. | 171 |
| What happened to the plates? | 172 |
| The Book of Mormon in Mormon Life | 172 |
| Avoiding the sin of pride. | 173 |
| Taking care of the poor. | 173 |
| Teaching the children | 174 |
| Repenting of sins and receiving forgiveness. | 174 |
| Finding answers to spiritual questions. | 175 |
| CHAPTER 10: Mormonism's Other Scriptures | 177 |
| A Scriptural Hodgepodge: The Pearl of Great Price | 178 |
| Revisiting Moses | 178 |
| Mummy dearest: Uncovering the writings of Abraham. | 179 |
| Expanding Matthew | 180 |
| Chronicling Joseph Smith | 181 |
| Lining up the Articles of Faith | 182 |
| Modern-Day Revelations in the D&C | 183 |
| But wait, there's more: God's revelations to Joseph Smith and others. | 183 |
| Key LDS scriptures in the D&C. | 185 |
| Wrapping up: Official declarations | 187 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| The Beat Goes On: Recent Revelations Not Found in the D&C | 189 |
| Picturing the ideal family | 189 |
| Day-to-day wisdom from the prophet | 190 |
| CHAPTER 11: Searching for a Home | 193 |
| A Significant Pit Stop: Kirtland, Ohio. | 194 |
| Receiving new revelations and doctrines. | 194 |
| Building the Kirtland Temple | 196 |
| Empty pockets and loaded threats: Good times come to an end | 197 |
| Kirtland here and now | 197 |
| Seeking Zion in Missouri. | 198 |
| Getting booted out of Zion. | 198 |
| Going to war. | 200 |
| Missouri here and now. | 201 |
| Nauvoo, Illinois: A Refuge on the Mississippi | 202 |
| Building a community. | 203 |
| Constructing the Nauvoo Temple | 204 |
| Trouble in Nauvoo. | 205 |
| Arrest and martyrdom | 206 |
| Nauvoo here and now | 207 |
| CHAPTER 12: Moving on to Utah with Brigham Young | 209 |
| A Crisis of Leadership | 210 |
| The Lion of the Lord: Brigham Young. | 210 |
| Another unschooled boy from Vermont | 211 |
| Becoming a leader in the Church | 212 |
| Famous leader and down-to-earth family man | 213 |
| A legacy to build on. | 213 |
| Westward Ho! The Pioneer Experience | 214 |
| Packing up and leaving Illinois. | 215 |
| The first company | 216 |
| Keep 'em coming: The Perpetual Emigrating Fund. | 218 |
| CHAPTER 13: Building the Kingdom in Utah | 219 |
| Building Zion | 220 |
| Settling the Salt Lake Valley | 220 |
| Movin' on out: Settling the Jell-O Belt | 222 |
| Conflicts with the Outside World | 223 |
| The Utah War and the Mormon Reformation. | 224 |
| The Mountain Meadows Massacre. | 225 |
| Polygamy: A Divine Principle (But an Outdated Practice) | 227 |
| Who practiced polygamy, and why? | 227 |
| Government pressure to end polygamy | 230 |
| The legacy of polygamy | 231 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| Mormonism in Transition. | 232 |
| Pledging allegiance to the flag. | 232 |
| Facing some lingering problems. | 232 |
| Gathering strength for a worldwide boom | 233 |
| PART 4: MORMONISM TODAY | 235 |
| CHAPTER 14: Called to Serve: Missionaries and International Growth | 237 |
| Missionaries of All Shapes and Sizes | 238 |
| Boy wonders. | 238 |
| Girl power. | 239 |
| Silver is golden. | 239 |
| Hail to the chief | 240 |
| Enlisting in God's Army. | 240 |
| Embracing the calling | 241 |
| Financing the mission. | 241 |
| Missionary boot camp | 242 |
| Living the Missionary Life. | 242 |
| Finding and teaching. | 243 |
| Following the rules | 245 |
| Rapid Growth: Mormonism Around the World. | 247 |
| Retaining members. | 248 |
| Being sensitive to cultural differences | 249 |
| Strengthening the worldwide Church. | 249 |
| CHAPTER 15: Hot-Button Issues for Latter-day Saints | 251 |
| Are Latter-day Saints Christian? | 252 |
| Becoming Like Our Heavenly Parents | 253 |
| DNA Science versus the Book of Mormon. | 253 |
| Getting Seer-Stoned | 254 |
| One Vision, Several Versions | 255 |
| Women and the Priesthood. | 256 |
| What About Heavenly Mother? | 257 |
| Crimes of Violence. | 258 |
| Puh-puh-puh . . . Polygamy | 259 |
| Brigham Young goes public. | 260 |
| The end of polygamy? | 261 |
| Racial Rapprochement | 261 |
| Mummy's the Word. | 263 |
| LDS versus LGBTQ+ | 264 |
| The Church's gay track record | 264 |
| Transgender Latter-day Saints | 265 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| CHAPTER 16: Earthly Sacrifices for Heavenly Blessings | 267 |
| Chase and Be Chaste: The Law of Chastity | 268 |
| Understanding the purposes of sexuality | 268 |
| Staying chaste | 269 |
| Enjoying marital intimacy | 270 |
| Receiving the blessings of chastity | 270 |
| Dealing with sexual sin | 271 |
| Whaddya Mean, No Coffee? Living the Word of Wisdom | 273 |
| Interpreting the Word of Wisdom | 274 |
| Reaping Word of Wisdom benefits | 274 |
| Tithing: Paying the Lord's Tax | 275 |
| Donating tithing gladly | 275 |
| Knowing where your tithe is going | 277 |
| Receiving tithing dividends | 278 |
| Fast Sunday: The Slowest Sabbath of the Month | 278 |
| Why Mormons fast | 279 |
| How and when to fast (And who shouldn't) | 281 |
| CHAPTER 17: Connecting with God and Each Other | 283 |
| What Latter-day Saints Do Daily . . . Ideally | 283 |
| Talking with the Big Guy | 284 |
| Studying scriptures | 287 |
| What Latter-day Saints Do Weekly . . . Ideally | 288 |
| Observing the Sabbath | 288 |
| Family Home Evening (Sorry, no Monday Night Football) | 291 |
| What Latter-day Saints Do Monthly . . . Ideally | 293 |
| Reaching out to each other | 293 |
| Break out the breath mints | 294 |
| Mormon "date night" | 294 |
| CHAPTER 18: <i>In the World but Not of the World</i> | 295 |
| Becoming Self-Reliant | 296 |
| Staying out of debt | 296 |
| Getting squirrely: Food storage | 297 |
| Preparing for emergencies | 300 |
| Journaling, Scrapbooking, and Other Mormon Pastimes | 301 |
| Keeping a record | 301 |
| Getting scrappy | 302 |
| Crafts and comfort food | 302 |
| Taking in a Bit of Culture | 303 |
| Lifting a chorus to the Lord | 303 |
| A little bit rock and roll | 304 |
| Mormon books | 305 |
| Mormon theatre | 306 |
| Mormon cinema | 307 |

PART 5: THE PART OF TENS.....309

CHAPTER 19: Quick Answers to Ten Common Questions

About Mormonism311

Are Latter-day Saints Christian?311

How Can Latter-day Saints Give Up 10 Percent of Their Income? ...313

What Happens Inside an LDS Temple?.....313

Why Don't Latter-day Saints Drink Alcohol or Coffee?.....314

Why Do Latter-day Saints Have Such Large, Strong Families?315

Do Latter-day Saints Believe in the Bible or Just the Book of Mormon?315

Do Latter-day Saints Really Believe that Humans Can Become Gods?.....316

Why Can't Women Hold Priesthood Offices?.....317

Do Latter-day Saints Still Practice Polygamy?318

Why Do Latter-day Saints Revere Joseph Smith?318

CHAPTER 20: Ten Mormon Places to Visit.....321

Sharon, Vermont321

Palmyra, New York322

Kirtland, Ohio.....322

Missouri323

Nauvoo and Carthage, Illinois324

Winter Quarters, Nebraska, and Council Bluffs, Iowa325

Martin's Cove, Wyoming.....326

Salt Lake City, Utah327

Provo, Utah.....328

Polynesian Cultural Center, Hawaii.....328

CHAPTER 21: Ten Famous Latter-day Saints You've Probably Never Heard Of329

Martha Hughes Cannon329

Walker Lewis330

Floyd Gottfredson331

Philo T. Farnsworth.....331

John Held Jr.332

Frank E. "Ted" Moss.....332

May Swenson.....333

Samuel W. Taylor.....333

Esther Peterson334

Gladys Knight.....334

INDEX335

Introduction

If you're picking up this book, you may already know that Mormonism's largest denomination, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is one of the world's fastest-growing religions. The Church has about 7 million members in the United States and another 10 million people on the rolls around the world. Almost all this growth has happened in the last 50 years, making Mormonism a hot topic that many people want to understand better.

In this book, we focus on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. You'll find the basics here for most everything you need to understand about the Church. We don't assume that you have any background. At the same time, even if you are a Latter-day Saint, you may find information in this book that helps you understand your religion more thoroughly and with a fresh perspective.

About This Book

Don't feel you have to read this book straight through from cover to cover. Each chapter is a self-contained unit designed to give you information about a particular topic. Where relevant, we also include cross-references to show you where to find more information. This way, you can find what you want quickly and skip over the stuff that seems less important to you.

One more thing: Although we're both practicing members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the views you find in this book are unofficial and don't necessarily represent the opinions of the Church's leadership.

Furthermore, although we tried our best to capture the broadest cross-section possible and present a range of viewpoints, we certainly can't claim that every Latter-day Saint you meet will agree with everything we say. Throughout the book, we refer you to a few other books that the Church does produce and sanction, and we also point you to the Church's official website, www.churchofjesuschrist.org.

In addition, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has some style preferences that we adopted for this book. You won't see the term *Mormon church* here because Mormon is a nickname, and the Church would rather have people use its official name. We do use *LDS church* for short, instead of spelling out the whole name each time, and we refer to Church members as *Latter-day Saints*. From time to time, you'll also see the word Mormon used as an adjective or a noun.

You may also notice a bit of fuss about the capitalization of *church*. Here's the deal: Whenever we're referring to other denominations or to churches in general, we use little c. But when we say "the Church" to mean the LDS church as a specific denomination, we use capital C. However, when we say "LDS church," we keep the c lower-case so it's clear that it's not an official name.

When it comes to the Bible, we stick with what Latter-day Saints still use: the good ol' King James Version (KJV for short). Because the Church's other scriptures are distinctively Mormon, they only come in one lingo — and it reads very much like the KJV. When we reference a particular verse or range of verses in any of the scriptures, we follow the standard: For example, in the Bible, Matthew 10:1 refers to Matthew as the book, 10 as the chapter number, and 1 as the verse.

Foolish Assumptions

While writing this book, we assumed that many of our readers aren't going to be Latter-day Saints, but some will be. Maybe you fit into one of these groups:

- » You've got friends, neighbors, relatives, or coworkers who are Latter-day Saints and you're naturally curious about their faith.
- » You've heard something or read an article about Mormonism, and it made you wonder what Latter-day Saints believe.
- » You're thinking of joining the LDS Church and want to know more about it.
- » You're a new Mormon convert trying to better understand what you've gotten yourself into.
- » You're an established Latter-day Saint, and you want to give this book to someone else who fits in one of the first four categories. Or maybe you like to read different perspectives on your own faith.

Icons Used in This Book

This book uses the following icons to help you find the information you need or to highlight ideas you may find particularly helpful.



TIP

This icon points to hands-on information to help you make sense of Mormon belief or practice.



REMEMBER

You find this icon next to significant information you'll want to remember.



SCRIPTURE

This icon appears next to most quotes from the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, or Pearl of Great Price.



CONTROVERSY

This icon points to areas of disagreement within the Latter-day Saint community or among outsiders who have criticized the Mormon faith.

Beyond the Book

In addition to what you're reading right now, this product also comes with a free access-anywhere Cheat Sheet that provides even more information about Mormonism and the LDS church. To access this Cheat Sheet, simply go to www.dummies.com and search for "Mormonism For Dummies Cheat Sheet" in the Search box.

Where to Go from Here

Mormonism For Dummies is like a big Sunday buffet at Grandma's house. You can eat as many of the yeast rolls as you want, and you don't have to touch the peas if you don't want to. In other words, in this book, we bring a little bit of everything to the table: history, doctrine, fun facts, spiritual disciplines, culture, and scripture. You can go to any section and discover The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its people, choosing what interests you the most.

If you're coming to this book with a specific question in mind, feel free to look up that topic in the index or table of contents and start with that section. Others may want to start with Chapter 1, which gives an overview of the whole Mormon topic. There's no wrong way to eat this buffet — just enjoy the meal.

1

What the Mormon Faith Is All About

IN THIS PART . . .

Here you find out the basics about what Mormons believe, including important stuff about God, Jesus Christ, the premortal life, the plan of salvation, and the afterlife. You also discover what happened in the 19th century when Joseph Smith was called as a prophet to restore the church of Jesus Christ and how the Mormon priesthood is organized and used today. Finally, you get to know more about the family: Why is the family such an important concept in Mormonism? Why do Mormons tend to have larger-than-usual families? Why are they so into genealogy?

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding the reasons for studying Mormonism
- » Seeing life through Latter-day Saint eyes: The past, present, and future
- » Discovering Mormonism from its beginnings
- » Finding out what it's like to be a Latter-day Saint
- » Exploring how Latter-day Saints are different from other Christians

Chapter **1**

A New World Religion

Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, traditional branches of Christianity — and Mormonism? If you ask some demographers and sociologists, the idea of Mormonism emerging as the newest major world religion isn't far-fetched. In the Christian sector, although Protestantism grew out of Catholicism, Mormonism bills itself as a completely fresh start, with enough distinctive beliefs and practices to back up that claim.

Mormonism isn't the newest kid on the religious block, but its start during the 1820s seems relatively recent — in fact, compared to other world religions, Mormonism is a toddler, still maturing in terms of culture, identity, growth, government, and other aspects. As a blueprint for the rest of the book, this opening chapter gives an overview of what it means to be a Mormon.

Why Know about Mormonism?

If you ask Mormon missionaries why you should find out more about Mormonism, they'll tell you that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, informally known as the LDS church, is the restoration of the Savior's true church, and he

wants you to convert. However, we suspect this answer won't satisfy many of our non-Mormon readers, so here are some other reasons:

» **It's the quintessential U.S. religion.** Increasingly, historians are acknowledging that Mormonism is perhaps the most successful, significant homegrown U.S. religion, founded just 54 years after the Declaration of Independence. In many ways, the story of Mormonism mirrors the story of the United States, and the faith reflects many American ideals and traits. In fact, Latter-day Saints believe God inspired the formation of the United States partly as a suitable homeland for the gospel's restoration. (For an overview of early Mormon history, see Chapters 4, 11, 12, and 13.)

» **It's one of the fastest-growing religions.** Chances are that one or more of your friends, neighbors, or relatives has already joined the LDS church or soon will. Consider these statistics:

- As of December 31, 2023, the worldwide Church had 17,255,394 members; 31,490 congregations; 67,871 full-time teaching missionaries; and materials published in 188 languages. To illustrate typical Church growth, in 2023 the Church added 251,763 baptized converts and 93,594 children of record. (For more on missionary work and Church growth around the world, see Chapter 14.)
- The LDS church is consistently ranked among the five largest U.S. religious bodies, larger than mainline Protestant denominations such as Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian. According to the National Council of Churches, the LDS church is the second-fastest-growing church in the United States.

» **It teaches good principles and practices.** Even for those people who don't embrace Mormonism as a religion, the faith yields many useful ideas that you can adapt to fit any worldview. Following are some highlights:

- **Strengthening families:** Latter-day Saints are known for their large, tight-knit, super-functional families. One main reason is that Latter-day Saints believe families can be together forever (for more on this idea, see Chapter 5). Also, the LDS church teaches practical techniques for strengthening families, such as family home evening (for more information on this, see Chapter 17).
- **Providing for the needy:** Marshalling its organizational might, the LDS church has created one of the world's most admired systems for helping people provide for their own material needs. Church-owned farms, ranches, canneries, storehouses, and other enterprises provide not only essential goods but also employment. Increasingly, the Church shares its bounty with people outside the faith. (For more on the Church's welfare program and humanitarian efforts, see Chapter 8.)

- **Maintaining health:** When founding prophet Joseph Smith introduced Mormonism's health code, known as the *Word of Wisdom*, little did he know that science would validate many of these teachings more than 100 years later. Likewise, the Mormon law of chastity helps reduce a host of physical, emotional, social, and spiritual ills. Today, Latter-day Saints are known for enjoying some of the most favorable health rates of any demographic group. (For more on these teachings, see Chapter 16.)

The Mormon Worldview



REMEMBER

The following equation best sums up how Latter-day Saints understand the universe and the purpose of life: As humans are, God used to be; as God is, humans may become.

One main key to getting the gist of Mormonism is the belief that a person's existence doesn't begin with birth on this earth. Rather, Latter-day Saints believe that all people lived as spirits before coming here. For Latter-day Saints, this belief helps explain a whole lot about the conditions and purposes of this earthly life, which they view as God's test of his children. In addition, Latter-day Saints hold some unusual views about the afterlife, particularly regarding what human beings can become. (For a more detailed treatment of these beliefs, see Chapter 2.)

Life before mortal life

If life doesn't start with conception and birth, when does it start? For Latter-day Saints, it *never* really started because each person has an eternal essence that has always existed. However, Latter-day Saints believe that Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother created spiritual bodies to house each person's eternal essence, so they are the spiritual parents of humankind. All human spirits were born before the earth was created.

Sitting at the knees of their Heavenly Parents, many spirit children expressed a desire to grow up and become like them (for more on the Heavenly Parents, see Chapter 3). So God set up the *plan of salvation*, which involved creating an earth where his children could gain physical bodies and go through a challenging test of faith and obedience. Those who pass the test with flying colors get the chance to eventually start an eternal family like God's.

In *premortality* or the *premortal life*, as Latter-day Saints interchangeably call this stage, two of the oldest spirit siblings made a big impression. The first spirit, named Jehovah, volunteered to help everyone overcome the sin and death they'd unavoidably encounter during the earthly test, and this brother was eventually born on earth as Jesus Christ (for more about him, see Chapter 3). Mormons believe he's their Savior and strive to be like him. The other spirit, named Lucifer, rebelled against God's plan of salvation, convincing a bunch of siblings to follow him and start a war. God banished Lucifer and his followers to the earth without bodies, and Mormons believe that these spirits are still trying to win humans to their side and thwart God's plan (for more about the devil, see Chapter 2).

Life on earth

Good news: In the Mormon view, everyone born on this earth chose to follow God's plan of salvation and come here. Even those who give in to evil during earthly life will still receive an eternal reward for making the correct choice during premortality. Latter-day Saints don't believe that humans are born carrying the stain of Adam's original sin, as Catholics and some Protestants do. But they do believe that each individual's circumstances in this life are at least partly influenced by what that person accomplished and became in premortality.

One of the most difficult aspects of this mortal test is that humans can't remember what happened in premortality, so they must rediscover their divine origins through faith. However, God sent Jesus Christ not only to overcome sin and death but also to establish the gospel, which serves as a road map back to God. Two kinds of messengers help people understand and follow this gospel: prophets and the *Holy Ghost*, a spiritual being who speaks directly to the human spirit (for more on him, see Chapter 3). By listening to these guides, people can figure out the puzzle of life. Unfortunately, the devil strives to fill the world with distractions, deceptions, and counterfeits.

Another hard aspect of the earthly test is that God generally won't interfere with people's freedom to act, even when they do terrible things to each other or fail miserably. In addition, God allows accidents, natural disasters, illnesses, and other difficulties to challenge his children and prompt them to seek him out. For Latter-day Saints, it helps to remember that these temporary trials represent a mere blink of the eye on an eternal scale, and they exercise faith that God will comfort and protect those who ask his help to endure suffering.

During mortality, Latter-day Saints believe that everyone needs to participate in certain rituals in order to live with the Heavenly Parents in the afterlife and become like them. Someone holding God's priesthood authority, which Latter-day

Saints believe currently comes only through the LDS church, must perform these rituals. If a person dies without receiving these ordinances, Latter-day Saints perform the rituals in temples on behalf of the deceased person, whose spirit then decides whether to accept (for more information, see Chapter 7). These ordinances include:

- » Baptism (see Chapter 6)
- » Confirmation and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost (see Chapter 6)
- » Priesthood ordination (for all worthy males; see Chapter 4)
- » The two-part temple endowment (see Chapter 7)
- » Sealing, including celestial marriage for those wedded on earth (see Chapter 7)

Life after mortal life

Latter-day Saints believe that when humans die, they slough off their physical bodies and return to the spiritual state. Some go to spirit paradise, and some go to spirit prison. Latter-day Saints believe that the spirits in paradise visit the spirits in prison and teach them the gospel, and some choose to accept it and cross over into paradise. Whether they're in paradise or prison, the stopover in the spirit world is only temporary because God has greater things in store.

Eventually, after God's spirit children have experienced their earthly tests and paid for their sins either by receiving the Savior's atonement or suffering themselves, he'll resurrect everyone with perfect physical bodies that will last forever. Then he'll sort people into three heavenly kingdoms:

» **Telestial kingdom:** Those who live in sin, die without repenting, and don't accept the Savior's atonement go here, after suffering for their own sins in spirit prison.

» **Terrestrial kingdom:** Those who live good lives but don't embrace the full gospel will inherit this kingdom. Jesus pays for their sins.

(Both the telestial kingdom and the terrestrial kingdom are glorious paradises, not hell or places of torture. For more on the three tiers of heaven, see Chapter 2.)

» **Celestial kingdom:** This highest kingdom is reserved for those who live the full gospel and receive the proper ordinances. This kingdom is where the Heavenly Parents live and where their children can become like them.

Joseph Smith and Mormonism's Beginnings

To Latter-day Saints, the term *gospel* means the “good news” that Christ died to save humanity and also refers to a very practical package of tools and instructions that the Savior provides for getting humans back home to God. That package includes doctrines, commandments, ordinances, continually updated revelations, and the priesthood authority to act in God’s name (for more on the Mormon priesthood, see Chapter 4). Remember, Latter-day Saints believe that the Savior was God’s first spirit child way back before the earth was formed, so he’s been on deck to reveal his gospel to prophets from Adam onward.

In the Mormon view, the timeline goes like this: First the Savior gave his gospel to Adam, but Adam’s descendants eventually lost it through disobedience and corruption. Then the Savior gave it to other prophets, such as Noah and Abraham, but their people gradually lost it, too. Finally, when the Savior was born on the earth to accomplish his mission of overcoming sin and death for all humankind, he reestablished his gospel. However, within a few decades after his resurrection, humans fumbled it away yet again.

During the 1,700-year religious dry spell that Latter-day Saints say started after the Savior’s New Testament apostles died, he worked behind the scenes and prepared the earth to eventually receive his gospel again. In 1820, he began the process of restoring his gospel for the final time. When a teenager named Joseph Smith knelt in prayer to ask God which church he should join, God the Father and his son Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph and told him that none of the existing churches were fully true — in fact, according to Joseph, God used the words “abomination” and “corrupt” in describing them. Within ten years, Joseph Smith launched the Savior’s restored gospel in the form of what people now know as the Latter-day Saint religion. (For a more detailed account of Mormonism’s founding, see Chapter 4.)

Translating additional scriptures

After Joseph Smith’s answer to prayer in 1820, which Latter-day Saints refer to as his *First Vision*, an angel began regularly appearing to prepare him for his prophetic calling. Finally, the time arrived for him to perform one of the most important steps in restoring the gospel: bringing forth additional scripture that helped restore correct principles and could serve as a witness and testament of the new faith.

As Latter-day Saints understand, something very special happened in the Western Hemisphere between 600 B.C. and A.D. 400. At the beginning of this 1,000-year time period, God instructed a prophet named Lehi to leave Jerusalem with some other families and move to the Western Hemisphere. Over the centuries, this little band grew into a major civilization that underwent continual cycles of faith and wickedness, prosperity and destruction. In his usual way, the Lord sent prophets to teach these people and call them to repentance.



SCRIPTURE

Soon after the Savior's resurrection, he dropped by to spend a few days with about 2,500 of his followers in the Western Hemisphere, ministering to his "other sheep" (John 10:16). Before the Savior ascended to heaven, he called 12 additional apostles to carry out his work in this part of the world. Under apostolic leadership, the people managed to hold onto the gospel for another 400 years after the Savior's momentous visit. Eventually, however, their lack of faith and charity led to their corruption and extermination, as recounted in the Book of Mormon, the LDS church's companion scripture to the Bible.

The Western Hemisphere prophets and apostles kept records on metal plates. A prophet named Mormon made a *For Dummies*-style compilation of the people's spiritual history — well, a shortened version, anyway — and his son Moroni buried it in a hillside. About 1,400 years later, Joseph Smith's family settled near this same hillside in upstate New York. With the help of God, who provided interpreting devices to go along with the metal plates, Joseph translated and published the ancient record, and today the LDS church distributes millions of copies each year in over 100 languages. If the proof of Mormonism is in the pudding, then the Book of Mormon is the pudding. (For more about the Book of Mormon, see Chapter 9.)

Establishing the Church

While translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith and his helpers came across passages that prompted questions, such as how to properly baptize someone. The questions that Joseph asked Heavenly Father triggered the following key events:

- » In 1829, John the Baptist appeared to Joseph and his chief scribe to restore the *Aaronic Priesthood*, the preparatory priesthood authority necessary to perform basic ordinances, including baptism.
- » Soon after John the Baptist's visitation, the New Testament apostles Peter, James, and John appeared on earth to give Joseph the *Melchizedek Priesthood*, the full authority to act in God's name within the Church organization. (For more on the two Mormon priesthoods, see Chapter 4.)

- » In 1830, Joseph Smith officially organized the Church, which Latter-day Saints believe the Savior recognizes as his only “true and living” church.
- » Until Joseph’s assassination in 1844, he received numerous additional revelations, scriptures, and ordinances that helped establish the new religion (for an overview of these additions, see Chapters 10 and 11).

Coming to terms with the M-word

As a prophet who lived somewhere in North or South America around A.D. 400, Mormon was just one of dozens of important figures in LDS history. Nevertheless, he’s the man whose name became the nickname for this whole religious movement. Unfortunately, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has recently expressed frustration with the nickname.

As we say earlier in this section, the prophet Mormon’s claim to fame was compiling and abridging the ancient records that became the Book of Mormon, titled that way because of Mormon’s central editorial role. After Joseph Smith translated and published the book, it didn’t take long for detractors to start calling his followers *Mormonites*, because of their belief in the book. The “ite” part of the nickname dropped off, and eventually the term stuck and lost most of its negative connotations.



Still, *Mormon* is just a nickname. What would Mormons rather be called? Although the Church hasn’t completely ruled out the terms *Mormon* and *Mormonism* at the cultural level, it asks the media to use the Church’s full name on first reference in a story — in other words, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — and then say the generic-sounding “Church of Jesus Christ” on each subsequent reference. However, that somewhat clunky and vague lingo hasn’t yet universally caught on.

At Church headquarters, use of the term *Mormon* has been phased out — even the Mormon Tabernacle Choir was renamed as the Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square (yeah, another clunky one). In public usage, what often takes the place of *Mormon* is the term *Latter-day Saint*, or *LDS* for short. The Church doesn’t like being called the LDS church, but it’s a heck of a lot better than *Mormon church*, which the leaders strongly discourage.

For this second edition of *Mormonism For Dummies*, the authors and editors seriously considered changing the title and terminology, but we felt it would be too confusing for the intended readership. Throughout this book, we use the terms *Mormon*, *LDS*, and *Latter-day Saint* interchangeably to refer to the doctrine, teachings, practices, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Within the LDS culture, some hipsters — yes, Mormon hipsters do exist — have started using the word *Mo* to refer to things Mormon, but we won’t go that far.