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The Mormon Mirage

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Chapter I

A GENTLE APOSTASY

Every Mormon, when he or she is about twelve years old, has the opportunity to go before a man of the LDS community who is revered for his wisdom and experience to receive a patriarchal blessing. I was about thirteen when I went before Garland F. Bushman, the patriarch of the stake, or region, in which I lived. Patriarch Bushman placed his hands on my head and said:

In the preexistence, you were one of the choice souls of heaven noted by Father Abraham. Your ancestors were noble people, of the tribe of Ephraim. You yourself have a great destiny to become a leader of women in the church and in the state where you will reside. You will meet a fine young man, be married in a temple of our Lord, and raise up righteous children. Finally, you will arise in the morning of the first resurrection, surrounded by your family.

These wonderful predictions made me weep for joy. The patriarch warned me, however, that Satan wanted my soul very much—so much, in fact, that he would try hard to deceive me. All the blessings promised me would therefore be conditional upon my resisting Satan, and my obedience to the precepts of Mormonism.

Now, years later, I have left Mormonism and I feel so strongly about it that I am writing a book telling why I have left.

It wasn't easy to leave. I owed, and still owe, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members a great debt of gratitude. But I am regarded by them as a traitor and an apostate. I left Mormonism after tasting some of its sweetest fruits.

Though my parents were Baptists, we did not attend church regularly until my father was converted to Mormonism by missionaries. I gladly

received the missionary lessons, and my younger brother and I were baptized into the Mormon Church when I was eleven. My mother, however, never accepted the Joseph Smith Story. Through the tumultuous years of my adolescence, the LDS Church was security. Teachers and counselors in the church were compassionate and truly interested in me. These people were bound together by great love for their families, the Church, and each other.

The excellent youth programs (including track meets, road shows, supervised dances, cookouts, camps, sports activities, firesides, work and service projects, and much more) filled a gap in my life that might otherwise have been filled with early dating and associations in unsavory places. Through the LDS Church, I found a concrete way to express my fervent love for God and my desires to serve him. I gave love freely, and had it returned a hundredfold.

Some of Mormonism's blessings were even more tangible. I received an education of the highest quality at Brigham Young University, and through writing contests I was awarded scholarships that made it easier for me to attend. The part-time jobs I held while in school (dorm resident assistant, staff writer for the university's weekly magazines, translation and public relations work for a professor in the Latin-American Studies department, and counter work at the basketball arena's concession stand) were provided by the BYU board of trustees, who were deeply interested in the welfare of its students.

Once, even the food I ate was provided by the LDS Church. My father had undergone extensive surgery, and when the church officials heard of this, they brought hot meals to our home for several days and assessed our grocery supply to determine what we needed. They returned with sacks and sacks of groceries, and even offered to make car, house, and utility payments if needed.

I loved Mormonism for these things, and in return showed my love by living and serving as a "good Mormon." Each time that I was interviewed by my bishop (ecclesiastical leader of my local ward or congregation) and asked about such things as my attendance at meetings, payment of tithes, observance of the Word of Wisdom (health laws), sexual purity, and support of Church doctrines and leaders, I was awarded a precious "temple recommend."

During my young adulthood, I served as a teacher in Sunday school, Relief Society (a ladies' organization), and Primary (a children's organization). I was active as a speaker in Sacrament meetings and was often called on to prepare programs for the youths' "Mutual Improvement Association"

and for special occasions. For a while, I worked as my ward's media aids supervisor, and in various other church "jobs."

I was never lukewarm. What I believed, I lived. I say all this because I believe that someone who has not lived a doctrine has no grounds to criticize it¹—just as a grade-school science student cannot reasonably speak with authority on nuclear physics. I lived Mormonism; I loved it—and I left it.

My "apostasy" did not happen overnight. Once the process began, however, it moved quickly. The summer after my junior year at BYU, I returned to my home in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to work. I was annoyed when my mother, a lukewarm Baptist who played ragtime piano at a local pizza parlor, suggested that I date non-Mormons that summer. A missionary I was "waiting for" was due to return that fall,² and I just wasn't interested in a non-LDS "Gentile." But she introduced me to Dan Scott, the object of her praises, who started off our introductory conversation by saying, "So you're a Mormon. I've read the *Book of Mormon*. It was, uh, interesting."

Immediately I thought to myself, *Maybe he could be converted*. Then, more cautious, I stalled, searching for a reply. Everyone I'd ever known who'd read the whole *Book of Mormon* had become a Mormon. In fact, I reflected, I'd known plenty of faithful Mormons who had never read the whole thing unless and until required to do so in a religion class or while on a mission. Perhaps, I thought, this would be a good time to terminate this discussion, and I left quickly.

A few weeks later, a voice on the phone said, "Hi! Bet you don't know who this is!" His Tennessee accent had betrayed him. I said, "Yes—Dan Scott." He was crushed, his surprise foiled, but not crushed enough to forget to ask me out. I accepted against my better judgment.

Our first date was a disaster. He took me to midweek services at his church where he announced, "She's a Mormon." I was stared at as if I were from another planet. (Mormons get accustomed, to a degree, to such treatment from curious non-Mormons. Once when I was in junior high, a sincere classmate asked me if something her mother told her was true: that Mormons didn't have navels. We quickly went into the girls' room, and I dispelled that myth with a tug of my blouse!)

Nonetheless, I was attracted by Dan's openness and decided to date him again if he asked, and he did.

I soon found Dan to be a true and warm friend with a sense of humor he could aim at himself as well as at others. Our only disagreements came when we discussed religion. He was so transparently shocked when I answered his questions about baptism for the dead, polygamy, treatment of Negroes, and

the LDS priesthood that we made an agreement. He would study the *Book of Mormon* and other LDS scripture with me if I would study the Bible with him. I felt this to be a personal triumph, because I'd never studied Mormonism with anyone (except my mother) who did not join the LDS Church.

Soon Dan and I had to admit to ourselves the love that was growing between us. One thing we both agreed on: We could not take the chance of becoming more deeply involved with our hearts so near and our souls so far apart. We both acknowledged that our respective religions weren't just "versions" of each other. They were not just different; they were oppositional.

Our discussions usually put me on the defensive. I was knowledgeable about my religion, and what was more, I was stubborn. Add to that a strong dose of love for the doctrines and people of Mormonism, and you have an idea of the battle Dan had to fight. He didn't fight it alone, though; he had several powerful weapons.

One was his brother-in-law, Charles Williamson, a preacher of great intelligence and patience. One day Charles and I agreed to sit down and talk only about religion. We sat on opposite sides of a table, me with my Bible, *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine and Covenants*, *Pearl of Great Price*, and *Principles of the Gospel*; he with his Bible. Dan soon left the room, a scene he described as a "verbal ping-pong game." Both Charles and I were exhausted after about two hours of table-slamming debate. I was on the verge of anger. I learned later that Charles told Dan in confidence that I knew more than any Mormon elder he'd ever spoken with, and frankly he didn't know if there was any hope for me.

My recurring headaches signaled tension that had begun to grow as my doubts had. Dan and Charles didn't think their talks had served any purpose. I was filled with a sick dread that I then thought was a godly sorrow for the lost souls of people like Dan and Charles. Actually, I was beginning to fear that *my* soul might be lost, and I dared not voice this fear—not even to myself.

Another of the mighty weapons used by Dan in the battle for my soul was the literature he somehow managed to find. These books dealt objectively and factually with Mormonism, from the view of non-Mormons. I was blessed by the fact that Dan chose the books he did for me to read. Most writings that criticized LDS doctrine that I had previously read had had very little lasting effect on me.

There are many books and magazine articles written to convince Mormons of their doctrinal errors. Many of these, however, make at least one of two major mistakes. One is underestimating the intelligence, integrity, or

character of the LDS people. Many times when I was a Mormon, I had read some otherwise factual literature against Mormonism which by its bitter or berating tone turned me off. The doctrinal point the writer was making never sank in. Such literature implies that Mormons believe as they do because they are stupid, narrow-minded, or satanic. Since I considered other Mormon friends and myself to be intelligent, open-minded children of God seeking to do his will, I would toss such offensive literature into the nearest trash can. Then I would offer a prayer to God for the soul of anyone who would tell such lies in print where they might be accepted as fact by someone who'd never met a good Latter-day Saint.

The other great error committed by many writers on Mormonism is that of not checking their facts. Like the mother of the girl who asked me about my navel, such writers discredit themselves with inaccuracies. Some writers, carried away in their enthusiasm, embellish facts—it's easy to do—but when I would run into such stretching or bending of the truth in writings critical of Mormonism, I would dismiss as also erroneous anything else I read there that didn't agree with LDS doctrines I had been taught.

When you confront many Mormons with, for example, copies of the original 1830 edition of the *Book of Mormon*, or strange prophecies made by Joseph Smith which never came true, some will be dumbfounded. Often such things are unavailable to them through regular Church channels. If, therefore, a book errs when covering things they *do* know about, how can they trust new information on things they have never heard of?

The most effective weapon of all in Dan's armory was three-pronged. First was his overwhelming faith and confidence in the Word of God, the Bible. Second was the prayer that he continually offered for my soul's enlightenment. Third, and most penetrating, was the love he had for me. Had we not loved each other, I don't believe I would have had the courage to leave the comfortable LDS way of life. Had he ceased loving me before my conversion was completed, I fear I would have returned to the womb of Mormonism and lived ever an infant, frightened and dependent, but secure in my deliberate ignorance.

I finally came to an impasse in my spiritual progress. I was struggling against the bonds of Mormonism—tradition and heritage, doctrinal comfort and love. Yet I felt that something was terribly wrong there—why did my teachings and background in Mormonism conflict so sharply with my new knowledge of the Bible? Why the inconsistencies in LDS historical accounts and early documents?