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[Home](#) > Manti Pageant Review: The Mormon Myth, Not the Mormon Miracle

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By:

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In June 2012, for the first time, I watched the Manti Pageant, officially known as the Mormon Miracle Pageant. Although we usually think of the LDS scriptures, general conference addresses, and curriculum manuals when we are considering what the LDS Church teaches, the Mormon Miracle Pageant is also an official production of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, one that gives a clear presentation of LDS belief. For that reason, the pageant deserves to be examined for what it claims and what it teaches. Note that this review will contain what are commonly called “spoilers.”



The Manti Temple, with outdoor seating for the Pageant

The Three Churches and the First Vision

The story thread on which the pageant narrative is hung is the “love story” of two fictional Mormons named Robert and Mary. The couple visit three different churches and ask questions the ministers there cannot answer: Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? The three churches are not named but are presented as representing churches holding revivals in 1820, the year of the supposed First Vision. The three churches, then, obviously represent the three denominations that Joseph Smith mentioned in his First Vision account in *Joseph Smith—History* 1:5, 9 (Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians). The first minister promotes salvation through infant baptism, the second teaches that faith alone is needed for salvation, and the third simply insists that his church interprets the Bible correctly. None of the ministers says anything about Jesus (!) and all of them claim that their church is the only true church.

The Pageant’s three churches are the most superficial caricatures of Protestant churches in the early 1800s. The facts are these: None of the denominations taught then or teach now that baptism (whether for infants or not) is necessary for salvation (although some Methodists could come close to this idea). None of them claimed then or claim now to be the only true church, or that it alone taught or teaches the true way of salvation. Their revivals were about getting unchurched people or lapsed churchgoers to come to faith in Christ, not about trying to get people to convert from one denomination to another. Their message was primarily about Christ, not about their denomination. Furthermore, all of these Protestant church bodies had answers—the **same** answers—to the questions asked by “Robert and Mary” in the Pageant:

- **Who are we?** Human beings are creatures uniquely and wonderfully made in God’s image, meaning that they have a capacity for relating to God and representing God as his agents in the physical world (Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 139:14-16).
- **How did we get here?** God made the first human beings (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:7, 21-23), and all subsequent human beings are the natural offspring of their parents (with the partial exception of Jesus, who had a biological mother but no biological father).
- **Why are we here?** God made us to know and glorify him, to love God and to love one another, and to care for the physical creation God made, and in doing these things to bring joy to God and to enjoy God and his works forever (Gen. 1:26-31; Ps. 8; 16:11; 86:9, 12; Mark 12:29-31; 1 Tim. 6:17).

Sadly, the Pageant narrator asserts that for Joseph Smith “the all-important question” was which church was the true church. Although this statement may reflect Joseph Smith’s values and priorities, it does not reflect those of the Bible. The all-important question should have been, and is, whether one trusts in Jesus Christ as truly and uniquely God incarnate and the only and sufficient Savior in whom we have complete forgiveness of sins and hope of eternal life.

The Pageant presents the First Vision according to the 1838 version found in the LDS scripture *Joseph Smith—History*, with no elements drawn from the other, earlier accounts. This is of course not surprising, and it would probably be unfair to criticize a Mormon pageant for omitting any reference to or elements from the earlier accounts.

As narrated in the Pageant, Joseph’s vision occurred when he did something supposedly revolutionary—he prayed. We are told that Joseph read James 1:5 (see JS-H 1:11-13) and concluded that *anyone*—even a simple farm boy like him—could “ask of God.” The narration

implies that at the time such an understanding of prayer was revolutionary, as if it was thought that only important, powerful people could pray to God. Of course, this is absolutely false. Most people prayed in Joseph's day, and prayed a lot—typically far more than even the most devout Christians do today. The Pageant also ends with a reminder of this remarkable, daring act of piety by the young Joseph, when “a boy went into the woods...to *pray*.”



Dramatic portrayal of Joseph praying in the woods

What the Pageant misses, as does Joseph's account of the event, is that James 1:5 has nothing to do with asking God for information or answers to questions via special revelations, such as asking God which church to join, or whether a particular book is God's word, or whether some man is really God's prophet. (Mormons cite James 1:5 and Joseph's prayer as precedent for all three.) James 1:5 is actually about asking God for **wisdom, not information**—wisdom meaning the ability to handle life's difficulties well, especially in context difficulties that create temptations to sin (see the whole context, James 1:2-18).

Although the Pageant follows the *Joseph Smith—History* account of the First Vision, it rushes through the core element of the account, namely, what Jesus Christ supposedly said to Joseph. All we are told is that when Joseph asked which church to join he was told to join none of them. The Pageant omits any mention of the reasons Jesus supposedly gave Joseph *why* he should not join any of the churches: that they were all wrong, that their creeds were an abomination, and so forth (JS-H 1:19). Clearly, these supposed words of Jesus to Joseph Smith are an embarrassment to the LDS Church. I have seen this material glossed over in presentations or discussions of the First Vision too many times to reach any other conclusion.

According to the narrator, the three years following Joseph Smith's first vision (1820-1823) were

uneventful except for intense persecution he suffered from the ministers and congregations of the churches (see JS-H 1:20-23). The narrator in highly dramatic tone informs the audience that no amount of persecution could break Joseph of his testimony that he had seen the reported vision. He refused to recant his testimony, we are told, the many times that he was physically attacked, even tarred and feathered, the many times he was jailed, and even when he was gunned down by an angry mob. Joseph's steadfastness in this testimony over so many years in the face of such persecution would seem to be an excellent reason to accept his emphatic insistence that the story was true (JS-H 1:24-25). One problem: There is zero evidence for this persecution over the First Vision story, not merely for the period 1820-1823 but **for the entirety of Joseph Smith's life**. No version of the story circulated publicly until the mid-1830s at the earliest (the 1832 account having been drafted and then set aside), and even then the story played no significant role in Mormonism during the rest of Joseph's life, let alone provoked persecution. The full-blown First Vision story of seeing God the Father and Jesus Christ was not published until 1842, two years before Joseph was killed, and by 1842 opponents of Mormonism had plenty of reasons for their opposition that had nothing to do with that particular story. In his adult years Joseph did suffer a lot of opposition, jailings, and physical violence, and he was killed by an angry mob, but these actions against Joseph had nothing to do with disbelief in the First Vision story.

In 1820-1823, Joseph did get into some controversies, but they had nothing to do with visions of Jesus but rather visions of buried treasure. The claim that nothing much happened during those years reflects the usual Mormon practice of glossing over the years of Joseph's money-digging, an activity that led directly to his claim in the mid-1820s of having discovered a cache of gold plates. Indeed, there are good reasons to suspect that this was part of Joseph's reason for coming up with the story of the First Vision: it was a way of claiming that Joseph had been a religious visionary prior to any reported involvement in such questionable practices as hunting for buried treasure using a seer stone.

The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon

Speaking of the seer stone, there was no seer stone or hat in view in the Pageant's portrayal of Joseph Smith translating the Book of Mormon. This is just one of several problems with the Pageant's account of what Mormons like to call "the coming forth of the Book of Mormon."

According to Joseph's story (re-told in the Pageant), an angel (a resurrected, glorified human being) named Moroni appeared to Joseph in 1823 and revealed to him the location near his home in Palmyra where plates of gold were buried. These gold plates (the Pageant consistently refers to them without qualification as gold) contained a history of the former inhabitants of this continent (i.e., North America, if not a larger region). When Joseph went to the spot and tried to touch them, he was thrown back and informed that he would not be allowed to take the plates until after he had returned to the spot once a year for four more years to receive "instruction and intelligence" regarding how the restoration was to be conducted (see JS-H 1:54-55). One problem that seems to have received little attention is the lack of any concrete information about all this alleged instruction. It appears that Joseph included this detail in his history to lend greater credibility to his claim that God had called him not only to translate the Book of Mormon but to be the prophet and president of the newly restored church. What historical information we have suggests that at least up to 1829 Joseph claimed only to be the divinely appointed translator of the Book of Mormon.

At this point the Pageant passes over the account in *Joseph Smith—History* concerning the

events of 1828 involving Martin Harris (JS-H 1:61-65) and introduces Oliver Cowdery as Joseph's scribe in the translation work. The omission is understandable given the embarrassment of the incidents, which raise more questions than they answer. According to the Pageant, Joseph dictated the translation of the gold plates to Oliver with a curtain separating them. Eyewitness testimonies appear conflicting on the matter of the curtain, and at first I found it surprising that the Pageant would admit that a curtain was used (if it was). On reflection, however, I have a theory as to why some Mormons at least might find this detail faith-promoting: it precludes, or seems to preclude, Oliver and Joseph "conspiring" in the production of the Book of Mormon text. Critics, on the other hand, naturally regard the curtain as a damaging detail, as it would allow Joseph to have used notes or a Bible when dictating to Oliver. It is difficult to keep from one's mind the line from *The Wizard of Oz*, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!" while thinking about this issue. In any case, the process is subject to critical questions with or without the curtain, even if its inclusion in the Pageant is striking.

Most testimonies concerning the process of translation report that Joseph put a "seer stone" into the bottom of his hat, placed his head into the hat to block out the light, and then dictated text to Oliver pieces at a time. The Pageant mentions nothing about any of this. It does report that with the gold plates was found a translation instrument called the Urim and Thummim, but in the translation scenes Joseph is not shown using them, either. Instead, Joseph is shown standing, dictating the Book of Mormon seemingly off the top of his head, without referring to plates or stones or books. What all of these claimed or proposed accounts of how Joseph produced his dictation reflect is that the gold plates had no direct role in the production of the translation. Joseph did not examine the plates using the seer stone or the ancient instrument, nor did he study the characters with his finger on the plates and wait for their meaning to be revealed to him, as is the usual depiction in LDS art. When it comes right down to it, **Joseph did not use the plates and never needed to see them himself in order to produce the Book of Mormon.** There was no need for Moroni to reveal the location of the plates to Joseph, no need for Joseph to struggle for two years to keep the plates from being stolen, and no need for Joseph to have the plates at all. Nor was there any need for Moroni to lug the gold plates some five thousand miles from Central America, as BYU scholars seem to think, in order to deposit them convenient to Joseph Smith's home. The gold plates are really superfluous to the story of Joseph's production of the "translation" known as the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon Dramatized

The middle "act" of the Pageant is a dramatization of select scenes from the Book of Mormon, with some narration to connect these scenes to its broader storyline. Four scenes dominate the Pageant's dramatization. The first focuses on Captain Moroni, who is not the angel that appeared to Joseph but an earlier figure in the Book of Mormon story. This Captain Moroni is both dashing hero and religious zealot, embodying American idealism long before Washington and Adams. The second scene tells about a prophet named Samuel who prophesied in the New World about the soon coming of Jesus Christ. The third scene is by far the most important, recounting Jesus Christ's appearance to the Nephites shortly after his resurrection and his establishment of a church in the New World. The fourth scene explains that "Mormon" is the prophet primarily responsible for the contents and arrangement of the Book of Mormon, and that he gave the plates to his son Moroni (the figure who later appeared to Joseph Smith).



Christ appearing to the Nephites in America

The selection and presentation of these scenes appear to be intended to give an engaging and meaningful introduction to non-Mormons concerning the Book of Mormon. The Pageant's selection also reflects the fact that the first quarter of the Book of Mormon, from which none of the scenes are taken, is extremely light on narrative. That first quarter of the Book of Mormon (consisting of the first seven of its fifteen books) was produced by Joseph Smith after the rest of the manuscript, as a replacement for the 116 pages originally dictated to Martin Harris and lost by Harris in 1828.

Hyrum and Joseph, Martyrs

The Pageant places great emphasis on the suffering and persecution that Joseph Smith and the early Mormons endured. A central event for this theme is the death of Joseph and his brother Hyrum in 1844, when a mob stormed the jail in which they were imprisoned and shot them dead. The Pageant depicts this event, omitting one important fact: Joseph actually shot back with a gun before he was killed. Only by omitting this fact can the motif of Joseph going as a lamb to the slaughter be maintained. Of course, the Pageant also omits any reference to Joseph's authorization of the violent destruction of the dissident *Nauvoo Expositor* that led to Joseph's arrest and imprisonment.

Brigham Young and the Trek to Utah

The last part of the Pageant tells the story of the Mormons following Brigham Young west to the land around the Salt Lake, where they created a home for themselves away from persecution. The story around which the Pageant is framed, concerning the married couple Robert and Mary, is brought to a close with their deaths—first that of Mary, then later Robert, who joins her in the celestial kingdom to continue their eternal marriage. Again, given the fact that the whole idea of

eternal marriage was introduced as theological justification for plural marriage, the omission of any reference to the practice in the Pageant is irksome even if understandable.

The Pageant as Theater

Of course, the pageant also deserves to be considered as art. The Pageant is an impressive spectacle, combining acting, singing, choreography, lighting, and even some special effects. The music reminded me of the orchestral movie scores produced by Miklos Rozsa (notably *Ben-Hur*). On the other hand, if you thought *The Sound of Music* (one of my favorite films) was saccharine, the Mormon Miracle Pageant is high fructose corn syrup on steroids. The Mormons are all incredibly, unremittingly noble, while the traditional Christians and other non-Mormons are all buffoons, prigs, or wolves. To describe the narration as ponderous is an understatement. Even the pageant's potentially most touching moments, concerning the suffering and death of Mormons in their trek to Utah, are played in an almost embarrassing over-the-top fashion, coming across as self-righteous appeals to pity.

In conclusion, the story of the "Mormon Miracle" Pageant is largely mythology. It is more than a glossy retelling of the story of Mormon origins. It is religious propaganda, a misleading presentation claiming to be historical fact. Its caricature of other churches, its claim that Joseph was persecuted for affirming the First Vision, its vague depiction of the "translation" of the Book of Mormon, and its lack of any reference to plural marriage, all contribute to a mythical account of Mormon origins.

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