

# WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH MITT?

## ROMNEY'S ROOTS AND HIS HAPLESS QUEST FOR THE PRESIDENCY

Will Bagley

What's the matter with Mitt Romney? In the homestretch of his roller-coaster presidential bid—exceptional for its slickness and boneheaded blunders—Romney's spirited performance and Obama's lethargic response in their first debate have made the contest a horserace. Now, in the first presidential battle to include a Mormon, anything can happen. Romney's biggest problem isn't his faith—it's his insular wealth, which makes him unable to engage in the good-ole-boy, beer-drinking retail politics required to become America's president. Mitt's evasiveness about his religious convictions is calculated but self-defeating, since openness about what his faith means to him might counter Mitt's worst problem: his lack of authenticity.

Neither religion nor politics is as interesting as sex, but when the two have a Romney-style head-on collision, the results can be spectacular. Ironically, this "Mormon moment" should have been an ideal opportunity for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to claim its singular identity and profit from an outpouring of sympathy for a uniquely American faith—see [Simon Critchley's](#) *New York Times* essay on Joseph Smith's revolutionary theology. It has instead coincided with a mass exodus of believers and a sharp debate within the church about what Mormonism means.

How many of Willard Mitt Romney's troubles arise from the old political "Mormon Problem," which led an American president to send an army to Utah in 1857, and how much of this intelligent, eloquent, and cute candidate's

predicament is his own damn fault? Romney's vast wealth is his biggest problem and poses a greater pitfall to his presidential ambitions than his religion. Only his years at a provincial Mormon enclave in Provo, Utah, tempered his elite education at Cranbrook School, Stanford, and Harvard, where he lived in a gated community. Romney's closest encounter with reality was working as a security guard at a Chrysler plant. He never busted a strike or beat up antiwar protestors, but to say Mitt lacks the common touch belabors the obvious.

What role did his religion play in making Willard Mitt Romney such a dismal political candidate? As Mormon Deacon three years younger than Willard M. Romney in 1962, I too lived far from Zion, in a rural ward made up of refugees from Mormon Country drawn to California's jobs. For baby-boomer Mormons, our religion's colorful history and unique doctrines had immense appeal—and being Latter-day Saints set us apart from our peers. But the church services of my youth consisted of endless hours of amateur preaching and racist right-wing politicking. A lot has changed in half a century: Mormonism has traded its rural western roots for a modern corporate marketing machine. Like candidate Romney, it is continually rewriting and denying its past.

The racist pieties regularly spewed from Mormon pulpits ended June 1978, when the reigning prophet, Spencer W. Kimball, received a revelation "extending priesthood and temple blessings to all worthy male members of the Church." Fortunately, Mormonism dumped its racism virtually overnight—but its policy had already alienated members like me. Today young Saints have no recollection of this ancient history, and the faith's hired historians try to equate its prejudicial past with benevolence. Yet Mitt Romney's acceptance of such beliefs as a young lay leader is only part of the complicated puzzle Mormonism

presents for his vaulting ambition—and his religion. For over 30 years, he supported a Mormon doctrine denying the priesthood to those afflicted with “the curse of Canaan,” which meant black African origins.

All religions are inherently weird, but only Scientology comes close to Mormonism in the weirdness sweepstakes. To counter this, the Corporation of the President, Mormonism’s legal identity, is running away from its gaudy history, rugged frontier folksiness and revolutionary theology in desperate attempt to make itself no more controversial than Methodism—and every bit as boring.

It was not always so.

As Deacon in 1964, I went to the Bishop’s office for the standard interview required for 14-year-old boys to advance in the faith’s Aaronic (or lesser) Priesthood. Bishop Rounds worked as a gardener, so he was an unusual character to hold an office usually assigned to accountants, lawyers, or businessmen. The bishop lacked the sophistication and even the pastoral skills of his predecessor, a dentist, so he relied on the handbook of instructions Salt Lake sent to Mormon officials. Brother Rounds ran through the handbook’s the list of questions Melchizedek Priesthood leaders asked to determine if I was worthy of the virtually automatic promotion to the office of Teacher. Did I accept the doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Did I have a testimony of the divine calling of the Prophet Joseph Smith and David O. McKay, the current president? Did I believe in the truth of the Book of Mormon? Did I play with myself?

Did I give Brother Rounds the honest or the expected answers? I hope I said I played with my friends, not with myself, and that I had my doubts about the

divine nature of the Restored Gospel. But maybe I had learned the true lesson of these painful sessions: don't tell the truth, tell people what they want to hear. Having read Mark Twain's *Letters from the Earth*, I failed to respond in the approved manner. Reading all 522 pages of *The Book of Mormon* convinced me it was the creation of a semi-literate frontier farm boy in the 1820s. Besides, I wondered how someone as homely as Bishop Rounds could produce his daughter Nadine, a very hot number. For a hormone-crazed 13-year old male, Nadine was a much more compelling subject than *The Book of Mormon*, which in 1860 struck British adventurer Richard Francis Burton as "composed only to emulate the sprightliness of some parts of Leviticus."

The interview seemed fairly standard until the bishop reached the end. "Have you had sex with animals?"

That woke me up. *You can have sex with animals?* At last—a question I could answer honestly: *Who knew you could have sex with animals?*

This story might cast light on why it might take Jehovah's divine intervention to make Mitt Romney president of the United States. The religion's long tradition of pragmatism and its enduring belief in ends justifying means teaches young Saints to believe in whatever works. In the church's endless "worthiness" interviews, lying works. Young Saints—at least this one—learned the bishop didn't want an honest answer: he wanted the *right* answer. We learned truth is fungible. Mormons didn't give up lying for the Lord when they abandoned polygamy: they learned to tell people what they want to hear.

Mitt oozes insincerity, but he believes everything he says, no matter how demonstrably untrue it may be. This legacy of his Mormon upbringing may explain why Romney has no qualms about retailing a long list of claims

conclusively exposed as lies—not merely half-truths or mostly false but big pants-on-fire lies. Mitt believes and his minions believe his false charges in their very bones—so they’re true. As Dr. P. J. Goebbels discovered and Fox News proves, repeat a lie often enough until everybody believes it’s true and it is.

Forty years ago Hunter Thompson called the Republican Convention “the Dance of the Robots.” This year the robots crowned their Robot King. Romney’s enormous wealth renders him incapable of appealing to the fabled Reagan Democrats, and his nomination of Paul Ryan shows he can’t even bank on the Republican base. Romney’s dramatic and cynical transformation from the Last of the Moderate Republicans to xenophobic Tea Party spear-carrier demonstrates his dedication to doing and saying whatever it takes to win the presidency of the United States. His end—saving America’s divinely inspired constitution, which is hanging by a thread—justifies his means.

For better or worse, Mitt Romney personifies everything Americans find admirable and spooky about Mormons. The Governor is friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, brave, thrifty—notoriously so—clean and reverent. But trustworthy and loyal? To be trusted by whom and loyal to what? As Frank Rich observed, Romney’s core problem is that he’s determined to keep secret his greatest passion—his faith.

A computer engineer once asked me, “How can brilliant people believe in a religion that is so patently unbelievable?” This may be Mormonism’s greatest mystery. A reasonable explanation involves a bigger problem: why do people follow such obviously bogus prophets as Joseph Smith, L. Ron Hubbard and Vladimir Putin? The answer lies not in the head but in the heart. Religion is not about intellect—it’s about *feeling*. Mormonism’s truth-claim is intensely

emotional: in the final thrilling pages of the *Book of Mormon*, after the evil red Lamanites have “put to death every Nephite that will not deny Christ,” Moroni explains how to know the Truth. The last white Nephite exhorts readers to “ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, and he will manifest the truth in you.” That manifestation communicates emotionally, directly to the heart, in what Mormons call “a burning in the bosom.” Young Saints are not taught to intellectually distinguish truth from fiction: Truth is something you *feel*.

#### THE DANGLING CONSTITUTION

Mixing religion and politics is particularly perilous for Mormon politicians. Brigham Young predicted “when the Constitution of the United States hangs, as it were, upon a single thread, they will have to call for the ‘Mormon’ Elders to save it from utter destruction.” Many Saints believe “that the Constitution will hang by a thread and the Church will save it,” sociologist Jan Shipps noted in 1999. On the day Barack Obama was elected president, Senator Orrin Hatch told Glenn Beck, “I believe the Constitution is hanging by a thread. I’ve been fighting to save it for all 32 (now 35) years I’ve been in the Senate.”

Like every Mormon congregation, the Oceanside-Carlsbad Ward had a library filled with classic tales of the Mormon frontier, like Dan Jones’s *Forty Years among the Indians*. But the most popular volume was Duane Crowther’s 1962 *Prophecy, Key to the Future*. I recently bought a 1970 copy of the twentieth printing—only the Lord knows how many copies this spellbinder sold. Much of it was devoted to what is called “The White Horse Prophecy.”

The impact of Crowther's collection of Mormonism's rich folk fantasies spilled forth from the pulpit of the Oceanside Ward. His hair-raising predictions of plagues, wars, the fall of the Christian Nations, the collapse of the U.S. government, and Christ's appearance at the site of the Garden of Eden in Missouri occasionally shattered the tedium of Sacrament Meetings with electrifying tales of a not-so-far distant apocalypse—scheduled, as I recall, for 1984. I doubt Crowther's fantasy was as popular at Mitt's far wealthier ward in Bloomington, Michigan, but who knows? During the Cuban crisis in 1962, even a wild prophecy like the one Edwin Rushton recalled in 1904 seemed perfectly believable.

Mormonism's magical world exists at the End of Time—that's why, unlike the Early-day Saints of Roman times, Mormons are Latter-day Saints. The Prophet Joseph, an eloquent and occasionally inebriated frontier preacher, loved to tell tall tales about the Last Days and funny stories castigating "the liars, swindlers, thieves, robbers, incendiaries, murderers, cheats, adulterers, harlots, blackguards, gamblers, bogus makers, idlers, busy bodies, pickpockets, vagabonds, filthy persons, and all other infidels and rebellious, disorderly persons" who had joined the "crusade against Joe Smith and the Mormons." Mitt Romney's great-great-grandpa Parley P. Pratt recorded one of these elegant insults as "A Dialogue between Joseph Smith and the Devil." It wished all the mobocrats were "in the middle of the sea, in a stone canoe, with an iron paddle; that a shark might swallow the canoe, and the shark be thrust into the nethermost part of h-l, and the door locked, the key lost, and a blind man hunting for it."

Smith's toast appears in Edwin Rushton's "White Horse Prophecy," the most

spectacularly goofy Mormon end-times legend of all. Sixty years after he heard it, Rushton remembered a vision Joseph Smith shared with him and Theodore Turley. "You will go to the Rocky Mountains and you will be a great and mighty people established there, which I will call the White Horse of peace and safety," the Seer purportedly predicted. The Prophet said he would never go there, but "Your enemies will continue to follow you with persecutions and they will make obnoxious laws against you in Congress." The Feds would "treat you like strangers and aliens and they will not give you your rights, but will govern you with strangers and commissioners. You will see the Constitution of the United States almost destroyed. It will hang like a thread as fine as a silk fiber."

The Prophet's countenance saddened as he said, "I love the Constitution; it was made by the inspiration of God; and it will be preserved and saved by the efforts of the White Horse, and by the Red Horse who will combine in its defense." (The Red Horse was the Lamanites, America's Indians.)

Meanwhile, the White Horse would become rich. "The time will come when the banks of every nation will fall and only two places will be safe where people can deposit their gold and treasure. This place will be the White Horse and England's vaults." World governments would collapse. A terrible revolution would sweep America, "and every specie of wickedness will be practiced rampantly in the land"; the "most terrible scenes of bloodshed, murder and rape that have ever been imagined or looked upon will take place." Peace and love would survive only in the Rocky Mountains. So many "of the honest in heart of the world" would gather to Zion for safety "that you will be in danger of famine, but not for want of seed, time and harvest, but because of so many to be fed," Joseph the Seer prophesied. England and France would unite "to keep Russia

from conquering the world." England would be chosen "from there being so much blood of Israel in the nation" to stop the bloodshed. "Armed with British bayonets, the doings of the Black Horse will be terrible."

The Great White Horse would "gather the honest in heart from among the Pale Horse (the American people) to stand by the Constitution of the United States as it was given by the inspiration of God." God would set up a Kingdom never to be thrown down, and the Kingdoms that would "not let the Gospel be preached in their lands will be humbled until they will." The blood of Israel in northern Europe would "be gathered out" and submit to the nations of God. The Messiah would come and the Ten Tribes of Israel would build a temple in Independence, Missouri. "There is a land beyond the Rocky Mountains that will be invaded by the heathen Chinese unless great care and protection be given," the Prophet foretold. In the last great struggle, "the whole of America will be made the Zion of God." Its enemies would be Gog and Magog: the Russian Czar, whose "power will be great," would lead the opposition to defeat, "and this land will be the Zion of our God. Amen."

LDS officialdom swiftly condemned "this so-called revelation" after it appeared in 1904. President Joseph F. Smith denounced this "ridiculous story" as "a lot of trash." Trash or not, such trash was a matter of constant speculation in the Mormonism of my youth. What Mitt Romney believes about all this falderal is anybody's guess. His father danced around that question when a magazine asked George Romney to "tell us your interpretation of the Constitution 'hanging by a thread' and whether you think that such a condition is present now or will be in the foreseeable future?"

"Anyone can look at the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith in this respect, as

reported by Brigham Young and others who apparently heard him make the statement," George Romney responded. He had always felt "government leaders who were Mormons would be involved in answering the question" of "whether we are going to proceed on the basis of the Constitution would arise and at this point." My fellow Saints in Oceanside ate this stuff up. Did Governor George Romney wonder if his son was born to save the Constitution? No one knows what Mitt thinks—the man keeps his own council on the subject of the White Horse—but thereby hangs a tale.

My editorial-cartoonist brother, Pat Bagley, is a solid historian in his own right. He's a sharp entrepreneur, too: the pins he crafted for the 2002 Winter Olympics—notably the coveted "Green Jello" pin—have attained legendary status among collectors. He started a publishing house in 1999 to capitalize on the winter games, and five years later he published "Mormons: History, Culture, Beliefs: Answers to Commonly Asked Questions About the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" to capture the airport trade.

"Acclaimed as the best introduction to Mormonism available, this wonderful book paints a reliable and informative portrait of the world's fastest growing religion and its people," proclaims the book's Amazon blurb. Mitt Romney's exploratory campaign stumbled across Pat's book in 2007 while trying to find a friendly, reasonable way to explain their candidate's religious views. They liked how the book covered "everything from the sacred (temples and doctrine) to the silly (green Jell-O)," and they contacted my brother about doing a massive reprint.

Only one problem: Pat's publishing company was named White Horse Books.

*Will Bagley is the author of "With Golden Visions Bright Before Them" and more than twenty books on overland emigration, railroads, mining, frontier violence, and the creation of digital search technology. David Roberts called him the "sharpest of all thorns in the side of the Mormon historical establishment." Despite being an unbeliever, Bagley admits he is thoroughly Mormon, saying, "Being Mormon is worse than being Jewish."*

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