

Introduction

These questions are designed to probe various aspects of the LDS Church's history and truth-claims.¹ The list was made for 1) investigators to ask the missionaries, 2) active members to ask themselves, or 3) those experiencing a faith transition to ask their parents or ecclesiastical leaders.

The majority of links provided are to [LDS approved sources](#) or to relatively neutral information repositories (such as wikipedia).

If any question contains incorrect information or is misleading in any way, please contact me, and I will fix it.

Approaches to difficult questions

One general way to deal with difficult questions is to suggest that God has been dispensing information “line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little” ([2 Nephi 28:30](#)). On the other hand, we expect to see consistency in the unfolding of God's handiwork because God “is the same yesterday and today and forever” ([1 Nephi 10:18](#)), “truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” ([D&C 93:24](#)), and his house “...is a house of order, saith the Lord God, and not a house of confusion.” ([D&C 132:8](#)).

Inconsistencies and difficulties may also be chalked up to the shortcomings and mistakes of men. On the one hand, the Lord (apparently) declared, through Joseph Smith:

What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.

Joseph Smith also emphasized “there is no error in the revelations which I have taught.”² On the other hand, he reminded us “I never told you I was perfect” and

¹The LDS Church is capable of answering many questions about its history and truth-claims, and many of the answers cast the Church in a positive light. Questions that frame the Church in a positive light are important—and missionaries and ecclesiastical leaders will be quick to ask and answer those questions—but difficult questions are similarly important for exploring the boundaries and potential contradictions found within LDS theology, history, and epistemology. In science, at least, it is the question that is not easily answered that often motivates truth-seekers to find new—or refine existing—models describing reality.

²The idea that there is no error in the revelations taught by a prophet or that we ought to follow what a prophet teaches regardless of its accuracy is suggested frequently in the LDS Church.

- “I have never yet preached a sermon and sent it out to the children of men, that they may not call scripture” ([Brigham Young](#))
- “Sometimes there are those who haggle over words. They might say the prophet gave us counsel but that we are not obligated to follow it unless he says it is a commandment. But the Lord says of the Prophet Joseph, ‘Thou shalt give heed unto all his words and commandments which he shall give unto you’” ([Ezra Taft Benson](#))
- “As an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ and as one who has seen firsthand the councils and

“a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such.”³ With caveats in place (i.e., revelation from God is perfect and all mistakes are from men), it is trivial, then, to take any event, doctrine, or teaching that is problematic and attribute it to the failures of men while attributing everything faith-promoting and wonderful to God’s divine influence. This is a tremendously powerful partitioning algorithm.⁴ Its only weakness may be that it is too powerful—such an algorithm seems capable of

workings of this Church, I bear solemn witness that no decision of significance affecting this Church or its members is ever made without earnestly seeking the inspiration, guidance, and approbation of our Eternal Father. This is the Church of Jesus Christ. God will not allow His Church to drift from its appointed course or fail to fulfill its divine destiny.” (Dieter F. Uchtdorf)

- “I do not acknowledge that I designedly lead this people astray one hair’s breadth from the truth, and I do not knowingly do a wrong” (Brigham Young)
- “...We will not and ... cannot lead you astray” (M. Russell Ballard)
- “There is no error in the revelations Joseph taught!” - Apostle Neal A. Maxwell, Sermons Not Spoken, p.6

³The idea that God’s leaders are fallible is occasionally emphasized, particularly when dealing with difficult issues. Some examples:

- “God is perfect, and His doctrine is pure. But He works through us—His imperfect children—and imperfect people make mistakes.” (Dieter F. Uchtdorf)
- “Can a Prophet or an Apostle be mistaken? Do not ask me any such question, for I will acknowledge that all the time...” (Brigham Young)

⁴The algorithm members often use for dealing with difficult problems with history or doctrine is that everything good and wonderful done or said by leaders or members is motivated by God and is evidence of the truthfulness of the LDS Church while everything that falls short of the ideal is considered the failings of man (e.g., “speaking as man” or “the church is perfect but the people aren’t”). It’s an extremely powerful [partitioning algorithm](#). The LDS Church comes out looking divine—no matter what difficult history a person may be exposed to—*by algorithmic definition*.

The problem with this algorithm is that it may be too powerful—any institution to which we apply it will also suddenly appear divine. A Jehovah’s Witness defends their organization in similar terms:

Every person in this organization—every one of Jehovah’s Witnesses including the governing body—we’re all imperfect and thus we are subject to making mistakes. Which means that if you look hard enough, all you will see instead of seeing these amazing things that Jehovah is accomplishing and our tremendous privilege of being part of it, all we are going to see is the errors of men. But when we focus on the good, on the guidance and loving support that we’ve received, aren’t we moved with appreciation to cleave to this body of fellow worshipers. And just look at what Jehovah is accomplishing by means of his imperfect servants. There is no other organization on earth providing spiritual food like the one that we belong to. When we look at all of this, how could we possibly let the failings of just a few people undermine this overwhelming proof of Jehova’s backing? 2016 [“remain loyal to jehovah” regional conference](#)

And a Catholic speaking about her Bishops as she defends the Catholic doctrine of forbidding birth control:

Bishops are not CEO’s; they are stand-ins for Christ. The relation of a bishop to the people is not analogous to any ‘power’ relationships in the secular world. They are human and prone to mistakes, but they are also a way that God speaks to the world. Bishops serve lay Catholics by standing up for our beliefs, as they are doing now. I am glad that when the world wants to know “what Catholics think” there is a clear way to find out. I am grateful for the leadership of our bishops in these recent weeks. [source](#)

divinizing any organization or individual to which it may be applied.

Questions

Joseph Smith's Polygamy

1. If sealing is such an important principle⁵, why did Joseph never seal himself to his parents or children during his lifetime?⁶
2. If sealing is such an important principle, why was Emma sealed to Joseph after so many others ([more than 16 well documented sealings](#))?
3. LDS Historian Brian Hales [wrote of Joseph's relationship with Fanny](#) "it is obvious Emma did not believe the ceremony was valid and concluded the relationship was adulterous. Ironically, Oliver Cowdery, who Joseph summoned to diffuse the situation, sided with Emma, discounting the validity of the polygamous marriage." Why did Joseph (apparently) not get permission for his relationship with Fanny?
4. For what purpose did Joseph Smith get sealed to other righteous men's wives (e.g., [Zina Huntington](#) and [Marinda Nancy Johnson Hyde](#))? In particular, what justified Joseph's marriage to [Zina Huntington](#), a happily newlywed, pregnant mother?
5. To whom was Zina Huntington married when her second child was born? Who fathered her third child? To whom will [Zina Huntington's](#) children (those fathered by her first husband, Henry Jacobs, and the one fathered by Brigham Young) belong in the eternities?
6. Why did [Zina Huntington](#) become Brigham Young's wife after Joseph died and not Henry Jacob's wife (especially considering that Henry already had children with Zina)?
7. Joseph Smith was sealed a second time to each of the Partridge sisters ([Emily](#) and [Eliza](#)) in Emma's presence in order to hide the first sealings—which had occurred 3 months prior—from Emma. [According to Emily](#), "To save the [Smith] family trouble Brother Joseph thought it best to have another ceremony performed." Is that [sufficient justification](#) for [duplicity](#)? Did the concealment save the family trouble?
8. Joseph Smith directly or implicitly [denied practicing polygamy](#) 5 times in his own words and was responsible for 3 additional direct denials. What made it

⁵Latter-day Saints view the temple sealing ceremony as having the utmost significance. Here are some examples: [The sealing ordinance links families eternally](#), [Marriage in the Lord's Way](#), ["The Sealing Power"](#).

⁶In [a reddit comment](#), Brian Hales, LDS Historian (and likely primary author of the [Nauvoo Polygamy lds.org essay](#)), stated: "Keep in mind Joseph died without being sealed to his children or parents."

okay for Joseph Smith (and [other early leaders](#)) to repeatedly lie about their practice of polygamy?⁷

9. What was the point of a union with [14 year old Helen Mar Kimball](#)? Specifically, if polyandrous unions with Joseph were good enough for the Jacobs and Hyde families, why would a potential polyandrous union with Vilate be inadequate for sealing to the Kimball family?
10. According to his daughter Helen, Heber C. Kimball was instructed by Joseph Smith [not to tell his first wife](#), Vilate, when he married his first *plural* wife, Sarah Noon. Should Vilate have been consulted before Heber took a second wife?
11. If Joseph was pressured into polygamy by [an angel with a drawn sword](#), why did the angel not give sufficient instructions to ensure that polygamy and/or sealings were done “correctly” (for instance, consistent with the principles suggested by [D&C 132:61](#))?⁸

The Book of Abraham

In his translation of the facsimiles, Joseph pointed to [specific characters and gave a specific translation](#). However, the characters on the facsimiles (*not* the vignettes, but the characters describing the vignettes) have been translated by both [BYU](#) and non-Mormon scholars. [The Book of Abraham lds.org essay](#) concedes: “None of the characters on the papyrus fragments mentioned Abraham’s name or any of the events recorded in the book of Abraham. Mormon and non-Mormon Egyptologists agree that the characters on the fragments do not match the translation given in the book of Abraham...”

⁷LDS apologist Brian Hales has attempted to argue that Joseph Smith wasn’t lying about polygamy but using “carefully worded denials” instead (so he was “technically” honest). I have examined that argument in great depth [here](#).

⁸Joseph Smith apparently received precise dimensions for the construction of, for example, a printing house ([D&C 94:10-11](#)):

10 And again, verily I say unto you, the second lot on the south shall be dedicated unto me for the building of a house unto me, for the work of the printing of the translation of my scriptures, and all things whatsoever I shall command you.

11 And it shall be fifty-five by sixty-five feet in the width thereof and the length thereof, in the inner court; and there shall be a lower and a higher court.

The [messiness](#) of Joseph Smith’s polygamy contrasts with such precise instruction. We might expect more detail to be given for something like polygamy—which had such a tremendous impact on all its participants—and perhaps less detail for printing buildings.

We cannot be certain when the principles given in [D&C 132:61](#) were first revealed, but we know the full revelation was recorded [by July 7, 1843](#). If these principles were revealed late, we are left wondering why these principles were not revealed earlier. For instance, had the angel delivered these principles at the same time as threats of death were he not to move ahead with polygamy, then perhaps Joseph would not have pressured Zina Huntington, the 7 month pregnant newlywed, into being sealed to him. On the other hand, if the [D&C 132:61 principles](#) were, in fact, revealed earlier to Joseph, we are left wondering why Joseph rarely, if ever, followed those principles. What would Joseph Smith’s polygamy have looked like had he followed the principles in [D&C 132:61](#) from the beginning?

Why do the translations of the facsimile characters not match up?⁹

The Book of Mormon

Richard Bushman, a well-known Mormon historian, [recently stated](#):

... there is phrasing everywhere—long phrases that if you google them you will find them in 19th century writings. The theology of the Book of Mormon is very much 19th century theology, and it reads like a 19th century understanding of the Hebrew Bible as an Old Testament ...

The number of [similarities with early 1800s thought](#) is *extensive*.

1. If the Book of Mormon is a historical record, and if we accept as accurate the stories of how it was translated (i.e., [words appeared on the stone in a hat until they were written correctly](#)) why does it bear such a strong imprint of having been composed in the early 19th century?
2. Why are there errors in the Book of Mormon [unique to the 1769 King James edition of the Bible](#) that Joseph Smith's family owned?
3. Why does the Book of Mormon [closely quote deutero-Isaiah](#) which likely wasn't written (at least in its current form) [until after Lehi and his family would have left Jerusalem](#)?
4. Why would Moroni have quoted Jesus speaking the precise words found at the end of the book of Mark when the section he was quoting is almost certainly of [dubious origin](#)?
5. If the book is ancient in origin, why did the author of the Book of Mormon [quote or paraphrase New Testament scripture more often than Old Testament scripture](#), even before the New Testament was written?

Spiritual Confirmation and Priesthood Guidance

1. Why do members of other religions receive strong spiritual experiences confirming to them that their religion is the correct religion? (See [Spiritual Witnesses](#))

⁹Consider that God apparently guided prophets thousands of years in advance to prepare additional records to go with the golden plates in order to prevent people from losing faith over minor translation errors were Joseph to have re-translated the lost 116 pages and his initial translation were altered. [D&C 10:31-33](#) makes this clear:

31 For, behold, if you should bring forth the same words they will say that you have lied and that you have pretended to translate, but that you have contradicted yourself.

32 And, behold, they will publish this, and Satan will harden the hearts of the people to stir them up to anger against you, that they will not believe my words.

33 Thus Satan thinketh to overpower your testimony in this generation, that the work may not come forth in this generation.

and additional discussion in [Testimony, Spiritual Experiences, and Truth: A Careful Examination](#))

2. Given [how missionaries instruct members to pray about the Book of Mormon](#), in what fashion could a person arrive at the conclusion that the Book of Mormon is *not* true? If a person persistently followed Moroni's promise with any sufficiently inspiring book, what would be the end result?
3. Elder Holland shared "[the missionary speech of all time](#)" at a New Mission President Seminar. It was shared by many others,¹⁰ who also found it to be very powerful. Ultimately, key parts of the story were [found to be in error](#), calling into question [the validity of the entire story](#). Why did people report feeling so touched (e.g., "the most powerful message to my heart...") by a story that was deeply flawed factually? Is it possible for a person to have received a similar witness of the "truth" of the Book of Mormon and for it to be factually flawed?
4. Before the 1900s, [over 60 individuals](#) received patriarchal blessings indicating that they will "remain until the second coming" or "not taste of death."¹¹ Why should the promptings of the Holy Ghost (which are considered the inspiration behind priesthood and patriarchal blessings) be considered reliable given these prophetic failures?
5. President George Albert Smith stated in a [1949 First Presidency Statement](#): "The attitude of the Church with reference to Negroes remains as it has always stood. It is not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of direct commandment from the Lord..." The [Lowry Nelson letters](#) and the [Stewart Udall letters](#) further underscore the unwavering confidence Church leaders of that time had in the divinity of the Black Priesthood/Temple ban and the doctrines and teachings offering it support.¹² Given the level of confidence leaders at that time had in the Priesthood/Temple ban, why should we have confidence in Church leaders' position today on homosexuality (i.e., that homosexual same-sex married couples are in "apostasy" and the children of homosexuals may not be baptized

¹⁰Elder Holland's story (also told by Kim B. Clark) was shared by many others (all last retrieved 2017-09-06): [1](#), [2](#), [3](#) [4](#), [5](#), and [6](#). The story profoundly influenced many hearers:

¹¹All these individuals are now dead as far as I'm aware—these are all from patriarchal blessings given before the 1900s, and I'm assuming we would likely know if any of them had somehow escaped death.

- "The most powerful message to my heart was a story from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland addressed to new mission presidents and their wives."
- "really awesome story"
- "then he ended with a powerful story...This was a powerful story for me. One about love and about how God shows his love. There are no lost causes, we are all of infinite worth to God and He will put us exactly where he needs us to be."
- "I want to tell an amazing story we were told at the devotional last night...HOW AMAZING IS THAT?! God sure works in mysterious and amazing ways."
- "How amazing is that? Think about how many people had to be prompted by the Holy Ghost for all of that to happen! We are where we are for a reason!"

¹²Confidence in the underlying teaching about the curse of Cain and "black" blood is also manifest in the practice of LDS hospitals segregating "black" blood from "white" blood [for many years](#).

without 1st presidency approval)? Is it possible that leaders today are “speaking as men” influenced by their upbringing and culture?¹³

Joseph Smith and the Restoration

1. The Joseph Smith Papers Project [historical introduction to the 1832 First Vision](#) states, “In the early 1830s, when this history was written, it appears that Joseph Smith had not broadcast the details of his first vision of Deity. The history of the church, as it was then generally understood, began with the gold plates.” Why does it appear that Joseph Smith did not tell anyone about the First Vision until well after the founding of the Church?
2. Why does it appear that Joseph Smith did not tell anyone about the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood [for several years](#)? And why did Joseph Smith [retro-fit Book of Commandment revelations with Priesthood restoration stories](#)? (see [full side-by-side BoC and D&C comparison](#))
3. Given their separation by 800 miles, the Saints in Kirtland were unaware of events as they occurred in Jackson County Missouri. Given [his omniscience](#), however, God should be aware of events as they occur. Unbeknownst to the Saints in Kirtland, the Saints in Missouri (aka ‘Zion’) had just had their businesses looted, their printing press destroyed, their farms and houses burned, and had just been forced to sign an agreement to leave Jackson County when [D&C 97](#) was revealed to Joseph Smith in Kirtland. Why did God appear to be fairly [unaware of the events that had just transpired in Jackson County](#) as indicated by the various concerns discussed in section 97?

Adam and Eve

The Church teaches [in 8 current manuals](#) that Adam lived at approximately 4000 BC; Joseph Smith claimed that [Adam and Eve walked out of the Garden of Eden into Missouri, USA](#),¹⁴ and modern leaders [affirm the physical, literal reality of Adam and Eve](#). In addition, restored LDS scripture describes Adam and Eve tilling the ground immediately upon their expulsion from the Garden of Eden (see [Moses 4:29](#)). Given that agriculture was not invented [until about 10,000 years ago](#), it appears that

¹³Additionally, consider [the arguments outlined by Bryce Cook](#).

¹⁴The recently leaked [Guideline Responses to Common Questions](#) is given to all General Authorities upon accepting their assignment. It contains the following response to the question “Was the Garden of Eden in Missouri?”

Strictly speaking, we do not know where the Garden of Eden was. Joseph Smith established a settlement called Adam-ondi-Ahman in Daviess County, Missouri. While not an important or foundational doctrine, **Latter-day Saints believe that Adam and Eve dwelt in that area after being expelled from the Garden of Eden.** (emphasis added)

all accounts of Adam and Eve from LDS prophetic sources place them somewhere between 4,000 BCE and 10,000 BCE (in Missouri, USA).

However, many data points [support a migration out of Africa beginning about 70,000 years ago](#). Aboriginal Australians likely migrated to Australia about *50,000* years ago, and extensive evidence shows migrations into the Pacific islands [around 20,000 years ago](#).¹⁵ In addition, all human genetic sequence data and inferences about viable population size suggest that there was never a time when there were only two humans on earth ([example 1](#), [example 2](#)).

1. In what fashion was Adam “the first man of all men” (Moses 1:34) and the “primal parent of our race” (according to [the 1909 First Presidency Statement](#)) respective to the Australian Aborigines and Pacific Islanders? Are those people descendants of Adam and Eve? If not, what makes Adam and Eve their “parent”?
2. If Adam and Eve were literal people, what is one possible time or place they could have lived that is also compatible with our understanding of the human migration data?
3. FairMormon acknowledges that there [was likely not a global flood 4,400 years ago](#). If the Garden of Eden really was in Missouri, how did Adam and Eve migrate to the Middle East? If Adam never actually lived in Missouri, then what are we to make of [Adam-ondi-Ahman](#)?

¹⁵The various methods used to date these events are accepted as generally accurate by every BYU scientist who operates within these domains ([for example](#)). In part, that’s because these methods are verified and calibrated by highly orthogonal measures of the passage of time (position of the stars relative to stonehenge, varve layers, speleothem deposition, tree-rings, etc).