

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

WHAT IS A WORLDVIEW?

In this edition of *Issues in Perspective*, I hope to analyze the concept of worldview, arguing that biblical Christianity is the only worldview that provides coherence and sustainability, and then test the worldview concept on two major cults—Mormonism and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

First, what is a worldview exactly? Christianity is not only a personal relationship with the living God through faith in Jesus Christ; it is a worldview. It is an entire way of thinking, covering not only theology, but how to think about ethics, history, science, literature, etc. Because God has revealed Himself verbally in the Bible, Christians have the answers to the most penetrating questions of life. James W. Sire suggests that there are seven such basic questions:

1. What is prime reality--the really real?
2. What is the nature of external reality, i.e., outside of ourselves?
3. What is a human being?
4. What happens to a person at death?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
7. What is the meaning of history?

Human beings must come to terms with these questions sometime during their lives. Sire argues that to discover one's worldview is a "significant step toward self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-understanding." [See James W. Sire. *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1988), pp. 17-18.] Genuine biblical Christianity provides coherence and sustainability as it answers these basic questions.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

MORMONISM: A DEFECTIVE WORLDVIEW

The History of Mormonism. Of all the cults, Mormonism is by far the largest and fastest growing, with as many as 10 million adherents worldwide. Its beginnings revolve totally around Joseph Smith, who was born on 23 December 1805 in Sharon, Vermont. His early years were greatly influenced by his father, who curiously spent a great deal of time searching for buried treasure using unorthodox and often occult methods. His life changed in 1820 when he

supposedly received a vision from God the Father and the Son, who told him that all other religions were an abomination but that he was the prophet to bring restoration.

In 1823 another vision from the angel Moroni further solidified Smith's charge from God. The angel informed him that he would uncover a number of golden plates that needed translating. He discovered these plates, inscribed with what he called "reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics," outside Palmyra, New York. He was able to translate them with a huge pair of spectacles that he called the "Urim and Thummim." According to his story, between 1827 and 1829, he "translated" the plates and in 1830 published *The Book of Mormon*. The plates were purportedly taken to heaven by Moroni.

In another vision from John the Baptist in 1829, Smith received the Aaronic priesthood and founded the "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." He subsequently relocated his religious headquarters to Ohio and Missouri, but, according to Boa, "Mormons were accused of a number of crimes in those places and were required to leave Missouri" in 1839 by order of the governor.

The Mormons, led by Smith, relocated to Illinois, where they built the city of Nauvoo, where he instituted the practice of polygamy. When Smith and his brother Hyrum tried to destroy a local newspaper office because of its stand against the Mormons, they were arrested and jailed in Carthage, Illinois. Tragically, an angry mob stormed the prison and on 27 June 1844 shot and killed the two brothers, making them martyrs. The leadership mantle passed to Brigham Young, the "First President" and prophet of the church.

Under Young's leadership, the Mormons relocated to Salt Lake City in July 1847. There they settled down and built their unique brand of religion. Young's influence was virtually dictatorial, but it provided the stability needed for the group to grow. During this period, the US government sought to make Utah a state but first the Mormons resisted this effort and later refused to give up polygamy as a condition for statehood. Only when the government threatened the Mormons with property loss did they change their doctrine and abolish polygamy as a doctrine.

Today, the Mormons are a highly structured and organized religion. Led by a First President, a Council of Twelve Apostles and a Council of Seventy, there are also bishops, counselors and teachers at all levels. Further, virtually all Mormon males serve as deacons and elders. Males over 12 years old are also members of the Mormon priesthood of Aaron or Melchizedek. Because they regard themselves as the true church, Mormons call all non-Mormons as "Gentiles."

For the Mormons, their scriptures define their faith. They regard scripture as the Bible, *The Book of Mormon*, *Doctrines and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*. Ken Boa summarizes the content of *The Book of Mormon*, the most important of the Mormon texts:

The Book of Mormon, which supposedly was written by several people from about 600 B.C. to A.D. 428, tells of the migration of an ancient people from the Tower of Babel to Central America. These people, known as the Jaredites, perished because of apostasy. A later migration

occurred in 600 B.C., when a group of Jews were supposedly told by God to flee Jerusalem before the Babylonian captivity. These Jews, led by Lehi and his son Nephi, crossed the Pacific Ocean and landed in South America. There they divided into two opposing nations, the Nephites and the Lamanites. The Lamanites, cursed with dark skin because of their iniquity, were the ancestors of the American Indians. (Similarly, the black people are said to have been cursed with dark skin because they are descendants of Cain, the first murderer.)

The Nephites recorded prophecies about the coming of Christ, and after His resurrection Christ visited them there in South America. He instituted communion, baptism, and the priesthood for the Nephites. Later they were annihilated in a battle with the Lamanites in A.D. 428. Before they were killed in battle, Mormon, the compiler of the divinely revealed *Book of Mormon*, and his son Moroni took the golden plates on which “the revelation” was recorded and buried them. These plates were uncovered 1,400 years later by Joseph Smith.

How reliable is this “history?” There are several key points that demonstrate that *The Book of Mormon* is unreliable as a historic text:

1. There are no reliable witnesses to the plates Smith supposedly translated.
2. As Boa remarks, “Though *The Book of Mormon* was buried in A.D. 428, it contains about 25,000 words verbatim from the A.D. 1611 King James version of the Bible!”
3. I recently visited the new Mormon temple in Omaha, Nebraska, where I live. During the tour, one guest asked why there is no archeological evidence for the historical claims of *The Book of Mormon*. Our guide could offer no answer, but the extensive claims of the book would necessitate some kind of evidence for these peoples. There is none.
4. There is absolutely no evidence of anything called “reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics.” Mormonism is a worldview that has generated passion and growth. It has been an aggressive religion, expecting all teens to commit two years in missionary service, for which they raise their own funds. Also, the LDS leaders expect every Mormon to tithe 10% of all income, with the result that the LDS church is extremely wealthy, with assets over \$30 billion. [*Time*, 4 August 1997, p. 54] Mormons are also visibly active in politics and social causes that promote conservative values and ethics. They remain a powerful force in American culture.

The Theology of Mormonism.

God. Mormonism teaches that God the Father was once a man, but became God. He has a physical body, as does his wife (the Heavenly Mother). Mormons deny the trinity, arguing that the Father, Son and Spirit are three separate gods. Mormons likewise teach that it is possible for all faithful Mormons to one day become gods too.

Jesus Christ. Mormonism teaches that Jesus is a separate god from the Father (Elohim) and is the spirit child of the Father and Mother in heaven. He is, therefore, the “elder brother” of all men spirit beings. His body was created through sexual union between Elohim and Mary. In fact, Mormonism teaches that Jesus was married, as a polygamist, to the two Marys and Martha. His death on Calvary’s cross does not provide full atonement, but does guarantee resurrection for everyone.

Scripture. Without question, Mormons equate *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* with the Bible; in fact, they regard it as more authoritative than the Bible. That book is complemented by other Mormon texts, the *Pearl of Great Price* and *Doctrines and Covenants*.

Salvation. The LDS church actually defines salvation as exaltation to godhood, which can only be earned through obedience to LDS leaders, Mormon baptism, tithing, marriage (which they believe is eternal) and secret temple rituals. Using 1 Corinthians 15:29, the LDS church also teaches that present day Mormons can be vicariously baptized for their ancestors, who will then be “saved.” For that reason, Mormons spend a great deal of time studying their family’s genealogy so that they can be baptized in their place.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

JEHOVAH’S WITNESS: A DEFECTIVE WORLDVIEW

The History of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The founder of this cult was Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916). Heavily influenced by Seventh Day Adventism in his early years, Russell broke with the Adventists and began publishing his own magazine, *Zion’s Watchtower and Herald of Christ’s Presence*, and in 1884 founded the Zion Watchtower Tract Society. A voluminous writer, Russell’s most important work was a seven-volume series entitled, *Studies in the Scriptures*, published over the period from 1886 to 1904. A man of questionable character and ethics, Russell is today disowned by modern Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Russell was succeeded in 1917 by Joseph Franklin Rutherford. Rutherford gained absolute control over the Watchtower Society and, in 1931, following Isaiah 43:10, he renamed the movement Jehovah’s Witnesses. He also denounced all organized religions and fostered a tone of hostility toward Christianity. A more prolific writer than Russell, Rutherford built on the teachings of Russell.

Nathan Homer Knorr followed Rutherford and under his leadership the Jehovah’s Witnesses stressed the training of their disciples. Under Knorr, the image of the movement changed. It became more respectable and organized. The movement began to focus on intense training of its layman and its leaders in what are known today as “Kingdom Halls.”

Jehovah’s Witnesses have produced their own “translation” of the Bible, known as *The New World Translation*. As Ken Boa argues, “As with other Witness literature, this translation is being widely distributed around the world and its producers are anonymous. Thus, there is no way of knowing the credentials of its translators and whether they worked from the original languages . . .”

Why are Jehovah’s Witnesses so aggressive and energetic? It stems from their eschatology (doctrine of the end times). As Boa demonstrates, Witnesses teach that Christ’s second coming has already occurred. It involved three stages: in 1874 Christ came to the “upper air” and later caught up the apostles and dead members of the 144,000, who will be immortal; in 1914 Christ ended the times of the Gentiles and began to reign; and in 1918 he came to the spiritual temple

and began the judgment of the nations. They now eagerly await the imminent battle of Armageddon in which Jesus will lead Jehovah's forces to defeat evil. Only faithful Witnesses will escape death in this battle; and only those who earn their place among the Witnesses through their "door to door" work are the "saved."

In the Witnesses door-to-door ministry, their most effective tools are their publications. Two publications dominate--*The Watchtower* and *Awake!*, which are distributed by Witnesses through their door to door "evangelism." *The Watchtower* is the more theological of the two, for in it are found doctrinal treatises and historical reviews of how the Witness movement developed. The other major publication of the Society is *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, completed in 1960. Hoekema writes of this "translation" that it "is by no means an objective rendering of the sacred text into modern English, but is a biased translation in which many of the peculiar teachings of the Watchtower Society are smuggled into the text of the Bible itself." Witnesses are aggressive and passionate in their use of this translation.

The Theology of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

God. Jehovah's Witnesses reject God as trinity. God is one (called Jehovah) and the first being he created was Jesus Christ, who then created everything else. The Holy Spirit is an impersonal and active force of Jehovah.

Jesus Christ. Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Jesus, while in heaven, was the archangel Michael, but that Jehovah, after creating him as Jesus Christ, made the physical universe through him. He lived a perfect life on earth and after dying on a stake (not a cross), he was resurrected as a spirit and his body was destroyed. Jesus is "a god," not *the* God.

Scripture. As mentioned in the historical review above, the writings of the founder and early leaders (Russell and Rutherford) are important for the foundational teachings of this cult. However, today Witnesses also depend on the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* and their magazine publications, *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*, to guide their thinking about doctrine and theology. The result is that they teach the Bible cannot be understood without the guidance of the Zion Watchtower Society.

Salvation. The first step for Witnesses is that they be baptized as a Jehovah's Witness. But the core teaching of Witnesses is that followers merit everlasting life through "door-to-door" promotion of Witness beliefs. However, eternal life in heaven is limited to 144,000 "anointed ones" who have already been chosen by Jehovah. The remaining Witnesses who merit Jehovah's favor through their works will spend eternity on the rejuvenated earth, not in heaven.

See James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews: A Biblical Understanding of Worldview Alternatives*, pp. 95-104.