

By the Hand of Mormon

I have had very little to do with Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons till this year. I recently help set up a website for a local evangelist who engages with them.

<http://www.cults-investigated.com>

I went to my local library and found this book "By the Hand of Mormon" by Terry L Givens (Oxford University Press, 2002). So I got it out.

There is so much about Mormonism that I did not know.

Before learning new things, I find it useful to spell out what I already know. Regarding Mormonism, all I knew was

- It was very American
- Young American Male Mormons go on two year missions, often abroad
- There was a large march to Salt Lake City, to escape persecution
- The founder claims to have been visited by an Angel
- They have a religious book unique to them called The Book of Mormon

So below is what I have learned. The founder was called Joseph Smith. Born 1805 and dies 1844. The Book of Mormon was published in 1830. He did not have an educated background. He lived in an era when folk spirituality was a big part of Christianity and prophecy and visions were very popular.

As a young boy, there was a lot of interest in finding gold or treasure. Joseph smith used 'seer stones' in helping to look for treasure but was unsuccessful.

At the age of 14 or 15 he has a vision of God and Jesus. God says to him 'this is my beloved Son'.

At one point, he asks God which church to join. Then God the Father and Jesus the Son of God appear and tell him that all the churches are corrupt and he shouldn't join any of them.

The book of James is very important to Joseph – especially the verse about asking for wisdom. Apparently Joseph asked for wisdom before his visions. Many later Mormon testimonies say something similar – they asked for wisdom, read the Book of Mormon, and had some special feelings.

The angel Moroni tells him about a Golden Bible which he finds at Cumorah a drumlin in Manchester, New York, United States. It was in a buried stone box. It is on Golden plates and the writing is in reformed Egyptian.

Joseph Smith translates this Bible using the Urim and Thumin. His first translation however is lost.

He does another translation using a Seer Stone and that one is the current Book of Mormon.

Very few people actually see the Golden Bible. Though there are about 8 that testify to having visions. These testimonies were included in the Book of Mormon, at the front and back.

The Book of Mormon itself says that Jews emigrated to America at the time of the Tower of Babel and around 600BC, and they had quite advanced civilisations. At first the belief was that the Native Indians were descendants of those Jews. I'm not sure if that is still the case. When many amazing archaeological finds were happening in South and Central America, the Mormons believed this was proof of the Book of Mormon.

Books from the Book of Mormon

1 Nephi
2 Nephi
Jacob
Enos
Jarom
Omni
Words of Mormon
Mosiah
Alma
Helaman
3 Nephi
4 Nephi
Mormon
Ether
Moroni

An interesting literary device found in the book of Mormon is the Chiasmus. Basically the stanzas are constructed so that the first is in parallel with the last, the second in parallel with the penultimate and so on. Devices like this are said to have been unlikely to have been made up by Joseph Smith.

Biblical passages with a chiastic structure:

Gospel of John (including 6:36–40; 15:7–17; 16:16–31; 18:28–19:16a; 19:16b–42).⁴⁵ and Matthew 27:62–28:20.⁴⁶

The Chiasmus of John 1:1–18:50

A The Word with God the Father (1:1–2)
B The Word's role in creation (1:3)
C God's Grace to mankind (1:4–5)
D Witness of John the Baptist (1:6–8)
E The Incarnation of the Word (1:9–11)
X Saving Faith in the Incarnate Word (1:12–13)
E' The Incarnation of the Word (1:14)
D' Witness of John the Baptist (1:15)
C' God's Grace to mankind (1:16)
B' The Word's role in re-creation (1:17)
A' The Word with God the Father (1:18)

http://www.onthewing.org/user/BS_Chiasmus%20-%20McCoy.pdf

How do I share the gospel?

I have read quite a bit of theology recently and it has benefited me in a lot of ways, but I feel a bit confused in other ways.

One of the key issues I am a little confused about is 'what is the gospel?' and 'How do I share it?'

Previously I would have said something along the lines of the 4 steps

- God loves me
- I have sinned
- Jesus died for me
- I must decide

Problems with this. This was not how the earliest gospel was preached. There was a huge amount about Jesus being the Messiah.

End of Matthew

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

End of Luke

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are

witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Romans 1

...the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures ³ regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, ⁴ and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

⁵ Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. ⁶ And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

So although there is nothing wrong with the 4 points they are missing a bit. The main issue is Israel's entire history and hope for a Messiah and for God to put the world to rights. There is a big emphasis on Jesus as ruling the world and wanting the nations to get in line.

NT Wright says

If we are to be biblical theologians, it simply will not do to tell the story of salvation as simply creation, fall, Jesus, salvation. We desperately need to say: creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, salvation. If we ask the question of how this particular human being is the instrument of salvation and do not say as our first answer, "because in him God's Israel-shaped plan to save the world came to fulfilment," then we leave a huge vacuum in our thinking (and in our reading of scripture).

So perhaps

- God made the world and humans
- Human beings went against God's plans
- God chose Israel to get his plan on track and use them to bless the world
- However, even Israel went off track
- God promised an anointed one to restore Israel
- Jesus came and proclaimed God's kingdom was coming
- His central act was his death and resurrection
- Through that we may have forgiveness of sins
- We become God's people through repentance, baptism, the Spirit
- We are to live in a way that pleases god
- God will raise his people in the future and they will live in a restored world. We will received resurrected bodies like Jesus.

Power is released when we proclaim Jesus, the crucified and risen one, as Lord of the world.

Notes from the Conclusion to Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul

Paul quotes most from Isaiah, The Psalms, Deuteronomy and Genesis.

Isaiah is an obvious choice with its large focus on eschatological hope, and also the inclusion of the gentiles.

The Psalms would be a good choice as the songbook of the Jews and the early Christians.

Deuteronomy's emphasis on blessings and curses fits neatly into early Christian belief.

Genesis quotations are mostly to do with Abraham.

Unlike Philo who uses a metaphorical method in interpreting scripture, Paul does not have a simple system.

One interesting way Paul uses scripture is the way he changes the tense, e.g.

For the Lord will not forsake his people (Psalm 94:14)

God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew (Rom 11:2)

I shall not be put to shame (Isaiah 50:7)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel (Rom 1:16)

The way the tenses change implies that the decisive event has occurred.

Paul is not always bothered about the context of the original usage but is interested in the immediate application to this very important new situation.

Overview of Romans

Romans 1

The gospel reveals the covenant justice of God.

God has come to put the world to rights.

The good news is about God's Son, and power is released when Jesus, the

Crucified One, Israel's Messiah, raised from the dead is proclaimed Lord of the World.

Deuteronomy 27-30 and Daniel 9 speak about God's anger and punishment as being part of his covenant justice, God's hostility to idolatry.

God is coming to judge the world – Psalm 96, 98.

Romans 2

The Jew is the answer to the problem of sin in the world. However, Israel's vocation went wrong.

All humans have sinned ... What is God going to do about it?

He granted promises to Israel ... How is God going to be faithful to those promises?

Genesis 15 is in Paul's mind.

Rom 5

Reconciliation through the work of Jesus. Peace, reconciliation, the love of God.

Renewal of humanity – Genesis 1. When humans are redeemed creation is set free from its slavery.

Glory – rule over creation

– the divine presence returning

Rom 6,7,8

Holy spirit reveals glory in human lives.

Romans 6,7,8 parallel the Exodus.

6 Slaves going through the water/ baptism

7 Mount Sinai / the Law

8 God dwells in the Tabernacle, leads as a pillar of cloud / Spirit

Led to promised land / Renewal of creation

Jesus shaped, spirit driven?

At end of paragraph after paragraph we read "through Jesus the Messiah", or "in Jesus..."

Through – to do with the human being Jesus Christ

In Christ – who we are as his people.

Purpose of the law – to draw sin into one place and let it be dealt with there.

Love of God – Covenant Love of God. Because of Love longs to do justice. Because of Love, does justice.

God does justice on the cross.

Romans 12-16

Doctrine of ethics. Follows through from 3-4 in the new humanity. The world was divided into slave and free, class. In the new age there are none of these divisions.

Mark in 1 Go

Yesterday I listened to (on my Bible Audio app) the Gospel of Mark in pretty much one sitting.

Here are some notes on what struck me.

There is the intensity of it. The intro about the Good News then the quotation mixing Malachi and Isaiah. Then soon we have the time is fulfilled. Miracles some teaching etc.

It is very much a story of Israel. There are connections with the Law (questions about the Sabbath, resurrection), the Psalms (22 at the Crucifixion), and the Prophets (quotation at the start and theme of the coming of the Kingdom of God). Many famous characters are referenced to. John the Baptist's description makes one think of Elijah. Then Jesus says he was Elijah, and Elijah comes on the mountain at the transfiguration. Moses is also there and in other places when the law is mentioned. The stilling of the waters also makes one think of Moses. Thoughts of Elisha and Elijah come when the raising of the dead girl. There is also plenty of reference to David. In the incident about plucking grain on the Sabbath, Jesus is hailed as Son of David. There is reference to the coming Kingdom of our Ancestor David. There is also the question concerning Psalm 110. Abraham is mentioned once along with Isaac and Jacob in relation to the resurrection story.

The feeding of the multitude (twice) would have made a Jewish reader think of the manna in the wilderness. The calming of the sea, the crossing of the Red Sea. The death of Jesus and its connection with Passover is very deliberate.

I was very interested in Mark 13:24-26 which is much closer to the great commission than anything I expected in Mark's gospel:

'But in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

²⁵ *and the stars will be falling from heaven,*

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ ***Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.***

Previously along with many other contemporary Christians I would have thought of this as about Jesus' second coming.

There is more about faith and repentance, in a more explicit way, than in the OT. Although of course it is there, it is clearly named and praised.