

Mormon Stories Podcast Part 1 with John Dehlin
321-322: Denver Snuffer – A Progressive, Fundamentalist, Non-Polygamist Mormon Lawyer
Who Claims to Have Seen Christ
Sunday, February 12, 2012
Denver Snuffer

John Dehlin: Hello, and welcome to another edition of Mormon Stories podcast. I'm your host, John Dehlin. I'm very excited to have a new guest with me today. Before I launch into introducing my guest and talking about him I want to provide just a little bit of a disclaimer generally and then dive in.

Recently I've been receiving a lot of feedback from my listeners who are expressing frustration. It's usually from the more believing side of my listenership. The sentiment that they've been expressing to me is basically that what they've always enjoyed about Mormon Stories is that it's open and respectful of all points of view, affirming of belief, or supportive of belief and not denigrating, but also supporting disbelief, and just wanting to hear all sides. Some of the feedback I've received lately is that people feel like Mormon Stories has dwindled a bit into being a little bit more critical or hostile towards belief and that is something we never, ever, ever want to do. I want my listenership to know that I'm sorry if they feel that way and I'm going to do everything I can. I've talked to my board of directors about this, which is full of believers and non-believers, and we are going to do what we can to right that ship, so I want to make the promise to you guys. This interview actually fits along that purpose quite nicely.

Today I've invited someone on this show whose name many of you may not know. His name is Denver Snuffer. He is an attorney in Salt Lake City. He is an author and sort of a social commentator or religious commentator on modern-day Mormonism. Denver is the author of at least eight books. Denver, welcome on Mormon Stories.

Denver Snuffer: It's good to be here [laughs]. If I'm your gesture towards the orthodox believing community then I'm pleased to hold down that end of the spectrum.

John: I want to tell the listeners right off why they really need to listen to this interview because it's not going to be boring, I can promise you. Denver, you've written several books. There are a couple that I've been made aware of. One is *The Second Comforter: Conversing with the Lord through the Veil*. Isn't your main premise there that members of the Church can actually potentially have a personal, I don't want to say visit, but can have a personal witness of Jesus. Is that kind of the approach of that book?

Denver: It is. I would go one step further and take the step that you were reluctant to take, and that is, yes, have a visit with the Lord.

John: You actually believe that that can happen in this life?

Denver: Correct. Yes, I do.

John: Maybe you even know people who've had that experience?

Denver: I do, in fact.

John: We'll talk about that today. We're not going to talk about that now. You also have a book you've written recently called *Passing the Heavenly Gift*. What's the main premise of that book?

Denver: It's taking a look at the Church's history, dividing it into four phases through which we have passed, and discussing the contrast and the definitional differences between the first phase in which Joseph Smith was around and the subsequent three phases after his death.

John: Okay. Just because I'm wanting to give my audience a sense for who they're listening to, you're unique because a lot of my listeners, they study the Church history, and for them the conclusion that they take from the history is that it's not credible, that it's fraudulent, and a lot of them end up just not believing and leaving the Church. The reason why I think you're such a fascinating interview is because you've dug into the history probably as much as any of us and it's taken you the other direction, almost. The term "fundamentalist" is dangerous because it's got with it associations like Warren Jeffs and all that stuff.

Denver: Right.

John: I would say you come out of a fundamentalist impulse which is: Your studies of the Church has even made your beliefs stronger but it's pointed you in two sort of impulses. One is to really look back into what Joseph did and what the Lord did through Joseph, and to really put the emphasis back on the early Church. And then, that also leads you to be a bit of a critic – and I don't mean critic in a nonconstructive way – but you are sort of a Hugh Nibley-esq kind of critic to the Church today. Is that fair to say?

Denver: Yes. There are things about the current Church I find exasperating. And yes, I do think that if Joseph Smith is an authentic agent for God then the real question that we ought to try to get to the bottom of is: What was God attempting to do in calling Joseph Smith? Not even what Joseph meant or what Joseph intended, but what was God trying to do through the agency of Joseph Smith, and the trail back to God's presence really picks up at the last place where we had a good deal of contact with God, and that's early in the restoration, early in Mormonism.

John: That's what we are going to be talking about today. We're going to be talking to a man who believes, who knows all the history, yet maintains a sincere belief in the restoration, and who believes that not only should we eschew atheism and agnosticism and ex-Mormonism, but is calling us to consider that maybe we can each have a personal witness of Christ, a literal personal witness of Christ. This is a man who is a successful professional, who lives in Salt Lake City, who many find to be very reputable and respectable. That's the intro, Denver.

Let's begin by just giving us a brief introduction to your story, a few of the relevant points or stories that inform your impulse or your brand of Mormonism today.

Denver: Well, I'm a convert, I joined in 1973, but I joined out of a family in which my mother and my sister were Baptists. My sister still is Baptist. The process of even considering Mormonism was one that arose out of what I would now call a polemical environment, because when my mom found out I was interested in the Mormon church all of that inoculation she'd hoped to have done earlier was followed up with a lot of pamphlets and anti-Mormon information to try and discourage the conversion. At the outset, when I joined the Church I came through a tidal wave of criticism and objections to the Church, and I feel comfortable. The idea that there is a criticism that ought to be leveled against either the faith or the founder or the current practices of the Church is the milieu out of which my faith originated. So I don't find that uncomfortable, I don't find that distressing.

John: You've been inoculated against criticisms from the start. You're a convert to the Church. Let's just talk about – did you serve a mission? Did you get married in the temple? Did you go to BYU? Tell us just a little bit about your bona fides, so to speak.

Denver: I joined the Church. I've been married in the temple. I attended the law school at Brigham Young University. In fact, Paul Toscano was a year ahead of me at the law school and he and I were first acquainted with one another there. He was classmates with Cory Maxwell, Neal Maxwell's son, who is down at Deseret Book now, previously at Bookcraft. The environment of the law school was an interesting one at BYU. Rex Lee was the Dean back then. Ed Kimball was my Criminal Law professor. My first marriage, which was a temple marriage, ended in divorce. I was subsequently married again. My current wife and I raised the four children from the first marriage and then she and I had five more of our own, so we've had nine children in the home though most of them, or the majority of them, are now gone. We're down to the final three. I've been on the High Council. I've taught Gospel Doctrine or the priesthood for 21 years. I've given a lot of care, time, attention, to both participating meaningfully in the religious process and in supporting and helping it.

John: You were a high councilman relatively recently, right?

Denver: I was. In fact, I understand the system well enough that I probably shouldn't tell people the machinations I used to get me in my current calling, but when they released me from the High Council I went over to teach the Priests. At the time I had a son who was still at home. He's now in college, and that was the calling I wanted, so using what I understood through participating on the High Council I was able to get called to teach the Priests, which I still do.

John: You're active in the Church, believing and committed to the Gospel, or to the restoration, I guess?

Denver: Yes. In fact, here is a bona fide for you, if it's of any worth. I literally cannot recall the last time I wasn't a 100% home teacher. It's been so many years [laughs]. There's a benchmark that some people will understand.

John: Wow, that's a pretty high bar. This is what we are going to do. I want you – we're not going to be able to go into too much depth, but I want you to give us your perspective. There's going to be a couple of parts to this podcast. One is give us your perspective on a history of the

Church that might be different from the correlated version, that gives us an overview of what you feel like God was actually trying to do with the restoration and through Joseph, so that we can get sort of an understanding, not only of what he was trying to do, but then how it went awry.

Denver: Okay.

John: Part one is what was he trying to do. Part two is how did it go awry, just at a high level. Part three is what are the problems with where we are now. And then part four is what can we do about it, for those who are believers who view your perspective. How do we be constructive parts of bringing about Zion, or whatever it is, does that make sense? Somewhere in there we have to throw your teachings about the second witness.

Denver: I think that the first part of that, when you go back to the first part of that; the origin, where we began and what was happening early on is connected to the very topic that you raise last, and that is man reuniting with God.

John: That's James 1:5, right? That's what the founding of Joseph – of the Church – started with, right?

Denver: Right. In fact, that's one of the comments that I make in the last book, and that is that Joseph Smith really stands foremost as a witness that James 1:5 works. And James 1:5 puts the burden on each individual then to ask God and to see if God will not answer them and give them information. It's what the missionaries go out and they tell everyone to do, "Here is our testimony. Here's our book. Here's our program. Now you pray and ask God if it isn't true." That's Moroni 10:4-5, those are the verses that the missionaries ask you to invoke. I just happen to think that that is not a right of passage to be experienced one time at the beginning and never thereafter to be broken out, polished off, and used again. I think that's the heart and core of the process, that is continually ask God, who does give to all men liberally and doesn't upbraid you, doesn't scold you, doesn't send you away after asking for a loaf of bread with a rock, or after asking for a fish send you away with a serpent. He gives to all men liberally, meaning that what he gives is even better than what you were asking for, and I think that is the process. It was not intended to say, "Check it out. If it's true we want to baptize you now. Get in line, pay your tithing, show up faithfully, do what we ask you to do, never turn down a calling, and be a good little Mormon." I think it was always intended that we continually increase in light and knowledge until we arrive at the perfect day, which is taken from the Doctrine and Covenants, the goal being the perfect day, not simply to witness the sunrise but to also arrive at noonday when the shadows are gone.

John: I want to return at the end, and maybe this will be a hook for our listeners. I want to return in the end of this discussion, maybe two hours from now, about how in the world it's possible to experience Christ now. But let's put that off, and for now, Joseph has this witness somewhere between the ages of 12 and 16; we don't know exactly the year.

Denver: Right.

John: But then a lot of other stuff happens. There's golden plates, there's Book of Mormon. There's the founding of the Church. There's the restoration. Supposedly there's the Aaronic priesthood and the Melchizedek priesthood. Then it moves into ordinances, and temple rituals, and polygamy. And then Joseph gets martyred, and then Brigham Young takes over. What of that stuff, which of the things that I mentioned, and other things, do you still see as valid and important? Do you see any of that stuff as well, as being distractions or side projects or missing the mark?

Denver: Well, there are 10,000 little nuances to every step of that, and that would take a great deal more time than we have in the interview. In general, what I see along the way is that the basic outline of Joseph praying, having contact with God, God directing Joseph, and him setting out on an adventure – that though at the end of that we can put into an overall narrative – at the beginning of that I don't think Joseph had a single clue where it was headed. In fact, the earliest accounts he gives of his First Vision are really a conversion story. It's a tale of personal redemption. It did not assume cosmic importance and have relevance for your salvation and mine until some years later. Joseph didn't approach this as a youth thinking that the entire universe was going to be reshaped through the experiences he was having. He was simply being converted. It assumed greater proportion as it went along in the understanding of Joseph. But I think at the beginning God's contact with Joseph was purposeful and intended ultimately to affect you and to affect me, and to affect mankind.

John: Where are you on the importance of authority, of priesthood, of rituals like baptism and the endowment to get into heaven? Do you see all of that as sort of punch passes that you need to go through to be exalted or do you see those as kind of bureaucratic distractions or side trips?

Denver: I think the purpose of the ordinances is to extend an invitation. That they are instructional; they are to initiate you into an understanding of a different culture than the one from which we hail in order to get you mentally and spiritually adapted to looking at the way that God deals with man. Man's culture and man's ways are not – culturally we are divided from God. When we go to more primitive cultures – in fact, we've even got the phrase, "the magic world view" that we have coined in order to describe the attitude that we think we're more sophisticated and we can look down upon, whereas, in the teachings of the Savior the more correct way would be the child's view, or becoming more childlike. We all remember in our childhood how believing we could be in all kinds of stories. The purpose of the ordinances, in my view, is to initiate us into another way of viewing things, another way of opening ourselves up to receiving those kinds of influences which, if there is a God – and I believe that there is – He would have embedded everywhere. And therefore, ordinances ought to heighten our sensitivities and create within each of us an expectation, not merely that we're going to go through a ceremony in which it's depicted that we will encounter God through the veil, but that that is a deliberate effort to invite us to experience the transcendent and to make the connection between ourselves and God through a veil, through that which apparently separates us, to reach up and to have Him reach down, and to make that connection. So I think the ordinances are educational. I think they are invitations. I think they are an extension of God's care, concern, and invitation to each one of us, and if they are received in that light I think they serve a marvelous purpose in inviting us. They are not the real thing but they are a depiction of the real thing, and an invitation to receive the real thing, which involves God and man.

John: That's a different way than it's talked about in Church. An immediate implication that comes to mind for me is: Is the question of what's happening with all of other God's children that aren't LDS, and what I'm hoping to hear you say – although I don't want to lead the witness – what I'm hoping to hear you say is that this is an inclusive perspective that then allows for God's power to manifest, to be available to all of his children, not just through the institutional LDS church. Am I hoping vainly or is there something to that?

Denver: I believe that God is as interested in *every* man as he is interested in *any* man. Christ may have come, lived, and died in a Jewish culture but the atonement that he wrought was intended universally. It was intended for all. In fact, some of the problem we have in coming into some unified understanding is that we do tend to be rather chauvinist, rather exclusivist, about what we have. Until we have had a far more widespread transcendent experience I'm not sure that we have any ground from which to boast about our own religious validity. Look at what has happened with transcendence among Buddhists, transcendence among the Hindu, even transcendence among Islam. The fact is that our ordinances were intended to invite us but we're the ones who have to pick up and accept that invitation and then do something further with it.

The endowment, if you look at it from Section 128 and 129 perspective, is Joseph's effort to lay out in ceremonial form the kind of experiences that he lived through. We tend to take them and transfer them out of the context in which Joseph could provide that initiation and say, "Oh, it's historical." But the story that is shown in the temple endowment is your life, it is my life, it is everyone's life. We arrive here in a state of innocence. We at some point become corrupted and therefore accountable. We begin from a position in which we know God; at least we, as a child, have no problem both believing in and feeling comforted by a divine being. It's everywhere. In fact, it is so promiscuous among the little children that they can believe in the Easter bunny and ten thousand other fairy tales, the tooth fairy. And then we arrive at a point in which we begin to feel alienated from Him. The endowment is your life, you've been cast out of that garden. Now the problem is trying to figure out from the mess in which we find ourselves in this lone – we are now alone – and dreary world. The Book of Mormon uses that phrase, "alone without God in the world" several times, it's a really pregnant with meaning phrase that I think captures the problem of where we are, and then find our way back. Where are the true messengers? Who does come now bearing a message from God? And, by the way, that is not always someone who presides over either our Church or any church. It can sometimes be a frail old woman ministering to the lepers in Calcutta, who gives up her life in order to live a celibate nun's life ministering relief to the poor and the outcast in the far flung reaches of the world, and yet, here she is, a visible manifestation of exactly what Christ was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount.

John: So for you, there's this godly impulse or this godly desire to communicate with man that's certainly manifested itself in Mormonism, but that is also manifesting itself outside of Mormonism. And Mormonism is maybe one strand of that attempt from God to connect with his children, is that fair to say?

Denver: Yes. At the second coming we do not expect that the only people who will survive the return of the Lord will be Latter-day Saints. In fact, it's a common teaching, going all the way back to the beginning, that during the millennium there will be missionary work to be done. If

there is going to be work to be done during the millennium then Mormonism is not the exclusive place you will find the kind of worthy people who will survive and rejoice at the Lord's return. And I don't even think some of those who survive the Lord's return will necessarily even be religious, they'll just be good people, principled people.

John: So even my atheist and agnostic friends, there's hope for them, too?

Denver: I absolutely believe so, and I think that an honest atheist who is concerned about what's good and what's right is better than the cynical, critical hypocritical religious folk who think themselves better. In fact, I think that the folks who are proud of their own religious worthiness in standing before God are probably the very ones that won't survive His return.

John: It's clear that that was Christ's message in the New Testament.

Denver: It is.

John: So the restoration for you was less about keys in terms of doors that are literally locked, that can't be opened without the keys, in terms of – I had a cousin of mine once describe it as the country club kind of approach, or the franchise approach, to salvation, that unless you buy into the franchise and have the right membership card you're not getting to heaven, and that's even how the temple ceremony has been interpreted by some. You have to literally not only have been through the right specific ordinances to make it to heaven but you have to actually know the right signs or tokens or whatever to even have a chance of getting back there. I'm hearing from you a simultaneously fundamentalist but also very inclusive framing of the restoration.

Denver: If you take the approach that you just suggested, then if you are a true believing Mormon, and if you think that the temple possesses that kind of power, then you're immediately confronted with the fact that we have made changes in my lifetime, not just by the removal of the penalty but the alteration of a sign. If they are, in fact, how you unlock the door, all of those folks who came through after 1990 are institutionally dispossessed of the capacity to open the door. Therefore it can't mean that, it must mean something else. And if it means something else then we ought to be exploring what are we trying, what are the hints that are contained in that, what are the underlying teachings that are contained in that, what is the invitation or the communication from God intended by that, not "Hey, I've got this bundle of keys and that's going to get me somewhere," because frankly, Jerald and Sandra Tanner have possession of the keys. They've been publishing them, and they don't believe in Mormonism at all. And yet they clearly are in possession of those kinds of things that in the first scenario you described, the possession of magic movements to unlock doors. Therefore it can't mean that. There must be something more to it.

John: I think I get a sense for what you view the restoration was all about. And now we've got what, a hundred and fifty, two hundred years of Mormon history that has been layered on top of what I see you arguing for as some very plain and precious truths. So talk us through your views on how – well, there's a lot that's been done, right. There's a lot that happened in Nauvoo, and then with Brigham Young in Salt Lake, all the way through the renunciation of polygamy and correlation to the modern Church. Talk us through your view of how the Church has progressed

historically, and when we've gotten it right and when we've gotten wrong, sort of in a 2000 foot view.

Denver: It's very difficult at the 2000 foot view other than to say in aggregate, from the time he began until the day of Joseph's death, from the beginning of the 1820 experience and lasting – if we can trust the 1820 dating, because we all know that that 1820 beautiful spring morning may have been 1823, or it may have been some other spring morning – but whenever that spring morning occurred, from that date until June 27th of 1844, Joseph's work was primarily additive. The religion that he was working on was increasing in volume, in content, in complexity, in nuance, and in depth. From that date until today the institutional Church, and when Joseph was here there may have been an institution, it's true, but the Church was immediately responsive to Joseph Smith. From the death of Joseph Smith until today the institutional Church has been primarily deductive, deductive in the sense of doctrine, nuance, ordinance, practice. It has grown immeasurably in wealth, in numbers, and in worldly success, but in terms of the underlying cosmos, the religious center that it precedes forth from, it's been simplified, it's been reductionist, it's been growing progressively less while at the same time succeeding in popularity more.

John: That resonates with me and I know it's going to resonate with a lot of listeners because the Church seems so insistent on claiming to have prophets, seers, and revelators, yet people who are really thoughtful about that are asking: Where's the prophecy? Where's the seeing? Where's the revelation? It's true that some things have been added to the Doctrine and Covenants, for example, the official declarations, almost as responses to social pressure. But the reorganized church is much more expansive than the traditional LDS church. You know, at least their D&C grows over time and ours tends to either change or kind of stay the same, so I resonate with that premise.

Let's first talk about the expansion. Joseph Smith added all of these things, right? He added the teachings about the institutional Church. He added the Melchizedek priesthood. He added baptisms for the dead, and celestial marriage, and the endowment. He even added polygamy. So before we talk about where we are with those now, tell me how you view those additions and how we know which of those additions were true and proper, versus him just experimenting or just coming up with stuff that isn't binding.

Denver: I've tried to work through at the up close and personal level all of those issues in that last book, *Passing the Heavenly Gift*. In general, from the 10,000 foot level, there are roles which other people played in the life of Joseph Smith that we really need to take into account when we're trying to reconstruct what went on there.

Let me use one little vignette as an example because everyone's familiar with this. Martin Harris, who is bankrolling the publication – well, he's bankrolling the translation as well as the publication of the Book of Mormon – wants to be able to get his wife on board with what he's doing in giving this young prophet the financial support that he's lending to him, and he persuades Joseph to inquire about allowing him to get possession of those 116 pages. We all know that ultimately, after having been told no a couple of times, Joseph is allowed to give the 116 pages and disaster ensued. They were lost, they were taken, they were apparently

adulterated, yet it would be interesting to try and find a copy of those around somewhere today. But through that incident, what we see is that Joseph Smith can be persuaded by someone who is an intimate with him, in doing something which the Lord told him is a bad idea, and it turned out it was, in fact, a bad idea. So if you accept that premise, and I think everyone would, whether they are extremely devout or whether they are skeptical; Joseph could be influenced. And then you introduce the events that occur with the conversion of Sidney Rigdon and the people that he brought on board.

I think that Mormonism at the beginning, during that first phase when Joseph was here, includes some very interesting accretions – additions – as a consequence of the influence of Sidney Rigdon. Sidney wanted a New Testament church. Sidney really wanted a restoration through an authoritative prophet; that was what he was teaching about in the western reserve of Ohio when he was a Campbellite minister. That was what he wanted to have, and when he got converted to Mormonism he ran to Joseph Smith and he became an immediate intimate, which irritated some folks like David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery. Joseph was awfully quick to take Sidney on board. But Sidney, after all, created numeric success. When he came on board that whole commune at Isaac Morley's farm essentially were converted en masse. They brought on board big numbers and therefore he legitimately had influence. Sidney is responsible for getting Joseph to work really focused on the New Testament church. I think that if you look at the restoration before Sidney's presence, and then you begin again after Sidney is disaffected in the 1838-1839 time frame and you say, what was Joseph doing pre-Rigdon and post-Rigdon, the look and feel of Mormonism is quite different than a New Testament church orientation.

What Joseph was trying to, or what the Lord, through Joseph, was trying to bring about, was something really quite ancient. The temple ordinances, though you have a lot of Mormon scholars working them into a New Testament motif and undoubtedly that case can be made, it really hails from something much earlier, something that is patriarchal, Egyptian, earliest age of man kind of faith. I can detect, even if you just take Section 107 of the Doctrine and Covenants – Section 107 of the Doctrine and Covenants is an attempt to get direction about how to manage the New Testament church. In the middle of talking about the New Testament church inquiries, you have this side show going on where the Lord is not just talking about what Joseph and Sidney were interested in knowing about, but the earliest stages of man. The first get together in the valley of Adam-ondi-Ahman three years previous to the death of Adam, in which seven high priests gather together, the Lord appears and administers comfort to Adam and calls him Michael, the Prince. And so you have this enormous antiquity that the Lord was interested in. In the same revelation that you have what Joseph and Sidney was interested in – and I think therein lies the real purpose behind the Lord calling Joseph in the first instance – when you go to the New Testament, Christ is talking about a second coming. He analogizes that to the time of Noah, that the model for what mankind needs to look like at His coming to survive the ordeal, the model is what it looked like much earlier than the New Testament, the patriarchal era, an era dominated by Enoch and Noah and shortly following on the heels of the death of Adam. And so the religion that Joseph was really working his way back into, after Rigdon's departure, was a much more ancient form than what we have today.

John: You are saying that's a good thing?

Denver: I'm saying that's a good thing. What we have done – what Mormons have done – what we have done with the restoration is akin to what happened with the children of Israel at the time of Samuel when they said, "Give us a king, we want to be like other people." The Lord was offering us something through Joseph Smith and we were saying, "Give us a church! Give us a New Testament church!" and the Lord gave us what we were asking for, and we've got it. We've got the best New Testament model church in existence anywhere. We don't have popes, we have prophets. We don't have cardinals, we have apostles. We don't have archbishops, we have seventies. We have authentic names derived from a real New Testament model. But was that really what we were shooting for, merely a New Testament walk back? Are we supposed to be walking back to something even further and more ancient still? I think Joseph's life, when you look at it as pre-Rigdon, post-Rigdon, allows you to say, "huh". Rigdon had an enormous influence much like Martin Harris with the 116 pages had that influence. And when you divorce Rigdon and you say, where was it headed before him, where did it return to after him, and you allow Rigdon to have his responsibility and his influence, then Joseph's mission began and ended in a much, much more ancient setting, one where we've yet to really reconcile ourselves with.

John: What I'm hearing you say is that there's something more profound and spiritual and connective to the divine that the restoration was trying to offer us, than simply to emulate the New Testament.

Denver: Yes.

John: And, more importantly, to create some type of corporate bureaucratic structure. The original question was: What do we do with all of Joseph's innovations with the endowment and with celestial marriage and even polygamy? I need you to simplify it for me a little bit. What I hear you say is that there were people influencing Joseph in different ways, because I think anyone's going to agree that in some ways he was sort of a sponge for feeling what was going on and reading what was going on, and then synthesizing and incorporating things. But let me just ask you again: How do we know whether polygamy is something that God wants us to be doing or not? How do we know whether celestial marriage is a doctrine or not? Because all of these things that Joseph added the Church has backed away from, but there's also the possibility that Joseph just took someone's idea and ran with it, but maybe it was taking us in the wrong direction.

Denver: In the difficulty – and I'm not trying to be evasive – but the difficulty is that all of the details really matter. And so when you get to something like that, details matter a great deal and we'd spend the rest of the time just on the details. I'm not trying to be evasive because I have written about this in *Passing the Heavenly Gift*. My view is that when Joseph made the inquiry about what to do about the plural wives, that that inquiry was provoked in 1829 with the translation of Jacob Chapter 2. That was when he asked about it. The answer that he got is really the first part of Section 132 that would not be reduced to writing until July of 1843. So Joseph is in possession of an answer in 1829 that he doesn't put in writing until 1843.

John: You're talking about polygamy, right?

Denver: I'm talking about the original inquiry that is the beginning part of Section 132. That beginning part, as I walk through in *Passing The Heavenly Gift*, has a series of verses that are devoted to the eternal duration of the marriage covenant, the possession of eternal progeny, the connection between the man and the woman and the image of God, and the preservation or perpetuation of the family of man. Throughout all of that, throughout that entire section dealing with the eternal marriage covenant, it is *a wife*, singular – a wife, a wife, a wife. I walk through that in the book; it's always singular. After completing the description of the eternal nature of the marriage covenant then He answers the question Joseph put, which is about the plural marriage, and that is separate from the eternal marriage covenant. But to go back to – is that a bone fide? Was Joseph out in the woods when he was talking about the eternal nature of the marriage covenant?

When you read the text of Genesis the word that is used to identify God in the original Hebrew is a plural word and the image of God is clarified to be male and female. Therefore, in the original Jewish text, you have a plural deity comprised of a male and a female, right in the text of Genesis from the original text. Was Joseph innovating? Was he out in the woods? Or was he merely returning to something that goes back to the original and is quite ancient when it comes to the eternal marriage covenant. I happen to think that the plural marriage issue, which is the second part of the beginning verses of Section 132 – and I think Section 132 is at least five different revelations – the first one deals with the marriage covenant for eternity as one subject, plural wives as a second subject. I happen to think that they were an authentic answer, and that the limitations which are extraordinarily limited in Joseph Smith's original practice got blown way out of proportion in the Brigham Young follow-on, and I don't think plural wives are essential for someone's exaltation, and I explain why in *Passing the Heavenly Gift*.

John: Just to summarize, you're saying that eternal marriage, and even theosis of a man and a wife becoming a god, in the sense that a companionship that achieves God's status...

Denver: Look at it this way, you are finite. You, as a mortal man in your individual state as a person, you are finite. You and your wife, despite the fact you're composed of flesh and blood and you're both going to die and be buried, you and your wife together are not finite because you produce offspring. And after you produce offspring, your offspring produce offspring. And so when that continues, when the man and the woman are together and that continues, assuming your progeny remains man and woman in every generation following hereafter – you, John Dehlin, become though you are flesh and blood and mortal – you become eternal and infinite because your seed will continue forever. That is the kind of symbol, that is the kind of expression found in the eternal marriage covenant that is a mortal experience that reflects the infinite nature of God.

John: So you're okay with eternal marriage, and you're okay with theosis of man and woman becoming joint heirs to God's inheritance.

Denver: Right.

John: As far as polygamy goes, you're seeing that maybe is something that God wanted Joseph to do, but not necessarily something that was intended for all of God's children, or for the eternities?

Denver: [laughing] Or for mass exploitation. Yes, I think that got off the rails at that point. Frankly, if you go back to Joseph's practice and you say, *how many plural wives?* Joseph tolerated inner circle practice of multiple wives, he tolerated that. But you go back and you research how many sealing of plural marriages Joseph Smith performed apart from his own. Go back and look at that because you'll be shocked at how many there *aren't*, there are not. Joseph was in one category and the narrow reasons in the answer found in Section 132 were satisfied, and the others weren't and didn't satisfy the criteria. He used plural marriage as a kind of litmus test. "Hey, bring me your wife, and I'm going to marry your wife because this is a principle." John Taylor brings him his wife, delivers his wife to him, and Joseph says, "Hey, you passed the test," and he seals them together.

There are a number of problems in analyzing what went on with Joseph Smith, the plural wives and the history of that, for absolutely understandable reasons including the fact that they wanted to keep it secret. They wanted to hide a great deal of what was going on. But when you boil it down to the final analysis Joseph did not seal in plural marriages as an eternal covenant, apart from himself, more than one man. And if it was an essential for salvation, if there is something salvific about plurality of wives, you can't prove that in the practices of Joseph Smith. The sealing of the plural wives was a practice really begun and expanded, beyond the person of Joseph Smith and one other, after Joseph's death and under the administration of Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve, beginning in Nauvoo.

John: Just to summarize, you are saying that we have to look at the doctrines that we ascribe to Joseph carefully. Some of them we've misunderstood, some of them he may have even just been experimenting, and some of them there are clear, sort of divine influences and justifications for. In your view, just to use polygamy as an example, it's certainly not something we're supposed to be practicing today. Is that fair to say?

Denver: Oh, yes. It does not belong to us today. In fact, if you go back and you look back at the journals and even the public talks, the general authorities, the presidents of the Church, have been saying that they don't even have the keys to practice that any more, they've been removed. I'm looking at Section 132 right at the moment. If you look throughout the first part of that, "a wife." In verse 15 "with her," and just throughout this beginning, "a wife," "a wife," – verse 26 "a wife". It's in the singular. You don't get to the second topic, which is the one he inquired about, until you get about verse 29. So I don't think that it is correct to equate eternal marriage with plurality of wives as we have done, but I get into that in some detail in *Approaching the Heavenly Gift*.

John: I'll ask you for which parts of the restoration you agree with and don't, just so that we can have a bit of a summary. You don't have to provide justification for each one but just in general. Give us your quick view on, let's just say, the endowment; I guess you already have. You're saying that there's spiritual value to the endowment.

Denver: Correct. But it's also clear if you read the explanations of Facsimile No. 2 that Joseph provided, and if you look at the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, that he wasn't done with what he regarded to be the ultimate temple ceremonies. What we have from him is the beginning of the work. The Nauvoo temple was never completed during Joseph's life, he died before it got to the second floor. He did some initiations in the red brick store. What would have been provided, had he survived to the completion of the temple, probably would have had a different look and feel, a more expansive look and feel. Because look at Facsimile No. 2 and the notes there. There's stuff yet coming. There's things not yet restored. And then Joseph talked about there is a place in the restoration for a return of animal sacrifice – not the law of Moses, that's been fulfilled – but that animal sacrifice has a place in the restoration. In fact, as he talked about that he said, "That portion that existed before the law of Moses", meaning you're going now back to that original era of the earth I was talking about before. That kind of religion is really the target ultimately of what the restoration was intended to include. The endowment, I think, is the beginning of where it was headed.

John: It's a bit refreshing in that it invites us to want to be expansive and creative, not this narrowing and legalizing of the restoration, but instead this sensibility is calling us to our more creative, higher expansive impulses to say, Mormonism – Joseph just started it. And there's so much more, so many better places we can take it if we tap into this sort of divine source. Is that kind of what you're saying?

Denver: Yes. Go connect up with that same source to which Joseph was connected and then watch where it takes you, because it won't leave you where you are now. You will wind up going somewhere that Joseph was headed. Let's face it, the farther back you go in the family of man, the more united we all become, genealogically, physiologically, genetically. There is a convergence when you get back. You go to the earliest pre-flood era, and emerging from the flood in the tales that we are told in our Old Testament there is one family, and we all began united under Adam, and we got fractured. We all got reunited – as kindred, as brothers of a common father, as sisters in a common family – again at Noah. And when you look at the promise of the Second Coming, one of the things that it hails for us is the opportunity once again to reunite as a single people, to become unified under the presiding direction of this benign, loving, self-sacrificing God whose purpose it is to bring us back into unity. And so yes, Mormonism should be a unifying faith, a creative faith, an inviting and a loving faith, and not a strangely militant, closed minded, arrogant group of proud folk.

John: I'm going to just ask you to do very quick, and I mean just a few sentences, just reviews of a couple of the things that people – I'll refer people to *Passing the Heavenly Gift* for your full explanations. But just really quickly: Blacks not getting the priesthood, thoughts on that? Just a few sentences, just a summary.

Denver: I point out in the book that one of the really interesting little details is that the same fellow who ordained Elijah Abel to the priesthood is the fellow who repeated the statement about Joseph did not want priesthood going to the slaves, the African-Americans. It's one of those little bits of irony where, okay, you ordained him, and you're the one who's bringing that along. Needless to say, that is a very problematic moment in Church history. And, if you take what Brigham Young said at face value, and you say that as the orthodox today claim, which is that

the president of the church can never lead us astray, Brigham Young was adamant that if the Church were ever to give priesthood to the blacks then the Church would lose all priesthood. Your choice is: Presidents of the church can, in fact, make mistakes, so everything's okay or, presidents of the church cannot make mistakes, Brigham Young was right, and the Church has no priesthood because we've conferred it upon blacks. We really do have moments in our history on that issue in which we are pointing in both directions.

John: So for you it's that God never intended blacks to have the priesthood withheld from them.

Denver: Yes. Joseph made no effort in Kirtland or in Nauvoo to exclude or to not ordain. And if Joseph represents the best practice then we have a lot of embarrassing dialogue. The problem is that Brigham Young won the argument and the majority of the Church followed Brigham Young. Brigham Young becomes the narrow neck, the funnel through which Mormonism is strained in its most popular iteration in the world today. Therefore you have to confront Brigham in all his language. And when you confront Brigham with all his language, you could not – it was impossible to convey priesthood. You have all those problems. I think we either have to be a little softer on the point that church presidents can never lead the Church astray on the one hand, or we have to be a whole lot more humble about declaring that we are in possession of all authority on the other hand, because you cannot assert those two propositions and harmonize them and so you are left with the horns of the dilemma, if you're someone that believes that current position. By the way, Brigham Young didn't think that the president of the church couldn't lead the church astray. He talked about how that was not only possible but a grave risk that we needed to guard ourselves against.

[crosstalk]

John: That's right, that's totally right. Let me just ask you quickly – my listeners are probably bored with me asking this question so I'm going to just make it really brief. Is it important, in your epistemology, your Mormon world view, that the Book of Mormon be an historical document in the sense that a Nephi and a Lehi actually existed, and that there were actual golden plates, and that the Book of Mormon is a historical document? Is that a pretty important part or are you flexible on that? And the same with the Book of Abraham.

Denver: I think the Book of Mormon is an important document, independent of its point of origin. However, one of the things that I pointed out is that it becomes really problematic to say that there is no historicity to it when Martin Harris and David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery say they saw one of the characters of the book. When they say they saw Moroni, then we know at least one of the people that the Book of Mormon describes showed up in an angelic form and was seen by three – well, four counting Joseph – people. If four people say that they saw him and they never relented in the position that they did see him, then we have the problem with, “Oh, we cited one of the characters.” Therefore, if we cited one of the characters, how do we displace all but him, given the fact that he comes at the end and he's talking about the preservation of plates and the passing of the plates along. I think if you're fair-minded the better view is: If you accept what the four witnesses – Joseph and the other three – say about having seen the plates through the auspices of Moroni, then dismissing its historicity becomes a bit of a challenge. I accept the Book of Mormon as being an authentic ancient book. I don't know that it matters as much as the content, the doctrinal content, and the import of the doctrinal content, but

I do accept it as being an actual record of an ancient and fallen people who saw our day and nailed us. I mean, they nailed us.

John: You mean they foresaw our day and got the predictions right, and are telling us what we need to know to get out of the mess we're in, is that kind of what you mean?

Denver: Yes, I mean that when it gets to talking about the religious environment of the last days and you accept their definition of gentile as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I think that is the context it was meant in, then the Book of Mormon is talking loudly and relevantly to us. And, by the way, they don't flatter us.

John: [Laughs] Right, right. And Book of Abraham?

Denver: Okay, Book of Abraham. Clearly the text that Joseph translated is not the text that we found in the Metropolitan Museum. Nibley's work on *[The Message of] the Joseph Smith Papyri - An Egyptian Endowment* walks through the history of the Church where he's describing the papyrus from which he was translating. The material that we have recovered of the Joseph Smith papyri are clearly different in appearance than what he said it came from. We don't have that papyrus any more. I think that what we have is an authentic Abrahamic collection of material but I don't know that it has a thing to do with the papyrus, and I think Nibley did a good job of acquitting Joseph in his *[The Message of] the Joseph Smith Papyri - An Egyptian Endowment* work. But again, that is one of those texts that I've spent a lot of time looking at and, in fact, looking at the facsimiles and Facsimile No. 2 in particular. There's some interesting material there. I'm not prepared to publish anything on that but I've tried to read everything pro and con that I can get my hands on because it appears to me to be an important text to look into.

John: I'm pulling this straight from your blog, which is DenverSnuffer.blogspot.com. There's going to be some people that sort of say, "Man! He's talking about angels, and he's talking about plates, and that's where you lose me, Denver." What you wrote on your blog – and I'm not saying this to be sensational – but you wrote, "I've seen angels. I've been taught by them." I think that's a proper quoting. I guess I'm only saying that because your approach is that we really can have access to the divine, and so because you've had an experience yourself then you, obviously, would be more inclined to trust the three witnesses and the eight witnesses instead of just dismiss them as fictional hogwash or deluded people, right?

Denver: Yes, a fantasy, whatever. In fact, when I first joined the Church I joined with the full expectation that this was the common experience for Latter-day Saints, that it was expected that you would have that kind of an encounter, and that that was normal for Mormons. I thought, Joseph Smith opened the heavens, Mormons believe in an open heavens, therefore Mormons with regularity have some contact with the hosts of heaven, the angelic and the divine, and it required me to move to Utah before it became abundantly apparent that most Mormons actually don't think it possible. There's a lot of people who believe it's possible but confined narrowly to the group at the very top, and that somehow God's always in touch with the guys at the very top, but for the rank and file that isn't the way God deals with us any more. He's given his authority to men, and he deals with the big men, and he leaves everyone else alone. Well, happily, in my naiveté early on, and with the full expectation that God would talk to me as he talked to Joseph, I

had encounters that satisfied me that even if no one else believed in it, that it was appropriate to believe in, and it can and does and will happen.

[end of MormonStories-321-DenverSnufferPt1]

(Transcript: Kiyoko Ball, v1.0)