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Born a Mormon

Reminiscing is such fun when you've finally reached the golden age of grannyhood. The best part is remembering when I was a chubby-cheeked (no wrinkles or creases) eager, loved, and loving youngster. Every bit of me was in love—with everything and everybody, especially Mama. My life and home radiated around Mama.

Doesn't everyone long to write an "I Remember Mama" ode? To set down the everlasting impressions of childhood? To relive the happenings and happiness of life on the old homeplace? My recollections center on gentle, loving Mama and Papa, Lula May, and Cecil Lehi Smithson.

At work or play, we were a fun family, a zealous, fourth-generation Mormon family. We pulled together just as our pioneer ancestors had as they pushed and pulled their homemade handcarts across mountains and plains to the Zion of the West—the Great Salt Lake Basin. There with Brigham Young, they proclaimed, "This is the place!"

We, too, had a piece of Zion to occupy. Led by Mama, we sang as our ancestors had sung:

Put your shoulder to the wheel. Push along.
 Do your duty with a heart full of song.
 We all have work, let no one shirk,
 Put your shoulder to the wheel.

And so, during the Great Depression, we "grubbed" alongside Mama and Papa and kept grub on the table. In our tight-knit Mormon community of Cactus Flat, Arizona (more properly designated Lebanon on the map, though no cedars flourished there, only mesquite, catclaw and cacti), Mama's songs and Mama's stories of our Mormon ancestors encouraged us and kept us proud to be Smithsons—proud to be Mormons.

Mama used to tell us, "Even though we're as poor as Job's turkey [however poor that was], we can be thankful that we're not as poor as church mice, nor as dumb. They're born and raised in a Mormon church house and never learned to sing 'Count Your Blessings!'" We all knew what was coming next. With Mama leading we lustily sang,

Count your blessings, name them one by one;
 Count your blessings, see what God hath done.

Then we'd listen as Mama recounted our blessings, especially the blessing of being born white Mormons.

Just to have been born a Mormon—especially a light white one—was the greatest of all earthly blessings. An earnestly sought special privilege, an earned-in-heaven reward, a mark of distinction.

As a white Mormon, I proudly accepted the teaching that my fair skin and Mormon parentage signified that I had been one of God's most intelligent and obedient born-in-heaven spirit children. There in a primeval childhood I had diligently applied myself to all the mandates and instructions of the heavenly Father and my own heavenly mother.

As a reward for my superior attributes and attitudes, I had been singled out, trained, and qualified to be born a white Latter-day Saint, deserving of emulation, adulation, and eventual deification. All dark-skinned people, even darker-complexioned Caucasians, and members of all other religions had been inferior spirits in heaven. (Our family still wonders what celestial mischief one of our favorite aunts got caught in to cause her to be born so dark.) Moreover, they would probably remain inferiors on earth and again in the resurrection. Superior intelligent spirits such as mine would naturally and inherently choose to be born white and delightful Latter-day Saints, while the more ignorant, ignoble spirits neither earn nor know better than to be born into inferior, false religions.

As a white Mormon, I heartily endorsed these teachings of our Latter-day Saints' authorities, especially those of Mormon prophet/presidents and apostles such as Apostle Melvin J. Ballard, who declared:

Of all the thousands of children born today, a certain portion of them went to the Hottentots of South Africa; thousands went to Chinese Mothers; thousands to Negro Mothers; thousands to beautiful white Latter-Day Saints Mothers. Now you cannot tell me that all these spirits were just arbitrarily designated, marked, to go where they did . . . I am convinced it is because of *some things they did before they came into this life*. (Melvin J. Ballard, *Crusade for Righteousness*, p. 218)

CHOICE SPIRITS GIVEN THE FAVORED LINEAGE

Mormon President Joseph F. Smith asked of the Mormon people:

Is it not a reasonable belief, that the Lord would select the choice spirits to come through the better grades of nations? Moreover, is it not reasonable to believe that less worthy spirits would come through less favored lineage? Does this not account in very large part, for *the various grades of color* and degrees of intelligence we find in the earth? (Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection*, p. 48)

Delighting in Mormonism's assessment that whiteness denoted righteousness, I early gloried in my lovely white skin, my Latter-day Saints parentage, and presumptive preeminence, counting myself worthy indeed and most fortunate.

In tender-hearted, wide-eyed wonder I marveled, as did all Mormon youngsters, that God the Father had once been a tiny human baby, born eons ago on another planet to white Mormon parents. Since all Mormons are carefully shielded and sternly cautioned against contamination with so-called Christian churches and their doctrines, I readily embraced the Latter-day Saints' delusion that this "baby god" had grown from babyhood to manhood. And that while living on that earth as a Mormon, God the Father had been required to fulfill all the Mormon gospel requirements including celestial marriage in the Mormon temple and the siring of a multitude of *mortal* offspring, followed by His death and resurrection. In heaven myriads more spiritual offspring reportedly were—and still are—born to God the Father and His wives through celestial procreation and gestation. Thus, God the Father had progressed from a celestial pre-existence to babyhood, to manhood, and on to godhood just as I would do too if I were an obedient, diligent Latter-day Saint.

Just as my grandparents long ago had set themselves to do, my parents, too, would follow God the Father's purported gospel pattern. They would "practice their religion," obeying the commandments and ordinances of the Mormon church paying their tithes, church and temple assessments in full. Then they, too, could be married and sealed for eternity in a Mormon temple and wear the authorized holy undergarments of the Mormon priesthood. And most certainly Mama and Papa would "live their religion" by providing *earthly* bodies for God's purported millions of spirit children, as many as they possibly could.

PAPA PROVOKED TO PARENTHOOD

"Who are we to deny God's little spirit children earthly bodies and a Mormon home?" Mama, with eyes glinting determination, demanded of the world at large and Papa in particular. "You know as well as I do that we're failing our religious duty. After all, we've been up there too, begging for bodies, wanting to come to earth. I can't help feeling sorry for God's poor little spirit children and ashamed of us for not doing more to help."

"Whoa up now, May," Papa patiently soothed. "You know we've heard about the little spirits in heaven all our lives and that I know about their needs and feel just as sorry for them as you do. But why get so ram-bunctious about it this morning? Simmer down and finish your biscuits; I'm hungry."

“You talk about hungry! What about all those little body-hungering spirits in heaven? I’m trying to tell you that we ought to be religious enough to provide as many bodies for them as we possibly can.”

“I’ve told you before that you don’t need to coax and convince me.” Papa smirked. “They can come as fast and as often as they want. I’m with them and you all the way. After all, as I’ve heard so many of our Mormon elders say, this is one Mormon commandment that we Mormon men don’t mind keeping. Just holler when you’re ready.”

“You really shouldn’t joke about so sacred an obligation, Chunk. But I am grateful that you’re such a good family man, able and willing to provide a home and bodies for God’s little needy spirits, just as our parents did for us. Just as our church authorities insist that God commands us to do. And besides all that, my empty arms hanker for another tiny wee one to hold and to mold.”

And so, even though Mama and Papa were as poor as the Arizona desert dirt from which they scraped out a meager living, they ushered me, their third born, royally into their already crowded two-room Mormon home. They verily believed that true royalty—a sexually begotten-in-heaven spirit baby of God—had come down from heaven to bless and enoble their lives. On that cold and blustery twelfth of March more than half a century ago, they, with hearts and hearth aglow, humbly and proudly made room for this tiny, newborn Mormon.

Together Mama and Papa named their newest daughter Thelma Rachel Smithson. They determined that I should early learn that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only true church and that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God.

From them I learned such other Mormon “gospel truths” as these:

- God is an exalted man with a physical body, parts, and passions.
- Men may become gods.
- Jesus is merely one of God’s billions of sexually begotten-in-heaven sons and the only one sexually begotten by Him on earth.
- Satan is a full spirit brother of Jesus. He could have been the Savior if his plan of salvation had surpassed that of Jesus.
- Adam’s “sin” was a blessing and *not* a curse.
- It was just as necessary for Adam to sin as it was for Christ to be crucified.

From early childhood these Mormon teachings were an important part of me. Easily and naturally they had possessed my very soul, mainly through Mama’s singing.

MY MORMON SINGING MOTHER

Early and late, sad or glad, Mama was forever singing. She had a song to suit every occasion and a special one, I believe, for my “birthing.”

I’ve always fancied that Mama must have been singing as I was aborning and that Mama infused me with a melody at my birth, for always I’ve had a bent and a yen to sing just as Mama did. Now wouldn’t it have pleased both Mama and me mightily if I could have claimed the distinction of coming into this world singing instead of squalling? However, I surely must have learned to sing (though wordlessly) before I learned to walk, for I seem to have always known the hymns and ballads she sang to me.

My earliest remembrance of Mama—the first, and I believe, the greatest impression of her life on mine—was the enchantment and pleasure of hearing her sing such tender ballads as “Just Plain Folks.” In God’s providence it was a very special song. It lastingly instilled in me a tender regard for just plain ordinary folks and led to the greatest blessing of all my life. Mama’s “Just Plain Folks” ballad is about a prodigal son—but unlike the biblical one in every way. The prodigal son of Jesus’ parable portrays God’s willingness to pardon and welcome the repentant, confessing sinner. He was a rich boy who left his father’s country estate to seek freedom but found want, ending up in the pigpen of sin, slopping hogs. He then humbly sought forgiveness for his sins from his loving, forgiving father.

But the poor-folks country lad in Mama’s ditty was an ornery, mean-spirited maverick who evidently never did realize his sinful unworthiness and seek his father’s forgiveness. Consequently he never experienced the joy and peace that pardon affords.

I wish I could sing to you the sad story of Mama’s poor country lad who had left his plain folks’ simple, country way of life and had gone not only to the city but to the dogs. There in the big city where he soon struck it rich, he was, instead of feeding swine, living “high on the hog.” One Saturday night while he was throwing a wing-ding of a Sodom and Gomorrah-Belshazzar party, his poor gray-haired, hard-working parents unexpectedly came to visit him.

I remember the words and tune so well, and especially the tender pathos in Mama’s lovely, soft voice as she crooned:

But coolly did he greet them
For rich friends were by his side,
Who’d ofttimes heard him boast of home so grand.
As the old man sadly looked at him
He said with modesty,
As he gently took his dear wife by the hand,
We are just plain folks, your mother and me,
Just plain folks as our own folk used to be.

Since our presence seems to grieve you,
We will go away and leave you
We are sadly out of place here,
For we're just plain folks.

Mama's pining song left me pining too—pinning for all poor forsaken parents whose wayward, ungrateful children turned out to be loose livers. Its manipulative message packed a mighty wallop, sending prickles up and down my spine.

Even though I knew that Mama was deliberately preaching to me in her intriguing songs, I enjoyed most of them anyway, especially “She’s Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage” and “After the Ball Is Over.” But “Baby Your Mother as She Babied You” always left me miserable and ashamed. Every one of her persuasive folk songs implanted its purposed lessons in my heart and directed my life, just as Mama planned them to. But most influential of all were the Mormon hymns we sang about Joseph Smith, the first prophet of Mormonism.

We sang “Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning” when Joseph Smith, as a fourteen-year-old farm lad “saw the Father and the Son.” We truly believed that in answer to young Smith’s prayer as to which church to join, God and Jesus had appeared to the questioning youth in Their once earthly, now bloodless resurrected human bodies of flesh and bones. Both God and Jesus had, according to Joseph Smith, sojourned in these bodies while living on earth as mortal men.

In the ensuing conversation, God supposedly commanded Joseph Smith to “join none of them [*the churches*], for they were *all* wrong . . . all their creeds were an *abomination* in His sight; that those professors [*all church members and ministers*] were all corrupt.”¹

Because of these Mormon teachings I had early learned to disdain all other churches, mistrust their members, and most especially their ministers. I labeled their doctrines as lies and arrogantly denounced their beliefs that God was a Spirit.

GOD, A POLYGAMOUS MARRIED MAN

Along with all other informed Mormons I believed in a “Father in heaven who was begotten on a previous heavenly world by *His* Father.”² The God of Mormonism was once a helpless, burping baby—born to Mormon parents who brought Him up to “live worthy of the Gospel” and to obey all the mandates that Mormon gospel proposes. And so at the age of eight, the child-God supposedly had to undergo baptism by immersion for the remission of His sins, imposition of hands for the reception of the Holy Ghost, and confirmation of His church membership. All of which suppos-

edly placed Him in the kingdom of *His* God! After having thus been cleansed of all His sins, “born of water” by baptism and “born of the Spirit” by the imposition of hands, our fledgling God was ready for further advancement.

At about the age of twelve, God the Father was ordained a deacon, just as all worthy twelve-year-old Mormon boys are. This, the first of several degrees of the Latter-day Saint priesthood, was a giant step in His progress to godhood. On and up He struggled through the offices of teacher and priest until finally He merited the coveted prestigious power and authority of becoming a Mormon elder, which granted His initial admission into the inner sanctum of the Mormon temple.

At last, He was allowed to learn Mormon priesthood secrets that hitherto had been withheld because only mature, worthy “Temple Mormons” can bear the “strong meat” of Mormonism’s secret doctrines and practices. All of this practically guaranteed His godhood for He could now have His wives and children sealed to Him for His eternal glory. Therefore, in special temple rites the newly enlightened future God was married and sealed for eternity to numerous wives, just as all Mormon men must be in order to eventually become gods.

The multiplication of God’s wives and children and children’s children plus the amassing of great knowledge and intelligence supposedly determined the greatness of the developing God. He therefore set about earnestly extending His kingdom of wives and children, gaining extensive experience and knowledge along the way. The enormity of His vast and various family duties and the tides of time naturally took their toll.

Our future God must have known that the time for His departure was at hand. Another expedient step must be taken on His “Glory Road,” one more milestone in His progression to godhood. Patiently and feebly the infirm God-man awaited His death and resurrection, just as any other aged, enfeebled Mormon patriarch would do.

And thus, the God of Mormonism, who was “once a man in mortal flesh as we are” and “has once been a finite being”³ having limits and bounds and subject to *death and* was “once in a fallen state,”⁴ “passed through the experiences of mortal life, including death and resurrection.”⁵

After God sickened, died, and was resurrected, He resurrected His numerous wives. God and His wives now have resurrected bodies of flesh and bones. The primary difference between their bodies and ours is that they no longer have blood in their veins. They reportedly live together as husband and wives and by procreation (generation) beget children in the same way and gestation period (the celestial equivalent of nine months) as all humans do. Mormon historian B. H. Roberts put it this way:

When in our literature we say, “God created the spirits of men,” it is understood that they were begotten. We mean “generation” not “creation.” (B. H. Roberts, *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, p. 260)

The God of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is still not yet perfect. He is still progressing from one degree to a higher level of perfection, still advancing in wisdom and knowledge, still busily and unceasingly sexually impregnating His wives. Ever and anon God must keep progressing, building up a greater kingdom and exaltation for Himself, making room for the developing of lesser gods—the devout, large-familied Mormon elders of this world.

They, too, are busily climbing Mormonism’s ladder of exaltation, ever pressing hard on the heels of God, ever climbing up behind Him, steadily pushing Him on ahead so that they can take His lately vacated station and become gods themselves. We Mormons truly believed that “as man is now, God once was. As God is, man may become.”

Apostle Orson Hyde summarized this doctrine when he said:

Remember that God, our Heavenly Father, was perhaps once a child, and mortal like we ourselves and rose step by step in the scale of progress, in the school of advancement; has moved forward and overcome, until He has arrived at the point where He now is. (Orson Hyde, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 1, p. 123)

A little simple reasoning makes us to understand that God’s further advancement to greater heights of perfection depends partly on the clambering, zealous Mormon elders and, to a greater degree, on His numerous obliging wives and their offspring, and therefore, even partly on me. For I, along with God’s other more obedient spirit children in our pre-earthly “primeval childhood,” had reportedly aided God in inspiring and cajoling, organizing and controlling the ill-starred, second-rate disobedient spirits, my weak little brother and sister spirits. Most of them are presumably only my half brothers and half sisters, all having been sired by the same heavenly Father but born by different heavenly mothers.

In such a hodgepodge of spirit children, there are the obedient and disobedient, the super intelligent and the intellectually defective, the ambitious and the dawdlers, the righteous and also those who prefer to follow Satan, all of whom are in need of the heavenly Father’s correction, supervision, and presence. However, God, with His hindering body of flesh and bones can be in but one place at a time. God, therefore, must have a pressing need for proficient spirits such as I to take over the lesser celestial kingdom affairs, leaving Him free to effectuate the two major requirements on

which His continued advancement hinges and which none but He can do.

Foremost are the time-consuming, debilitating procreative visits to each of His thousands of wives, which surely must leave Him worn and weary, drained in spirit and in body with very little time and energy to spend in advancing in knowledge and wisdom. He must garner ever greater stores of learning, for according to the first prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “the glory of God is intelligence.”⁶ But surely the extension of God’s intelligence, as important as it is, does not compare with the strength and fervor poured into the multiplication of His progeny, which keeps God and His queens as busy as the proverbial bees around the honey pot.

In the highest realms of heaven, “drones” are inexcusable, even me. As God the Father, “the directing Intelligence of the universe,” keeps striving for ever-greater godhood, my heavenborn, not-yet-mortal spirit assertedly kept working, learning and progressing. At all costs I had to earn the right to leave heaven and be born on earth, for without the experiences and circumstances of an earth life I could never achieve my highest potential—that of becoming a celestial queen and goddess, a heavenly mother. Assuredly, more than anything else that could be given to me and most earnestly sought for was the privilege of leaving heaven.

As a rule, most false religions have their members working their way up to heaven, but Mormonism had me *first working my way out and down*. However, my prestigious performance in heaven caused God to keep me there longer. Through the eons of eternity God had reserved me in heaven so that I could receive the ultimate of all eternal blessings. I was to be born in Joseph Smith’s dispensation, the “greatest dispensation of all times,” which he ushered in on April 6, 1830, when he established what eventually became known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

LATTER-DAY “SAINTS”

I, too, delighted in the teachings of the high officials of the Mormon Church that there

are many spirits that are *more noble, more intelligent* than others . . . among the Saints is the most likely place for these spirits to take their tabernacle [bodies], through a just and righteous parentage. They [the more noble, more intelligent] are to be sent to that people that are the most *righteous* of any other people upon the earth. . . . This is the reason why the Lord kept sending them here. . . . The Lord has not kept them in store for five or six thousand years past, and kept them waiting for their bodies all this time to send them among the Hottentots, the African negroes, the idolatrous Hindoos [sic], any other of the fallen nations that dwell upon the face of this earth. They are not kept in reserve in order to come forth to receive such a degraded parent-

age upon the earth. (Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 1, pp. 62–63)

Whereas disapprobation and disgrace are said to be the just portion of the purported “lesser spirits,” deference and high esteem are thought to be the just dues of the Mormon authorities and their wives. They presumably were of the elite set in heaven, the outstanding leaders and organizers of God’s spirit children, set apart and coached in heaven for their leading roles and specific high offices in the Mormon kingdom in these “latter days.”

To these, our Latter-day high priests and prophets, we Mormons gave all due honor and unthinking loyalty, being constantly reminded at home and in sacrament meetings to “obey the counsel of the authorities of the church.” Moreover, we must never challenge their edicts nor envy their high status, never resent being their underlings. For before leaving heaven we had agreed to continue as their subordinates on earth. There we had promised to “sustain” them as our leaders in the priesthood and in all earthly affairs.

After all, we were told, it was because of our own faults that we were not of the heavenly “upper crust.” We should have applied ourselves as diligently in heaven as the “authorities” had. Therefore, we now must be content with our lower status on earth. We felt duty bound to honor the agreements we had made in heaven and to submit to their higher priesthood powers.

Neither were we to lament the fact that the same ruling families of early-day Mormonism are still the leading families of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (for explanation we were again referred to the premortal spirit world).

We all believed the romantic notion that eons ago in heaven our Mormon spirits had wooed and won our earthly “intendeds” and that together our affianced spirits had strolled down heaven’s lover’s lane seeking still other spirits to become our earthly children. They in turn had wooed and won their own true-loves, who chose and trained other spirits to become *their* earthly children. And so on, *ad infinitum*. These, we were told, were truly “made in heaven” marriages.

And, of course, the spirits of our Mormon church authorities had judiciously chosen their brides-to-be from the cream of the spiritual crop. This they were entitled to do, for they held high priestly positions and long tenure in the church of heaven. They and their super-special spiritual fiancées had, of course, chosen and trained ultra-elite spirits to perpetuate the family’s prestigious powers in the earthly priesthood, ecclesiastical politics, and the elite inner circle of what would become Mormonism.

Since the authorities of the church had been trained in heaven and I had “sustained” them there, I was to support their earthly endeavors and edicts in these latter days. I felt obliged to take counsel of the authorities

in every area of life, especially their “spiritual” reasonings concerning God’s wives and my own heavenly mother, for whom I felt a special love and affinity, fascination, and gratitude.

ADORATION OF HEAVENLY MOTHER

Along with other well-intentioned Latter-day Saints, I loved to sing one of Mormonism’s most popular hymns, “Oh My Father,” which further developed our belief in and adoration for a heavenly mother as well as a heavenly Father. The heavenly mother doctrine was enhanced as we sang:

In the heavens are parents single? No, the thought makes reason stare.
Truth is reason, truth eternal Tells me I’ve a Mother there.

In conclusion we sang this petitionary prayer begging for the blessings and permission of both the heavenly Father and heavenly mother to re-enter heaven and live with them there:

Then at length when I’ve completed All you sent me forth to do
With your mutual approbation Let me come and dwell with you.

My heavenly mother was just as real and important to me as my heavenly Father. She seemed more intimate and dearer to me, for I presumed that God the Father was away much of the time from our particular mansion. Jealously I fancied Him striding masterfully across His vast heavenly domain, visiting and making love to His other wives, begetting other spirit children, sternly correcting and instructing His other oft-time wayward offspring, while my heavenly mother lonesomely waited at home, religiously tending her home and children, especially me.

In prayer and in song I thanked God for sending the “Latter-day prophet” Joseph Smith, to teach us these astounding doctrines and “to guide us in these latter days.”

JOSEPH SMITH’S BLOOD PLEADS UNTO HEAVEN

I sang of the blood of my “martyred” Mormon prophet, who had died in a wild exchange of gunfire while fighting for his life in the Carthage, Illinois, jail. There, he was shot through the heart by a bullet from an angry frontier mob as he awaited trial on charges of treason, which stemmed from his destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*. This newspaper had been issued by disgruntled Mormons to expose the prophet Joseph Smith and to accuse and reprove him for, among other evils, teaching many gods, polygamy, adultery, and secret temple marriages for eternity with *other* Mormon men’s wives and daughters.

We Mormons never allowed our minds to dwell on the fact that these disaffected Mormon men had a right to challenge the Latter-day prophet. Never did we even consider that Mormons themselves had instigated, and to a great extent composed, the mob that killed our prophet. Most certainly we never admitted that our prophet may have been *guilty* of the charges leveled against him; our prophet could do no wrong.

Even though Joseph Smith had died an inglorious death in a common jail cell, charged as a traitor, an adulterer, and a horse thief, we Mormons glorified him and laid the blame on other churches and their ministers. We sang vindictively of how “The Priests of Baal” (ministers of other denominations), “desperate their crafts to save,” had incited the mob that slew our prophet. In conclusion we intoned, “Long shall his blood which was shed by assassins plead unto heaven. Earth shall atone for the blood of that man.” In still another Mormon hymn, “The Seer, Joseph, the Seer,” we related how Joseph Smith:

Of noble seed, of Heavenly birth
Came to bless the Saints on earth. . . ,

The Saints, the Saints his only pride
For them he lived, for them he died. . . .

Unchanged in death with a Savior’s love
He pleads their cause in the courts above. . . .

He died, he died for those he loved
He reigns, he reigns in the realms above. . . .

He waits on Zion’s shore
To welcome the Saints forevermore.

I knew the songs and stories of Joseph Smith, and I knew them well. I had heard them day and night for half a lifetime. Whereso’er Mormon people congregate, Joseph Smith’s spirit seems to pervade the air as they tenderly talk of his lowly birth, his life, his ministry, his death, his worth. But I knew very little about Jesus’ birth, and I was too embarrassed to ask for there seemed to be something clandestine about Jesus’ conception.

One night before I was old enough to understand the hows and wherefores of childbirth, as I sat quietly in the fireplace corner, I overheard the visiting Mormon missionary telling my father about when “God over-shadowed Mary.” When Papa discovered my presence, he sternly ordered me from the room. Then I realized that the Mormon missionary’s recital of Jesus’ birth had not been meant for my little girl ears. I had overheard a Mormon priesthood secret.

JESUS AND SATAN—SEXUALLY BEGOTTEN SONS OF GOD

For years, though I tried to forget the incident and my embarrassment and shame, the question was always there—how *was* Jesus conceived and why the mystery?

I believed, along with all other Mormons, that Jesus is merely one of God's billions of sexually begotten sons. He supposedly was the first one born in heaven to God and His wives, and "the Only Begotten in the flesh." I did not then know of Mormonism's secret teaching that God came to earth with a fleshly body and "overshadowed Mary causing her to conceive."

We Mormons believed also that Lucifer and Jesus were brothers; both had been sexually sired and born in heaven. ("The Devil is a spirit son of God who was born in the morning of pre-existence," says Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, p. 192.) And that at a "Council of the Gods," where plans were being made for the redemption of mankind, both Jesus and the devil offered to become the Savior. Because Jesus' plan supposedly proffered freedom of choice and Satan's scheme did not, the Council elected Jesus to be the Redeemer of the world instead of Lucifer. However, even the devil could have been the Savior if he had formulated a better plan.

We Latter-day Saints believed that in order to gain exaltation and become a god it was necessary for Jesus to come to earth, receive a body, and be totally obedient to all Mormon ordinances and requirements, including temple marriage. Jesus, it was said, had come as one of God's spirit sons in the "meridian of time." Joseph Smith, another of God's choicest spirit sons, assertedly had come to usher in the greatest of all dispensations, "the fullness of time." He holds sway over the church, earth, heaven, and hell in this dispensation, all the while steadily advancing to greater godhood as Jesus and other gods assertedly did in their dispensations.

THE BIBLE—A POLLUTED, INSUFFICIENT GUIDE

I followed these Mormon beliefs and the Mormon authorities blindly, never reading the Bible for myself—seldom if ever hearing it read, even in Mormon services. This was in accordance with the Mormon apostles:

The words contained in this Bible are merely a history of what is gone by; it was never given to guide the servant of God in the course he should pursue. *The Bible is not a sufficient guide*, it is only the history of the people who lived 1800 years ago. (Orson Hyde, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 2, p. 75)

Moreover:

There are many plain and precious things taken away from the book [Bible]. Because of these things which were taken away out of the gospel of the Lamb, an exceeding great many do stumble, yea, inso-much that Satan hath great power over them. (Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 13:28b, 29b)

I was taught that the Bible causes “a great many to stumble and fall” and is “part the word of God, part the word of man, and part the word of the devil.” Full of conflicts and errors with “much truth taken away and much error added,” it had no real place in my life or in the life of any other Mormon I had ever met.

Apostle Orson Pratt asked, “Who knows that *even one verse of the Bible* has escaped pollution so as to convey the same sense that it did in the original?”⁷ So I went haphazardly along following Mormonism’s scheme, *which does not include* faith in the sufficiency of the blood of Jesus to cleanse our personal sins.

I never realized that I had not given Christ His rightful place in my heart and life until one day, because of the ingrained regard for just plain folks (instilled in me by Mama’s folksy singing), I attended the Calvary Baptist Church services in my hometown of Safford, Arizona. I went that day out of love for my keen-witted, silver-haired “daddy-in-law.” He was justly proud, I believed, of his heritage of being a humble, hard-working man of the soil. He was just a soft-spoken sharecropper, lately from East Texas and presently an exultant charter member of this newly organized small band of devout Bible-believers.

It was then and there that I first learned (though I rebelled against it) that I not only had a natural “bent and yen” for singing, but I had, as well, an innate hankering for *sinning!*

To say that I was surprised to hear that God’s Word declared me to be a sinner, a child of the devil, and not a favorite child of God—as I had always prided myself on being—does not half-way describe my reactions. I could not believe my ears, and I most certainly would not believe that Baptist preacher!

For the first time in my life I began reading the Bible. I would prove to my non-Mormon husband, Ernest, and especially to his folks, that I was *not* born a sinner but was, as I had so often told them, God’s begotten spirit child. I would also prove that I, a favorite spirit child of God, really had been born into this world with innate goodness, looking and acting as much like the heavenly Father and my heavenly mother as I did my earthly parents.

But to my dismay, as I studied the Bible to prove that I was not a sinner, I was convicted of sin. I began to feel uncomfortable. I was no longer satisfied with myself; bothered by my faults and failures (we Mormons never spoke of them as sins), I was no longer able to sugar-coat, water them

down, or wave them aside for a later perusal. I could no longer be satisfied to wait until after I had died and gone to Mormonism's world of departed spirits or to paradise to make things right.

I could not understand all this sudden awareness of my sinful inner self. Could it be that my conscience had suddenly aroused itself, was wide awake, more active than usual? But if it were my conscience, why should it after thirty years of near dormancy suddenly stir up all this sudden volcanic activity? Why all this moiling and boiling? It was belching up ashes of the past that I had so easily put aside and practically forgotten—what in the world was happening inside me?

But then, how *could* I realize or express what was happening to me when I had not even heard that it should and would happen? My Bible study had brought on these attacks. The Holy Spirit was reproving, convicting, and convincing *me*, a Latter-day Saint, of *sin!* He was making me to hunger and thirst after righteousness, and to realize that I was a dirty, besmirched “nothing,” needing a mighty Savior. I saw myself as just a mangy coyote “critter” born with an innate yen for sinning, skulking wantonly and wearily in the desert of life, howling at the moon, as it were.

No one had ever told me that I needed to give my heart to *Jesus*. I had never even heard of Jesus' plea: “Give me thine heart.” I had never before been made aware of my sinfulness or of my failure to allow Jesus His rightful and honored place in my heart and life.

There, that first Sunday of January, when for the third time I had accompanied my daddy-in-law to the Baptist services, I heard the minister read: “. . . and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son: in whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins. . . . And He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; that in all things He might have the pre-eminence” (Colossians 1:13-18). As I listened to the message, I realized that the Bible speaks of Jesus as God's *only* Son, not merely one of His many sons as I had always been taught. “When the fullness of the time was come,” the preacher continued reading, “God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons” (Galatians 4:4–5).

Then I began to realize that God had sent His only Son “in the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 1:10) and *not* in the meridian of time as Joseph Smith had claimed. By claiming that he had ushered in the fullness of time and opened up the greatest dispensation of all times, Joseph Smith had stolen honor from Jesus and confiscated it to himself. Now I knew that in the fullness of time, when all things were right and ready, Christ had come to redeem me, who was under the law of sin and death, that I might become God's adopted child.

According to the Bible we had not been born God's children in heaven but "were dead in trespasses and sins,"

and were by nature the children of wrath. But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, . . . hath quickened us [made us alive] together . . . with Christ (by grace ye are saved) . . . For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the *gift* of God: *not of works*, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:1–9)

The Holy Spirit brought me to the knowledge and conviction that I was a sinner, even though I was a Latter-day Saint. He made me realize that I was guilty of many, many sins, but the *greatest* sin was in not giving Christ first place in my heart and life. I seemed to hear Him saying, "Give Me first place in your heart. Make Me preeminent in your life."

I felt Him at my heart's door. I heard His pleading: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20).

The minister's invitation to accept Christ as Savior was seemingly directed at me. As he asked, "Why won't you accept my Jesus?" I looked about for a Baptist who was accepting Jesus. I wanted to know how it was done. Surely that Baptist minister did not mean me—I was already a church member!

I had been baptized when I was eight years old to have my sins washed away. Shortly thereafter I had been "confirmed" and supposedly "born of the Spirit" when three Mormon elders had laid their hands on my head and commanded me to receive the Holy Ghost.

I had been taught that the Holy Ghost cannot be received any other way, and I believed it. All my life I had trusted that these "men who hold the Mormon priesthood possess divine authority thus to act for God, and by possessing part of God's power they are in reality part of God."⁸

My name was already on the Mormon church roll and so was supposedly entered in the Lamb's Book of Life. I knew that my works and ordinances were recorded in the Mormon Ward record books by our Mormon Ward clerks.

1. Joseph Smith, *Peart of Great Price*, Writings of Joseph Smith, 2:19.
2. Orson Pratt, *The Seer*, p. 132.
3. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 7, p. 333.
4. Pratt, *The Seer*, p. 23.
5. James Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, p. 39.
6. *Doctrine and Covenants*, 93:36.
7. Pratt, *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon*, p. 47.
8. B. H. Roberts, *New Witness for God*, p. 187.