One Word, many writings

by Adam Francisco
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Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. 1 John 4:1–6

We live in an increasingly interconnected world. We are now able to communicate with people of different cultures with the click of a button. Information is available twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week through the Internet. Traveling overseas is also relatively easy and affordable these days. But you don’t have to travel to a different country to experience a different culture. America is a country of considerable cultural and ethnic diversity. Nowhere are these differences more obvious than in the various religions scattered about America’s cities and even its rural areas. People of many faiths now live next door to us, work with us, build houses of worship in our neighborhoods, and even find converts among our friends.

One Word, many writings is a Bible study resource created to address this demographic trend. The holy writings of Christianity and other religious faiths are examined and compared, with a goal of identifying the source of each and providing some tools for Christians who encounter people of other faiths in their daily lives. The subjects and the Bible studies in this book are appropriate for high-school-age young people through older adults.
Why Study Other Religious Writings?

Religion is inherent in all cultures and all people. This study then is a study of people and the source of their core beliefs. Undertaking such a study is beneficial for the following reasons:

We may better understand people of other faiths, so that we do not fear or avoid them but are able to interact with them from a base knowledge. We will have “points of contact” from which conversations may arise.

We may grow in compassion for the 3.7 billion people who do not know the one true God. They are people who need the Gospel, who do not know the benefit of God’s grace in His Word and Sacraments.

We may be better able to avoid the influence of false religious writings and hold more firmly to our Christian faith. It can be helpful to test the mettle of our convictions against the beliefs of others.

We are not alone. We cannot avoid increased contact with other religions and their writings in the twenty-first century, but we can be prepared for such contact.

We have a compelling need to share Jesus Christ with others. To a world with many gods, we can offer the blessing of faith in the one God who is the only Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of all people. This is a truth that we cannot help but share.

Suggestions for Adapting and Using These Studies

It is not required that all twelve studies in this book be taught or that they be taught in a particular order. While most groups will benefit from reviewing the basic writings of Christianity in Sessions 1 and 2, some may prefer to skip these studies or use them as a conclusion.

If you decide to use only some of the studies initially, consider these points as you make your choices:

What religions are prominent in current events now?
What religions are prominent in your community?
What religions are prominent in the media?

Finally, while these studies will meet the needs of many groups, you may need to alter them in order to make them fit the needs and characteristics of your group.
Lesson Focus

The Book of Mormon is the earliest and one of Mormonism’s most-definitive books. It adds a different dimension to the life and ministry of Jesus by supposedly describing His activity on the American continent. Its theology—though more subtle than what one finds in Doctrines and Covenants and The Pearl of Great Price—likewise adds to the teachings of the historical (and biblical) Jesus. (See One God, many gods, Lesson 9.) The result is not a different Christian denomination but a radical reenvisioning of the person and work of Jesus, as well as the nature of Christianity that ultimately claims to clean up the errors that have crept into the Church since its formative period. The challenge that Mormonism poses to historic Christianity and the growing misperception that Mormonism is, in fact, Christian, warrant study of the Book of Mormon. In addition, Christians routinely bump up against Mormons and thus have opportunities to speak the true Gospel to them. Quick Reference Page 10 provides a snapshot of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism) for participants.
Opening Discussion

The Book of Mormon is nothing short of radical. It posits an entirely new understanding of Jesus. He is viewed as the offspring of two deities—a heavenly father and mother—and spirit brother of Lucifer and the rest of the human race. In addition, he is reported to have ministered to ancient people living in America who are also believed to be descendants of the Jews.

Ask the class if they have heard this description of Jesus before. Chances are they have, perhaps in their own home as they entertained Mormon missionaries. What is the problem with this story? (There are a number [e.g., it doesn't correspond with the biblical text, contradicts biblical theology, etc.], but you will want to focus on the fact that this alleged episode in ancient American history has no evidence to support its claims.)

Ask students who have had some interaction with Mormonism how Mormons explain this new history of Jesus. Most often they quote another Mormon text, Doctrine and Covenants, to explain it. Chapter 9:7–9 of that book explains that people can know that the story of Jesus coming to America and all of Mormon theology is true, not because it corresponds to the historical record, but because they have experienced a burning in their bosom causing them to “feel that it is right.” Discuss with the class the problems associated with such an epistemology (theory of knowledge). (Our feelings change from day-to-day; there is no objective position from which to develop a clear basis for teaching and doctrine.)

Understanding the Book of Mormon

Distribute copies of Participant Page 10. It provides a concise summary of the core story of the Book of Mormon. After students have had time to read the handout, ask and allow the class (individually or in small groups) to answer the following questions:

What is the significance of the Book of Mormon to Mormonism? (The Book of Mormon is the oldest Mormon text. According to Mormon legend, it contains a translation of a text originally inscribed in reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics on golden tablets.)

What does the Book of Mormon teach? (It claims to contain the lost history of two ancient American civilizations—the Jaredites and the descendants of Lehi and Nephi.)

What did you find especially surprising about its teachings? (Answers will vary. Most of what is taught concerning the history of these two ancient civilizations has no basis in verifiable history.)
Thinking about the Book of Mormon

It is baffling why people continue to believe the Book of Mormon and its account of the Jews coming to ancient America, despite the lack of any evidence. (For more information, see sacred-texts.com/mor/index.htm, or obtain a copy at your local library or bookstore.) This testifies to the grip Satan has on the hearts and minds of humans.

Have selected students read 1 John 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; and 2 Timothy 3:15 aloud, and discuss how these passages relate to the success of Mormonism. The Book of 1 John enjoins Christians to test the spirits. Ask the class where the teachings found in the Book of Mormon fall in their test of the spirits. Can Mormonism be described in any way as Christian? (No. The teachings of the Book of Mormon cannot hold up under scrutiny.)

Christians aren’t only called to examine and separate themselves from false teachings, but they are also called to defend the Christian faith. Have the class read and discuss 1 Peter 3:15. Then, ask how a Christian might respond and even defend the truthfulness of the Gospel as it has been confessed through the ages in, for example, the Apostles’ Creed over against the claims of Mormons based on the Book of Mormon. There are a number of ways. Focus, however, on the historicity of the Gospel, for, as Paul said, it did not occur “in a corner” (Acts 26:26). In fact, the essential events all took place “under Pontius Pilate” in the historical record and can be verified.

Read Galatians 1:6–9. What does Paul say about any new gospel being preached by someone else? (Even if this word comes from an angel, it is to be cursed.) How does this Scripture directly address the contents of the Book of Mormon? (It was supposedly revealed by an angel to Joseph Smith. Based on these verses, we should recognize it as false teaching.)

Closing

Conclude the study with the following prayer or one of your own.

Heavenly Father, Your only-begotten Son came down from heaven and died for us and our salvation. All this was accomplished at a certain place and in a certain time at the cross of Calvary. We thank and praise You for calling us to this faith. Continue to use us to point others back to that one event, where Your love and mercy were made manifest for all to see. Amen.
The Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon is one of the chief texts of Mormonism. It is, according to Mormon legend, a translation of a text that was originally inscribed in reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics (a language unknown to historians and linguists) on golden tablets.

The story goes that the soon-to-be designated Mormon prophet Joseph Smith (1805–44) was approached by an angel named Moroni, who had buried the tablets containing the writings of ancient American prophets centuries earlier. Moroni directed Smith to render the writings in English for the purpose of restoring the Church of Jesus Christ. Smith did this from 1827 to 1829 under unverifiable circumstances by looking at them and interpreting the text through some mysterious spectacles called Urim and Thummim.

The following year, the Book of Mormon, the earliest defining Mormon writing, was published. It claims to contain the lost history of two ancient American civilizations—the Jaredites and the descendants of Lehi and Nephi. The Jaredites, the elder of the two, settled on the American continent after they left the tower of Babel around, according to Mormon chronology, 2250 BC. However, upon their arrival in the Western Hemisphere, they grew corrupt, and all traces of them were wiped off the earth.

The second group left Jerusalem around 600 BC. After traveling overland from the region of the eastern Mediterranean Sea and passing through the Arabian Peninsula, they landed on the west coast of South America. Soon, however, they divided into two groups—the Nephites and the Lamanites.

The story continues by describing how Jesus—who is, in the Mormon view, the offspring of a conjugal union between a heavenly father and mother (like the rest of humanity) and spirit brother of Lucifer—appeared to the Nephites. He preached the Mormon gospel that, according to 2 Nephi 31:13–21, man must believe in the Mormon version of Jesus, repent of his sins, be baptized, receive the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands, and then live a life of obedience.

Eventually, the Mormon story continues, the Nephites and their descendants became corrupt, and they disappeared from history. There is no historical record of a group of early Americans that fits the description of the Nephites as described by the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, nevertheless, see themselves as the restorers of the pure gospel once delivered to the Nephites and corrupted by the Church for nearly two thousand years.

This historically undocumented group of ancient Americans became extinct in AD 421, when the Lamanites annihilated the Nephites at the battle of Cumorah. The Book of Mormon is seen by the Mormons to complement and correct the false theological interpretations of the Bible. It advances Mormonism’s conviction that we (like Jesus and Lucifer) are all offspring of the heavenly father who are temporarily tested before returning to our primordial divine existence.

Note: The Book of Mormon is available at sacred-texts.com/mor/index.htm.
Mormonism
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

History
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was formed by Joseph Smith, Jr. in 1830 in Fayette, New York. Smith claims to have translated the Book of Mormon from golden tablets entrusted to him by the angel Moroni. In 1844, Smith and his brother were imprisoned and killed. Brigham Young moved the group to the Salt Lake Valley in Utah, where it flourished.

Central Teaching
Mormons believe that God was once a human being just as we are and that we can become gods and earn admittance to a celestial heaven.

Significant People
In addition to Joseph Smith (1805–44) and Brigham Young, other important leaders include Oliver Cowdery, who figured prominently in the founding, and Sidney Rigdon, an early convert and theologian in the Latter-day Saints who was passed over for leadership at Smith's death.

Today's Connection
Mormon tabernacles have been erected in all parts of the United States and are planned or under construction on all major continents. Mormon membership has grown to more than thirteen million members worldwide with more than five million in the United States. The sight of two young men in business suits and black nametags riding bicycles and knocking on people's doors is familiar to many. These are among the more than fifty thousand volunteer missionaries who serve the church each year.

Christian Response
Christians bear witness to the one triune God, through whom we have salvation by God's grace alone, not by our efforts. The Bible is God's unchanging truth and our only authority for teaching.

Web Resource
mormon.org/mormonorg/eng