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UNRESOLVED TENSIONS IN THE MORMON DOCTRINES OF GOD, MAN, AND SALVATION DURING THREE CRITICAL PERIODS OF DEVELOPMENT

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Jay Scott Lowder

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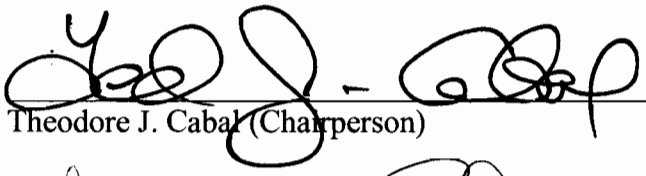

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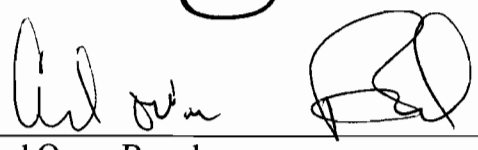

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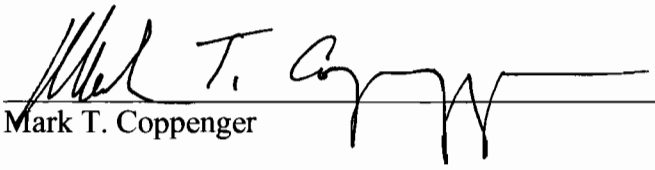

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BYU Brigham Young University

CHC *Comprehensive History of the Church*

CR Conference Reports

D&C Doctrine and Covenants

DJS Joseph Smith, *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*

DS Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*

EM *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*

HC B.H. Roberts, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints*

HWD Craig L. Bloomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation.*

JD *Journal of Discourses*

LCL LDS Collectors Library 2005 CD-ROM

LDS Latter-day Saints

LF *Lectures on Faith*

MD Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*

MFP *Messages of the First Presidency*

TJS Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*

PREFACE

The writing of a dissertation is always a joint venture involving more people than just the writer. This is particularly true in my case. The faculty of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary represents the finest collection of evangelical scholars in the world. Several professors have contributed significantly to my intellectual growth during my time at the seminary. Among them are James Parker, Thomas Schreiner, and Bruce Ware.

Through his seminars and informal conversations, Ronald Nash nurtured my passion for evaluating worldviews. Ted Cabal, my supervising professor, provided many insights and much refreshing encouragement during the process of writing. The seed of the idea that germinated into this dissertation came from a seminar with James Chancellor, one of my committee members. I also thank my other committee member, Chad Brand, for his valuable insights. David Puckett, associate vice president for doctoral studies, demonstrated patience and compassion during my many years in the doctoral program.

I have also received tremendous support from my family. My parents and in-laws have provided financial and emotional support during this journey. They have never wavered in their commitment to this dissertation.

My wife, Christy, who is my partner and co-laborer in Christ, has joyfully sacrificed for the completion of this project especially in the task of editing. Her own

commitment to theological and intellectual growth has rivaled my own, and as a result, her cheerful encouragement has strengthened my resolve many times.

Jay S. Lowder

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2007

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints is a relatively young religious movement, yet during its one hundred and seventy-seven year history, it has espoused a wide diversity of doctrines.[1] When Joseph Smith founded the church in 1830, he believed that it was a restoration of the true gospel. He claimed that God had forbidden him in a vision from joining any of the existing churches because none of them possessed the true gospel. During the long, dark night of the "great apostasy," Christian doctrines had been perverted and changed.[2]

Smith proclaimed that his church was a restoration of true beliefs about God. It was his role as the living prophet of God to restore the doctrines that were lost after the death of the apostles.[3] Because Latter-day Saints believe that their restored doctrines are true, Mormon leaders and scholars commonly assume that the doctrines of the church have never changed. While there might have been different emphases at different times, they deny that any substantial changes in doctrine have ever occurred. Many evangelical

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[1]This dissertation will examine only the branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints that followed the leadership of Brigham Young after the death of Joseph Smith. This church is headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah. The terms Mormon, Mormonism, and LDS are commonly used to refer to this church. For the origin and rapid growth of the LDS church see Rodney Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith," *Review of Religious Research* 26 (September 1984): 18-27.

[2]Joseph Smith - History 1:18-19.

[3]Todd Compton, "Apostasy," in *EM*, 1:56-58; Cory H. Maxwell, "Restoration of All Things,"

scholars have also assumed that there is a consistency in Mormon doctrine. Based upon this unexamined assumption, both Mormon and evangelical scholars frequently attempt to identify, summarize, and evaluate LDS doctrines by citing only a few "authoritative" Mormon leaders.[4]

Because of this assumed yet unproven belief that Mormon theology has remained unchanged, it has been difficult for Mormon and evangelical scholars to account for seemingly divergent theological statements of Mormon leaders. For example, it appears that Mormon leaders have taught contradictory views of omniscience. Hyrum Smith, who was Joseph Smith's brother, a patriarch of the church, and an associate president of the church, proclaimed in 1844 that he "would not serve a God that had not all wisdom and all power."[5] Only twenty-three years later, President Brigham Young attacked as erroneous a similar exhaustive foreknowledge view held by Orson Pratt.

Like Hyrum Smith, Pratt taught that God possesses all knowledge and as a result, he cannot continue to learn new truths. God had complete knowledge of the past, present, and future. Young, acting as the living prophet of the church, voiced his opposition to the teachings of Pratt, specifically his doctrine of omniscience: "According to his theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power; but the God that I

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in *EM*, 3:1218-19.

[4]The issue of whether a particular Mormon leader's words are "authoritative" for the church or whether they merely represent a strand within the broader fabric of Mormonism theology is complex. Because this issue is crucial for the examination of doctrinal tensions, it will be addressed in chapter 2.

[5]Hyrum Smith, "The Temple," *Contributor* 4, no. 12 (September 1883), in LCL. This is a record of his sermon preached on 7 April 1844. It represents Hyrum's view of omniscience at the end of his life since he and his brother Joseph were martyred only two months later on 27 June 1844.

serve is progressing eternally, and so are his children."[6] A later LDS president, Joseph Fielding Smith, agreed with the view of Hyrum Smith and Orson Pratt that God has all knowledge. Apparently unaware that he was contradicting the view of Brigham Young, Joseph Fielding Smith wrote, "I believe that God knows all things and that his understanding is perfect, not 'relative'".[7] LDS historian Thomas Alexander observed that the belief in a historical unity of doctrine has hindered Mormon theological studies:

> Perhaps the main barrier to understanding the development of Mormon theology is an underlying assumption by most church members that there is an underlying cumulative unity of doctrine. Mormons seem to believe that particular doctrines develop consistently, that ideas build on each other in hierarchical fashion. As a result, older revelations are interpreted by referring to current positions. . . . While this type of exegesis may produce systematic theology, and while it may satisfy those trying to understand and interpret current doctrine, it is bad history, since it leaves an unwarranted impression of continuity and consistency.[8]

This tendency has allowed Mormon scholars to overlook, intentionally or unintentionally, the tensions that exist in the doctrines of the church. LDS scholars like Alexander have

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[6]Brigham Young, *JD*, 11:287. Soon after this sermon by Young, several of Pratt's views, including his view of omniscience, were officially condemned on 23 August 1865 (*MFP*, 2:234). Brigham Young was not alone in believing that God and his children must progress in knowledge. President Wilson Woodruff taught in 1857 that" God himself is increasing and progressing in knowledge, power, and dominion, and will do so, worlds without end. It is just so with us" (*JD*, 6:120).

[7]Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:8. Smith either was unaware that the view of God progressing in knowledge was ever taught in the church or chose to ignore it. His son-in-law, Apostle Bruce R. McConkie, was so strongly opposed to the view of God progressing in knowledge that he labeled it as one of seven deadly heresies: "There are those who say that God is progressing in knowledge and is learning new truths. This is a false teaching which grows out of a wholly twisted and incorrect view of the King Follett Sermon and of what is meant by eternal progression." Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies" [on-line]; accessed 28 March 2004; Available from http://emp.byui.edu/marrottr/SevenDeadlyHeresies.htm; Internet. This sermon was delivered on 1 June 1980 as a Brigham Young University Fireside Speech. McConkie was an enormously popular theologian in the LDS church and a prominent apostle. His writings frequently reflected intolerance toward finite views of God's nature. *MD*, 545.

[8]Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," *Sunstone* 22 (1999): 15. This article was originally published in a 1980 issue of *Sunstone*. It became so influential and significant among scholars that it was reprinted again in *Sunstone* in 1985 and 1999. In the 1999 reprint, Alexander added a response to common criticisms of his claim that Mormon doctrine has changed over time.

urged scholars to reevaluate their mistaken assumptions about the supposed unity of doctrine. In a similar manner, evangelical scholars have noted that many books fail to "appreciate the diversity of views that have historically been held within Mormonism. . . . Too often Mormon theology has been presented as monolithic and homogeneous."[9]

The official view of the Mormon church is that its doctrines have never changed; however, some Mormons and evangelicals in recent years have begun to recognize distinct periods of Mormon doctrine.[10] One of the earliest scholars to identify different periods of doctrine was O. Kendall White, Jr. He believed that a new type of Mormon theology called "Mormon neo-orthodox" had arisen in the mid-twentieth century. The doctrines of this Mormon neo-orthodoxy contradicted the earlier doctrines of "traditional Mormonism." Since the publication of his writings, additional LDS

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[9]Frances J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, "Introduction," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Frances J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 21-22. The terms "evangelical," "traditional Christianity," and "historic Christianity" refer to the "great Christian theological tradition." This tradition includes the doctrines that are part of the earliest Christian orthodox tradition. Rennie has listed several key beliefs of evangelical Christianity: "The Bible is the truthful revelation of God and through it the life-giving voice of God speaks; God is the almighty creator and we are his dependent creation; God has entered history redemptively in the incarnation of Jesus Christ; God's nature exists in Trinitarian expression; Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human, the power and judgment of sin is a reality for all humanity; God graciously takes the initiative in coming to us savingly in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit; Jesus Christ is building his church; and the consummation of history will be expressed in the second advent of Jesus Christ, the general resurrection, the final judgment, heaven and hell." I. S. Rennie, "Evangelical Theology," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 239.

[10]For example, Van Hale surveyed the Mormon doctrine of God from a historical standpoint and argued that at different points in its development, Mormonism has held views of God that could be correctly labeled as monotheism, polytheism, tritheism, henotheism, modalism, bitheism, and trinitarianism. He acknowledged that Mormon theologians never used these terms, but he believed that the statements of leading LDS authorities reflected these different views. He concluded that it would be better for Mormons to avoid defining their doctrine of God using traditional Christian terminology because of the possibility that God may reveal more of himself to the church in the future. Van Hale, "Defining the Mormon Doctrine of Deity," *Sunstone* 10 (January 1985): 23-27.

scholars have accepted the idea that there have been at least two distinctive periods of Mormon doctrinal development.[11]

The Importance of Evangelical Studies of Mormonism

There has been a long history of evangelical scholars studying, evaluating, and critiquing Mormon theology, yet interest in the LDS church and its teachings has reached a new level in the last fifteen years. The evangelical scholars involved in this new wave of Mormon studies have recognized the importance of clarifying the doctrinal teachings of the LDS church and the need to respond to them. There are several reasons why the Mormon church should be studied and understood better by evangelicals. First, the rapid historical growth of the LDS church continues unchanged.[12] The church had a membership of over 12,200,000 in 2005. Not only is the Mormon church growing within the United States, but its growth in other countries has implications for the evangelical missionary movement. More than 6,600,000 of its members are located in other countries of the world. The spread of the LDS gospel throughout the entire world is a major goal of the church. For this purpose, the Mormon church has translated the Book of Mormon into

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[11]O. Kendall White Jr., "Mormonism -- A Nineteenth Century Heresy," *Journal of Religious Thought* 26 (Spring - Summer 1969): 44-55; idem, "The Transformation of Mormon Theology, "*Dialogue* 5 (Summer 1970): 9-24; idem, "A Reply to the Critics of the Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy Hypothesis," *Dialogue* 6 (Fall 1971): 97-100; Idem, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987); idem, "Mormon Neo-Orthodox Theology," *Journal of Religious Thought* 28 (Autumn - Winter 1997): 119-31. White is professor emeritus of sociology at Washington and Lee University.

[12]Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith." In a 1996 article, Stark demonstrated that his projections for the growth of the church have been proven correct because the LDS church has continued to experience rapid growth. Idem, "So Far So Good: A Brief Assessment of Mormon Membership Projections," *Review of Religious Research* 38, no. 2 (1996): 175-78.

106 languages and has distributed fifty-one million copies of it around the world during the last ten years.[13]

Second, a new and better-educated generation of LDS scholars has arisen in the last thirty years. Carl Mosser noted the dramatic rise in the number of Mormon students graduating from highly recognized graduate schools. Many of these graduate students are receiving their training in fields that directly relate to the apologetic claims of the church such as archaeology, philosophy, theology, and ancient languages. In addition, LDS scholars now participate in many professional societies. Mosser concluded that evangelical scholars must continue to respond to the claims of the LDS church in the academy.[14]

Third, evangelical scholars responding to Mormon claims and providing assessments of their theology and philosophy encounter difficult methodological issues. It is widely acknowledged by evangelical scholars that defining LDS doctrine is difficult.[15] There are several reasons why this task is difficult, but the primary issue is

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[13]"Key Facts and Figures" [on-line]; accessed 24 January 2006; Available from http://www.lds.org/newsroom/page/0,15606,4034-1---10-168,00.html, Internet; Gordon Hinkley, "Opening Remarks," CR, April 2005.

[14]Carl Mosser, "And the Saints Go Marching On: The New Mormon Challenge for World Missions, Apologetics, and Theology," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Frances J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 72-74. Also see Chad Owen Brand, "The Mormon Appeal: Yesterday and Today," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 10. LDS scholars do not merely make positive apologetic arguments for their faith. They also continue the historic LDS tradition of arguing against the truth claims of traditional Christianity. For example, they frequently argue that evangelical theology is erroneous because it reflects a syncretism of biblical truths and false Hellenistic philosophy. It will be argued later that Mormonism itself reflects Hellenistic philosophy. See Stephen E. Robinson, "LDS Doctrine Compared with Other Christian Doctrine," *EM*, 1: 399-401.

[15]For examples of evangelical evaluations of LDS doctrine, see Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish, *The Mormon Concept of God* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991); James R. White, *Is the Mormon My Brother? Discerning the Differences between Mormonism and Christianity*

that LDS doctrines are not consistent throughout the history of the church. An evaluation of the doctrinal tensions in LDS theology will assist evangelical scholars as they respond to this growing popular and scholarly religious movement.[16]

Unresolved Tensions in Mormon Doctrines

This dissertation will argue that there are *unresolved* tensions in the Mormon doctrinal areas of theology proper, anthropology, and soteriology during *three* periods of doctrinal development. Not only have LDS doctrines developed and changed *between* these three main periods, but there have been competing views *within* these periods. The tensions between the different LDS views of these doctrines are not the result of mere changes in emphases or the restating of doctrines. Instead, these changes have been substantial and significant. This claim directly opposes the common view that the Mormon church has always held the same doctrinal views. It will not be argued that these tensions are *irresolvable* in a logical sense. While it is likely that the tensions are *irresolvable*, it will only be argued that *unresolved* tensions have existed within selected doctrines. Past and present Mormon scholars have been unable to support their assumption that the LDS church possesses a uniform doctrinal history.

(Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997); *The New Mormon Challenge*, ed. Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

[16]This approach will also provide a defense for the validity of many current evangelical studies of Mormonism. LDS scholars frequently accuse evangelicals of distorting and misrepresenting their doctrines. See Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 13-18, 56-57. It will be shown that the reason contemporary LDS scholars react so strongly to evangelical evaluations of their doctrines is that Mormon scholars are divided among themselves over doctrinal issues. Because they hold widely divergent views of LDS doctrine, they tend to react powerfully against any summary of LDS doctrine that does not fit their own personal views.

The greatest theological differences between Mormonism and evangelical Christianity lie in the doctrines of the nature of God, the nature of man, and their relationship to each other. Traditional Christianity maintains a strong distinction between the Creator and the creature while the view of the Mormon church is that "God and man are the same species."[17] The doctrines that will be examined for evidence of unresolved tensions relate to the relationship between God and man. It will be shown that there are *unresolved* tensions in Mormon theology in the doctrines of omniscience, omnipotence, human nature, the means of salvation, and the relationship between faith and reason.

The Exclusive Truth Claim of the LDS Church

The presence of *unresolved* tensions in Mormon doctrines undermines the church's claim to be the only true church. It also calls into question the truth of the doctrines themselves. The LDS church views traditional Christianity as false and itself as the one true church with the only true doctrines. Because the church assumes that its eternal doctrines have remained the same and have never varied, it is committed to arguing that its doctrines demonstrate historical consistency.[18] Joseph Smith intended for

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[17]LDS scholar Robinson has claimed that this is the main difference between evangelicals and Mormons. Since Robinson's apparent goal in the rest of the dialogue was to minimize the differences between Mormons and evangelicals this claim is noteworthy. Blomberg and Robinson, *HWD*, 82. The idea that God and man have the same ontological status is pervasive in Mormonism. Apostle B. H. Roberts taught that humans were as eternal as God because each person possesses "the same kind of substance or essence" as God. B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book Company, 1994), 1:135. This differs from the historical Christian view in which the one divine essence is shared only by the three members of the Trinity. The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit do not share a divine essence as in Mormonism. Instead, they share three divine essences. Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005). While Mormons believe that God is higher and more exalted than man, God's sole purpose is to work for the purpose of man's exaltation to godhood. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1969), 46, 53.

[18]Along with many other Western religious groups, the Mormon church believes that truths is demonstrated both by their correspondence with reality and by their coherence.

the Church of Jesus Christ of the *Latter*-day Saints to be a restoration of the Christianity that had been lost after the death of the *former*-day saints and apostles. Apostle James Talmage noted that because of Joseph Smith's First Vision, "the darkness of the long night of apostasy was dispelled. . . . The silence of the centuries was broken."[19] Similarly, Apostle Charles Penrose claimed that true Christianity perished after the death of Jesus' disciples because "pagan institutions mingled with the rites of the church until the apostolic authority and true Christian spirit and doctrines were entirely subverted."[20] The source of this corruption was the pagan Hellenistic philosophy that had crept into the teaching of the early church.[21] Since the doctrines of traditional Christianity were false, Mormons also criticized the ministers who taught these false doctrines. President Brigham Young blamed the persecutions of Mormons on false ministers who feared that the truth of the LDS doctrines would cause them to lose their "bread and butter."[22]

The Mormon church believes that in contrast to the false doctrines of traditional Christianity, it exclusively possesses the fullness of the gospel and true

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[19]James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission according to Holy Scriptures both Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1990), 708.

[20]Charles W. Penrose, *What Mormons Believe: Epitome of the Doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1900), 6. Also see LDS President Hugh Brown, CR October 1964, 102; Apostle Mark E. Petersen, CR October 1969, 118; B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Van der Donckt Discussion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 212-13; idem, *The Seventy's Course in Theology* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book Company, 1994), 1:135; Apostle Bruce A. McConkie, "Doctrinal Restoration," in *Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things*, The Religious Studies Monograph Series, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 1:22.

[21]David L. Paulsen, "Doctrine, Harmonization of Paradox," in *EM*, 1: 402-03. While some recent LDS leaders have become skeptical of science, earlier Mormons believed that religious doctrines were erroneous if they conflicted with the theories of science. Brigham Young argued that one of the reasons the pagan world had rejected Christianity was because of its opposition to scientific truths. *JD*, 14:116.

[22]*JD*, 18: 232.

doctrines. It is "pure, primitive Christianity."[23] The living prophet of the church continually receives revelation from God, which enables him to lead the church perfectly and without error.

This continual revelation comes in a "never-ending stream from God to his prophets on earth."[24] Without this further revelation, it would be impossible to resolve otherwise intractable doctrinal issues. Robert L. Millet and Noel B. Reynolds claim that the Bible alone cannot resolve many doctrinal issues.

> Furthermore, Latter-day revelation provides answers to many practical and doctrinal questions that arise out of the biblical text. From the Bible, many views can be entertained concerning such matters as the nature of God, the purposes of life, the rules of marriage and divorce, and the possibilities of repentance and salvation after death. Complete answers to questions like these are not always found in the Bible alone. Without further revelation, answers to these questions that have been asked over the years remain unsatisfactory.[25]

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[23]Orson F. Whitney, *The Strength of the Mormon Position* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1917), in LCL, 25; Also see Hugh B. Brown, *Continuing the Quest* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1961), in LCL, 202-203. Hyrum L. Andrus taught just as Jesus had been the foundation of the original church, Joseph Smith now holds a similar position as a cornerstone on which the LDS church is being built. Hyrum L. Andrus, *God, Man, and the Universe,* Foundations of the Millennial Kingdom of Christ, vol. 1. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Inc., 1968), 31. Joseph Smith taught that is was his task to restore the important doctrines, which "had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled." *HC*, 1:245.

[24]Spencer Kimball, CR May 1997, 76. Also see President Wilford Woodruff, *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff, His Two Counselors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others Collected Discourses* ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), in LCL, 53. Apostle Cowley claimed that unless there was a living prophet, God cannot accomplish anything on earth that will result in the salvation of people. Matthias F. Cowley, *Cowley's Talks on Doctrine* (Chattanooga, TN: Ben E. Rich., Publisher, 1902), in LCL, 84. Also see Dallin H. Oaks, CR, April 1998, 55; Marden J. Clark, "Some Implications of Human Freedom," *Dialogue* 5 (Summer 1970):48; Brigham Young, *JD*, 18:232.

[25]Robert Millet and Noel B. Reynolds, *Latter-day Christianity: 10 Basic Issues* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Religious Studies Center, 1998), 21: The Book of Mormon appealed to many because it claimed to answer "perplexing questions of theology, clarified obscure passages of the Bible, and carried its story into the New World." Gordon S. Wood, "Evangelical American and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 61 (October 1980): 380; also see Craig J. Hazen, "The Apologetic Impulse in Early Mormonism: The Historical Roots of the New Mormon Challenge," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement.*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 2002), 43.

The Significance of Unresolved Doctrinal Tensions

The Mormon view that truth is found only in the church and that the fullness of doctrine is revealed only through the living prophet places the LDS church in a unique position regarding its doctrinal history. Its claim to possess the restored gospel partially depends upon the assumption that its doctrines have been consistent over time. Historically, evangelical scholars have critiqued the LDS church by demonstrating the conflicts between Mormon doctrines and the truths of the Bible; however, it is also valuable to evaluate the consistency of LDS doctrines over time. The test of coherence can be applied to Mormon doctrine.[26] If Joseph Smith's teachings were indeed restorations of the truth and an infallible living prophet always leads the church, then there should be a historical consistency in LDS doctrine. Conversely, if tensions exist in LDS doctrine, then the tensions themselves serve as arguments against the truthfulness of Smith's claims and the doctrines of the LDS church.[27]

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[26]Many philosophers recognize the importance of the test of coherence. While there are contemporary debates and issues regarding the strength of the coherence theory of truth, few philosophers discount its validity completely. See Paul Thagard, *Coherence in Thought and Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 5. Often philosophers have argued that the coherence and correspondence theories should be used together. See Ralph C.S. Walker, *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 7; also see James van Cleve, "Why Coherence is Not Enough: A Defense of Moderate Foundationalism," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, 168-180. Contemporary Debates in Philosophy. ed. by Matthew Steup and Ernest Sosa (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2005); Catherine Z. Elgin, "Non-foundationist Epistemology: Holism, Coherence, and Tenability," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, Contemporary Debates in Philosophy. ed. Matthew Steup and Ernest Sosa (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), 156.

[27]The LDS denial of progressive revelation makes this issue of doctrinal unity more serious. Since God revealed the entire gospel at the beginning to Adam, the church cannot claim that it now understands a particular doctrine better than in the past or that God has now revealed more truth about a doctrine. What the church knew about a doctrine in 1830 *should* be what it knows today. Talmage taught that "the gospel, so far as this earth and its inhabitants are concerned, dates from Adam." James E. Talmage, CR, April 1981. While "conversely" is a commonly used to refer to statements like claim, this statement is technically a contrapositive.

Even a cursory survey of Mormon doctrines reveals apparent tensions in the teachings of leading LDS prophets, apostles, and general authorities. Rather than possessing a doctrinal unity, Mormon theology is characterized by different, competing views that shift in prominence over time. Parrish and Mosser noted that Joseph Smith left the church with more rather than less doctrinal questions:

> Many Latter-day Saints (informally known as Mormons) have claimed that Joseph Smith's revelations settle many questions about the nature of God and that Smith's insights provide explanations to ultimate questions that are more persuasive than those of other God concepts. The fact is, however, that there are differences of opinion among Mormons about the nature of God. . . . This tremendous flux about what Mormons believe ultimately stems, I believe, from the fact that Smith's teachings did not actually bring greater precision to our understanding of God. Rather, his many conflicting statements introduce more questions and problems than they solve.[28]

A study of the historical tensions in Mormon doctrines will be beneficial to both evangelical and LDS scholars. For evangelicals, it will clarify the *range* of doctrinal views that exist within the Mormon church and which should be taken into account in future dialogues between evangelicals and Mormons. For Mormon scholars, this study will illuminate the challenges that they must overcome in order for them to claim that Mormonism is the true faith once delivered to the Latter-day Saints.

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[28]Stephen E. Parrish and Carl Mosser, "A Tale of Two Theisms: The Philosophical Usefulness of the Classical and Mormon Concepts of God," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Frances J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 195.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

An evaluation of Mormon doctrine requires a well-defined and precise methodology. This is particularly true for an examination of unresolved tensions within doctrines. Several significant methodological issues must be addressed before examining specific Mormon doctrines. First, the difficulties in determining Mormon doctrine will be acknowledged. Second, the current, popular LDS "minimalist" approach to defining doctrine will be critiqued. Third, a survey of representative approaches by contemporary LDS and evangelical scholars will lead to an enumeration of the valid doctrinal sources to be used in assessing Mormon doctrine.

The Difficulty of Determining Mormon Doctrines

The Lack of Systematic Theology

The first factor that makes determining Mormon doctrinal positions difficult is that the LDS church makes few official, *doctrinally binding* theological statements. Members of the Mormon church are required to accept relatively few official doctrines. Louis G. Midgley gave a short list of core Mormon beliefs that are necessary for church membership. They include the denial of creation *ex nihilo*, idealism, and absolute determinism and the acceptance of eternal agency, "the necessary existence apart from

God, a nonrelativistic good, and the doctrine that all mortals are the offspring and heirs of God."[1]

Compared to other religious groups, church members have an unusual amount of flexibility outside of core beliefs.[2] Blake T. Ostler gave a perceptive analysis of the absence of systematic, official thought and its impact on the LDS membership.

> Many Mormons, and probably most non-Mormons, have failed to grasp the wide latitude of possible beliefs, which can be tolerated within the tradition of Mormon thought. . . . For instance, an individual member's beliefs may range from an absolutist view to a traditionally heretical, finitist view of God and man and still remain well within the bounds of traditional Mormon expressions of faith—a latitude far beyond the tolerance of Protestantism or Catholicism. The Church's reluctance to clarify its theology on an official level has left it up to individual members to think through and work out their own understanding of and relationship to God. In short, the burden of a consistent theology and vibrant relationship with God in Mormonism is not a corporate responsibility.[3]

For many LDS members, "doctrine" is an indiscriminate term, which refers to all teachings of Mormon leaders. Mormon scholars have noted that the LDS church does not require any specific philosophical system. McMurrin observed that this gives the LDS

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[1]Louis C. Midgley, "Theology," in *EM*, 3:1475-76.

[2]Phillip L. Barlow, "The Bible in Mormonism" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1988), 270; also see Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion and the Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 112; Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, "Introduction: A Much-Needed and Challenging Book," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2002), 22; Chad Owen Brand, "The Mormon Appeal: Yesterday and Today," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 9, no.2 (Summer 2005): 10. Usually members of religious groups that stress openness to divergent views and encourage tolerance do not claim to have sole possession of the truth. The LDS church is unique because it makes the exclusive claim to have the fullness of the truth and yet allows diverse opinions among its members.

[3]Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1982): 73.

church the advantage of not being burdened by dogmatic creeds and the disadvantage of having doctrines that lack internal consistency.[4]

Joseph Smith did not found the Mormon church upon creeds and confessions; moreover, a study of his teaching will not yield a systematic theology. Even the divine revelations, which he received, were occasional in nature, being received in response to the particular daily needs of the LDS church leadership and members. While he believed that his teaching was consistent with human reason, common sense, and empirical facts, he made no effort to summarize his views in a definitive way.[5] Even his *Articles on Faith*, first printed in 1842 and later canonized as part of the Pearl of Great Price, was not used as a creed or binding statement of doctrine.[6] The audience of the *Articles on Faith* was not even the church. Instead, Joseph Smith wrote it for a newspaper editor who wanted a summary of beliefs in Mormonism. Edgar Lyon noted the Articles on Faith explained the Mormon views on the issues currently being debated between religious groups of the time. Joseph Smith claimed to give the definitive answers to "doctrines which were dividing Christianity into many small antagonistic factions."[7]

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[4]McMurrin, *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, 112; Barlow, "The Bible in Mormonism," 270.

[5]Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), 74-75. This lack of interest in systematizing his teachings does not mean that Joseph Smith rejected the value of reason or education. One of his famous revelations emphasized the value of education for Mormons and stated, "It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance." (D&C 131:6).

[6]Gary P. Gillum, "Creeds," in *EM*, 1:343-44.

[7]Edgar Lyon, "Doctrinal Development of the Church during the Nauvoo Sojourn, 1839-1846," *Brigham Young University Studies* 15 (Summer 1975), 445. Lyon also observed that some of the most unique and cherished Mormon beliefs such as the three heavens, eternal progression, and baptism for the dead were left out intentionally. He argued that Joseph Smith felt that these doctrines would be more confusing than clarifying for a non-LDS audience. +

Smith wanted the LDS church to be free from restrictive, authoritative doctrinal statements. When asked by a non-Mormon in 1843 to explain the "most prominent" and distinctive feature of Mormonism, Smith replied that it was other religious groups that are "all circumscribed by some peculiar creed, which deprived its members the privilege of believing anything not contained therein."[8] Smith demonstrated his commitment to this view during an incident in which a LDS elder gave an idiosyncratic view on a minor point of prophecy in Revelation. A Mormon high council claimed that his teaching was in error and intended to censure his views. Smith rejected the proposed censure because he believed that condemning doctrine was more characteristic of "Methodists" than of Mormons.[9]

In contrast to other religious groups, Joseph Smith desired for Mormons to have as much "liberty of thinking and believing" as they wanted without fear of being excluded from the church.[10] While the absence of systematic theology in Mormonism complicates the task of determining Mormon doctrine, it has also allowed the church to function without a paid clergy.[11] It would be difficult for the church to enforce rigid

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[8]*HC* 5:215. Smith taught that God viewed creeds as "abominations" (*HC* 1:6). In general, Mormons believe that the errors of the apostasy began when "the simple affirmations of biblical faith were turned into complex propositions of theology." Stephen E. Robinson, "LDS Doctrine Compared with Other Christian Doctrine," in *EM*, 1:400.

[9]*HC*, 5:340.

[10]Ibid. The frequent religious persecution of the Mormons strengthened Smith's commitment to liberty of thought. This strong reluctance to censure or correct doctrine weakened significantly after the death of Smith in 1844. Within sixteen years of Smith's death, the doctrinal tolerance practiced by Joseph Smith had been replaced by the more authoritarian leadership of Brigham Young, who led the official denunciation of Orson Pratt's views.

[11]This lack of distinction between "clergy and laity" is widely celebrated. See Lowell Bennion, "A Mormon View of Life," *Dialogue* 24 (1991): 65.

doctrinal boundaries since there are no vocational systematic theologians in the church hierarchical leadership structure.[12]

Joseph Smith also chose not to emphasize the details of his First Vision. Even though this vision has become popular today in the church and Mormons use it to support many different doctrinal beliefs, Smith himself did not refer to his vision when he taught doctrines. Allen concluded that he refrained from citing the First Vision because he did not want Mormons to begin using it as "a loose creedal statement."[13] This would not have been compatible with the early LDS "open attitude toward doctrine."[14] It was only after his death that the church began to use this vision to justify many of its beliefs including the corporal nature of deity, the plurality of gods, and continual revelation.

Clear, systematic doctrines do not emerge from the Mormon canon or Smith's public discourses. The successive living prophets of the church also did not systematize

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[12]Eugene England concluded that since Mormonism views God as progressing and changing, systematic theology is not even possible. For traditional Mormons like England, all of reality is changing. Eugene England, "Why the Church is as True as the Gospel," *Sunstone* 21 (June 1999): 68. Mormons anticipated that since new revelations would continue to come to the church, any creed would become quickly outdated. Joseph Smith believed that religious groups who formulated creeds essentially had said to God, "hitherto shall Thou come, and no further" (*HC*, 6:57). Also see Gillum, "Creeds," *EM*, 343-44.

[13]James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 47.

[14]Louis C. Midgley, "Theology," in *EM*, 3:1475. Apostle James E. Talmage argued that a "complete code of faith" was not possible for a church which believed in continual revelation. James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith: Being a Consideration of the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), in LCL, 5. While some contemporary Mormon scholars favor the lack of systematic theology in the church, other Mormons such as McMurrin lament that the church's theology is 'in a very crude state, and needs a through, competent, working over by the church's theologians." Sterling M. McMurrin, "An Interview with Sterling McMurrin: B. Ostler, Interviewer," *Dialogue* 17 (Spring 1984): 33. Former BYU history professor Richard D. Poll believes that Mormonism lacks a systematic theology and a specific philosophy because the church does not have a proper appreciation for its past. For example, Mormon theologians regularly ignore problematic theological issues such as the church's past defense of plural marriage and subsequent rejection of it. Richard D. Poll, "God and Man in History," *Dialogue* 7 (Spring 1972):102.

their doctrines.[15] For example, even though Brigham Young sometimes enforced a form of Mormon doctrinal orthodoxy, he made little effort to explain systematically the specifics of these doctrines.[16] Because the doctrines of the church have not been systematized, LDS scholars have frequently overlooked the unresolved doctrinal tensions within the church. This is especially true of the most recent generation of LDS theologians who have not reconciled their views of metaphysics and God's nature.

The Ambiguity of Doctrinal Authority and Sources

There is considerable ambiguity within the LDS church regarding the proper sources for determining Mormon beliefs. For many Mormons, it is not clear how to distinguish between doctrines that are "official" and doctrines that are private speculations. This uncertainty complicates the task of studying LDS doctrine because there is often a difference between the smaller body of established *official* doctrines and the larger body of doctrines that *function* as official. BYU professor Larry E. Dahl explained that LDS doctrine "has a broad meaning in Mormon vernacular, where it is used to mean virtually everything that is, or has been, taught or believed by the Latter-day Saints."[17] He noted that some doctrinal views are designated as "official" while other

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[15]B. H. Roberts viewed the Book of Mormon as revelations of God's redemptive actions in history rather than a reflective theology. B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Van der Donckt Discussion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 213; also see Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 74-75; Gerald M. Bradford, "On Doing Theology," *Brigham Young University Studies* 14 (Spring 1974): 358.

[16]Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 201.

[17]Larry E. Dahl, "Doctrine: Meaning, Source, and History of Doctrine," in *EM*, 1:394. The set of beliefs cherished as *unquestionably* official is relatively small; however, many Mormon leaders have expressed their personal views on doctrinal issues as if they were the official view.

views that are not "authoritative" are accepted so widely that they should be considered LDS doctrine.[18] It is a challenging task to determine if a particular view is an "official doctrine."[19] Elucidating the limits of permissible LDS doctrinal views is even more complex.[20]

Often the larger body of *unofficial* teachings of Mormon leaders has determined the theological direction of the LDS church more than the smaller body of *official* teachings. Phillip Barlow claimed that the dominant theological influences in the church have come from general authorities. In every generation, they have authored "synthetical" books that have provided instruction for church members. The teachings of these general authorities have often rivaled and sometimes surpassed the influence of the LDS presidents, who are the only "official" sources for doctrines besides the Standard Works.[21]

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[18]Ibid.

[19]In a 1980 sermon, Apostle Bruce McConkie listed beliefs such as God progressing in knowledge and belief in evolution among the "seven deadly heresies." He argued that these views were neither true nor acceptable for Mormons; however, many LDS leaders and scholars in the past have held these views and believed that they were acceptable within the broader web of LDS beliefs. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies" [on-line]; accessed 28 March 2004, Available from http://emp.byui.edu/marrottr /SevenDeadlyHeresies.htm; Internet.

[20]Midgley, "Theology," 3:1475.

[21]Barlow, "The Bible in Mormonism," 394; Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* was an unofficial book written by a General Authority that greatly influenced the church. LDS president David O. McKay and his two counselors objected to some of the views contained in *Mormon Doctrine*; however, they did not officially state their objections. Tim S. Reid concluded that "McConkie's status as a General Authority, the title of the book, his prolific writing presence, and the fact that there was never an official published opposition to McConkie's work helped to make his beliefs the predominant view among Latter-day Saints." Tim S. Reid, "Mormons and Evolution: A History of B. H. Roberts and His Attempt to Reconcile Science and Religion" (Ph.D. diss, Oregon State University, 1997), 226. Also see Midgley, "Theology," in *EM*, 3:1476. The general authorities of the LDS church consist of the first presidency, composed of the president and his two counselors, the twelve apostles, the members of the council of the seventy, and the presiding bishopric (*MD*, 309). Although the term "general authorities" technically includes the president of the church, often scholars use the term to refer primarily to the apostles and the council of the seventy as distinct from the president and his counselors. It is in this sense that Barlow and others argue that the doctrinal course of the church has been charted more by the general authorities than by

For example, even though he did not become LDS president until 1970, Joseph Fielding Smith exerted a tremendous influence over the direction of LDS doctrine while he was still an apostle. He vigorously attacked the theory of evolution even though the official LDS view of evolution was neutral. His teaching and writings including the 1954 publication of *Man: His Origin and Destiny* shifted the view of evolution held by many church members from cautious acceptance to complete rejection. *Technically,* only the Standard Works and the first presidency, which consists of the LDS president and his two counselors, determine Mormon doctrine. *Functionally*, however, the general authorities have been the main source for elucidating the doctrines of the church.

The first presidency has the authority to correct doctrines taught by general authorities and other LDS leaders as in the case of Apostle Orson who was forced to recant his views on omniscience.[22] Historically, the Mormon leadership has also prevented the publication of some books by general authorities. Because the teaching of the general authorities can be censored by the first presidency, Mormons assume that the church gives its tacit approval to the publication of books written by general authorities.[23]

There is also ambiguity regarding how the words of the LDS presidents relate to "official doctrine." In theory, the church accepts a view as official when the prophet of the church speaks in agreement with his counselors and twelve apostles and the

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the presidents of the church. The Standard Works of the church include the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.

[22]Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Daniel H. Wells, "Instructions to the Saints January 29 1860," in *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, comp. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965-75), 2:222-23.

[23]David H. Bailey, "Science and Mormonism: Past, Present, and Future," *Dialogue* 29 (Spring 1996): 85.

revelation is sustained by the church during its semiannual conferences.[24] The difficulty is that historically the majority of the teachings of Mormon presidents do not meet these two criteria. There is ambiguity regarding the status of the words of the living prophet when they have not passed through this formal process. For example, with what level of authority does a LDS president speak when he delivers a sermon at the church's semi-annual conference? It is also not clear how the words of the living prophet, spoken either officially or unofficially, relate in authority to the Standard Works.

The prophets themselves have not agreed on these issues. President Joseph Fielding Smith taught the primacy of the Standard Works over the words of the LDS prophet:

> You cannot accept the books written by the authorities of the Church as standards in doctrine, only in so far as they accord with the revealed word in the standard works. Every man who writes is responsible, not the Church, for what he writes. If Joseph Fielding Smith writes something, which is out of harmony with the revelations, then every member of the Church is duty bound to reject it. If he writes that which is in perfect harmony with the revealed word of the Lord, then it should be accepted.[25]

The second Mormon president, Brigham Young, held a different view. He firmly believed that when his sermons were written down and proofread by him, then they "are as good Scripture as is couched in the Bible." He repeated this claim again by saying, "I have never preached a sermon and sent it out to the children of men, that they may not call scripture."[26] Ezra Taft Benson, the thirteenth LDS president, quoted Brigham

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[24]Dahl, "Doctrine," 1:395.

[25]Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:203. Because of this issue, contemporary church members face a dilemma regarding books published by LDS presidents. Each of these books contains a disclaimer on the copyright page stating that the views contained in the book may not reflect the views of the Mormon church. Often these books are doctrinal in nature. The result is that these books *function* among church members as authoritative, yet they are not *officially* binding sources of doctrine.

[26]*JD* , 13:264; Also see *JD*, 13:95.

Young's remarks and used them to oppose those in the church who believed that the living prophet could only claim to speak words of scripture if he said, "thus saith the Lord." Benson believed that it was impossible for the prophet to give advice or counsel without it being from the Lord and therefore obligatory upon church members.[27]

There are competing methodologies used today by Mormon leaders and scholars for determining LDS doctrine because there is no consensus regarding the range of authority among doctrinal statements. The corpus of indisputable official doctrinal statements is small, and it is insufficient for determining the doctrines of the church. In recent years, some Mormon scholars have begun using a new methodology for determining doctrine. This has been a noble attempt to resolve the serious problem of formulating Mormon doctrine; however, their approach has serious weaknesses. An evaluation of this approach will precede the evaluation of the tensions in Mormon doctrines.

The Challenge of Mormon Minimalism

Some Mormon scholars have espoused a specific approach for determining Mormon doctrine which can be best described as "minimalism."[28] It specifies one method

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[27]Ezra Taft Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 136.

[28]Carl Mosser first used the term "minimalism" to describe a particular set of Mormon doctrinal views that had emerged in the contemporary LDS church. In a recent book, he explained why he no longer uses this term. He wrote, "What I have in the past termed 'Mormon minimalism' is more of a trend than a single definable position. The movement will have to develop its distinctive characteristics further before a fully adequate term can be found by which to refer to it." Carl Mosser, "And the Saints Go Marching On: The New Mormon Challenge for World Missions, Apologetics, and Theology," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Frances J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 418. Mosser is correct in characterizing this movement as broader than just a single focused methodological trend. It will be demonstrated that many of the "minimalists" hold corresponding theological views within contemporary Mormonism which can be called "Mormon neo-absolutism"; therefore, the term "minimalism" will be used

for determining the authority of LDS theological statements, and it excludes all other approaches. The exclusivity of this methodological approach supports the theological views of the conservative LDS leaders and scholars who currently dominate the church. By insisting upon this approach, they have effectively undermined the arguments of other Mormons who hold different views on doctrinal issues.

LDS minimalists attempt to clarify the common doctrinal ambiguity by establishing a clear standard for what constitutes Mormon doctrine. Historically, Mormon scholars and leaders have recognized that the highest degree of authority for doctrinal statements occurs when they are either part of the LDS canon or they have been spoken by the prophet and sustained by the church. They have also recognized different levels of authority for doctrinal statements and even a range of meanings for the word "doctrine."[29] In contrast, minimalists believe that only the Standard Works qualify as Mormon doctrine. The narrow set of doctrinal propositions of "official" doctrines is the only set of "acceptable" doctrines for Mormons. This reduces everything ever spoken by Mormons, including the non-sustained words of LDS presidents, to mere speculation at best and distraction from true doctrine at worst. They reject the existence of widely accepted, permissible views of Mormon doctrines. Either someone holds a narrow, canonical view of a doctrine or else they hold a misguided and erroneous view of doctrine.[30]

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to refer only to the methodological view of the broader movement of "Mormon neo-absolutist" leaders and scholars.

[29]Dahl explained that the idea of Mormon doctrine is broad: "Some of these beliefs qualify as official doctrine and are given to the Saints as counsel, exhortation, reproof, and instruction. Other teachings, ones that lack official or authoritative standing, may also be widespread among Church members at any given time." Dahl, "Doctrine" in *EM*, 1:394.

[30]Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 15-16. Also see *MD*, 764-65; Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, "Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the

Stephen Robinson, a popular and influential LDS minimalist, has demonstrated this movement's intolerance toward the idea of a range of permissible doctrinal views. In sharp contrast to Joseph Smith's relaxed approach to systematic theology and creedal statements, Robinson and other minimalists denigrate any LDS theological views except their own views, which they believe, are derived "sola scriptura."[31] He has objected to the practice of summarizing or evaluating common Mormon doctrines that are not "official" in the narrower sense required by the minimalist view:

> If any Latter-day Saint, especially one of the leading Brethren, ever said a thing, these critics take it to represent "Mormonism," regardless of the context of the particular statement and regardless of whether any other Latter-day Saint ever said it or believed it. Often the Latter-day Saints themselves are guilty of this same error and search through the *Journal of Discourses* as if it were some sort of Mormon Talmud, looking for 'new" doctrines not found in the standard works and not taught in the Church today.[32]

In order to rescue Mormon and evangelical scholars alike from their misguided search for what he considers esoteric Mormon teachings, Robinson has advocated his minimalist

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Mormon Doctrine of Creation and a Defense of Creation *ex nihilo*," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement,* ed. Frances J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 99.

[31]Minimalism has affected recent studies of LDS doctrine and will continue to influence future dialogues between Mormon and evangelical scholars. For this reason, it will be evaluated as a contemporary movement within the church. This does not mean that there were not a few LDS leaders in previous generations who held essentially the same view. For example, there were frequent conflicts between Apostle Orson Pratt and LDS president Brigham Young. On the surface, these revolved around specific doctrinal issues such as omniscience, but there were also deeper methodological differences between them that fueled their conflicts. James G. Berga noted that their views of revelation led to a conflict "between Young's notion of dynamic revelation, which provided for the possibility of superseding past revelation, and Pratt's fundamentalist adherence to the written word of divine canon and past revelation." James G. Bergera, "The Orson Pratt / Brigham Young Controversy," *Dialogue* 13 (Summer 1980): 42.

[32]Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?,* 15-16. Robinson believes that both LDS scholars and church members should stop seeking insights and inspiration from non-official, non-authoritative teachings. A side benefit for Mormon scholars of this methodology is that it allows them to label many of the less defensible historic LDS beliefs as "commentary," "speculative" or "later nineteenth century rhetoric." James R. White, *Is the Mormon My Brother? Discerning the Differences between Mormonism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), 38-39.

method of determining the LDS doctrine. He believes that this approach produces the Mormon equivalent of the Catholic *nihil obstat* or *imprimatur*.[33]

Inadequacies of the Minimalist Methodology

LDS scholars and leaders who espouse the minimalist view have provoked a valuable debate over methodology; however, their view fails to explain adequately the past and present formulation of Mormon doctrine. Minimalists are certainly free to *advocate* and *prescribe* that Mormons adopt this methodology, but their proposal fails to account for the range of Mormon doctrinal views found within the church in the past and present. Even though they believe that their approach is the *only* acceptable way to determine LDS doctrine, their methodological approach is untenable.

Insufficient View of the Authority of the Living Prophet

The Mormon church was founded upon a belief that God was once again speaking to humans through living prophets. As a result, the church has valued the current revelations of God to the church as much or more than the established canon. Mormons believe that God's past revelations to the ancient church and to the restored church are valuable; however, these truths are not as relevant for church members today as the current revelations given to the LDS presidents. Minimalism has mistakenly reversed this historical emphasis by declaring that the Standard Works are more important than current revelations. As a result, this approach cannot account for the existence of doctrinal diversity in the church either in the past or in the present.

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[33]White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?*, 13-14.

Joseph Smith felt that his prophetic authority was improperly restricted by the traditional view of the Bible brought into the church by new converts. He himself held a more limited view of the permanency of scripture because of "his own prophetic experience which suggested that scripture was provisional – subject to improvement and expansion."[34] He frequently acted upon his belief that his authority as the living prophet surpassed the authority of older, recorded revelations. For example, Smith boldly created his own translation of some of the books of the Old and New Testaments because he was confident that he possessed the right to correct scripture. His role as the living prophet and seer qualified him to be the final authority on biblical translations since he alone fully understood the truths of God.[35]

Smith's successors, Brigham Young and other early LDS leaders, continued to value the living prophets over the established canon. President Wilford Woodruff argued for the primacy of the prophet over the canon based upon his recollection of an incident in the early LDS church:

> When he concluded, Brother Joseph turned to Brother Brigham Young and said, "Brother Brigham I want you to take the stand and tell us your views with regard to

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[34]Barlow, "The Bible in Mormonism," 264. Two respected LDS scholars have written, "above the authority of the written record stands the authority of the living prophet. . . . Moreover, the living voice is generally richer than any writing." W.D. Davies and Truman G. Madsen, "Scriptures," in *EM*, 3:1278-79.

[35]Smith changed 3140 verses in four Old Testament books and seven New Testament books. Because of his radical new views about creation, human lineage, and the plurality of Gods, he changed the text of Genesis 662 times, which was more than any other book. Robert L. Millet, *The Mormon Faith: Understanding Restored Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1998), 26. Smith also felt the freedom to evaluate the accuracy of the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. Surprisingly, he believed that the German translation of the New Testament was superior to the original Greek: "I have an old edition of the New Testament in the Latin, Hebrew, German, and Greek languages. I have been reading the German, and find it to be the most [nearly] correct translation, and to correspond nearest to the revelations which God has given to me for the last fourteen years" (*DJS*, 343). This claim to prophetic authority, even over Scripture itself, led Hyrum L. Andrus to compare the role of Joseph Smith to the role of Jesus. Hyrum L. Andrus, *God, Man, and the Universe*, Foundations of the Millennial Kingdom of Christ, vol.1 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Inc., 1968), 31.

> the written oracles and the written word of God." Brother Brigham took the stand, and he took the Bible, and laid it down; he took the Book of Mormon, and laid it down; and he took the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, and laid it down before him, and he said: "There is the written word of God to us, concerning the work of God from the beginning of the world, almost, to our day." "And now," said he, "when compared with the living oracles those books are nothing to me; those books do not convey the word of God direct to us now, as do the words of a Prophet or a man bearing the Holy Priesthood in our day and generation. I would rather have the living oracles than all the writing in the books." That was the course he pursued. When he was through, Brother Joseph said to the congregation: "Brother Brigham has told you the word of the Lord, and he has told you the truth."[36]

Brigham Young corrected leaders like Pratt because of his belief that the words of the living prophet were superior to scripture. He disagreed with Pratt who espoused a view that today would be classified as minimalism. LDS historian Leonard J. Arlington explained that these two leaders possessed different views of doctrine. While Pratt held that doctrine should be "reconcilable with extant written scriptures, Brigham Young believed in continuous revelation."[37]

Similarly, Apostle Orson Hyde taught in 1854 that "the words contained in the Bible are merely a history of what is gone before; it was never given to guide the servant of God in the course that he should pursue."[38] This belief that the modern words of the prophet outweigh the words of scripture continued into the twentieth century. President Ezra Taft Benson taught two principles for determining doctrine. First, "the living prophet is more vital to us than the standard works." Second, "the living prophet is more

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[36]Wilford Woodruff, CR, October 1897.

[37]Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 207.

[38]*JD*, 2:75.

important to us than a dead prophet."[39] The words and authority of the current president are tremendously important for church members.

Latter-day saints believe that obedience to new revelations received through the living prophet is tantamount to obedience to God. For example, Apostle Bruce R. McConkie temporarily changed his view of how Mormons should determine doctrine in order to accommodate a new revelation. McConkie usually advocated minimalism and thereby emphasized the Standard Works and the sustained teachings of the prophets over any other source of teaching.

However, this belief came into conflict with a newer revelation given to the church. The June 1978 pronouncement that reversed the divine ban on "negros" in the priesthood forced him to change his view and to claim that all former authoritative LDS teaching on the subject was now unimportant:

> There are statements in our literature by the early Brethren that we have interpreted to mean that the Negroes would not receive the priesthood in mortality. I have said the same things, and people write me letters and say, "You said such and such, and how is it now that we do such and such?" All I can say is that it is time disbelieving people repented and got in line and believed in a living, modern prophet. *Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation.* We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world . . . .We get our truth and light line upon line and precept upon precept (2 Ne. 28:30; Isa. 28:9-10; D&C 98:11-12; 128:21). It doesn't make a particle of difference what anybody ever said about the Negro matter before the first day of June 1978. It is a new day and a new arrangement, and the Lord has now given the revelation that sheds light out into the world on this subject.[40]

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[39]Taft, T*eachings of Ezra Taft Benson,* 335.

[40]Bruce R. McConkie, *Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McCo*nkie, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), in LCL, 343 (emphasis mine).

Inadequate View of the Sources for Mormon Doctrine

Minimalists have wrongly downplayed the role of continuing revelation in the church; moreover, their view of doctrinal sources does not reflect either how church members have determined doctrine in the past or the current practice of church members. For example, Joseph Smith preached his most important sermon, the King Follett Discourse, at the April 1844 church conference.[41] The influence of this sermon on the history of the church cannot be overestimated. It was a culmination of a lifetime of doctrinal developments and it publicly initiated a doctrinal shift from early to traditional Mormon doctrine. This new direction would dominate the theology of the church for over one hundred years even through this sermon was technically a non-authoritative, non-canonical teaching of Smith.

The King Follett Discourse is an obstacle for minimalists because it does not meet their criteria as a source of doctrine. It is neither part of the Standard Works nor has it ever been officially sustained by the church in conference. Despite its unofficial status, it altered the course of Mormon theology and doctrinal history. It was one of Smith's last sermons since he was killed three months after it was delivered. Prior to this time, Smith

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[41]No LDS scholar disputes that this was the pinnacle of Smith's teaching. See McConkie, *MD*, 421; the King Follett Discourse has been reprinted by the church more times than any other sermon. Many of the subjects in this two and half hour speech were doctrinal in nature. One scholar counted twenty-seven different doctrinal subjects in the sermon. The impact of the sermon was felt immediately in the church, not only because of the estimated 20,000 people who heard it, but also because it was published three times during that initial year. Over time, its popularity has only increased. For example, it was published eleven times during the twentieth century. Donald Q. Cannon, "The King Follett Discourse: Joseph Smith's Greatest Sermon in Historical Perspective," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 179, 182, 190-91. The popularity of this sermon does not mean that it has not been controversial. LDS leaders sometimes have disagreed over whether it should be part of the official history of the church. The church leadership prevented B.H. Roberts from including the sermon in the 1912 first edition of the seminal *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints.* Thirty-eight years later, it was inserted into the text of the second edition. Ibid., 191-92.

had taught certain doctrines only privately to the LDS leadership. Without this sermon and the new theological direction that it publicly charted, the development of Mormon theology after the death of Smith might have taken a different course. Brigham Young and the other leaders remembered Smith's teaching as encapsulated in this sermon and in the decades after his death, they continued to lead the church in this new direction of traditional Mormon theology.

The King Follett Discourse is not the only example of important teachings of Joseph Smith that lie outside the narrow boundaries of minimalism. Reid concluded that Smith's non-canonical teachings have functioned as authoritative in the church.[42] The theological legacy of Smith simply cannot be explained by referring only to the Standard Works. In fact, one of the reasons why his public teaching was not sustained by the church was that neither Smith nor the church believed that his discourses needed any approval. Even the official LDS church publication *Gospel Principles* teaches church members that "the non-canonical statements of Joseph Smith . . . constitute much of the ground for Mormon philosophical discussion."[43] It was in his non-official writings and sermons that Smith developed the implications of his emerging theology.

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[42]Reid, "Mormons and Evolution," 34.

[43]*Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, 1978), 9-10. Anderson noted that the authority of a prophet's words is not affected by whether or not they have become part of the canon. Gary A. Anderson, "Scripture, Words of Living Prophets," in *EM*, 3: 1281. Even Robinson, a strict minimalist, conceded that the King Follett Discourse and the "epigram" of Lorenzo Snow function as authoritative for Mormons. He explained, "Neither statement is scriptural or canonized in the technical sense, and neither had been explained or elucidated to the church in any official manner, but they are so widely accepted by Latter-day Saints that this technical point has become moot" (*HWD*, 85). His concession undermines his entire argument against extracanonical sources for doctrine. David H. Yarn made a similar admission: "Though Latter-day Saints extensively use the scriptures to learn about God, their fundamental knowledge concerning him is based upon the Prophet Joseph Smith's first vision, the Prophet's subsequent revelatory experiences, and individual personal revelation." David H. Yarn Jr., "God," in *EM*, 2:546.

Like the writings of Joseph Smith, the writings of the other presidents have influenced Mormon doctrine.[44] Because president Benson and others taught that "the living prophet is more important to us than a dead prophet," the teachings of Smith's successors have been viewed by scholars, leaders, and church members as setting the course of the church's doctrines.[45] The first presidency of the church clarified this issue for the church on April 5, 1931:

> We call attention to the fact that when one of the general authorities of the Church makes a definite statement in regard to any doctrine, particularly when the statement is made in a dogmatic declaration of finality, whether he expresses it as his opinion or not, he is regarded as voicing the Church, and his statements are accepted as the approved doctrines of the Church, which they should be.[46]

Because the teachings of the LDS leadership were important to early Mormons, many of the nineteenth century sermons preached in Salt Lake City were collected and printed in church newspapers. The largest and most comprehensive collection of these sermons was the twenty-six volume *Journal of Discourses*. Watt

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[44]Reid noted that "Latter-day Saints accept the inspired utterances of the Prophets and Apostles in much the same vein as others in the Judeo-Christian tradition accept the Old and New Testament Prophets and Apostles . . . . Though believing in an open canon, relatively little has been added to the body of LDS scripture since Smith's death in 1844. However, doctrinal exposition has been provided by his successors and subsequent developments in Latter-day Saint theology are largely based on their efforts. Although not necessarily canonized doctrine, Latter-day Saints believe these sermons and writings are inspired" (Reid, "Mormons and Evolution," 21). Another argument against minimalism is that canonized scripture can lose its official status. The minimalist view of *sola scriptura* encounters difficulties when it is applied to the history of the *Lectures on Faith*. The *Lectures on Faith* are a written record of the doctrinal teachings of the LDS elders during the winter of 1834. There is debate among scholars regarding whether Smith authored the lectures himself. Regardless of their authorship, the *Lectures on Faith* clearly had the approval of Smith prior to publication. Until 1921, the church published them as part of the canonical book, the Doctrine and Covenants. They were removed by the church in 1921 for various reasons, but they continue to influence Mormons today and serve as another example of a non-canonical, but very influential Mormon writing that has influenced the church. Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," *Sunstone* 22 (1999): 27; Leland Gentry, "What of the Lectures on Faith?," *Brigham Young University Studies* 19 (Fall 1978), 9; Larry E. Dahl, "Lectures on Faith," in *EM*, 2:818-21.

[45]Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, 335.

[46]First Presidency, "1931 Statement of the First Presidency" [on-line]; accessed 15 March 2006; available from http://eyring.hplx.net/Eyring/faq/evolution/FP1931.html; Internet.

demonstrated that many early LDS members, who could not obtain these sermons through the church newspapers, read the sermons in the *Journal of Discourses*.[47] Minimalists have erroneously excluded sermon collections like the *Journal of Discourses* from their analysis of doctrine. Robinson was disturbed that Mormons seem to be eagerly seeking doctrinal truths in the *Journal of Discourses*. Instead of admitting that many Mormon leaders, scholars, and church members regularly consult the *Journal of Discourses* as a valuable source of LDS doctrines, Robinson claimed incorrectly that Mormons who read the *Journal of Discourse* today are seeking only esoteric and arcane beliefs: "Often the Latter-Day saints are themselves guilty of this same error and search through the *Journal of Discourse* as if it were some sort of Mormon Talmud, looking for 'new' doctrines not found in the Standard Works and not taught in the church today."[48] This minimalist approach also excludes the influential writings of three famous LDS theologians, James E. Talmage, Brigham H. Roberts, and John A. Widtsoe, who systematized Mormon doctrines after the turn of the century.[49]

In addition, minimalism excludes the semiannual general conferences of the church, which are another important source of doctrine. Mormons view the sermons preached by the living prophets and general authorities at these conferences as sources of

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[47]The sermons compiled in the *Journal of Discourses* were originally published in England on a semi-monthly basis for thirty-two years from 1854-1886. The publication of these sermons occurred with the approval of the church even though they were not technically authoritative. Ronald G. Watt, "Journal of Discourses," in *EM*, 2:76.

[48]Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?*, 15-16. Despite the opposition of minimalists today, earlier Mormon leaders had no objection to church members assuming that sermons were authoritative.

[49]These three theologians creatively harmonized the doctrinal teachings of the previous generations of LDS leaders into the more standardized and unified "traditional Mormon" doctrines that dominated the church until the middle of the twentieth century. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 19. Also see Kurt Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theological Evolution* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2000).

truth received directly from God. The sermons preached at these conferences are recorded, proofed, corrected if necessary by the church, and then published in the official LDS church magazine *Ensign.*

Sometimes general authorities write and publish doctrinal books that influence the church as much as their general conference sermons. These unofficial books carry disclaimers to the effect that the views of the books are only those of the authors; however, Mormons routinely read them for doctrinal instruction. Eleanor Knowles observed that church members commonly refer to these books in order to answer their doctrinal questions:

> The desire for definitive answers to a host of vexing and unsettled questions has been satisfied in the present era by books like Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine*. . . . Such compendia have no official standing and represent the opinions of their authors. Their pronouncements, however, are popular among some in the Church.[50]

By rejecting the flawed minimalist methodology, a study of Mormon doctrine can include all of the significant sources of Mormon doctrine. This approach is broad enough to explain the historical development of the church's doctrine among the LDS leadership and membership. For example, a broader approach can explain the results of a study by Knowles who compiled a list of books that have influenced Mormon doctrine. Of the forty-two books that she listed, thirty-three of them were not written by LDS presidents. Even the nine books either written by a president or containing the writings and teachings of presidents would not meet the stringent minimalist standard for being

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[50]Eleanor Knowles, "Doctrine: Treaties on Doctrine," in *EM*, 1: 403-04; Also see Reid, "Mormons and Evolution," 226.

acceptable sources of doctrinal teaching, but collectively they have swayed the church's doctrine.[51]

This approach can also explain the results of a definitive survey conducted in 1969 by Leonard Arlington. He asked prominent LDS scholars to rank the most important Mormon intellectuals in the history of the church. The results showed that Joseph Smith ranked only third in his contributions to Mormon intellectual thought. In addition, only two other LDS presidents ranked in the top twelve Mormon intellectuals. The rest of the list was composed mostly of general authorities whose writings have influenced the church as much as the LDS living prophets.[52]

When Stan Larson conducted the same survey twenty-four years later in 1993, Joseph Smith had fallen to the rank of fifth. In this updated survey, the highest ranked Mormon intellectuals in descending order were B. H. Roberts, Orson Pratt, Sterling McMurrin, Leonard J. Arrington, Joseph Smith, James E. Talmage, Hugh W. Nibley, John A. Widtsoe, Lowell L. Bennion, Parley P. Pratt, Henry Eyring, and Eliza R. Snow. Joseph Smith and Hugh W. Nibley are the only two LDS presidents in this list. The rest of the intellectuals are historians, theologians, and Mormon scholars. The two surveys demonstrate that restricting doctrinal studies to only the LDS presidents and the canon mistakenly excludes most of the important sources for the formation of Mormon doctrine.[53]

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[51] Knowles, Doctrine: Treaties on Doctrine," 1: 403-404.

[52]See Leonard J. Arrington, "The Intellectual Tradition of the Latter-day Saints," *Dialogue* 4 (Spring 1969): 13-26.

[53]Stan Larson, "Intellectuals in Mormon History: An Update," *Dialogue* 26 (Fall 1993): 188-89. This examination of tensions in Mormon doctrine incorporates the views of these twelve intellectuals.

Methodological Approach

A continuum of Mormon sources will be used to demonstrate the existence of unresolved tensions in LDS doctrines. Both Mormon and evangelical scholars regularly use this type of broad approach for studying Mormonism despite the recent objections by minimalists.[54] LDS scholar Paulsen used five categories of sources in descending levels of authority: The Standard Works, Joseph Smith's doctrinal statements, doctrines taught by LDS presidents, "propositions entailed" by the preceding first and second categories of sources, and teachings that are coherent with authoritative teachings.[55] Evangelical scholar White used a four-tiered system for categorizing the authority of doctrinal sources.[56] The editors of a recent evangelical book on Mormonism enumerated a similar

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[54]It has been proven that the minimalist methodology is untenable. As a result, most of the common complaints by Mormons regarding evangelical evaluations of Mormon theology are fallacious. Many Mormon scholars use a range of sources for studying Mormon doctrine. Evangelicals should be careful to document the level of authority or influence that a Mormon teaching possesses; however, there is no need for evangelical scholars to apologize for citing non-official and non-canonical Mormon teachings. Richard J. Mouw's recent misguided apology on behalf of evangelicals was apparently motivated by his acceptance of minimalism. If minimalism was tenable and existed as the only accurate method of describing Mormon theology, then perhaps his apology would have been more appropriate. Speaking at the Mormon tabernacle in Salt Lake City on 14 November 2004, Mouw uttered this confession of guilt: "I know that I have learned much in this continuing dialogue, and I am now convinced that we evangelicals have often seriously misrepresented the beliefs and practices of the Mormon community. Indeed, let me state it bluntly to the LDS folks here this evening: we have sinned against you. The God of the Scriptures makes it clear that it is a terrible thing to bear false witness against our neighbors, and we have been guilty of that sort of transgression in things we have said about you. We have told you what you believe without making a sincere effort first of all to *ask* you what you believe. . . . And even at our best, we have -- and this is true of both of our communities - we have talked past each other, setting forth oversimplified and distorted accounts of what the other group believes." Richard J. Mouw, "Opening Remarks" [on-line]; accessed 14 July 2006; available from http://www.standingtogether.org /Responses_mouw.doc; Internet.

[55]David Lamont Paulsen, "Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Michigan, 1975), 66. Because the general authorities of the church are often the ones who work out the doctrinal implications of the teachings of the living prophets, many of the sources that Paulsen used for his fourth category came from the writings of the general authorities.

[56]White's categories are similar to Paulsen's sources: First, there are the Standard Works and the living prophets. The second level consists of the teachings of Joseph Smith, the statements of the first presidency, and the secretive temple ordinances. The third and fourth levels are composed of the statements of the general authorities on issues of doctrine. The distinction between the third and fourth level pertains to the venue where their teachings take place. White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?,* 40.

approach to determining the LDS views and doctrinal sources. They included views that fell into three categories:

> 1) Widespread and historically held positions; (2) widespread contemporary views; or (3) minority views permitted within contemporary Mormonism that seem to be the most plausible and defensible of LDS options.[57]

LDS philosopher Ostler has argued that it is a mistake to think of all Mormon doctrinal sources as possessing the same level of authority. Since there are many sources for doctrine, studies of Mormonism must use all of these sources and must "recognize a continuum of sources, some more and some less authoritative, as a source of Mormon beliefs."[58] In general, Mormons scholars like Ostler, who have used this broader scope of

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[57]Beckwith, Mosser, and Owen, "Introduction," 22. At least one Mormon has been critical of the approach taken by the editors of this book. Beckwith has provided a thorough defense of their approach. See Francis J. Beckwith, "Sects in the City: Mormonism and the Philosophical Perils of Being a Missionary Faith," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 14-30.

[58]Ostler, "Bridging the Gulf." Ostler correctly recognized the need for a continuum of sources. Ironically, he wrongly believed that Stephen Robinson recognized this continuum. In his review of *How Wide the Divide*, Ostler wrote, "Robinson adopts a personal voice and discusses his personal beliefs, as opposed to defined, 'official' Mormon beliefs. This approach is essential to discussions of Latter-day Saint doctrines for a very simple reason: An official creedal statement of Mormon doctrine does not exist, and a broad diversity of possible views abounds within Mormonism." In fact, one of the common objections to Robinson's approach is that he thinks he is speaking for the church. Some have correctly complained that he first claimed that he was not speaking officially for the LDS church, yet he then presented his minimalist and neo-absolutist views as *the* correct and authoritative views of the LDS church. For example, he explicitly rejected *the Journal of Discourses* as a source for doctrine, and he adamantly argued that in *the* LDS view, God is infinite. It will be argued later that Robinson's neo-absolutist views of God's nature are not the *only* possible Mormon view. His view is merely *one* of several views that are acceptable within the contemporary church. Second, some have incorrectly suggested that Robinson does not represent the mainstream of current LDS thought. His minimalism and neo-absolutism do represent the current generation of LDS leaders but they do not represent the church's historical beliefs. The way that Robinson has responded to these criticisms shows that he believed he really was speaking for the LDS church and not just as an individual. Regarding the criticisms of his views, he wrote, "The flimsiest, in my judgment, is the claim that my views as expressed in *HWD* are not representative of 'real' Mormonism. Some Evangelical reviewers have accused me of intentional deception on this point, while others have merely dismissed me as an aberration out of harmony with the LDS mainstream. . . . I am an active Latter-day Saint, I am a former bishop in the LDS Church, I am one of a handful of Latter-day Saints to hold a doctorate in religious studies (Duke, 1978), and I have learned the religious terminology of Protestants by teaching religion at both Methodist and Presbyterian colleges. I have been at BYU in the Department of Ancient Scripture for thirteen years, six and a half of those years serving as department chair. I have served in the LDS Church both officially and unofficially in discussions with other denominations and continue to do so today." Matthew Connelly, Craig Blomberg, and Stephen E. Robinson, "Sizing up the Divide: Reviews and Replies," *Brigham Young University Studies* 38 (1999): 174.

sources, do not belong to the contemporary "neo-absolutist" movement in the church. They usually represent the older, traditional Mormon views, and they treasure the past teachings of LDS leaders and theologians.

Sources for Doctrinal Analysis

The examination of LDS doctrines will begin with the Standard Works. All Mormons recognize their prime importance.[59] On issues where there are different opinions among LDS theologians, the manner in which each side of an issue utilizes the Standard Works will be noted. The teachings of the LDS presidents will also be considered. They carry the prophetic mantle of Joseph Smith and each one is given the title of "prophet, seer, and revelator."[60] Among the Mormon presidents, the teachings of Joseph Smith will be given more prominence because of his preeminent position in Mormon history. LDS President Hunter taught that because of Smith's position as the "choice seer," he is rightly praised by Mormons when they sing the hymn of praise to him, "Praise to the Man."[61]

There are two reasons why the *Lectures on Faith* constitutes an additional source of doctrine. First, Smith either authored the *Lectures on Faith* or heartily agreed

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[59]Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:203; McConkie, *MD*, 764-65. Mormons accept the Old and New Testaments as authoritative, although Joseph Smith taught that "ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors" (*DJS*, 245.)Because of their belief that there were errors in the transmission process, almost all Mormons reject verbal inerrancy (Davies and Madsen, "Scriptures," *EM*, 3:1278"). Robinson made the surprising and misleading claim that the LDS belief about scripture is equivalent to the "Chicago Statement on Biblical Literacy." Bloomberg and Robinson, *HWD*, 63; Ostler, "Bridging the Gulf."

[60]Woodruff, *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, 50.

[61]Howard W. Hunter, *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter: Fourteenth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints,* ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 189-90.

with them. Alexander's conclusion regarding the *Lectures on Faith* represents the consensus of many scholars: "The *Lectures on Faith* represent Joseph Smith's views at the time. Clearly, he played a role in their authorship and their publication."[62] Second, many Mormon scholars and leaders, especially the more conservative ones, have supported their doctrines by citing the *Lectures on Faith*. The lectures represented an early "classical statement of the Mormon concept of God."[63] They emerged as a clear statement of the church's beliefs during a time when the church was otherwise adamantly opposed to creeds and confessions.

The theology of many early Mormon leaders will also be evaluated using the *Journal of Discourses*. Although some current LDS scholars and leaders dismiss its contribution, a comprehensive study of LDS doctrine cannot ignore this source because many of the sermons contained within the *Journal of Discourses* had doctrinal themes.[64] In addition to the *Journal of Discourses*, the teachings of more recent general authorities also will be used to determine doctrine. The use of these teachings by general authorities is justified because Mormon leaders frequently urge church members to heed the instructions of their leaders. LDS President Cannon exhorted Mormons to trust the teachings of the apostles, who constitute part of the general authorities: "You watch the men that listen to the Apostles, to the authority that God has placed in His Church, and

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[62]Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 26. Gentry, "What of the Lectures on Faith?," 18-19.

[63]Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 12.

[64]Robinson dismissed the value of the *Journal of Discourses* (*HWD*, 73-74). Other scholars have affirmed its value. See Richard F. Haglund and David J. Whitaker. "Intellectual History," in *EM*, 2:687.

you will find that they are not carried about by cunning craftiness of men nor by every wind of doctrine."[65]

Another source for the teachings of general authorities is the semiannual General Conference of the church. Thousands of church members hear these sermons in person; moreover, the church broadcasts them to Mormons in other countries around the world. The church also unofficially endorses these sermons by publishing them in the LDS magazine *Ensign* in the month after each conference. For these two reasons, the sermons at these conferences are important sources of doctrinal views. There are other articles written by Mormon leaders, which are published by the church in its official periodicals like *Ensign*. These articles also regularly influence the doctrine of the church.

Throughout the history of the church, general authorities have published books on doctrine. These books which Barlow has called "synthetical books" have often been the main source of doctrinal exposition, clarification, and systemization for LDS church members. Barlow has argued that functionally and practically, these books have surpassed the influence of the living prophets of the church.[66] These unofficial, yet influential books have been more widely read by church members than the sermons and writings of the presidents and will be included in this evaluation.[67]

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[65]George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, ed. Jerreld L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1987), in LCL, 212-13. Also see White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?*, 175.

[66]Barlow, "The Bible in Mormonism," 218-19.

[67]The exception would be the words of Joseph Smith that constitute the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Mormons frequently read these canonical books; however, the doctrines in the books can be interpreted different ways. How Mormons interpret the doctrines of Joseph Smith depends upon which synthetical books they read. For example, a Mormon who reads B. H. Robert's *The Seventy's Course in Theology* will interpret the Standard Works in a different light than the one who reads Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine*. Reid, "Mormons and Evolution," 226.

There are other sources for Mormon doctrine which will be incorporated into this evaluation of Mormon doctrine. For example, the LDS church owns and operates Brigham Young University. The church gives some latitude to professors, but frequently the church has also warned them to stay within the doctrinal bounds of the church. Throughout the years of the university's existence, several professors have been dismissed for erroneous teaching, especially on the subject of evolution. President Howard W. Hunter reminded the school's faculty and staff that there was no gap between the university and "the Church itself in government, teaching, or principle. In this we are unified, and this unity distinguishes us from every other religious institution in the world."[68] Because of the church's control over the university, the writings of BYU scholars will be taken as representative of doctrinal views that are at least permissible within the church.[69]

Outside the direct control of the church, there is a large community of Mormon scholars who are faithful and active members of the LDS church. They choose to publish articles and books on Mormon doctrine in unofficial scholarly journals and through unofficial publishers. They make substantial contributions to studies of LDS theology, philosophy, and history. For example, articles in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* and *Sunstone* regularly address the past and present beliefs of the Mormon

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[68]Hunter, *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*,"188.

[69]The teachings of the general authorities will be given a greater weight than those of BYU professors because of their official position and their broader influence. In addition, White correctly noted that BYU scholars are capable of misrepresenting LDS doctrine. In his evaluation of Robinson's views in *How Wide the Divide*, he noted, "LDS apologists, including BYU faculty, can provide us with less than representative viewpoints when it suits their purposes and agendas. And certainly the greatest problem with *How Wide the Divide?* is just this: it presents as LDS orthodoxy a view of God, Christ, and even salvation that is *not* what one will hear when attending the General Conference in Salt Lake City or when reading the current manuals on religion published by the Church." White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?* , 175.

church. These independent, yet loyal Mormon scholars are invaluable because they represent the broad spectrum of doctrinal views that historically have been found in the church. For example, on the issue of omniscience, some LDS scholars argue for God's exhaustive foreknowledge, while others believe that God eternally progresses in knowledge. This issue has been debated among Mormons since the beginning of the church, and it was one of the disputed doctrines in the conflict between Brigham Young and Orson Pratt. The fact that years later this debate continues among Mormons is evidence that there are indeed unresolved doctrinal tensions in the church. If an evaluation of Mormon doctrines was mistakenly limited to only the official teaching of the church during the last thirty years, one might wrongly conclude that the church has possessed only one view on this issue. In fact, many LDS church members today are unaware that their church ever held any view of omniscience other than the current, exhaustive foreknowledge view.

Another resource for LDS doctrinal studies is the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. This five-volume encyclopedia contains the writings of hundreds of respected LDS leaders and scholars. In addition to the contributions of independent LDS scholars, two apostles, four general authorities, and two LDS presidents guided the project. Each article was carefully reviewed by the church and revised when considered necessary.[70] As a result, the views expressed by articles within the encyclopedia are at the very least acceptable to the Mormon church.

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[70]David H. Ludlow, "Preface," in *EM*, 1:lxi. Ludlow is a former dean of religious education at BYU. Idem, "Acknowledgments," in *EM*, 1:lxiii. Some articles were revised multiple times before they were acceptable to the church. For example, the article on evolution was revised three times and greatly reduced in length. Bailey, "Science and Mormonism," 85.

Areas of Doctrinal Tension

The greatest theological differences between Mormonism and evangelical Christianity lie in doctrines relating to the nature of God, the nature of man, and their relationship to each other. Traditional Christianity maintains a strong distinction between the Creator and the creature, while the unwavering view of the Mormon church has been that "God and man are the same species."[71] When Mormonism is examined historically, it is apparent that there are unresolved doctrinal tensions in several areas of Mormon doctrine. [72] The claim that these doctrinal tensions have existed within the church and that they are presently *unresolved* will be substantiated through an examination of the tensions in five specific areas of Mormon doctrine during three critical periods of doctrinal development: divine omniscience, divine omnipotence, human nature, the means of salvation, and the relationship between faith and reason.[73]

Periods of Doctrinal Development

Some LDS and evangelical scholars have recognized that there have been periods of doctrinal development during which particular views of doctrines have dominated the church. Different church leaders have shifted the church back and forth between absolute conceptions of God and finite conceptions of God. Mark Nolan

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[71]Blomberg and Robinson, *HWD,* 82. The idea that God and man have the same ontological status is pervasive in Mormonism. See D&C 93:29; Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1969), 46, 53.

[72]Many Mormon doctrines have changed over time, especially between 1830 and 1915. See Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of God.*

[73]Widmer's argument that modern Mormonism emerged around 1915 from the reformulation of earlier divergent views supports the claim that there are unresolved tensions in Mormon doctrine. However, his analysis of Mormon doctrine did not extend past 1915 and therefore does not account for the later development of neo-orthodox Mormonism. He also did not evaluate the changes that have occurred in the Mormon views of man and salvation. Ibid.

believed that contemporary Mormonism suffers from "a tension between absolutist and finitistic understandings of important theological beliefs."[74]

White was the first scholar to propose the existence of two distinct types of Mormon theology. He used the term "traditional Mormonism" to refer to the theology that arose near the end of Joseph Smith's life. This theology dominated the church until "Mormon neo-orthodoxy" arose after the Second World War. White argued that a finite view of God, a trust in the unlimited goodness of humans, and the view of salvation by works characterized traditional LDS theology. In contrast, Mormon neo-orthodoxy, which dominates the contemporary church teaches that God is absolute and infinite, humans are weak and depraved, and that salvation is mostly by grace.[75]

White later modified his original understanding of doctrinal development and recognized that the very earliest theology of the church from 1830 to 1835 was different from subsequent traditional Mormonism. He has continued to argue that traditional Mormonism theology is the true theological progeny of Smith:

> My use of the term "Mormon neo-orthodoxy" is admittedly arbitrary and may not satisfy everyone. Though my initial usage did not imply a return to early Mormon thought, the analyses of Alexander and T. Edgar Lyon have convinced me that Mormon neo-orthodoxy is similar to Mormon theology of 1830 to 1835. In this sense, it may be conceived as a return to the earliest "Mormon" beliefs and consequently as an authentic expression of Mormon theology. However, and this is a fundamental point, it does not represent a return to the theology that Joseph Smith left his legacy – the theology that became the foundation of traditional Mormonism.[76]

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[74]Mark Nolan, "Materialism and the Mormon Faith," *Dialogue* 22 (Winter 1989): 66.

[75]O. Kendall White, Jr., "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," *Dialogue* 5 (Summer 1970): 9-24; idem, "A Reply to the Critics of the Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy Hypothesis," *Dialogue* 6 (Fall 1971): 100; idem, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987).

[76]White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, xviii.

His perceptive analysis of Mormonism has helped scholars recognize that LDS theology has not been uniform throughout its history.[77]

White's term *neo-orthodoxy* will not be used in this analysis of Mormon doctrines because it is more accurate to recognize that *traditional Mormonism* and *neo-orthodox Mormonism* are the result of the underlying and unresolved tensions in LDS theology between finite and absolutist conceptions of God. The term *traditional Mormonism* is appropriate, but *neo-orthodoxy* will be replaced with the terms *neo-absolutism* and *neo-absolutist*. The term *early Mormonism* will be used to describe the teachings of the church during the first five years of its existence. An advantage of this

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[77]The admission by White that there are similarities between neo-orthodoxy and early Mormonism deflects the main criticism of his work by contemporary Mormons who themselves are neo-orthodox. ibid. These conservative scholars wrongly believe the there has been an unbroken historical continuity between the views of Joseph Smith and their views today. They argue correctly for the similarities between their views and the early views of the church, yet they fail to account for the fact that for over a hundred years the church taught the antithetical views of traditional Mormonism. They have attempted unsuccessfully to exclude the teaching of a large number of traditional Mormons by advocating a minimalist methodology. Millet criticized White for believing that any change occurred in the history of the church: "I believe it is a mistake to accept in wholesale and uncritical fashion many of the presuppositions and conclusions of those, like Alexander and White, who propose a clear delineation between Joseph Smith's pre-1835 thought -- especially the teachings of the Book of Mormon -- and what came from the Prophet in the latter part of his ministry. . . . While the recent reemphasis by the institutional Church on the teachings of the Book of Mormon (and thus on a 'redemptive theology") may be an effort to strengthen 'the Saints in a day of cultural crisis, the idea that such a move represents a straying from the post-1835 thought of Joseph Smith is an unwarranted conclusion. On the key doctrines of God, man, and salvation, the Prophet's early teachings did not differ markedly from that which he declared just prior to his death." Robert L. Millet, "Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism: Orthodoxy, Neoorthodoxy, Tension, and Tradition," *Brigham Young University Studies* 29 (1989): 50. One legitimate deficiency of White's analysis is that he failed to recognize that traditional Mormonism and neo-orthodox Mormonism have often existed simultaneously in the church since the death of Joseph Smith in 1844. It is generally true that traditional Mormonism dominated the church from the 1844 until the 1950's, and that since that time, neo-orthodoxy has gained ascendancy. However, there were some LDS leaders and scholars during the era of traditional Mormonism whose theology could be labeled either as vestiges of early Mormon theology or as incipient neo-orthodox Mormonism. For example, Orson Pratt, who was officially condemned twice by Brigham Young, would be a theological hero in the neo-orthodox atmosphere of the church today. In a similar manner, there are traditional Mormons today who exist on the fringes of the church and who continue to espouse their finitist views. The leadership of the church would like for Mormons and evangelicals to forget the years of traditional Mormon theology, yet even a casual reading of scholarly journals such as *Dialogue* and *Sunstone* proves that traditional Mormonism is alive today in the Mormon academy and in the Mormon church.

terminology is that it emphasizes that Mormon theology has oscillated between the unresolved absolutist and finitist tensions inherit within its doctrines.

Three Periods of Mormon Doctrine

Early Mormonism

Early Mormonism can be dated from the inception of the church in 1830 to Joseph Smith's theological shift that occurred around 1835. Alexander called this period "the initial era of Mormon doctrinal development" during which the views of the church were surprisingly similar to the surrounding Protestant denominations.[78] The church began with a highly literalistic interpretation of the Bible that was "within the general framework of historic Christian fundamentalism."[79] Ostler referred to this period as "an earlier period of absolutistic preconceptions" in which the church temporarily retained the "Catholic-Protestant view of the day which stressed the creator/creature dichotomy and a single, infinite, and absolute God."[80]

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[78]Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 15.

[79]McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, ix; also see White, "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," 10; Stephen E. Parrish and Carl Mosser, "A Tale of Two Theisms: The Philosophical Usefulness of the Classical and Mormon Concepts of God," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement,* ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 200; Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 74-75; Paul M. Edwards, "Persistences that Differ: Comments on the Doctrine of Man," *Sunstone* 5 (September-October 1980): 43; The focus of the church during these initial years was not on new doctrines. Instead, the church focused on the eschatological excitement which captivated the membership. Grant Underwood, "Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology," *Dialogue* 17 (Autumn 1984): 60.

[80]Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence," 59-60. Blomberg has noted that if Mormons continue the current trend of returning to their earliest beliefs, rooted primarily in the Book of Mormon, they will be drawing *closer* to historic Christianity since there is a "smaller amount of heterodoxy in the Book of Mormon compared with Joseph Smith's later writings." Blomberg was not implying that this shift alone would be sufficient for Mormons to be considered Christians. He was expressing his view that Mormonism could move incrementally closer to evangelical Christianity. Craig L. Blomberg, "Is Mormonism Christian?," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2002), 326.

Even though the Book of Mormon and the earlier portions of the Doctrine and Covenants supported the doctrines of early Mormonism, the implications of some of these new revelations began to shift the theology of Smith himself.[81] For example, Smith had already given his account of the First Vision in 1832. This vision, in which Smith claimed to encounter both the Father and the Son in bodily form, later become one of the doctrinal foundations for the traditional Mormon belief in the plurality of Gods. Because Smith only gradually realized the radical theological implications of his vision and because his followers were not ready to be introduced to these new concepts, Smith rarely referred to the vision during the years of early Mormon theology. Later, this vision would become a theological pillar of traditional Mormonism.[82]

Traditional Mormonism

Alexander characterized the period from 1836 to 1935 as a time of vigorous doctrinal development.[83] The initial impetus for traditional Mormonism came from a shift in the teachings of Joseph Smith, which began to emerge through the later portions of the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. Many scholars have recognized that Smith's views changed substantially, not just subtly, during this period. White noted that the period of 1835 to 1844 was the first step in the development of traditional Mormonism: "From 1835 until his martyrdom in 1844, Joseph Smith increasingly emphasized the finite nature of God, a more optimistic view of humanity, and a doctrine

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[81]Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of* God, 143.

[82]James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 47.

[83]Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 15.

of salvation by merit."[84] Many of these newer doctrines emerged from 1840 to 1844 as the church resided in Nauvoo, Illinois.[85] Dahl observed the gradual nature of this change: "Joseph's teachings relating to such things as the nature of man, his premortal existence, his agency, and his eternal potential of godhood also gradually unfolded to him and to those around him."[86] Van Hale argued that while Smith began teaching the radical doctrine of the plurality of the Gods privately around 1835, he waited until 1839 to teach it publicly and until 1844 to make it an official doctrine.[87] During the period from 1836 to 1844, Smith shifted his views on the "concepts of God and man" and "eternal progression."[88] The clearest articulation of Smith's new expansive theological vision was the King Follett Discourse, preached in April 1844. God was no longer viewed as distant, infinite, unapproachable, and qualitatively different from humans.

> God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible, - I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form - like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man... Here, then, is eternal life - to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have done before you, namely, by going from

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[84]White, *Mormon Neo-orthodoxy*, xix-xx.

[85]Guy Bishop, "Eternal Marriage in Early Mormon Marital Beliefs," *The Historian* 53 (1990): 77-88.

[86]Dahl, "Doctrine," 396. Edwards agreed that Smith's views changed, but he placed the shift earlier than most scholars. He viewed the change as occurring from 1833 to 1835. Edwards, "Persistences that Differ," 49.

[87]Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence," 61; Van Hale, "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 219. It is difficult to date precisely when Smith's theology changed, in particular his development of the idea of the plurality of Gods, since he publicly denied that his theology had ever changed: "I wish to declare I have always and in all congregations when I have preached on the subject of the Deity, it has been the plurality of Gods. It has been preached by the Elders for fifteen years." *HC*, 6: 474.

[88]Lyon, "Doctrinal Development of the Church," 437.

> one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power. . . . The first principles of man are self-existent with God. God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with himself, so that they might have one glory upon another, and all that knowledge, power, glory, and intelligence, which is requisite in order to save them in the world of spirits.[89]

This sermon moved Joseph Smith's newer teachings from the category of private, peripheral LDS teachings to the category of official and fundamental teachings of the church.[90] The membership of the church was required to accept the new direction set by the living prophet regardless of their earlier ideas derived from scripture.[91]

After the death of Joseph Smith, the leadership of the church continued this shift from early Mormon doctrine to traditional Mormon doctrine. The absolute conceptions of God found in the doctrines of early Mormonism were slowly replaced by

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[89]*DJS*, 340, 341, 349.

[90]England, who himself was a traditional Mormon, described the implications of this teaching: "Notice the lack of traditional Christian absolutism here. The emphasis seems rather to be on God's similarity to humans, on God as having the same kind of being as we do and making available to us a process of growth he himself has been engaged in and apparently is still engaged in, 'whereby the less intelligent . . . could have a privilege to advance like Himself.' The verb structure implies he *still is* advancing. God is a 'greater' but not absolute intelligence; he is moving to 'higher' and 'higher' exaltations, not to some absolute state of the highest possible exaltation." Eugene England, "Perfection and Progression: Two Complementary Ways to Talk about God," *Dialogue* 29 (Summer 1989): 34.

[91]Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental," 51. Edwards believed that the doctrines of the plurality of the gods, the human potential for eternal progression, the materiality of the universe, and the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* emerged from this sermon. Edwards, "Persistences that Differ," 43. Tickemyer, who saw clear similarities between the teachings of Smith and process theology, cited this sermon as proof that "pluralisms appear to be quite fundamental to Mormon thinking." Garland E. Tickemyer, "Joseph Smith and Process Theology," *Dialogue* 17 (Autumn 1984): 79-80; This sermon also helped the church understand that the idea of the plurality of Gods was a doctrinal implication of Joseph Smith's encounter with the embodied Father and Son as recorded in the First Vision. Richard J. Cummings, "Quintessential Mormonism: Literal-Mindedness as a Way of Life," *Dialogue* 15 (Winter 1982): 94.

more finite conceptions of God.[92] Alexander stated "it seems clear that certain ideas that developed between 1832 and 1844 were internalized after 1845 and accepted by the Latter-Day Saints."[93] Brigham Young preserved the finite view of God, the optimistic view of humankind, and the idea of salvation by merit that had emerged from the later teachings of Joseph Smith. The church's major theologians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries expanded upon this foundation as they drew out the implications of traditional Mormon doctrines.[94] They articulated and explained the ideas that were implicit in Smith's teachings.[95]

Neo-Absolutist Mormonism

Since the 1950s, a new theological movement has arisen in Mormonism.[96] It is both a scholarly and popular movement that has attempted to return the Mormon church

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[92]Not all of Smith's new doctrines were accepted by every Mormon. When it became apparent that his successor, Brigham Young, would continue this new theological direction, many small groups began to leave the church. Tanner noted that doctrinal disputes encouraged some people to leave the church: "The death of Joseph Smith in 1844 produced another flurry of new groups seeking to take advantage of the loss of the church's leader. There were people in these organizations who agreed that Joseph Smith had been a true prophet, although many of them rejected or ignored some of the doctrines or practices he had established." Martin S. Tanner, "Schismatic Groups," in *EM*, 3:1265.

[93]Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 19.

[94]Edwards listed these theologians as Parley Pratt, Charles Penrose, B.H. Roberts, and James Talmage. Edwards, "Persistences that Differ," 43; other theologians like John Widtsoe, Matthias F. Cowley, Lorenzo Snow, and Orson F. Whitney were also traditional Mormons.

[95]Sometimes the oral teachings of Smith upon which these men relied have been lost. Dean C. Jesse described how it was possible for this loss to occur in a church that treasured Smith's words and sought vigorously to preserve them. He estimated that less than one tenth of Smith's spoken words were actually recorded. Dean C. Jesse, "Priceless Words and Fallible Memories: Joseph Smith as Seen in the Effort to Preserve His Discourses," *Brigham Young University Studies* 31 (1991): 23.

[96]It would be possible to subdivide neo-absolutism into two periods. The teachings of Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie would represent an *initial* period of neo-absolutist doctrinal development that spanned from the 1950's to 1980's. More recent generations of neo-absolutists have built upon the views of Smith and McConkie, yet their doctrines have become even more radically different from traditional Mormonism than the views of their predecessors. Stephen E. Robinson and Robert L. Millett are examples of these newer neo-absolutists.

to the early teachings of Joseph Smith. Neo-absolutist theologians firmly believe that Mormon doctrine has always remained the same and has never varied.[97] As a result, they discount any past traditional Mormon teaching as the misguided, private interpretations of individual Mormons. Even if a president of the church taught one of these traditional doctrines, their words are still considered unimportant.[98] These theologians are correct in recognizing that if LDS theology has genuinely changed over time, this transformation would undermine the church's proud and exclusive claim to have the fullness of the gospel.

Doctrinally, neo-absolutism "emphasizes man's contingency, the creation of man as a conscious entity and God's absoluteness and complete otherness in contrast to traditional Mormon thought."[99] It is also characterized by a rejection of the traditional Mormon view of faith and reason. Most neo-absolutist Mormons do not feel compelled to reconcile their more absolute views of God with the pluralistic metaphysics espoused by Joseph Smith.[100] Tickemyer viewed this movement as a reaction to a historical overemphasis within the church on the "anthropomorphic polytheism" within Mormon

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[97]The reason why "neo-absolutism" was chosen to describe this period of Mormon doctrine will be shown in chapter four.

[98]Millet, "Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism," 50-51; for example, McMurrin's 1959 book, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, was an insightful and valuable examination of the theologically liberal and radical views at the heart of Mormonism. He believed that these views were the solution to many of the problems of contemporary religion. His book resulted in "a congratulatory letter from church president David O. McKay and sharp criticism from McKay's conservative second counselor – J. Reuben Clark." L. Jackson Newell, "Introductory Essay," in *The Theological Foundations if the Mormon Religion*, v-xiii (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000). The two reactions to the book predictably varied since McKay was a traditional Mormon, and Clark was a neo-absolutist Mormon.

[99] Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence," 42.

[100]Robinson did not see any need to respond to his critics' philosophical objections to his belief in an infinite God. "If some whiz kids want to attempt to explain their philosophical objections to me, I shall be amused at the prospect of finite theologians telling an infinite God what he can or cannot be or do." Blomberg and Robinson, "Sizing up the Divide," 175-76.

doctrine.[101] This movement has placed an emphasis on the earlier writings of Joseph Smith contained in the Book of Mormon instead of his later canonical writings and his later sermons like the King Follett Discourse.[102] Neo-absolutism has not been without Mormon critics. McMurrin sharply criticized it as a type of "Jansenist movement" which betrays the "dominant character not only of the Mormon theology but also of the Mormon religion."[103]

In order to demonstrate the existence of unresolved tensions in Mormon doctrines, five doctrinal areas will be examined. The survey of these doctrines will show that the church has held different views during the periods of early, traditional, and neo-absolutist theology. These differences are substantial and many of these views are directly contradictory toward each other. This analysis will disprove the common Mormon assumption that the LDS church possesses a historical doctrinal unity.[104]

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[101]Tickemyer, "Joseph Smith and Process Theology," 75.

[102]Millet, *The Mormon Faith*, 170; also see McMurrin, *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, 67-8; White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, 139-40. Evangelical scholar James White notes that it is the *Doctrine and Covenant* rather than the Book of Mormon which has had the greatest influence on the majority of traditional Mormon doctrines. White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?*, 58.

[103]McMurrin, *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, 67-68.

[104]Millet, "Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism," 66.

CHAPTER 3

OMNISCIENCE

The Mormon church has emphasized the importance of the doctrine of God since its inception. Among the truths that the church claimed were lost during the apostasy were important truths about God's being.[1] Joseph Smith believed that unless he had restored the truth about God's nature, no one would be able to express the true faith in God necessary for salvation. Similarly, the *Lectures on Faith* taught that faith in God required that people have "a correct idea of his character, perfections, and attributes."[2] Like other doctrines, the Mormon view of omniscience has changed over time due to the underlying tensions between absolute and finite conceptions of God. Despite the importance that Mormon leaders have attached to understanding the true nature of God, unresolved tensions remain in the LDS doctrine of God, including the divine attribute of

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[1]In the King Follett Discourse, Joseph Smith described the ignorance of men concerning God and proclaimed his ability to correct it: "There are but a very few beings in the world who understand rightly the character of God. The great majority of mankind do not comprehend anything, either that which is past, or that which is to come, as it respects their relationship to God." *DJS*, 32. He staked his reputation as a prophet on his ability to teach God's nature correctly (Ibid., 34). More recently, Bruce R. McConkie taught that "if the doctrine setting forth the nature and kind of being God had had not been restored we would be worshipping cows or crocodiles or cedar posts or unknown spirit essences -- all to no avail." Bruce R. McConkie, "Doctrinal Restoration," in *Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., The Religious Studies Monograph Series 12 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 8; also see B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Van der Donckt Discussion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 212.

[2]*LF* 3:4. Joseph Smith linked the knowledge of God's character with salvation in the King Follett Discourse (*DJS*, 33).

omniscience.[3] Mormon theologians have never been able to resolve permanently the issue of whether God possesses exhaustive foreknowledge.

The Early Mormon View of Omniscience

The earliest Mormon view of omniscience was indistinguishable from the historical Christian view that God has all knowledge of the past, present, and future. God's nature was viewed as absolute, infinite, and unchanging; therefore, he necessarily possesses perfect, unlimited knowledge. The early Mormon canon and the teachings of the early LDS leaders supported this view of exhaustive foreknowledge. Both implicitly and explicitly, the church taught that God's omniscience was complete.

The Early Mormon Canon

The earliest revelations of the church taught the immutability of the nature of God. For example, 1 Nephi 10:18 taught that regarding God's nature, "he is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Doctrine and Covenants 20:17 reiterated that "he is the same God yesterday, today, and tomorrow.[4] Early Mormons concluded from these passages the since God never changes, his knowledge must be unlimited. Their conclusion was supported by several passages that explicitly taught God's complete

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[3]Many scholars, both LDS and evangelical, recognize that two views of divine knowledge have existed within the LDS church. See James Gary Bergera, "Does God Progress in Knowledge?," *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1982): 179; Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books 2001), 27; David L. Paulsen, "Omnipotent God; Omnipresence of God; Omniscience of God," in *EM*, 3:1030; James R. Harris, "Eternal Progression and the Foreknowledge of God," *Brigham Young University Studies* 8 (Autumn 1967): 37; Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish, *The Mormon Concept of God* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 41; Stephen E. Parish and Carl Mosser. "A Tale of Two Theisms: The Philosophical Usefulness of the Classical and Mormon Concepts of God," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 202.

[4]This same idea of immutability was also taught in Moroni 9:9; 10:9, 2 Nephi 2:4; 27:23; 29:9-10.

knowledge of past, present, and future events. For example, 2 Nephi 9:6 declares that "The Lord knoweth all things from the beginning." This traditional view of omniscience was also taught in the Words of Mormon 1:7 and Doctrine and Covenants 20:17.

The Teachings of Early Mormon Leaders

The sermons and writings of the earliest Mormon leaders show that they built upon the canonical teachings regarding omniscience.[5] Joseph Smith's early public teachings emphasized the absolute nature of God. He warned his followers against yielding to the sinful "constitutional disposition of mankind to set up bounds to the works and ways of the Almighty."[6]

Regardless of its authorship, the *Lectures on Faith* expressed similar views on the absolute nature of God. As such, it demonstrates the commitment of early Mormon leaders to an absolutist view of God's attributes and to the importance of correctly understanding his character. The *Lectures on Faith* taught that in God "all fulness and perfection dwell; who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent."[7] Lecture four specified that God's knowledge is of "all his works from the beginning of the world."[8] This divine foreknowledge does not progress or advance because God's attributes can

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[5]Ostler noted that before 1835, the church retained the absolutist doctrines of traditional Christianity because "the saints assumed the usage and meaning" of the previous centuries of Christian theologians. Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1982): 60.

[6]*HC*, 5:529.

[7]*LF*, 2:2.

[8]*LF*, 4:5.

never change.[9] The security of the saints' salvation depended upon God's limitless knowledge:

> Without the knowledge of all things God would not be able to save any portion of his creatures; for it is by reason of the knowledge which he has of all things, from the beginning to the end, that enables him to give that understanding to his creatures by which they are made partakers of eternal life; and if it were not for the idea existing in the minds of men that God had all knowledge it would be impossible for them to exercise faith in him.[10]

Eugene England noted that the *Lectures on Faith* used the traditional Christian concepts of omniscience and omnipotence. They reflect "a very early state" of LDS doctrine. England hypothesized that if the lectures had been written at a later date, then the traditional terms of omniscience and omnipotence would have been "qualified" or else the unique Mormon interpretation of these terms would have been included.[11]

Joseph Smith's brother, Hyrum Smith, was a major figure in the early church. He carried many titles including apostle, assistant president, associate president, and patriarch of the church. He forcefully proclaimed the necessity of faith in God's full knowledge of all things. He stated that "I would not serve a God that had not all wisdom and all power."[12] Similarly, W. A Cowdery, an editor of the Mormon periodical *Messenger and Advocate*, described God as "a great First cause, prime mover, self-

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[9]"For God never changes, therefore his attributes and character remain forever the same" (LF 4:19). In the same lecture, it was argued that the Latter-day Saints' faith in God's unchanging character parallels the faith of the former-day Saints. This demonstrates that the comprehensive omniscience taught in the traditional Christian canon was understood and accepted by the early LDS church.

[10]*LF*, 4:11.

[11]Eugene England, "Perfection and Progression: Two Complementary Ways to Talk about God," *Dialogue* 29 (Summer 1989): 33. England does not use the terms early and traditional Mormonism, but his observation regarding the early state of LDS doctrine reflected in the *Lectures on Faith* supports the idea that traditional Mormonism held a different view of omniscience than the earliest Mormon view.

[12]*HC*, 6:300. Hyrum Smith made this statement in the context of proclaiming that "our Savior is competent to save all from death and hell."

existent, independent, and all wise being whom we call God."[13] Orson Pratt believed firmly in the early LDS view of God's omniscience both while it was the popular teaching of the church and later during the ascendancy of the traditional Mormon view of qualified omniscience. He taught that the father and the son have "a fullness of happiness, a fullness of power, a fullness of influence."[14]

Similarities to Protestant Views

Many of the early converts to Mormonism came from traditional Christian denominations. They carried into the LDS church the truths about God that they had held before joining the church. They were able to retain many of their traditional Christian beliefs about the nature of God for the first few years of the church. Allen concluded that regardless of their original Protestant denomination "converts to Mormonism in the early and mid 1830s would find little if any discomfort with the concept of God set forth in the teachings of their new religion."[15] Even when Smith began privately contemplating the deeper implications of his revelations and teaching them to the LDS leadership, most Mormons continued to retain their absolutist conceptions of God. The more controversial

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[13]Warren A. Cowdery, "Letter Number 2," *Messenger and Advocate* 1, (May, 1835), in LCL, 113.

[14]*JD*, 21:259. Orson Pratt's life and teachings illustrate the truth that even though early Mormonism can be dated from 1830-1835, early Mormon views continued unofficially in the LDS church after 1835 through a few leaders like Pratt who resisted the developing views of traditional Mormonism. There is a sense in which the neo-absolutist LDS views which now dominate the church are a continuation of the early LDS views retained by Orson Pratt and others who never fully embraced the views of traditional Mormonism.

[15]James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 47.

"doctrines advanced by Joseph Smith in the 1840's and built upon in later years by other church leaders" had not yet emerged.[16]

Early Mormonism emphasized the free will of human beings. This "free agency" was an irrevocable gift from God. The Mormon canon taught a libertarian view of freedom: "Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh . . . . And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil."[17] This view of freedom was common in many of the Christian denominations in the same time period. The LDS view of free agency was also similar to the form of perfectionism found among the Methodist and the Disciples of Christ denominations.[18] While this early view of omniscience was close to the traditional Christian view, newer revelations received by Joseph Smith beginning in 1833, and his reflection upon their implications began shifting the LDS doctrine of omniscience soon after 1835.[19]

The Traditional Mormon View of Omniscience

Joseph Smith's theology was dynamic. This was consistent with his view of continuing revelation. Since he believed that God was constantly revealing more truth to the church, he was prepared to change his views when he received newer revelations. The

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[16]During the early years of the church, the critics of the LDS church were numerous. While they voiced many complaints against Smith and his teachings, they did not attack his views of God's nature. Ibid. This is another indication that the LDS views of God's nature were initially similar to the other denominations.

[17]2 Nephi 2:27. Ostler noted that "the Mormon scriptures provide an excellent discussion of the nature of free agency which assumes libertarian free will. The *locus classicus* for the Mormon understanding of free will is the Book of Mormon itself." Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Though*, 201, 208.

[18]Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," *Sunstone* 22 (1999): 17.

[19]See D&C, 93:29

new theological views that emerged in Smith's teachings after 1835 and which served as the basis for traditional Mormonism were necessary in order to remain consistent with the newer revelations. Instead of continuing to retain an absolute conception of God, Smith began a process of developing unique LDS views of God's attributes. These new views of God's nature arose out of his reflections upon a new, lofty view of humans. He changed his view of humans from finite creatures to co-eternal, necessary beings that exist alongside God. He also developed the idea that humans can become Gods and that God was once a man. After his death, Mormon leaders like Brigham Young took the seeds of the prophet's new theological direction and developed them into the traditional Mormon view of omniscience.

Greater Emphasis on Free Agency

The high value placed upon free agency in early Mormonism increased significantly in traditional Mormonism. Not only was agency inviolable, but it was eternal. The intelligences, which form each person, have always existed and they have the same eternal, necessary status as God:

> Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be . . . .For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy.[20]

During the same period of time, Mormonism abandoned the vestiges of original sin contained in the Book of Mormon. This was a shift away from viewing each person as "carnal, sensual, devilish" to viewing each person as a being who has "the power to

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[20]D&C 93:29, 33. This revelation was received in May 1833. It was revelations like this one which laid the groundwork for Smith's shift in theology. He began to recognize the implications of the necessary, eternal existence of intelligence. God could not be completely absolute, as envisioned in historical Christian theology and early Mormonism, if his existence was co-eternal with intelligence.

control his thoughts" and who possesses the unrestricted, neutral freedom "to select the course in life he wishes to pursue."[21]

Traditional Mormonism taught that human beings were noble, free, and even necessary in their existence. In light of these new truths, it was natural that the absolutist view of God's omniscience was diminished. Out of respect for eternal free agency, God *would not* coerce human behavior.[22] In fact, God *could not* violate libertarian human freedom without ceasing to be God.[23] Brigham Young taught that humans had the same freedom as God and that their freedom is based upon the same eternal laws:

> . . . but we are just in the position and condition, and upon precisely the same ground that God our Father is -- He cannot force his children to do this, that or the other against their will - the eternal laws by which he and all others exist in the eternities of the Gods, decree that the consent of the creature must be obtained before the Creator can rule perfectly. . . The consent of the creature must be had in these things . . .[24]

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[21]Mosiah 16:3; also see Howard W. Hunter, *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter: Fourteenth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints*, ed. Clyde J. Williams, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 79.

[22]B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Company, 1994), 4:29-30; Also see Hunter, 76, 78, 80; John S. Welch, "Law: Overview," in *EM*, 2: 808. White observed that although LDS scripture and literature contains many references to free agency as the "gift of God," this agency is not really a gift because it was possessed by all intelligences independent of God from eternity past. It is a gift only in the sense that God helps intelligences to maintain this ontologically necessary part of their being. O. Kendall White, Jr., *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 75.

[23]Brigham Young taught this repeatedly in his sermons. See *JD*, 11:272.

[24]*JD*, 15:134; B. H. Roberts also taught the absolute free agency of humans. He placed only two limits on human volition. First, each person has an internal weakness that requires divine assistance. Second, because God's help is required, each person is not the sole creator of himself or herself. Humans are co-creators of themselves along with God. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology,* 2:24-25. Bohn concluded, "On the concept of agency depends Mormonism's explanation of the nature of God, humankind, good and evil, and since Mormons expect to be doing more than merely adoring God in the hereafter – the future of humanity and the universe (David E. Bohn, "Freedom," in *EM*, 2:525); also see Paul M. Edwards, "Persistences that Differ: Comments on the Doctrine of Man," *Sunstone* 5 (September-October 1980): 48. Stott noted the similarities between existential and LDS views of human beings. Michelle Stott, "Of Truth and Passion: Mormonism and Existential Thought," *Dialogue* 22 (Winter 1989): 83-84.

Eternal Progression of God and Man

In his famous King Follett Discourse, Smith taught that God was once a man and that humans could become gods.[25] For traditional Mormons, this implied that God himself might still be progressing in knowledge. According to Brigham Young, God's current knowledge of temporal, earthly things is based on his past experience as a mortal on another earth. Because of this experiential knowledge of life, he can relate to human beings because "has had a body and been on earth."[26]

LDS president Hugh Brown informed the church that God's existence is similar to the existence of finite human beings. He is not an "absolute being";

> Like us, he exists in a world of space and time. Like us, he has ends to be achieved, and he fashions a cosmic plan for realizing them. He is a concrete, living person, and though in our finite state we cannot fully comprehend him, we know that we are akin to him, for he is revealed to us in the divine personality of his Son Jesus Christ.[27]

Because the universe is full of eternal free agents, God could not have foreknown and decreed all things in advance. In the traditional Mormon view, any form of predestination or any form of exhaustive foreknowledge would make him static and stale rather than dynamic and living. Some modern LDS scholars have concluded that for Mormonism, the future is an open adventure for God and man.[28]

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[25]*DJS,* 340.

[26]*JD,*4:272.

[27]CR, April 1964, 83.

[28]Harris argued that "Mormon theology includes the concept that we can progress eventually to godhood. Adventure is only another name for that struggle for progress. Risk willingly taken is what free agency is all about – to allow us to gain the capacity and the initiative to become gods. We cannot become adults, let alone gods, if we expect to be divinely coddled." John S. Harris, "Risk and Terror," *Dialogue* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 155. A LDS philosopher noted that God waits to discover what each individual will choose to become because "the future is genuinely open and as yet undecided and therefore truly up to us to declare to God who we will be." Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 307-08.

Foreknowledge Based upon Acquaintance

The shift from the early Mormon view of God as an absolute being to a finite being provided LDS theologians with the key for consistently teaching divine foreknowledge while rejecting foreordination. They reformulated the idea of omniscience by changing their view of how God learns about the future.[29] God's omniscience was no longer based upon an absolute, infinite nature. His knowledge now arose from empirical observation. God has a prolonged acquaintance with his spirit children that allows him to know their decisions in advance:

> Our Heavenly Father has a full knowledge of the nature and dispositions of each of His children, a knowledge gained by long observation and experience in the past eternity of our primeval childhood; a knowledge compared with which that gained by earthly parents through mortal experience with their children is infinitesimally small. By reason of that surpassing knowledge, God reads the future of a child and children, of men individually and of men collectively as communities and nations; He knows what each will do under given conditions, and sees the end from the beginning.[30]

God planned the course of the world based upon what each person would choose in particular situations. Brigham Young taught that millions of years before

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[29]From its beginning, Mormonism has rejected predestination. Belief in predestination could have never flourished in Mormonism because the Mormon canon teaches that predestination was the evil idea of Satan. Moses 4:1-4 records that Satan made a proposal to the Father to save all human being by removing their free agency. All spirit children could have been saved, but the cost would have been the loss of their free agency. The rejection of Satan's proposal led to his rebellion against God, after which he and the intelligences who followed him were cast down from heaven (D&C 29:36-37; 76:25-38). Also see Chauncey E. Riddle, "Devils," in *EM*, 1:379; James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission according to Holy Scriptures both Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1990), 8, 15: David E. Bohn, "Freedom," in *EM*, 2:525; Apostle LeGrand Richards, "The Third Article of Faith," in *Our Prophets and Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Instructor, 1956), 18. Jesus' plan to save humans through free agency was accepted, and as a result he was able to preserve their agency. Brigham Young, *JD* , 3:81; also see LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1950), in LCL, 275. Traditional Mormons rejected predestination even more firmly than early Mormons because they rejected the idea of exhaustive divine foreknowledge.

[30]James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1958), in LCL, 20; Also see Harris, "Eternal Progression," 42.

people are born, God knows their choices.[31] Abraham 3:22-28 taught that God chose the prophets and earthly rulers from among the intelligences who were the "noble and great ones." The knowledge gained from empirical observation of the intelligences governed his selection of great saints like Adam and Abraham.[32] Traditional LDS theologians concluded that character traits such as nobility and greatness must have been developed by individual intelligences during premortal life.[33] Gayle Brown noted that "to the Latter-day Saints, premortal life is characterized by individuality, agency, intelligence, and opportunity for eternal progression."[34] These noble intelligences retain their free agency

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[31]Since God learns through a process of observation which occurs over time, and the Mormon God himself is in time, God may have possessed the knowledge "millions of years before this world was formed, that Pharaoh would be a wicked man," but there was a definite point in time at which he gained this knowledge. (Brigham Young, *JD*, 7:290). It is clear that the traditional Mormon view of omniscience based upon prolonged acquaintance was radically different from the historical Christian view of omniscience. One evangelical scholar has defined omniscience as the fact that "God knows himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and eternal act." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 190. While the absolutist language about God in early Mormonism might have fit this definition, traditional Mormonism affirmed neither the simplicity of God's knowledge nor its eternality.

[32]Some contemporary Mormon theologians and philosophers have concluded that there was a contradiction inherent in this traditional Mormon approach to omniscience. Ostler argued that God's acquaintance with intelligences could not have provided him with perfect knowledge of their future actions even though Mormon theologians like Talmage believed that God could know perfectly what each person would choose. Ostler noted that that this certainty of knowledge contradicts the strong Mormon commitment to libertarian freedom. In the libertarian view of freedom, past actions and character cannot guarantee future actions. Ostler wrote that "libertarianism of any stripe requires that there are at least two possible futures open to our free acts" and that "Talmage's explanation of how God knows the future entails a certain type of character determinism." Ostler T. Blake, "Mormonism and Determinism," *Dialogue* 32 (Winter 1999): 46. Some contemporary traditional Mormons like Ostler believe that God cannot know the future perfectly. Their view of the future as undetermined is similar to open theism.

[33]Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, 277-78; Also see *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, 1978), 10; Hunter, *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, 288.

[34]Gayle Oblad Brown, "Premortal Life," in *EM*, 3:1123-25. On the subject of premortal intelligences, President Joseph Fielding Smith taught, "They may have all had an equal start . . . but the right of free agency which was given to them enabled some to outstrip others, and thus, through eons of immortal existence, to become more intelligent, more faithful." Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:58.

and therefore retain the ability to reject their premortal callings during mortal life. Even Joseph Smith could have fallen away from his divine calling.[35]

Eternal Environment of God

The traditional LDS view of God accepted the existence of eternal entities that were co-eternal with God. This corresponded to a shift in emphasis in the church from the Book of Mormon to the Doctrine and Covenants.[36] This change was necessary because the more absolutist conceptions of God found in the Book of Mormon did not fit smoothly with the new theological developments within traditional Mormonism. In contrast, the Doctrine and Covenants, especially the later portion of it, was consistent with the emerging finite view of God. Based upon revelations such as Doctrine and Covenants 93:23-29,130:20, and Joseph Smith's later sermons, traditional LDS theologians recognized that God exists eternally in relationship with intelligences, time, space, matter, and laws. Apostle John A. Widtsoe described these eternal entities.

> The phenomena of the universe result from the interaction of *matter*, *energy,* and *intelligence*. These *fundamental, universal elements* are forever acting upon one another to produce the infinite variety of the universe. Nevertheless, space is not filled with disorder; chaos does not prevail. On the contrary, the universe, so far as known, is essentially orderly. It is filled with intelligence, which itself operates through the *law of cause and effect*. Under like conditions, the same cause will forever give the same effect. Therefore, where like conditions are permanently operating, like results will always be found. This *law* lies at the foundation of the orderliness of nature.[37]

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[35]The LDS church publication *Gospel Principles* teaches that "everyone is free on earth to accept or reject his calling" (*Gospel Principles*, 10, 17); similarly, Ostler interpreted D&C, 3:9 to mean that God's foreordination of leaders is conditional and contains the possibility that God might have to revise the divine plan if a leader falls away from his calling. Ostler, "Mormonism and Determinism," 49.

[36]James R. White, *Is the Mormon My Brother? Discerning the Differences between Mormonism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), 58.

[37]John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft 1937), in LCL, 13-14 (emphasis mine).

Different Responses to the Mormon Metaphysics

The newer revelations in the later portion of the canon committed Mormonism to a belief in an eternal external environment for God, reinforced its rejection of *creation ex nihilo*, and steered the doctrine of God away from absolute conceptions and toward finitist theology. This shift was beginning to occur at the time of Joseph Smith's death. Because the implications of this metaphysical view were developed in influential, yet "unofficial" doctrinal works after the death of Smith, not all Mormons have embraced the views of traditional Mormonism. McMurrin noted that although "the Mormon doctrine that God is finite comes from the revelatory pronouncements of Joseph Smith," he did not fully explain the implications of his newer finitist theology.[38] If Smith had lived longer, then the church would have made an irrevocable break from early Mormon doctrines. Because his death prevented him from completing the shift, a few LDS scholars in the church after 1844 and some modern scholars have continued to "employ the terminology of absolutistic theology within non-absolutistic metaphysical contexts."[39]

After Smith's death, most leaders of the LDS church accepted the implications of the eternal environment of God and the eternal progression of God and man. Traditional Mormons like Brigham Young, James E. Talmage, John A. Widtsoe, and B.H. Roberts led the church to develop a finitist theology that included limitations on God's knowledge and power. Their views dominated the church from 1844 to the 1950s. Clark observed that this tradition is the "broad center of Mormonism both historically and

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[38]Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 106.9.

[39]Ibid.

presently."[40] Ostler described the Mormon view of God as a "finitistic theology" in which "man, like God, in His primal nature, could choose to become gods."[41]

God's Progression within the Universe

Traditional Mormons recognized the implications of the distinct LDS metaphysics; therefore, they defined God's knowledge differently from early Mormons. They concluded that if God possessed all knowledge, then he would be the sole, static being in a continually progressing universe. Brigham Young taught that human beings will not reach a maximal state of knowledge and power because all intelligences must continue to either progress or regress. Human intelligence will always be able to increase. Young based his belief in this limitless progression of knowledge upon an eternal law that "all organized existence is in progress, either to an endless advancement in eternal perfections or back to dissolution."[42] Young did not exclude God from the necessary progression of all intelligences. Elder Hugh Brown proclaimed an expansive view of God and men progressing together:

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[40]Marden J. Clark, "Some Implications of Human Freedom," *Dialogue* 5 (Summer 1970): 50. Neo-absolutist Mormonism was already beginning to emerge in the church at the time of Clark's article. In the contemporary church, it is neo-absolutism that dominates the church instead of traditional Mormonism. Traditional Mormon beliefs continue to survive and thrive in the broader LDS scholarly community which publishes scholarly works in unofficial, outside journals.

[41]Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 71-73. Traditional Mormonism developed views that in some aspects resemble process theology. Tickemyer made a strong case for the congruence between LDS theology and process theology. Garland E. Tickemyer, "Joseph Smith and Process Theology," *Dialogue* 17 (Autumn 1984): 77; also see Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 122.

[42]*JD,* 1:349-350. The argument that all beings must either progress or regress was made repeatedly by traditional Mormons. Since no being is exempt from this law, traditional Mormons assumed that God must be continually progressing. President McKay taught this principle: "Stop progressing and you retrogress." David O. McKay, *Pathways to Happiness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1957), in LCL, 292; also see Apostle Charles W. Penrose, *What Mormons Believe: Epitome of the Doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1900), 8.

> For Mormonism the world is uncreated, and God and men are winning mastery over other uncreated elements. God has become a demiurge once again, which means one who works on existing material, a craftsman. All that is, is in process, and it is a process that is marked by two main characteristics: It is becoming increasingly more complex, and intelligent beings, God and men, are collaboratively gaining increasing mastery over it.[43]

Since progression is the goal of existence, the greatest tragedy that could be experienced is to be denied the opportunity to progress. The ultimate punishment that God gave to Satan and demons and will give to unrepentant humans who have committed the unpardonable sin is to deny them the ability to progress. Because of this punishment, they are continually in a state of deterioration.[44] B. H. Roberts argued that the traditional Catholic and Protestant view of God as outside of time is errant because when Jesus grew in wisdom as recorded in Luke 2:52, this was "a succession of time with God – a before and an after."[45] Traditional Mormon theologians noted that even if God had somehow reached a point where he transcends time, he was once in time in the same way as humans are now in time.[46]

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[43]CR, April 1956, 105. There is an irony in the traditional LDS view of the eternal and uncreated elements whose existences are independent of God. Mormon theologians have always criticized traditional Christianity for its alleged acceptance of pagan Hellenistic philosophy; however, traditional Mormonism portrayed God as a Platonic demiurge and craftsman working with eternal elements.

[44]Brigham Young taught that only the sons of perdition will cease to progress. "That is the time when a person will cease to learn, and from that time forth, will descend in ignorance, forgetting that which they formerly knew, and decreasing until they return to the native element, whether it be one thousand or in one million years, or during as many eternities as you can count. They will cease to increase, but must decrease, until they return to the native element. These are the only characters who will ever cease to learn, both in time and eternity" (*JD*, 3:203).

[45]Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 96.

[46]Kent E. Robson, "Time and Omniscience in Mormon Theology," *Sunstone* 5 (May-June 1980): 23.

Mormon leaders also anticipated with joy being able to advance in knowledge and to "develop throughout the eternities that are before us."[47] It was natural for them to assume that God himself must be experiencing the same kind of joy through progression in knowledge. The laws of eternal progression were eternal laws that "extend even up to God Himself."[48] Widtsoe taught that the eternal life which God enjoys and which he offers to humans, also allows each person to enjoy exploring the inexhaustible universe and thereby to gain a never-ending education and never ending advancement.[49]Apostle George Q. Cannon taught that both the Father and the Son endlessly progress in knowledge.[50] McMurrin, a more recent traditional Mormon, claimed that unlike traditional Christianity, Mormonism believes that stability and unchanging reality are found in the "dynamic processes of the universe" rather than in God's nature.[51]

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[47]Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1939), in LCL, 432. Widtsoe himself believed that without the possibility of progress, "life is tasteless." John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation: Aids to Faith in a Modern Day* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), in LCL, 300.

[48]Many scholars consider B. H. Roberts to have been the greatest LDS theologian in the history of the church. He recognized the radical difference between the LDS view of God which he labeled the "Christian" view and the common but erroneous religious sentiment regarding deity: "The Christian idea of God is not that of a being outside the universe, above its struggles, and taking no part in the process, solely exalted, beneficent, self-determined and complete; no, it is also that of a God who loves, who yearns, who suffers, who keenly laments the rebellious and misguided activity of the free agents brought into being by himself as part of himself, who enters into the storm and conflict, and is subject to condition as the Soul of it all: conditions not artificial and transitory, but inherent in the process of producing free and conscious beings, and essential to the full self-development even of Deity" (Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology,* 4:71). He believed that Smith taught this view when he preached that "all the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement and improvement. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge." Traditional Mormons recognized that God could not be static and unchanging if humans and all other intelligences are progressing. *DJS*, 348-49.

[49]John A. Widtsoe, *Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co), in LCL, 202.

[50]George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, ed. Jerreld L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1987), in LCL, 92.

[51]Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1959), 23.

The progressive nature of God and man made the LDS view of a pluralistic universe necessary. Since intelligences can progress eternally, the number of creations in the universe must be infinite so that an infinite number of exalted humans can exercise dominion over them. When he spoke on the plurality of worlds, the cosmology of Brigham Young was expansive.

> I observed this morning that you may take the particles of matter composing this earth, and if they could be enumerated they would only be a beginning to the number of the creations of God; and they are continually coming into existence, and undergoing changes and passing through the same experience that we are passing through.[52]

As eternal learners in an eternally expanding universe, God and man continue to progress eternally in knowledge and power.[53]

Redefining Omniscience

Traditional Mormons retained the scriptural language of omniscience while recognizing that their definition of omniscience differed from traditional Christian definitions. During the years that traditional Mormonism dominated the church, LDS leaders taught that there were definite limits to God's omniscience. It is important to evaluate their understanding of God's knowledge since many neo-absolutist Mormons today argue that any limitation on God's knowledge is abhorrent. They also adamantly deny that the Mormon leaders ever taught what they consider to be an imperfect view of God.

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[52]*JD*, 14:72.

[53]Hyrum L. Andrus, *God, Man, and the Universe,* Foundations of the Millennial Kingdom of Christ, vol.1 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft., 1968), 110.

Brigham Young understood the implications of the eternal progression taught by his predecessor Joseph Smith, especially his later teachings which established traditional Mormonism. Apostle Orson Pratt also revered the teachings of Smith, but he remembered most clearly the earlier absolutist canonical teachings rather than Smith's later teachings. As a result, Young and Pratt reached different conclusions regarding the nature of God and the extent of his knowledge. Young believed that God and man are eternally increasing in knowledge. Apostle Pratt held to the absolute view of God that had characterized early Mormonism. As a result, he taught that God must have all knowledge. Pratt taught that among the Gods in the universe, all of them have the same level of absolute knowledge.

Both men were firmly convinced that they were preserving the tradition of Joseph Smith. Because Joseph Smith was the father of both early Mormonism and traditional Mormonism and his death left the tensions between them unresolved, both men were, in a sense, correct. There were several doctrinal and methodological issues of contention between Young and Pratt. The nature of divine omniscience was one of these areas of disagreement. Privately and publicly, Young rebuked Pratt for his view of omniscience.[54] He respected Pratt's intellect and character but he still opposed his views:

> Some men seem as if they could learn so much and no more. They appear to be bounded in their capacity for acquiring knowledge, as Brother Orson Pratt, has in theory, bounded the capacity of God. According to his theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power; but the God that I serve is progressing eternally, and so are his children: they will increase to all eternity, if they are faithful. But there are some of our brethren who know just so much, and they seem to be able to learn no more.[55]

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[54]Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 64-65.

[55]*JD,* 11:287.

The result of these rebukes of Pratt was that church members concluded that his views were both unofficial and wrong.[56] Under Brigham Young's leadership, the first presidency of the church decided that since they did not "wish incorrect and unsound doctrines" to be taught in the church, Pratt's teachings must be condemned. In 1860, the first presidency officially condemned several of Pratt's views, including the idea that the Father and the Son are not progressing in knowledge and the idea that all of the gods in the universe have the same level of absolute knowledge. They rejected Pratt's teaching by quoting the same words that Joseph Smith himself had spoken of an erroneous doctrine, "it is not true." Then the first presidency issued a warning to other LDS leaders: "This should be a lasting lesson to the Elders of Israel not to undertake to teach doctrine they do not understand."[57] The disagreement with Pratt was significant enough that just five years later, they issued a very similar statement in which they reprinted word for word their

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[56]James G. Berea, "The Orson Pratt/Brigham Young Controversy," *Dialogue* 13 (Summer 1980): 16. Brigham Young was excited about the prospect of being able to learn forever. He anticipated that he would be able to learn thousands of times faster than on earth. Some of his frustration with Pratt came from his belief that Pratt was limiting the eternal progress of humans by limiting God's progress. Both Brigham Young and his Counselor Jedediah M. Grant believed that Pratt's view "lariatted out" God by limiting his ability to gain in knowledge. Grant explained, "Men have to be rewarded according to their works; if a man ceases to work, there is no more blessing for him. He is lariatted out, as Orson Pratt lariatted out the Gods in his theory; his circle is as far as the string extends. My God is not lariatted out" (*JD*, 4:127). Brigham Young recognized that the hope of progression motivated human action. It is "the grand moving principle and cause of the actions of the children of men" (*JD*, 2:91). Orson Pratt had the same hope for accelerated learning after mortal life; however, he denied that God still could progress in knowledge in the same way as humans can progress in knowledge (*JD*, 21:263).

[57]Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Daniel H. Wells, "Instructions to the Saints January 29, 1860," in *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, comp. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965-75), 2:222-23. Also see Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 65-66; some of the other issues that separated Young and Pratt were Pratt's "pantheistic concept of God," their different views of the role of the Mormon canon in the formation of doctrine, and Young's Adam - God doctrine. Ibid., 64-65.

reproof of his teachings.[58] From an official standpoint, the church has never formally revoked this correction of Pratt.

Brigham Young's intolerance of Pratt's view was uncharacteristic of his usual approach to doctrinal issues. Typically, Young demonstrated flexibility in accepting some diversity of views among leaders. He was not quick to condemn the views of other church members even when they disagreed with him. England argued that Young was intolerant of Pratt's view of omniscience because he was passionate about guarding the theological tradition that he had received from Smith:

> But he clearly felt that the idea of eternal progression was indeed the mainspring of all action, including divine action, and that the central concepts he had learned from Joseph concerning progression in both humans and God must be kept alive in the Mormon heritage. He reprinted the "King Follett Discourse" a number of times and referred often to doing and teaching only what he had learned from Joseph. . . . The testimony of many of the Apostles who knew them both -- and who like Brigham were taught and trained by Joseph in a concentrated way in the last two years of his life - was that Brigham Young indeed succeeded in remembering and teaching what Joseph taught.[59]

B. H. Roberts also redefined the Mormon understanding of omniscience. He taught extensively on God's attributes because he believed that understanding the nature of God was essential for the Mormon faith. He defined omniscience as "all-knowing" and cited many Old and New Testament references to God's omniscience.[60] However, he

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[58]Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Daniel H. Wells, "Hearken O Ye Latter-Day Saints August 23 1865," in *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, comp. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965-75), 2: 233-35.

[59]Eugene England, "Perfection and Progression: Two Complementary Ways to Talk about God," *Dialogue* 29 (Summer 1989): 36.

[60]Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4:68.

believed that all divine attributes except eternality were non-absolute and had limitations.[61]

Unlike early Mormons, Roberts did not believe that God's immutability prevented growth in his attributes: "Hence we could not say of God's immutability as we do of his eternity that it is absolute, since there may come change through progress even for God."[62] Since God himself is progressing, divine knowledge must include all knowledge that exists but not all knowledge possible. God can still be correctly described as the "most intelligent of all" because in relation to other intelligences, he is beyond comparison.[63] From the standpoint of humans, he appears to be all knowing, yet from the perspective of eternal progression, he constantly advances in knowledge.[64]

Robert's approach to theology showed two common characteristics of traditional Mormon discussions on God's nature. First, he accepted the canonical scriptures of the church, but was not strictly limited to them. He was also willing to use reason and philosophy to deduce truths about God.[65] Second, Roberts affirmed the truths of the scriptures while limiting their references to the sphere of existence known to

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[61]Ibid., 4:70.

[62]Ibid.

[63]Ibid., 4:18, 19.

[64]Roberts believed that he was teaching a high view of God since in his view, God is not only the most intelligent being, but he is also more intelligent than the sum of all other beings. Ibid.

[65]Barlow has shown how the early Mormon literal interpretations of the Bible and strong reliance upon the canon were not continued in the traditional Mormon Church. Phillip L. Barlow, "The Bible in Mormonism," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1988), 91. Over time the LDS view of the Bible's authority and preeminence diminished. This allowed traditional Mormon theologians to escape the absolutist views of God found in the Mormon canon. Barlow concluded that "while the Bible remained basic to Mormon thought, the trend to limit its authority, muted under Joseph Smith, grew stronger from the 1850's to the 1870's." Ibid., 91. It is clear that this trend continued in the church until it was reversed by the rise of neo-absolutist theology in the 1950s and its calls for the church to return to the canon.

humans. He wrote, "our revelations in the Scriptures – all four books – pertain to our earth, and its heavens; to those intelligences, spirits, men, angels, arch-angels, God, and Gods, pertaining to that order of existence to which we belong . . . . The revelations we have received of God, let it be said again, are local, not absolutely of all existences."[66]

Widtsoe held a similar view of omniscience. For him, the term "infinite" must always be a relative term. Although God is now infinite in knowledge, he arrived at "infinite" knowledge through a process of obedience and progression and he will continue to progress in the same manner.

> One thing seems clear, however, that the Lord who is a part of the universe, in common with all other parts of the universe is subject to eternal universal laws. In some manner, mysterious to us, he has recognized and utilized the laws of the universe of which he is the chief intelligence. Therefore, if the law of progression be accepted, God must have been engaged from the beginning, and must now be engaged in progressive development, and infinite as God is, he must have been less powerful in the past than he is today. Nothing in the universe is static or quiescent.[67]

Genuine progress must include advancement in knowledge and power through trial and error learning.[68] For humans, there is no greater or more intelligent being than God, but this does not imply that he possesses all knowledge, or that he cannot continue to advance in knowledge.[69] He should be honored as the supremely knowledgeable God, yet his knowledge will never cease to continue to increase over time.

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[66]Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 2:133.

[67]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology,* 24-25.

[68]Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation,* 179.

[69]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology,* 67. Like God, humans must be able to advance forever. The ability to "know, think, and act" is eternal. This was the reason why in the traditional Mormon view of heaven, the worship of God was peripheral rather than central. Instead of being glorified through worship, God is glorified when his children, like him, continue to learn eternally. Widtsoe encouraged Mormons to marry in the temple since this would grant them the highest ability to enjoy the kind of eternal increase which God himself enjoys. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation,* 300.

Widtsoe believed that God's work and labors would never cease.[70] The result of God's labors is a further accumulation of knowledge.[71] As a result of his commitment to God's continuing growth in knowledge and power, Widtsoe used absolute terms for God's nature but they were always qualified by the existence of universal laws like eternal progression.[72]

Talmage explained that progression and advancement are not limited to inferior intelligences.[73] For this reason, God must be progressing in knowledge. Similarly, Apostle Penrose made no exceptions to the principle that "progress is the law of the universe, and all beings, all intelligences will have an opportunity of progressing along certain lines."[74] President Cannon also held that "there is no such thing as standing still in the eternal work of God. It is endless progress, progressing from one degree of

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[70]John A. Widtsoe, *An Understandable Religion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1944), 38. One of his arguments for endless learning was that since numbers are infinite, no being could ever know all of the infinite possibilities of numbers. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation,* 182.

[71]For traditional Mormons like Widtsoe, endless divine learning was the reason why they were certain that God would forever retain his status as the most intelligent being. Humans could progress eternally and never surpass God's knowledge since he too was advancing in knowledge.(Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought,* 91). Humans had the possibility of rising to "undreamed of heights, to the very threshold of divinity" without surpassing God (Widtsoe, *An Understandable Religion*, 39). Widtsoe was confident that people could revere and rely upon God as the object of their faith because "God, the Father, the supreme God of whom we have knowledge, is the greatest intelligence in the infinite universe, because he is infinite in all matters pertaining to us and transcends wholly our understanding in His power and wisdom. We know no greater God than the omniscient, omnipotent Father." Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 67.

[72]Alan K. Parrish," Doctrine and Covenants 76 and the Visions of Resurrected Life in the Teachings of Elder John A. Widtsoe," in *Doctrines for Exaltation: The 1989 Sperry Symposium on the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Susan Easton Black et al. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 21.

[73]Talmage concluded that "this conception leads to the inevitable deduction that God Himself, Elohim, the Very Eternal Father, is a progressive Being, eternally advancing from one perfection to another, possessed as He is of that distinguishing attribute, which shall be the endowment of all who attain celestial exaltation - the power of eternal increase." James E. Talmage, "The Philosophical Basis of "Mormonism," *Improvement Era* 18, no. 11 (1915), in LCL.

[74]CR, April 1965, 37.

knowledge to another degree."[75] Several contemporary LDS scholars continue to represent the traditional Mormon view of omniscience. Ostler viewed God's attributes as having an "absolute status" even though the completeness of this status is limited because "it is a relative completion through His power and knowledge."[76] He described the traditional Mormon view of God as a "finitistic theology" in which "man, like God in his primal nature, could choose to become god."[77]

Eugene England and Lowell Bennion viewed the historical Christian attributes of God such as omniscience and omnipotence as foreign to the LDS faith. Bennion distinguished Mormonism from other religions based on its lack of absolutism.

> These religions hold that God is omniscient, omnipotent, absolute, the source of everything that exists. Humanity and earth life are entirely the work of Deity. This view contrasts in almost every particular with the Mormon understanding of God's relationship to humans and the universe.[78]

Diversity in Traditional Mormon Views of Providence

Many traditional Mormon theologians believed in God's meticulous providence over every detail of life and at the same time believed that God had limited

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[75]Cannon, *Gospel Truth*, 92.

[76]Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 90. Ostler also argued that a view of limited omniscience does not violate the requirement set forth in the *Lectures on Faith* that God knows all things. He believed that the lectures do not specify whether "all things" includes future truths that are not yet determined. God must be "a being who can insure our salvation. . . . God need not be the greatest conceivable being; he must, however, be the minimally sufficient ground of faith" (Ibid., 12-13, 73); Also see Harris, "Eternal Progression and the Foreknowledge of God," 43. Roberts also required only that worshippers consider God to be "the supreme governing power in the world pertaining to them." B. H. Roberts, *The Gospel and Man's Relationship to Deity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1965), 107.

[77]Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 72-73.

[78]Lowell Bennion, "A Mormon View of Life," *Dialogue* 24 (1991), 60. Also see Eugene England, "The Good News - and the Bad," review of *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*, by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson," *Brigham Young University Studies* 38

omniscience. They failed to recognize the inherent difficulties in their affirmations of both God's complete control and his incomplete knowledge. They never addressed the issue of how God with his commitment to libertarian freedom would be able to anticipate flawlessly the free will decisions of his children. In their view, God would always achieve his specific purposes. His foreknowledge, rooted in his prolonged acquaintance with his spirit children, was sufficient to ensure that God, although limited in knowledge, was completely in control.[79] Some traditional Mormons reached a different conclusion. They believed that the future was presently undetermined because God logically could not possess foreknowledge of a future that did not yet exist. God knows the general features of the future and masterfully responds to human choices, but his providence is not meticulous because he does not plan every detail. They varied among themselves regarding how much God presently could know about the future and how much of the future was planned in advance. Interpreted in the light of modern models of providence, it is clear that their views ranged between the equivalents of open theism and process theology.

Ostler noted that God's original plan as revealed to Joseph Smith was to build the Mormon temple in Independence, Missouri. The church was unable to complete the temple at that time because religious persecution forced them to move to Nauvoo. In fact, they were never able to complete the temple that God had commanded them to build. Ostler wrote that God's "contingency plan" was necessary to "compensate for wicked

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(1999): 197. Similarly, evangelical scholars object to the use of orthodox Christian terminology by Mormons. See Parish and Mosser, "A Tale of Two Theisms," 203;

[79]Talmage, *The Great Apostasy*, 42.

actions as true choices unfold in a world that is truly open and sometimes different than originally expected."[80]

The Neo-absolutist Mormon View of Omniscience

The Mormon metaphysics in which God has an eternal environment is established firmly in the LDS canon. No Mormon leader denies the eternality of time, space, intelligences, and laws; however, some have denied that these metaphysical truths entail a finite view of God's nature. These neo-absolutists deny that the church ever taught that God's nature has limitations; moreover, they define the divine attributes in terms that resemble the absolute language of early Mormonism. They have embraced a view of God's complete and absolute knowledge of all past, present, and future events.

Neo-absolutism and Early Mormonism

Both early and neo-absolutist Mormons believed that God's knowledge is unlimited; therefore, God cannot progress in knowledge. The significant difference between the two groups is that the early Mormon view of God developed during a time when only the earlier portion of the canon had been received. With the exception of Orson Pratt, the early Mormons taught their absolutist views of God either *before* the newer revelations were received or *before* the implications of the newer revelations were understood.[81] These revelations in the latter portions of the Doctrine and Covenants and

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[80]Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 309. In describing their history, it is common for Mormons to speak of events in ways that imply that future events are conditional, even if they personally do not recognize the implications of their statements. See Hyrum L. Andrus, 1973), 487-88; Lorenzo Snow, *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow: Fifth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), in LCL, 137; Wilson Woodruff, *Collected Discourses Delivered by President Wilford Woodruff, His Two Counselors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others*, ed. Brian H. Stuy (Woodland Hills, UT: B. H. S. Publishing, 1987), 5:2.

the Pearl of Great Price established the unique Mormon metaphysics. Prior to their reception, Mormons believed that God alone was eternal and therefore necessarily unlimited. Neo-absolutist theologians face difficult challenges. Unlike the early Mormon theologians, neo-absolustists must reconcile their views of God's nature both *doctrinally* with the the eternal environment of God and *historically* with the more than one hundred years of traditional Mormon teaching in their church.

Neo-absolutist Mormons teach that God's omniscience is absolute. They claim that the LDS canon, especially the Book of Mormon, supports an unlimited view of divine knowledge. Their commitment to this absolute conception of divine knowledge has forced them to accept at least two untenable methodological strategies. First, it has become necessary for them to espouse the flawed methodology of minimalism in order to ignore the clear teachings of major LDS leaders and theologians during the years of traditional Mormonism. The majority of the church's teachings from 1835 to the 1950's oppose the views of the neo-absolutists.[82] As noted previously, their minimalism labels the majority of these historical teachings of the church as speculative and unimportant.

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[81]It took time for Smith to comprehend the radical nature of some of his new revelations. He also often delayed the public teaching of newer, controversial doctrines. At the time of his death, Smith was still in the process of shifting the church from the absolutist conceptions found in the *Lectures on Faith* to the finitist conceptions established by the King Follett Discourse.

[82]In addition to ignoring the historical teachings of LDS leaders, neo-absolutist Mormons also ignore the views of most of the LDS scholarly community today. Many LDS scholars today still hold the traditional Mormon views because they believe that these views are more intellectually cogent and consistent. The LDS leadership and the popular neo-absolutist theologians in the church routinely ignore their views. For example, Robinson dismissed their views entirely when he referred to them as "whiz kids." He wrote that "I can find no description of God in the standard works as 'finite' . . . . And if some whiz kids want to attempt to explain their philosophical objections to me, I shall be amused at the prospect of finite theologians telling an infinite God what he can or cannot be or do. The doctrine of the Church as stated in its standard works is that God is infinite." Matthew Connelly, Craig Blomberg, and Stephen E. Robinson, "Sizing up the Divide: Reviews and Replies," *Brigham Young University Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 175-76.

Second, neo-absolutist theologians have adopted a different view of faith and reason than the view held previously by the church. Traditional Mormons were confident and proud that their beliefs were logically consistent and completely reconcilable with all the truths of science and reason. Early Mormons and traditional Mormons frequently argued that unlike their true beliefs, Protestant and Catholic views were contrary to science and therefore necessarily false. The current neo-absolutist shift away from reason has been necessary in order for them to deny the logical implications of the eternal environment of God.[83]

The Absolute Omniscience of an Infinite God

Neo-absolutist Mormons base their view of omniscience on God's absolute nature. At some point in eternity past, he was a finite, mortal being, but now he has progressed far enough to become an infinite, absolute being. He cannot progress any further in knowledge since he knows all things past, present, and future.

> Our Father's development and progression over an infinitely long period of time has brought him to the point at which he now presides as God Almighty, He who is omnipotent, omniscient, and, by means of his Holy Spirit, omnipresent: he has all power, all knowledge, and is, through the Light of Christ, in and through all things.[84]

God has reached the end of his long learning process and now possesses all knowledge. Even though he once progressed in knowledge, he has now reached a maximal state of knowledge. Because he has been learning for more than "2,555,000,000 years," his

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[83]It will be argued further in chapter 7 that neo-absolutist Mormonism has altered the LDS view of faith and reason.

[84]Robert L. Millett and Joseph Fielding McConkie, *The Life Beyond* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 148.

knowledge is now limitless.[85] They claim that for a Mormon, the only correct view of such an infinite being is one that affirms his "infinite attributes."[86] His perfection and immutability ensure that there is no deficiency in his knowledge.[87]

LDS President Joseph Fielding Smith linked God's nature to his possession of all knowledge. He has all knowledge because he is infinite and possesses all attributes absolutely.[88] In addition, McConkie believed that "the greatest truth known to man is that there is a God in heaven who is infinite and eternal."[89] President Benson also

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[85]Ibid., 149. A practical consequence of this abandonment of a finite conception of God is that Mormons today are warned against becoming too familiar and casual with God. His absolute nature separates him from humanity and requires a reverent distance. Bruce R. McConkie, *Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), in LCL, 68. McConkie reversed the intension of Joseph Smith, especially as revealed in the King Follett Discourse. Smith wanted his doctrines "to exalt man." *DJS* 346. He labored to show how much God was like man, rather than different from him. "If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible, I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form -- like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man" (Ibid., 340). Millett also instructed Mormons to keep a reverent distance from God. He warned against viewing God as a celestial cheerleader; however, Smith taught that God's highest goal was to assist man's upward climb. "God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself" (ibid., 349). Smith's theology was an effort to humanize God and to achieve a "deification of man," yet these are the very dangers against which Apostle Maxwell warned. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Book Company, 1979), in LCL, 21, 25.

[86]Andrus, *God, Man, and the Universe,* 144.

[87]Ibid., 127. Andrus differed from most neo-absolutist theologians because he believed that truths about future events do not exist yet. Like traditional Mormons, he accepted that God knows all there is to know at any given time about the future. Despite this similarity, he was a neo-absolutist because he refused to redefine omniscience in light of this undetermined future. He repeatedly affirmed that God's omniscience is absolute, not relative. This distinguished him from traditional LDS theologians like Young, Roberts, Widtsoe, and Talmage who recognized the logical implications of eternal libertarian free agency in a future that is still unfolding even for God.

[88]CR, June 1971, 2. Joseph Fielding Smith was a major figure in the development of the neo-absolutist movement. Smith's long tenure as a leader in the church enabled him to spread his views throughout the church and to alter the direction of the church's theology. For over sixty-two years, he served as an apostle, a counselor, and president.

[89]Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies" [on-line]; accessed 28 March 2004; available from http://emp.byui.edu/marrottr/SevenDeadlyHeresies.htm; Internet. McConkie was Joseph Fielding Smith's son-in-law. He was an apostle and a major theologian of the church, and his relationship with Smith increased his influence in the church even more. Together, these two men were major representatives of the growing neo-absolutist movement in the LDS church.

unequivocally proclaimed that God is an "all-knowing, all-powerful being, endowed with all the attributes of perfection."[90]

Specific Rejection of Progression in Knowledge

Neo-absolutist Mormons reject the two interrelated traditional Mormon views that God's knowledge is limited and that he is currently advancing in knowledge. In contrast to Widtsoe who taught that the divine attributes are always relative, Joseph Fielding Smith believed that "*God knows all things* and that *his understanding is perfect, not 'relative.'*"[91] Bergera noted the similarity between this statement by Smith and the teachings of Orson Pratt that were officially condemned.[92] Maxwell believed that the scriptural truth of God's omniscience must be accepted without "adding qualifiers" from extra biblical considerations and concerns.[93] In a similar manner, President Spencer Kimball rejected the limited view of omniscience and taught, "there is no power he does not possess and no truth he does not know."[94] These leaders and theologians frequently cited the church's canon as evidence that absolute omniscience was the only possible

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[90]Ezra Taft Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 4. Like other neo-absolutist Mormons, Benson continued to teach that as "gods in embryo" humans have "unlimited potential for progress and attainment" ibid., 21). These theologians never addressed the glaring issue of how God's progress could cease without humans eventually reaching his level of knowledge.

[91]Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:8. Also see Bergera, "The Orson Pratt/Brigham Young Controversy," 42; Allen D. Roberts, "The Dilemma of the Mormon Rationalist," *Dialogue* 30, no. 4 (1997): 80-81.

[92]Bergera, "The Orson Pratt/Brigham Young Controversy," 42.

[93]Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience*, 7, 14.

[94]CR, May 1997, 49. Also see Robert L. Millet, "The Process of Salvation," in *Salvation in Christ: Comparative Views,* ed. Roger R. Keller and Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005), 172.

LDS view.[95] When confronted with the traditional Mormon view of omniscience, they either ignored it entirely or stated that there was no need to offer rational arguments for their view of omniscience.[96]

The Danger of Divine Progression

Neo-absolutist Mormons believe that their view of omniscience is the *only* acceptable and historical LDS view. All other views of omniscience are at best incorrect and at worse heretical. This opposition to the traditional view of limited omniscience is not new in the church, although it has only become widespread since the ascendancy of neo-absolutism. As early as 1929, B. H. Roberts, Mormonism's undisputed greatest intellectual, encountered opposition from the LDS leadership over his traditional Mormon view of omniscience. There were several different doctrinal issues which were opposed by the leadership and which led them to prohibit the publication of Robert's book *The Truth, the Way, and the Life*. Among the several views that they rejected, they specifically opposed his view of God as progressing in knowledge.[97] Joseph Fielding Smith was part of the committee that opposed the publication of his manuscript.

Joseph Fielding Smith continued to oppose this view of omniscience during his long tenure in the church leadership. Many years after his opposition to B. H. Robert's

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[95]Glenn L. Pearson and Reid E. Bankhead, *Building Faith with the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 94; Robert L. Millet and Noel B. Reynolds, *Latter-Day Christianity: 10 Basic Issues* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Religious Studies Center, 1998), 32.; Bruce R. McConkie, *MD*, 545.

[96]Pearson and Bankhead, *Building Faith with the Book of Mormon*, 95.

[97]Blake T. Ostler, "The Mormon Concept of God," *Dialogue* 17 (Summer 1984): 76. Robert's manuscript was finally published in 1994. See B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, the Life, An Elementary Treatise on Theology: The Masterwork of B. H. Roberts*, ed. Stan Larson (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994).

book, Smith expressed his amazement that some church members would believe the strange doctrine that God progresses in knowledge. He ridiculed this view as the idea of God acting like a cosmic chemist who must learn experimentally in order to gain new knowledge. Smith argued that God must know all things from the beginning and that his knowledge cannot be based upon empirical observation or trial and error learning. He noted that such a finite God might someday err in his experiments and might inadvertently destroy the universe.[98] He concluded that this was a "very dangerous" doctrine rooted only in "man's opinions" rather than in revelation.[99]

In McConkie's most famous sermon entitled "The Seven Deadly Heresies," he identified one of these heresies as the idea that God "has more to learn and new truths to discover."[100] After arguing that God must know all things, he concluded that "unless we know and believe this doctrine we cannot gain faith upon life and salvation." McConkie was unequivocally equating the possession of the correct view of omniscience and salvation.[101] These neo-absolutist theologians believed that their view was the *only* Mormon view. Moreover, unlike traditional Mormons, some neo-absolutist Mormons believe that they attribute to God "every honor, every glory, and perfection that

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[98]Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:7-8, 10.

[99]Ibid., 1:8. Smith's statements are puzzling. Either he was truly ignorant of the views of omniscience held by his predecessors, or he intentionally ignored their teachings. Similarly, his father, Joseph F. Smith, who had also been a president of the church, taught that those who would limit God's knowledge were "ignoramuses" and "learned fools." CR, April 1914, 5.

[100]McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies."

[101]Ibid. Like his father-in-law, McConkie never addressed the existence of the traditional Mormon view of omniscience in the LDS church. Since neo-absolutists have dominated the church since the 1950s, many Mormons are unaware that the view, which McConkie labeled as a heresy, was actually a major teaching of previous generations of LDS leaders. Neo-absolutist Mormons also forget that Pratt's view of God's absolute omniscience was officially rejected and rebuked by the LDS church under the leadership of Young. This censure of Pratt by the first presidency has never been officially reversed.

Evangelicals do."[102] Even though this is an imprecise overstatement of the current doctrinal views of the church, it is true that their views are closer to evangelical views than those of their predecessors.

The Omniscience of a Timelessness God

In the traditional LDS view, God is a being in time. Like every other being in the universe, he experiences a succession of time because the time-space continuum is eternal. In contrast to the traditional view, neo-absolutist Mormons argued for the timelessness of God.[103] Apostle Neal Maxwell clearly articulated this view when he taught on the subject of foreordination.

> Once the believer acknowledges that the past, present, and future are before God *simultaneously* — even though we do not understand how — then the doctrine of foreordination may be seen somewhat more clearly.[104]

For Maxwell, the doctrine of foreordination was a precious but widely misunderstood gospel truth. He argued that Mormons generally ignore the biblical truth of foreordination

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[102]Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *HWD*, 92. Neo-absolutist Mormons view evangelical theology more positively than their predecessors do. They believe that the "divide" between Mormons and evangelicals is narrower than evangelicals will admit. When these Mormons are confronted with traditional Mormon views, they complain that their critics are inaccurately defining LDS views. See Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 13-18, 56-57. Robinson dismisses the teachings of all LDS presidents from the nineteenth century as "homiletic material" with a "distinctly different flavor" than the LDS canon (*HWD* 67-68). Because there is confusion today among Mormons regarding what constitutes doctrine, Mormons are sometimes accused of being deceptive. They are not being deceptive regarding the doctrines taught *today* in the church; however, some of them have been deceptive regarding their doctrinal *history*. One of the weaknesses of neo-absolutism is its intentional or unintentional *amnesia* regarding the long history of traditional Mormon doctrines taught in the church.

[103]Ostler, "The Mormon Concept of God," 75; Robson, "Time and Omniscience in Mormon Theology," 19.

[104]Neal A. Maxwell, "A More Determined Discipleship," *Ensign* 9 (February 1979): 71.

because they fear that it entails predestination. He believed that the idea of timelessness provided the key for affirming foreordination while denying predestination.[105]

Some neo-absolutist Mormons believe that all glorified beings exist outside of time. For these beings, eternity is a time of existence that is separate from the passing of time. It is "one eternal moment."[106] McConkie taught that eternity refers to "spheres of existence outside the realm of time." Beings who have gained eternal life now exist beyond "temporal limitations."[107] An advantage of this view is that it allows neo-absolutists to affirm the canonical teachings that speak of God as eternal or as possessing certain attributes for eternity. As Mormons, they must still affirm God's past progression from finite mortal to an infinite deity even if he no longer progresses in knowledge. McConkie wrote, "eternity becomes a measure of eternal time."[108] Evangelical scholar

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[105]Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience*, 20. He argued that a better understanding of God's absolute knowledge would encourage Mormons to work diligently toward their salvation. Maxwell believed that this timelessness view is the *only* acceptable LDS view. He rejected any views in which God "is constrained by finite knowledge and by time." Ibid. Although the canon taught that God foreordains leaders and prophets, traditional Mormons did not emphasize this doctrine because they understood that God was a temporal being and that any foreordination was conditional. Robson, "Time and Omniscience in Mormon Theology," 19.

[106]Hyrum L. Andrus, *The Glory of God and Man's Relation to Deity* (Provo, UT: Extension Publications of Brigham Young University, 1964), 12.

[107]McConkie, *MD*, 239. Contemporary traditional Mormons are critical of the timelessness view taught by the neo-absolutist theologians. Robson argues that this threatens "the very bulwark of Mormon theology," which is that God and man are similar (Robson, "Time and Omniscience in Mormon Theology," 23). Since in traditional Mormonism, God and man experience time together and man may rise through progression to Godhood, humans are not "radically other than God." Robinson also noted that a timeless God cannot be the LDS God because God's possession of a body entails that he has a "spatio-temporal location." Ibid.

[108]McConkie, *MD,* 240; also see Robert L. Millet, *The Mormon Faith: Understanding Restored Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1998), 168-169; Millet and Reynolds, *Latter-day Christianity*, 22. Another common approach of neo-absolutist Mormons is claiming that eternity refers to aspects of the divine nature that never change such as "His love, constancy, and willingness to bless His people." Ibid., 22.

White defined this Mormon view of eternity as "the period of deification for a particular God."[109]

Divine Progression in Dominion

Neo-absolutist Mormons acknowledged that God's progression is eternal and that he experiences eternal increase; however, they explained that this increase refers to "increasing and advancing his creations, not from new intellectual experiences."[110] In this view, God experiences "eternal family increase."[111] He is glorified when his children are exalted, and since there are no limits to the number of his creations, he can forever receive more glory and dominion.[112] This increase in dominion, rather than knowledge, characterizes his eternal progress.[113]

A consequence of this shift in the way that God's omniscience is viewed is that neo-absolutist Mormons have a different perspective on the reason why God allows trials. In the traditional Mormon view, God tests his children during their mortal lives in order to determine their faithfulness. In their premortal lives, the spirit children had accepted God's plan to exalt them through a time of moral probation on earth. Traditional Mormons never considered the possibility that God knew in advance the outcome of each person's testing, but this is what some neo-absolutists teach. For example, Maxwell

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[109]White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?*, 179.

[110]Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience*, 15. Maxwell was critical of some Mormons who wrongly assumed that eternal progression involves increased knowledge.

[111]Parrish, "Doctrine and Covenants 76 and the Visions of Resurrected Life in the Teachings of Elder John A. Widtsoe." 218.

[112]Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:7, 10.

[113]Millet and McConkie, *The Life Beyond*, 149-150; also see Edwards, "Persistences that Differ," 49; McConkie, *MD*, 238-39.

taught that since God already knows how faithful each person will be, the purpose of moral testing is for each person to learn for themselves the level of their faithfulness.

> God knows beforehand whether we can cope, but we need to know and to be able to have ultimate self-esteem by having overcome before added responsibilities and adventures come to us. God knows the outcome before the trial has begun, but we do not know, and so we must pass through certain experiences.[114]

Unresolved Tensions in the Mormon Doctrine of Omniscience

There are tensions between the early, traditional, and neo-absolutist Mormon views of omniscience. This is significant because while Mormonism claims to have been a restoration of the true knowledge of God, historically the LDS church has not had a single, consistent, permanent view of omniscience. Many contemporary LDS theologians simply ignore the existence of these tensions in the church's doctrine of omniscience. When teaching on the subject of omniscience, they cite only the Mormon canon. Because they have a minimalist methodology, which allows them to ignore the past views of church leaders during the years of traditional Mormon theology, they claim that their view of omniscience is the *only* Mormon view ever held by the church. They have failed to resolve the tensions in this area of Mormon doctrine because they refuse to admit that there are any tensions to resolve. Their approach fails for two reasons.

First, their view cannot explain the doctrinal history of church. The statements of prominent LDS presidents, leaders, and scholars are ignored by their approach to history. Second, their view is not logically consistent. Their metaphysical view is not compatible with their view of absolute omniscience. Early Mormons were able to teach

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[114]Neal A. Maxwell, *Things As They Really Are* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978), in LCL, 88.

the absolute, infinite character of God because they had retained from historic Christianity a finite view of time, space, and the universe. Since that time, the later portions of the Mormon canon have committed the church to a different view of the universe. Logically, the LDS God is necessarily limited in his knowledge by his spatio-temporal location in a universe that he did not create and by the eternal libertarian freedom of intelligences which are themselves eternally necessary beings. This God must progress in knowledge since he cannot know the future perfectly.

Some traditional Mormons approach the issue of omniscience by accepting that Mormonism has never resolved the issue. Others have attempted to reconcile the competing Mormon views. In general, they make use of a method that can be called a two-sphere approach. Harris noted the apparent contradictions between LDS leaders on the issue of omniscience, but he believed that the doctrine of the plurality of gods provided the key to reconciling these divergent statements. He wrote that God "enjoys a perfect union with all the other divine beings through the immensity of space." Even though the God of this world, Elohim, does not possess all knowledge, he can access the divine "storehouse" of knowledge, which contains all the knowledge of the other Gods.[115] Harris argued that sometimes LDS leaders have spoken in terms of the limited knowledge of Elohim and at the other times have spoken in terms of the cumulative, shared absolute knowledge of all the Gods.

England believed that the apparently contradictory statements about omniscience must be understood as references to the two type of knowledge that God has in two different spheres of existence. These two realms of God are simultaneous,

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[115]Harris, "Eternal Progression and the Foreknowledge of God," 45.

complementary modes of existence, the "single sphere mode," and the "multiple sphere mode." He noted the problems that LDS theologians encounter when they try to reconcile Mormon teachings about omniscience. He argued that the teachings of Mormons leaders are contradictory *if* all of the statements were references to the same sphere.[116] England claimed that that these statements were not contradictory because when the prophets spoke of God's absolute, unchanging nature, they were speaking in the "single sphere mode" which refers only to this world and its inhabitants. He reasoned that since all of the revelations given to the church are "local," these leaders were correct from the human perspective and in human experience. In the single sphere mode of existence, God has all knowledge. This meets the requirements of the *Lectures on Faith,* since God can still be the sufficient object of faith.[117]

On the other hand, when the prophets spoke of God's progression in knowledge, they were using the "multiple sphere mode" which refers to the "higher or more advanced" sphere, which is more exalted than this world. In this mode of existence, God is still gaining knowledge in the higher realms.[118] England believed that LDS leaders have always understood the two-sphere approach. Each one of them has chosen to speak in terms of the sphere that was most relevant for needs of their listeners.

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[116]England wrote that "it is difficult to imagine a more stark contradiction in authoritative statements about the Mormon concept of God: Hyrum Smith says that God has all wisdom and power; Brigham Young says that he does not and is progressing in those attributes. How could there be such a dramatic reversal in dogma? Isn't this a simple matter of fact or falsehood? Isn't it certain that either God is perfect, with all knowledge and power, or he is not? How could there be direct opposition at the prophetic level about something so unambiguous and fundamental?" England argued that the LDS church should clarify its two spheres approach to omniscience and even celebrate it. England, "Perfection and Progression" 32.

[117]Ibid.

[118]Ibid., 44.

> Mormon thinkers of various orientations can unite in this task, while continuing to use whichever way of talking about God is more appropriate to what they choose to emphasize in their ongoing struggle to know God: adventure or worship, potential or dependence, progress or perfection, the multiple spheres of our ultimate vision or the single sphere of our immediate concern.[119]

The proposals of Harris and England highlight the difficulty that LDS scholars face when they seek to clarify the church's views on omniscience. There is not *one* Mormon view of omniscience. Instead, there are two contradictory and competing views. Their proposals fail because while some traditional theologians might accept their approach, neo-absolutist Mormons reject this approach because they reject *any* possibility of growth in divine knowledge in *any* sphere. Traditional Mormons who spoke of limited omniscience might have believed in the two-sphere approach although England lacks explicit evidence that they did understand it this way.

The neo-absolutist denial of any growth in God's knowledge is an insurmountable obstacle for these attempts at reconciliation. Neo-absolutist Mormons have vigorously denounced *any* limitations on the divine knowledge as false, wrong, dangerous, and heretical. The two-sphere approach cannot account for the neo-absolutist adamant belief in absolute omniscience. The God envisioned by Harris and England is still the finite God of traditional Mormonism. England conceded this point when he concluded that much to the distress of his followers on earth, God cannot provide a "bulwark against all danger, and frustration, and change, and loss." The future for such a finite God is "ultimately open."[120] This view of God is abhorrent to neo-absolutist theologians.

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[119]Ibid., 46.

[120]Ibid.

There is currently no resolution to the tensions in the Mormon view of omniscience. It seems unlikely that any Mormon leader or scholar will be able to reconcile the statements of LDS leaders and scholars on both sides of this divisive issue. The new, exclusive theological clarity promised by Joseph Smith and his restored church has yet to become apparent in the doctrine of omniscience. It will be shown that Smith also left his followers with confusion regarding the nature of God's power.

CHAPTER 4

OMNIPOTENCE

In his famous King Follett Discourse, Joseph Smith taught the importance of knowing "what kind of a being we have got to worship."[1] He believed that a correct knowledge of the character of God is a necessary requirement for a relationship with him. Smith was also confident that he knew more about God's true nature "than all the world put together."[2] Despite his confidence, Smith left the Mormon church with unresolved tensions in its views of God's nature. As with the doctrine of omniscience, there has been no single, clear Mormon doctrine of omnipotence. Instead, there have been competing views of God's power in early Mormonism, traditional Mormonism, and neo-absolutist Mormonism.

The Early Mormon View of Omnipotence

From 1830 to 1835, the LDS church believed in a God who possessed an absolute nature. The church held this view because its earliest canonical scriptures taught the historical Christian view that God is absolute, infinite, and immutable.[3] In language similar to the Bible, God was described as the sole, absolute source of all that exists.

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[1] *DJS*, 344.

[2] Ibid.

[3] As noted in chapter 2, Mormon theology has oscillated between absolute and finite views of God. Because of these historical shifts between infinite and finite views of God this dissertation refers to the contemporary theological traditional in Mormonism as "Mormon neo-absolutism" rather than the less

This absolute, immutable God possesses omnipotence as part of his attributes. The Book of Mormon referred to God as "the same yesterday, today, and forever" seven times.[4] It also referred to Christ as "the Lord Omnipotent" six times.[5] In addition, God was

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precise term of "Mormon neo-orthodoxy" which was coined by O. Kendall White, Jr. in 1970. See O. Kendall White, Jr., "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," *Dialogue* 5 (Summer 1970): 9-24. Evangelicals typically do not use the term "absolute" to describe the nature of God; however, many Mormon leaders and scholars have using this term to describe the historical Christian view of God's nature. When Mormons use this term, they are referring to the historical Christian view that God is perfect in all of his attribute, infinite in his nature, and unconditioned in his actions.. Many Mormons have wrongly assumed that this idea of God as absolute arose as part of the corruption of Christianity by Hellenistic philosophy during the great apostasy. The terms "absolute" and "absolutist" will be used in this dissertation because of history of these terms in Mormon literature. For example, Blake T. Ostler noted that Joseph Smith's later doctrines were a departure from the historical Christian view: "Joseph's doctrine of the necessary existence of man and rejection of creation *ex nihilo* also had serious logical consequences for his concept of God. In contrast to the *absolute* Being of traditional theology, classically described as static, unconditioned and unrelated, Joseph taught that God was once as man is, had actually become God and that He is conditioned by and related to the uncreated quantities of reality. He also taught that men could become as God." Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1982): 59-78 (emphasis mine). Likewise, Lowell L. Bennion rejoiced in the fundamental difference between Mormonism and other religions: "Most world religions including traditional Christianity begin with the idea that God existed alone. He then created all things – the universe, laws, human beings, and nature *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. These religions hold that God is omniscient, omnipotent, absolute, the source of everything that exists. Humanity and earth life are entirely the work of Deity. This view contrasts in almost every detail with the Mormon understanding of God's relationship to humans and the universe. " Lowell L. Bennion, "A Mormon View of Life," *Dialogue* 24 (1991): 60. Also see John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft 1937), in LCL, 24-25; B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book Company, 1994), 70; O. Kendall White, Jr., "Mormonism – A Nineteenth Century Heresy," *Journal of Religious Thought* 26 (Spring-Summer 1969): 47-48.; idem, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 64-65; Sterling McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 106-09; idem, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 25; idem, "An Interview with Sterling McMurrin: B. Ostler, Interviewer," *Dialogue* 17 (Spring 1984): 36; Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine" *Sunstone* 22 (1999): 17; Marden J. Clark, "Some Implications of Human Freedom," *Dialogue* 5 (Summer 1970): 50; Mark Nolan, "Materialism and the Mormon Faith," *Dialogue* 22 (Winter 1989): 73; Gary James Bergera, "Does God Progress in Knowledge?," *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1982): 181; Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God*)Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), 66, 73; Lannie Rex Sears, "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology" (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard, 1996), 28; David L. Paulsen, "Omnipotent God; Omnipresence of God; Omniscience of God," in *EM*, 3:1030.

[4]Moroni 9:9; 10:19; 1 Nephi 10:18; 2 Nephi 2:4; 27:33; 29:9; 29:10. These seven Book of Mormon references and Doctrine and Covenants 20:12 are the only canonical references to God's immutability in the LDS canon. This is significant because after Doctrine and Covenants 20:12 was received in April 1830, there were no further revelations received which supported the idea of the immutability of God.

[5]Mosiah 3:5; 3:17, 18, 21; 5:2; 5:15.

described twice in the Book of Mormon as being "all-powerful."[6] Despite the prominence of the ideas of immutability and omnipotence in the early Mormon canon, these ideas were completely absent from the portion of the LDS canon that was received after 1831, just one year after the founding of the church. The newer revelations shifted the doctrines of the church resulting in a diminished view of the omnipotence of God and a different understanding of this divine attribute altogether.[7]

The leaders of the early Mormon church also reflected the early canonical teaching of absolute divine power. In 1835, W. A. Cowdery described God in historical Christian terms. He taught that "there is a great first cause, prime mover, self-existent, independent, and all-wise being whom we call God."[8] He taught that Christians should live holy lives separated from the world because God's possesses an absolute nature which includes his immutability.[9]

The *Lectures on Faith* also reflected the earliest theology of the church. Regardless of the issues surrounding the authorship of the lectures, Joseph Smith and the other LDS leaders authorized its publication thereby endorsing its doctrinal teachings regarding the early Mormon view of the nature of God: [10] The *Lectures on Faith* taught

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[6]Jacob 2:5; Alma 44:5.

[7]The phrase "omnipotent" occurred only once in the Doctrine and Covenants and did not occur in the Pearl of Great Price. Further, the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price have no references to God as "all-powerful" or as being "the same yesterday, today, and forever."

[8]Warren A. Cowdery, "Letter Number 2," *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 8 (May, 1835), in LCL, 113.

[9]Ibid.

[10]For the issues surrounding the *Lectures on Faith* and its function in the early LDS church, see Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 70; Leland Gentry, "What of the Lectures on Faith?," *Brigham Young University Studies* 19 (Fall 1978): 5-19; Larry E. Dahl, "Lectures on Faith," in *EM*, 2:818-21; Richard F. Haglund and David J. Whitaker, "Intellectual History," in *EM*, 2:687.

that "God is the only supreme and independent being in whom all fullness and perfection dwell; who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient."[11] It was argued that the salvation of human beings depends upon God's power over everything.[12] Fear instead of faith would characterize the saints if God's power were limited.[13] This omnipotence, like the other divine attributes, must "remain forever the same."[14] These principles from the *Lectures on Faith* echoed the teachings of Smith who preached that a correct view of God's possession of power is essential for the life of a believer. Only those who are foolish enough to "set up stakes for the Almighty" deny omnipotence.[15]Although by the time of his death Joseph Smith had substantially shifted the theological direction of the church, not all Mormon leaders accepted the transition from early Mormon theology to traditional Mormon theology. A few apostles such as Orson Pratt and Charles Penrose continued to teach God's infinite nature despite the newer revelations of Smith and his successors.

Pratt taught that all of the Gods share the "highest degree of glory" which includes "a fullness of power."[16] He argued that intelligences are the eternal, material particles that compose everything in the universe. Even though some of Pratt's contemporaries feared that he was worshipping matter instead of God, he believed that

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[11]*LF*, 2:2.

[12]Ibid., 4:12.

[13]Ibid., 3:19; 4:12.

[14]Ibid., 4:19.

[15]*DJS*, 201. Also see White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, 92.

[16]*JD*, 21:259. Nolan noted that Pratt's insurmountable challenge was to reconcile the early LDS view of God with the "materialistic metaphysics" of the later revelations. Nolan, "Materialism and the Mormon Faith," 72-73.

God was absolute, perfect, and worthy of worship precisely because he is composed of these intelligences. For this reason, he is absolute, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent.

Nolan has described Pratt's view as "panpsychic" because it is the idea that "intelligence is copresent with materiality in all it manifestations, although in varying degrees."[17] Like Pratt, Penrose believed that God's attributes come from eternal intelligences which he called spirit. In his 1884 sermon on this subject, Penrose summarized his views on the nature of spirit.

> This spirit which pervades all things, which is the light and life of all things, by which our heavenly Father operates, by which He is omnipotent, never had a beginning and never will have an end. It is the light of truth; it is the spirit of intelligence. . . . Such a Being is our Father and our God, and we are following in His footsteps. He has attained to perfection. He has arisen to kingdoms of power. He comprehends all things, because in Him dwelleth the fullness of the Godhead, bodily. He is a perfect manifestation, expression, and revelation of this eternal essence, this spirit of eternal, everlasting intelligence or light of truth. . . .That spirit exists wherever there is a particle of material substance; that spirit is round about it, and in it, and through it; but that we may comprehend it, it must be manifested through organisms. The perfection of its manifestation is in the personality of a being called God.[18]

Penrose believed that God's omnipotence depended upon his status as the supreme embodiment of a material intelligence. It is not clear whether Pratt and Penrose consciously recognized that they were attempting to reconcile the tensions within Smith's doctrine of the nature of God. In the end, the church officially condemned Pratt's view twice under Brigham Young's leadership, and the view of Penrose was opposed by Mormon leaders of his generation. This opposition stemmed from the rising influence of traditional LDS theologians in the church.

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[17]Nolan, "Materialism and the Mormon Faith," 72.

In early Mormonism, not only was God infinite and absolute in his nature but there were no other eternal entities that could potentially limit his power. Early Mormonism accepted the historical Christian belief that God created the universe *ex nihilo*. Indeed, there are no explicit denials of *creation ex nihilo* in the LDS canon.

It was not until 1835 that Smith and his successors began to reject *explicitly* the traditional view of creation. No passage "in the Standard Works explicitly denies that God created the universe *ex nihilo*."[19] Mormon philosopher Ostler viewed the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* and the acceptance of the necessary existence of man as a transition which occurred in LDS theology after 1835.

> The metaphysical foundations of Mormonism before 1835 were incompatible with the radical pluralism inherent in the idea of man's necessary existence. Although several scriptural "proof-texts" originating from this era are now cited to support the doctrine of man's pre-existence, the earliest converts seem to have been altogether unaware of the doctrine. *In the absence of the clarifications of the Nauvoo era, it is to be expected that the saints assumed the usage and meaning pervading the theological concepts of the day and established by nearly fifteen centuries of absolutist elucidation.* For example, the word "create" assumed creation *ex nihilo*, the term "intelligence" implied a knowledge of truth rather than a self-existing entity, and the term "spirit" did not connote a quasi-material substance.[20]

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[18] *JD*, 26:24-25.

[19] Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, "Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the Mormon Doctrine of Creation and a Defense of Creation *ex nihilo*," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*. ed. Frances J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 101.

[20] Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1982): 60 (emphasis mine). Joseph Smith received D&C 93 as early as May 1833. This revelation taught that intelligence, truth, and the elements were eternal; however, it was common for Smith to teach privately the implications of new revelations until they were published. The publication of the Doctrine and Covenants occurred in 1835 and laid the foundation for Smith's public teaching of these doctrines. It was this canonical book, especially the latter portion of it, which laid the foundation for the shift from early LDS theology to traditional LDS theology. The 1842 publication of the *Pearl of Great Price* marked the completion of these shifts in the doctrines of Joseph Smith.

The Traditional Mormon View of Omnipotence

The Eternal Environment of God

The theology that developed from Smith's later revelations and teachings explained God's nature in light of his existence in an eternal environment. God had forever existed alongside other eternal entities. Ostler argued that Joseph Smith himself initiated the shift from an absolute conception of God to a finite conception of him. He wrote that "Joseph's doctrine of the necessary existence of man and rejection of creation *ex nihilo* also had serious logical consequences for his concept of God."[21] Apostle John A. Widtsoe reflected this change when he wrote that God is a "part of the universe" and is subject to the same laws as every other intelligence.[22] As traditional Mormonism developed, it became apparent that God's was inextricably bound within an environment of five components: intelligences, matter, time, space, and laws.

Intelligences. Doctrine and Covenants 93:29 asserted that "man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither can it be." Expanding upon this principle, Joseph Smith proclaimed that the mind of man was "co-equal with God himself."[23] He argued that God could not have created

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[21]Ibid., 62.

[22]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 25.

[23]Joseph Smith, TJS, 353. In all of the recorded transcripts of this sermon, the term "co-equal" was applied to human beings. However, Joseph Fielding Smith, who compiled and arranged this collection of Smith's teachings argued that he must have said that the mind of man is "co-eternal with God" because man can be equal with God only in his eternality. He blamed the mistake on the person who recorded the sermon. Despite Joseph Fielding Smith's distress over this alleged "mistake," there are three reasons to believe that the original phrase is correct. First, it is well known among scholars that the early church carefully recorded the words of Smith. Studies of the Smith's sermons in which there are multiple records of his sermons have demonstrated how accurately Smith's words were recorded. Second, Joseph Smith believed that *because* man is "co-eternal" with God, he is "co-equal" with God. His goal was to diminish the differences between God and man in order to achieve his expressed goal "to exalt man." Ibid., 352.

intelligence since it is a "self-existing principle." Furthermore, it would be illogical to claim that the intelligence has a beginning yet would never have an end.[24] Smith understood that in the historical Christian view, humans exist contingently rather than necessarily. Consequently, they are relatively unimportant in comparison with the aseity and necessary existence of God. He wanted his followers to reject the view that humans were contingent because in his estimation this lessened their value.[25] In Smith's view, humans are co-eternal and co-equal with God himself and therefore valuable.

Brigham Young and other traditional Mormon leaders continued to emphasize this "eternity of life."[26] They drew two significant conclusions from the eternality of intelligence. First, all intelligences exist on a grand continuum from humans to the Gods. Roberts taught that "God and man are of the same race and "angels are intelligences of the human species."[27] Second, free agency is a necessary characteristic of intelligences.

Third, Joseph Fielding Smith was a neo-absolutist Mormon. Even though he revered the words of Smith, it is clear that he often did not understand their meaning and significance. From the viewpoint of neo-absolutism, Smith could not have proclaimed God and man to be so similar. However, Joseph Smith's true theological legacy is traditional Mormonism, not neo-absolutist Mormonism. In the traditional Mormon view, which is rooted in Smith's proclamations, God and man are close relatives of almost equal status. Ostler summarized this traditional LDS view: "The emphasis was on the similarity between human beings and God, for God is viewed as the same kind of being that humans are." Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 80.

[24]Joseph Smith, TJS, 395.

[25]Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph.*, comp. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1980), in LCL, 359. In another sermon, Smith preached that "the first principles of man are self-existent with God." Smith, DIJ, 46.

[26]Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1954), 49; also see Orson F. Whitney, *Gospel Themes: A Treatise on Salient Features of "Mormonism"* (Salt Lake City: n. p., 1914), 5; Rex L. Sears, "Determinist Mansions in the Mormon House?," *Dialogue* 31 (Winter 1998): 141; Truman G. Madsen, "Smith, Joseph: Teachings of Joseph Smith," in *EM* 4:1339-43; Jay E. Jensen, "Spirit," in *EM*, 4:1404.

[27]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 65; also see Brigham H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Van der Donckt Discussion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 256.

Following Brigham Young's teaching that "every intelligent being must have the power of choice," traditional Mormons concluded that eternal agency must limit God's nature.[28]

Matter. Doctrine and Covenants 93:33 taught the church that matter, which was referred to as "elements," is eternal. The implications of the eternality of matter became a common theme among traditional Mormon leaders. Brigham Young preached, "eternity is, was, and will continue to be full of matter and life."[29] There could never be a time when matter and life did not exist because they are essential components of all existence. Orson Pratt taught that "materiality is indelibly stamped upon the very heaven of heavens . . . it is the very essence of all existences.[30] Elder Hugh B. Brown described the universe as an infinite expanse of preexisting material over which God and man are "winning mastery."[31]

Indeed, God is limited to working with matter, since as Apostle Widtsoe noted, God lacks the ability to create or destroy matter. The elements are "indestructible" and the acceptance of this truth is a prerequisite for any theological reflection.[32] The eternality

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[28]Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 62; also see Lowell Bennion, "A Mormon View of Life," *Dialogue* 24 (1991): 61. Mormons to speak of agency as a gift of God based upon passages like Moses 3:17; 4:3; 7:32; D&C, 93:30 and Abraham 3:25-28. However, technically agency is not a gift since intelligences possessed it eternally. See White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, 75. These passages may teach it is a gift from God because he chooses not to violate the free agency of each person. Young believed that if God did violate human agency, then he would lose his status as God. *JD*, 1:118.

[29]*JD*, 3:277.

[30]Orson Pratt, *Masterful Discourses and Writings of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 63. Brigham Young also believed that matter and life were inseparable, he disagreed with the view of Pratt that has been labeled "panpsyschism." In opposition to Pratt's views, the First Presidency declared that life never existed in a disorganized state. There have always been "organized beings." MFP, 2:233.

[31]CR, April 1956, 105. Parley Pratt also argued for the material nature of everything.

[32]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology,* 12-13. Widtsoe believed that energy was also eternal. Also see Nolan, "Materialism and the Mormon Faith," 62-65; Also see McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of*

of matter also served as the basis for the strong LDS rejection of any form of immateriality. Parley Pratt taught that even God could not conceive of the "immateriality" cherished by the sectarian ministers of Christianity. He claimed that since both atheists and sectarians deny the existence of a material God both groups essentially share the same belief in nothingness.[33]

Time and Space. Because of the foundational beliefs in the eternality of matter and in the corporality of all intelligences, traditional Mormons concluded that time and space also must be eternal. Joseph Smith assumed the eternality of time and space when he spoke of intelligence and matter as having no beginning or end.[34] Roberts believed that even though God was "omnipotent," he could never "place himself beyond the boundary of space; nor on the outside of time."[35] Orson Pratt elaborated upon this belief that God has spatial and temporal characteristics. He was confident that God's body was similar in size to the human body and that God could travel throughout space at tremendous velocities.[36] Brigham Young University professor Truman Madsen

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the Mormon Religion, 6; Paul M. Edwards, "Persistences that Differ: Comments on the Doctrine of Man," *Sunstone* 5 (September-October 1980): 44.

[33]Parley P. Pratt, "Materiality," in *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Van der Donckt Discussion,* ed. Brigham H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 254-65.

[34]*DJS*, 124.

[35]Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4:70. McMurrin noted that Mormonism is committed to a belief in God as "spatial and temporal in character." McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology*, 14.

[36]Orson Pratt, *Orson Pratt's Works* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1945), in LCL, 36. Also see Orson Pratt, *Masterful Discourses and Writings of Orson Pratt*, 496; Brigham Young taught a similar idea. When humans have become exalted they will be able to move between the innumerable creations at high speeds just like God. *JD*, 13:77.

encouraged the saints to identify similarities between themselves and God: "In space, you are coexistent with God. In time, you are coeternal with God."[37]

Laws. Unlike historical Christianity in which God's wisdom is demonstrated in his establishment of laws, Mormons believe that God displays his wisdom in his preexisting use of laws. Traditional Mormons believed that physical and spiritual laws are eternal and uncreated. Like matter, God is not responsible for their existence. In his wisdom, he uses them to accomplish his purposes. The basis for this divergence from the historical Christian view on the existence of eternal laws is found in two canonical passages. First, 2 Nephi 2:11 stated, "For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things." Second, Doctrine and Covenants 93:30 added that "all truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence." These laws are binding on all beings, even God. Because these laws limit God, Brigham Young preached that if any God acted contrary to the eternal principles, then he would immediately cease to be a God.[38]

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[37]Truman Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1966), in LCL, 16. Since 1833, no LDS leader or theologian has ever disputed that time and space are eternal. Both neo-absolutists and traditional Mormons affirm this foundational belief, yet they differ on whether these eternal entities affect God's nature. Neo-absolutists have diminished the implications of these eternal entities without denying their existence. However, traditional Mormons in the past emphasized their existence and their implications for a more finite conception of God. Also see Richard Poll, "God and Man in History," *Dialogue* 7 (Spring 1972): 101; David Lamont Paulsen, "Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Michigan, 1975), 79; David H. Yarn, *The Gospel: God, Man, and Truth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1979, in LCL; White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, 68; Stephen E. Parish and Carl Mosser, "A Tale of Two Theisms: The Philosophical Usefulness of the Classical and Mormon Concepts of God," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 203.

[38]*JD*, 1:118.

Many traditional Mormons like Widtsoe attributed God's achievement of his present divine status to his actions in the past including "his recognition of universal laws."[39] Apostle Whitney listed the principles of truth, faith, repentance, and baptism as a few of the uncreated laws that God has chosen to accept and to utilize in fulfilling the gospel plan.[40] Elder Melvin J. Ballard taught that God could not have used these laws to gain his own exalted status and then chosen to alter them.[41] As traditional Mormons reflected upon the eternal nature of laws, they recognized that two of them in particular relate to the omnipotence of God.

First, the eternal law of progression requires that all intelligences, including God, must progress eternally. President Cannon proclaimed that "all must progress or retrograde."[42] This choice to advance or regress is given to every intelligence because as Apostle Penrose taught "progress is the eternal order of creation."[43] Therefore, traditional Mormon theologians concluded that God must progress in power and knowledge.

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[39]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 25.

[40]Whitney, *Gospel Themes*, 6-7.

[41]CR, October 1912, 106; also see Poll, "God and Man in History," 103; Duane E. Jeffery, "Seers, Servants, and Evolution: The Uncomfortable Interface," *Dialogue* 8, nos. 3-4 (1973): 68; Blake T. Ostler, "The Mormon Concept of God," *Dialogue* 17 (Summer 1984): 67; Sears, "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology," 35-36; Kathleen Flake, "Evil's Origin and Evil's End in the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis," *Sunstone* 21 (August 1998): 25; Mark S. Gustavson, "Horror and the Divine Will," *Dialogue* 21 (Spring 1998): 79. Evangelical scholar Beckwith has rightly questioned whether Mormonism, with its dual commitments to materialism and exaltation by obedience to eternal laws, can account for the existence of these laws. Francis J. Beckwith, "Moral Law, the Mormon Universe, and the Nature of the Right We Ought to Choose," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*. ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2002), 226-29.

[42]*JD*, 26:86-87.

[43]Charles W. Penrose, *What Mormons Believe: Epitome of the Doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1900), 8.

Second, the law of opposition meant that evil is eternal and necessary. President Woodruff preached that from eternity "two principles do exist, good and evil, God and the Devil."[44] Because of this principle, nothing is inherently evil. Instead, evil occurs whenever the will of God is resisted. Roberts linked the existence of evil to the existence of all dualities in the universe including the existence of good and evil. Both good and evil must exist because "the existence of the one implied the existence of the other; and, conversely, the non-existence of the latter would imply the non-existence of the former."[45] Evil is the counterpart to good just like cold is the counterpart to heat.[46]

The Explicit Rejection of Creation *Ex Nihilo*

Even though the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* is a well-known tenet of Mormonism, this denial was not explicit during the years of early Mormonism. In the King Follett Discourse of 1844, Joseph Smith officially established the view of creation from preexisting materials as a tenet of Mormon doctrine.

> You ask the learned doctors why they say the world was made out of nothing, and they will answer, "Doesn't the Bible say He created the world?" And they infer, from the word create, that it must have been made out of nothing. Now, the word create came from the word baurau, which does not mean to create out of nothing; it

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[44]Wilford Woodruff, *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), in LCL, 239. In the same sermon, Woodruff taught that "there was always war between light and darkness." Also see John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation: Aids to Faith in a Modern Day* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), in LCL, 206; Klaus J. Hanson believed that traditional Mormonism is a modern form of Manichaeism as evidenced by its view of evil. Klaus J. Hanson, *Mormonism and the American Experiment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 72-73. Evangelicals have argued that this LDS view of evil is "cosmological dualism," making it impossible for Mormonism to solve the problem of the existence of evil. Parish and Mosser, "A Tale of Two Theisms," 212-16. Traditional and neo-absolutists theodicies will be examined later.

[45]B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), in LCL, 3:224.

[46]*CHC*, 403-04. Also see Paulsen, "Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism,"148; David B. Timmins, "Free Agency, Determinism, and Chaos Theory," *Dialogue* 28 no. 3 (Fall 1995): 170; White, "Mormonism – A Nineteenth Century Heresy," 47; Riddle C. Chauncey, "Philosophy," in *EM*, 3:1078.

> means to organize; the same as a man would organize materials and build a ship. Hence we infer that God had materials to organize the world out of chaos-chaotic matter, which is element, and in which dwells all the glory. Element had an existence from the time He had. The pure principles of element are principles which can never be destroyed; they may be organized and reorganized, but not destroyed. They had no beginning, and can have no end[47]

Brigham Young taught the saints that the sectarians falsely believe God created the world without materials. In contrast, he told them "you may be assured the Latter-day Saints do not believe any such thing."[48] Orson Pratt denied that the Bible even "hints" at such an erroneous doctrine.[49] Apostle Penrose believed it was the atoms themselves that are eternal and indestructible.[50] Likewise, Talmage argued that people accept the eternality of matter because they know they know that "from nothing, nothing can be derived."[51]

Theology Becomes Materialistic and Naturalistic

With few exceptions, early Mormonism adopted the traditional Christian worldview until later revelations required the development of a different worldview. For example, the Book of Mormon does not necessarily require belief in a corporeal God or

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[47]*HC*, 308-309.

[48]*JD,* 18:232. The eternality of matter and the denouncement of creation *ex nihilo* was a major theme in Young's preaching. Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 48, 100, 441. He declared that "no child should be taught any such dogma." *JD* 13:249.

[49]*JD*, 16:316.

[50]*JD*, 26:27-28.

[51]James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith: Being a Consideration of the Principal Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), in LCL, 30. Widtsoe rejected creation *ex nihilo* as "absurd." Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 12. Jeffery believed that the LDS church has denounced this doctrine more strongly and consistently than any other doctrine ("Seers, Servants, and Evolution," 47). It has been rejected by all Mormons leaders and scholars since Smith's King Follett Discourse. See Edwards, Kent F. Nielsen, and Stephen D. Ricks, "Creation, Creation Accounts," in *EM*, 1:340-41; Also see Chauncey, "Philosophy," 3:1078; Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 62; Bennion, "A Mormon View of Life," 60; Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 264. Beckwith and Parrish noted that the LDS view of creation is similar to the view of

rejection of creation *ex nihilo*. The later revelations which introduced the idea that God has an eternal, external environment and which led to the establishment of traditional Mormonism also shifted the theology of the church in a naturalistic and materialistic direction. For traditional Mormons, the material nature of the universe was of preeminent importance because God himself is "a material intelligence."[52] Widtsoe concluded that the nature and existence of matter is a "fundamental conception of the gospel."[53] In his insightful analysis of Mormonism, McMurrin wrote that Mormonism exhibits "monism in the fact that the Mormon metaphysics describes both spirit and matter by essentially the same categories."[54]

Because traditional Mormon theology became naturalistic, it developed a view of miracles which explained them as completely the results of the operation of undiscovered natural laws. Brigham Young taught that the miracles performed by Jesus occurred because he knew how to control the elements using natural laws and principles.

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creation in process philosophy. Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish., *The Mormon Concept of God*, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 42.

[52]Parley P. Pratt, "Materiality," 254.

[53]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 10-11. Also see Orson Pratt, *Masterful Discourses and Writings of Orson Pratt*, 63; Brigham Young believed that the gospel was partially "a set of laws and ordinances designed to assist the Son of God in the task of purifying "this matter." Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 139.

[54]McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology*, 18; due to this materialistic emphasis in LDS theology, the Mormon view of God became strongly anthropomorphic. The proclamation of Joseph Smith that "God Himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man" further led the church in this direction (*DJS* 34). Also see *JD*, 9:286; Garland E. Tickemyer, "Joseph Smith and Process Theology," *Dialogue* 17 (Autumn 1984): 75; Stephen E. Robinson, "God the Father, Overview," in *EM*, 3:549; Alma P. Burton, "Doctrine: Distinctive Teachings," in *EM*, 1:397; James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980):61; Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, iv-v; the publication and popularization of Joseph Smith's First Vision ensured that this anthropomorphic trend continued after his death. See Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental," 49-50; also see James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission According to Holy Scriptures both Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1990), 708-09; Robinson, "God the Father, Overview," 548.

> Yet I will say with regard to miracles, there is no such thing save to the ignorant- that is, there never was a result wrought out by God or by any of His creatures without there being a cause for it. There may be results, the causes of which we do not see or understand, and what we call miracles are no more than this - they are the results or effects of causes hidden from our understandings.[55]

The Finitude of God

Traditional Mormons, beginning with Smith, recognized that if God was at one time a man, then God was once finite.[56] As traditional Mormonism developed, theologians concluded that God must still be finite and will always remain finite. In a universe that is progressing, God can not reach a point of being infinite and absolute. Because of this belief, traditional theologians retained the scriptural language for God's attributes, yet they assumed his environment always conditions his nature.[57]

The view of traditional theologians like Widtsoe and Roberts has been described as a "dynamic perfection" view of God. The classical attributes predicated of God such as omnipotence were understood to be relative and relational.[58] Widtsoe wrote

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[55]*JD*, 13:141. Also see Brigham Young, CR, October, 64-65; Sears, "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology," 37; idem, "Determinist Mansions in the Mormon House?," 122. Brigham Young argued that because of this view of miracles, Mormonism agrees with science unlike the sectarian ministers who foolishly opposed science. He claimed that in "these respects we differ from the Christian world, for our religion will not clash with or contradict the facts of science in any particular." *JD*, 14:117.

[56]*DJS*, 34; *JD*, 7:333-34.

[57]Many theologians and philosophers have recognized that the only alternative to accepting that the Mormon God is finite is to embrace irrationality. See Paulsen, "Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism," 74; also see Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 62; Tickemyer, "Joseph Smith and Process Theology," 76; Sears, "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology," 42; Bennion, "A Mormon View of Life," 60; Sears, "Determinist Mansions in the Mormon House?," 141; White, "Mormonism -- A Nineteenth Century Heresy," 47. England feared that the modern LDS church, which is dominated by neo-absolutist leaders, might compromise the LDS theological legacy, which is "our enlightened, rationalistic understandings of the nature of God." Eugene England, "Review of *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation,*" by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson," *Brigham Young University Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 196.

that when humans think of God, "to our senses and understanding, he is as perfection."[59] For humans, all thoughts about God's nature are necessarily "relative."[60] Roberts believed that the language of God's perfections has a limited reference since God gives only "local" revelations pertaining to "our heaven and earth." For this reason, Mormons considered God "perfect in regard to the earth yet still progressing in other realms."[61]

God's Progress to Divine Status

Since the time of the King Follett Discourse, traditional LDS leaders have focused upon God's past progression from mortal probation to deity.[62] He must have progressed from human to divine because the law of progression requires that every exalted being has "passed through a mortal ordeal."[63] Just as humans are now expected to

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[58]Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 100.

[59]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 67. Talmage taught this same view of relative perfection when he wrote, "what a man calls 'perfection' is after all comparative." CR, April 1918, 161. Also see Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 90.

[60]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 28. A traditional Mormon, William Whittall warned against the mistake of interpreting terms such as "infinite power" and "illimitable wisdom" as literal terms because this would result in absurdity. All such terms are always relative. Henry William Whittall, "The Omnipresence of God," in *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity : The Roberts-Van der Donckt Discussion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 240-41.

[61]Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 160. Roberts used this idea to reconcile the biblical emphasis upon the oneness of God and the plurality of Gods taught in the later Mormon revelations. For the inhabitants of earth, there is only one Godhead (ibid., 27). Also see Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 18-19. Mormons also recognized that God cannot be literally omnipresent. Omnipresence must also be relative because "even God is limited by the law that one body cannot occupy two places at one and the same time" (Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4:71). Also see Whittall, "The Omnipresence of God," 240-42; *JD*, 26:24; Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 256; David L. Paulsen "Omnipotent God; Omnipresence of God; Omniscience of God," 3: 1030. They believed that God's influence was present everywhere in his "power diffused throughout the spiritual and physical universe, giving vitality, activity, and force to the various things around us" (Whittall, "The Omnipresence of God," 241). Also see Hyrum L. Andrus, *God, Man, and the Universe,* Foundations of the Millennial Kingdom of Christ, vol.1 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 128-29.

[62]*DJS*, 34.

[63]*JD*, 18:293.

prove their faithfulness on earth, God once proved his faithfulness and thereby gained the requisite knowledge for exaltation.[64] President Lorenzo Snow coined the famous couplet which encapsulated this belief in God's past progress and the hope of man's future progress. Snow proclaimed "as man is, God once was. As God is, man may become."[65]

"God" as a Status

Joseph Smith wanted to "take away the veil" so that his followers could "understand God and how He comes to be God.[66] Ostler noted that for Smith "Elohim has not always had the status of 'God,' or of being a divine person."[67] Traditional LDS theologians continued to contemplate the implications of the principle that since God had to achieve this status, his possession of divinity is contingent. God had only achieved his exalted position because "he has recognized and utilized the laws of the universe."[68] It was his obedience to the eternal laws that resulted in his exaltation.[69] God, having achieved this status now assists lower intelligences as they seek to gain power, wisdom, and glory through the same process.[70]

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[64]Brigham Young believed that without the knowledge he gained on earth, God would not be able to judge righteously, since *all* knowledge is learned through *experience*. *JD*, 4:272.

[65]Lorenzo Snow, *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow: Fifth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), in LCL, 2. This statement along with the teachings of the King Follett Discourse have served as the main non-canonical yet authoritative basis for this Mormon doctrine, and has been quoted repeatedly by LDS leaders. Also see Nolan, "Materialism and the Mormon Faith," 73.

[66]*DJS*, 340.

[67]Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 78.

[68]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 25.

[69]Ibid. Also see Melvin J. Ballard, CR, October 1912, 106.

[70]Whittall, "The Omnipresence of God," 239-40; Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 80; Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 72-73. Brigham Young

For Brigham Young, God's status remains entirely contingent upon his continued obedience to the same divine laws through which he gained exaltation. For example, God cannot violate human agency and remain God.[71] Likewise, God cannot misuse his power by tormenting and afflicting humans unnecessarily without risking his divinity.[72] Sears noted that this "theoretic possibility of God being stripped of his power" is consistent with the belief that God's power flows from the voluntary obedience of his subjects. Since intelligences give their obedience to God because he exemplifies the eternal principles, their subjection to him is contingent upon God's own continued obedience to the eternal principles.[73]

The Existence of Other Gods

As Joseph Smith's theology developed, he arrived at conclusion that there must be a plurality of Gods. The first written record of Smith espousing this doctrine was

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taught that the reason why Jesus had more power than Satan was because of his greater obedience to the principles of exaltation. *JS,* 1:116. Satan's punishment for leading the rebellion against God is that he will not receive a body, which is *the* prerequisite for further exaltation. Brigham Young, *JD*, 1:116.

[71]Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 62. It is important to distinguish between the LDS use of the words "God" and "Godhead." The word "God" can be a reference either to Elohim or to divine status. In fact, Roberts taught that three exalted divine intelligences could choose to "stand also as the sign and symbol of all that is divine and would act as and be to all intensions and purposes The One God." Not only do these three beings act as one, but they also represent all of the infinite number of exalted beings who compose the "Collectivity of the Divine Intelligences." Roberts, *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 168. For Roberts, these three Gods, which compose the "Godhead," have all power and perfections because they have access to "all the councils of the Gods." Ibid. Also see Daniel H. Ludlow, *Selected Writings of Daniel H. Ludlow,* Gospel Scholars Series (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2000), 342-43; Ostler, "Bridging the Gulf."

[72]*JD*, 1:117-18. Young was expanding upon the idea contained in Alma 42:22 which hypothetically speaks of God ceasing to be God if he denied justice. Even though this passage in the Book of Mormon was published in 1830, early Mormons did not contemplate the possibility of God losing his status because their absolute conceptions of him were incompatible with this possibility.

[73]Sears, "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology," 37. Flake has suggested that when Lucifer presented his deterministic proposal to God, his real intension was to destroy God in order to supplant him. She believed that "because Lucifer's plan would have destroyed human agency – source of our progressive capacity – it would have also destroyed God's power." Flake, "Evil's Origin and Evil's End in the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis," 25.

his correspondence from Liberty jail in 1839.[74] Between 1839 and his 1844 King Follett Discourse, Smith taught the plurality of Gods privately among the church leadership. The doctrine was circulated unobtrusively in the church as a "speculative doctrine until 1844."[75] In the King Follett Discourse, Smith taught publicly that in the Genesis creation account, *Elohim* actually translates as "Gods." For Smith, few things were more clear or intuitive than the existence of many Gods. He believed that since every being must have a father, the father of Jesus also must have had a father.[76] Since there must be an infinite lineage of father and sons, exalted intelligence such as God exist one above another, so that there is no end to them.[77]

Roberts firmly believed that Smith had taught, explicitly and implicitly, a "plurality of divine intelligences."[78] Widtsoe also spoke of the innumerable divine beings who qualified as "Gods," and who exist on different levels an "infinite graduation from lowest to highest development."[79] One of these Gods must be the wife of Elohim who possesses the same attributes as him. Indeed, in order to father children, every God must

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[74]Van Hale, "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 219.

[75]Ibid., 216, 223.

[76]*DJS*, 38. Brigham Young claimed there were so many Gods that he did not know the number of them. *JD*, 7:333-34.

[77]*DJS*, 38. Ostler noted that Smith was making a logical deduction from the ideas that God once had progressed to divinity and that man can achieve the same exaltation. Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 62.

[78]Roberts believed that Satan had misled the Jews into adopting "the extremes of monotheism" as a reaction against the polytheism of their pagan neighbors. During the Great Apostasy, the church had coupled this Jewish error with corrupt Hellenistic philosophy, which resulted in the apostate doctrine of the Trinity. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 161-62. Roberts dismissed the biblical passages which spoke of the oneness of God as "local" revelations. Ibid., 159.

[79]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 26.

have a divine wife.[80] Later traditional Mormons continued to teach the importance of this plurality of intelligences and its implications for church members, male and female, who have the potential to become Gods themselves. President Kimball was willing to contemplate the possibility that all of the church members hearing his general conference sermon could become gods. He rejoiced over the vast number of potential deities.

> Brethren, 225,000 of you are here tonight. I suppose 225,000 of you may become gods. There seems to be plenty of space out there in the universe. And the Lord has proved that he knows how to do it. I think he could make, or probably have us help make, worlds for all of us, for every one of us 225,000.[81]

God's Continuous Progression in Power

Since the time of the King Follett Discourse, no Mormon leader or scholar has denied God's past progression from mortal, human existence to divinity. However, today neo-absolutist Mormons deny that God still progresses in knowledge, and they deny that this view was ever taught in the church. It is evident traditional Mormons believed that God continued to advance in power. In addition to their belief in God's past progression, they also believed that he progresses forever. Young preached that God's principle of operation in this world involved organizing, increasing, gathering, and distributing. His

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[80]Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 25; also see Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 23.

[81]CR, October 1975, 77. One Mormon leader indirectly compared the LDS doctrine of the plurality of gods to polytheism. Evangelical scholar White noted that although Mormons are offended by suggestions that they believe in polytheism, Elder Kenneth R. Stevens did not shy away from this association in a General Conference sermon. James R. White, *Is the Mormon My Brother? Discerning the Differences between Mormonism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), 100-01; Stevens preached that while he was in Tahiti, "I came to learn through their legends that there was a time when they believed in the Gods of heaven as we do, even a plurality of Gods, and that they believed in the creation of this earth even as our doctrine teaches. This, however, has been explained away and replaced by modern Christian doctrine which teaches of a God who is everywhere present, and so small He dwells in the human heart, but who has no parts nor passions, and by a different story of the creation. And so, it thrilled me when our missionaries preached Mormonism to have those people nod their heads and say, 'It sounds like the old doctrine which was common to our people.'" CR, October 1941, 66.

life is characterized by the "principles of eternal duration, increase, power, glory, and exaltation."[82] In response to Orson Pratt's teaching that God has reached a point of absolute power, Young denounced the view that God could cease progressing.

> Some men seem as if they could learn so much and no more. They appear to be bounded in their capacity for acquiring knowledge, as Brother Orson Pratt, has in theory, bounded the capacity of God. According to his theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power; but the God that I serve is progressing eternally, and so are his children: they will increase to all eternity, if they are faithful.[83]

Another traditional Mormon, Apostle Talmage, taught that progression is not the prerogative of lesser beings *only*, but also of higher and more exalted beings like God. Just as the lesser beings progress, "God Himself, Elohim, the Very Eternal Father, is a progressive being, eternally progressing from one perfection to another."[84] Widtsoe added that since everything in the universe is either progressing or regressing, God "must now be engaged in progressive development."[85] Elder Hugh Brown thought of God as a Greek "demiurge" working with pre-existing materials, who gains a mastery and power over the materials over time.[86]

Omnipotence Redefined and Reinterpreted

Like early Mormons, traditional Mormons continued to ascribe to God the attribute of omnipotence. However, their view differed from the early Mormon

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[82]*JD*, 1:17.

[83]*JD*, 11:287.

[84]James R. Talmage, "The Philosophical Basis of Mormonism," *Improvement Era* 28, no. 11 (September 1915), in LCL.

[85]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 25.

[86]CR, April 1956, 105. Also see Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4:69-70; idem, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 34-35; Sears, "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology, "18;

theologians regarding the nature of this attribute. For example, Brigham Young taught that God was omnipotent, yet he believed that Pratt's view of God as possessing all power was incorrect. Traditional Mormons followed the line of thought exemplified by B. H. Roberts who wrote, "the attribute omnipotence must needs be thought upon also as somewhat limited."[87] He considered God's inability to transcend time and space and his inability to create *ex nihilo* to be a limitation on God's omnipotence.[88] Widtsoe was confident that God is omnipotent, but this omnipotence was not to be interpreted as absolute. Rather, God is not absolutely all-powerful, yet "to our senses and understanding he is as perfection."[89] Only from the human perspective is it correct to refer to God as being omnipotent because he is the greatest being that humans encounter. More recent Mormon scholars have noted that traditional Mormon theology requires a redefined concept of omnipotence.[90] For example, Paulsen formulated a definition of omnipotence, which he believed expresses the traditional Mormon understanding of God's power. He wrote that within the context of the LDS metaphysics, "God is omnipotent$_m$ if God can bring about any state-of-affairs consistent with the nature of other eternal existences."[91]

McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion,* 22; Lisa Ramsey Adams, "Eternal Progression," in *EM*, 2:466, White, "Mormonism – A Nineteenth Century Heresy," 46.

[87]Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4:70.

[88]Ibid. Roberts concluded that when God exercises his power, the consent of other intelligences is required. *CHC* 2:399. Kimball believed that God won the war in heaven against Satan only because enough intelligences chose his side. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 32-33.

[89]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 66-67.

[90]Alfred Benney and Roger R. Keller noted that the LDS view of God's nature results in a different view of omnipotence than that of historical Christianity. Alfred Benney and Roger R. Keller, "Catholicism and Mormonism," in *EM*, 1:258. Also see Parish and Mosser, "A Tale of Two Theisms," 202.

[91]Paulsen, "Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism," 76-77.

In other words, there are physical limitations on the exercise of his power.[92] Ostler has argued that these physical limitations on God's actions should lead to characterizing his power as "maximal power" rather than absolute power. This possession of maximal power qualifies him as the adequate object of faith and worship.[93]

Finitistic Theodicy

Many traditional Mormons recognized that the LDS metaphysics could serve as the basis for a unique theodicy. In particular, the beliefs in the uncreated nature of evil and the necessary, eternal existence of intelligences lent themselves to the construction of a two-fold rationale for the existence of evil. First, evil is unavoidable because God cannot control it. Second, evil is eternal both by its nature and because a corollary of eternal free agency is the possibility of evil.

Eternal and uncreated evil. Roberts developed the most extensive traditional Mormon theodicy. He began with the implications of the "law of opposition" which he alternately called the "doctrine of opposite existences" or "antimonies."[94] He noted that it is impossible for good to exist without evil. Evil itself is an independent, eternal force.[95] President Woodruff taught that the "war between light and darkness" has always

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[92]Paulsen "Omnipotent God; Omnipresence of God; Omniscience of God," *EM*, 3:1030.

[93]Blake T. Ostler, "Review of The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis by Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish," *Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies Review of Books* 8, no. 2 (1996): 104. Also see J. Marden Clark, "Some Implications of Human Freedom," *Dialogue* 5 (Summer 1970): 50; Tickemyer, "Joseph Smith and Process Theology," 76; Bennion, "A Mormon View of Life," *Dialogue* 24 (1991): 60; Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 122; Beckwith, "Moral Law, the Mormon Universe, and the Nature of the Right We Ought to Choose," 225.

[94]Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3:219.

[95]Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 1:131.

occurred.[96] Since all intelligences, including God "must adjust themselves to these eternal existences" of good and evil, God could not have prevented evil.[97] Evil was detrimental since the progress of intelligences depends upon their ability to choose between opposite moral choices. Some scholars have compared this view to Manichaeism.

Eternally Free Intelligences. In the LDS view, evil is eternal and each intelligence is free to choose good or evil. President John Taylor preached that God desires to accomplish "the very best that he can do for all," yet his benevolence is constrained by eternal laws like agency.[98] Since God did not create the intelligences and he must allow them to make free choices, he cannot be held responsible for their evil.

> This conception of things relieves God of the responsibility for the nature and status of intelligences in all stages of their development; their inherent nature and their volition make them primarily what they are, and this nature they may change, slowly, perhaps, yet change it they may. God has put them in the way of changing it by enlarging their intelligence through change of environment, through experiences; the only way God affects these self-existent beings is favorably; he creates not their inherent nature; he is not responsible for the use they make of their freedom; nor is he the author of their sufferings when they fall into sin: that arises out of the violations of law to which the "intelligence" subscribed, and must be endured until its lessons are learned.[99]

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[96]Woodruff, *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, 239. Interestingly, Woodruff encouraged the saints by claiming that someday they would win the war against Satan and then they would have peace. However, in the LDS view, this would be true only of this creation. The LDS view requires that since evil is eternal, it will continue to occur forever in the countless number of creations. Across the universe, the eternal conflict between good and evil will never ultimately end.

[97]*CHC*, 404; Roberts contemplated how terrible life would be without opposing forces like good and evil. He wrote, "What a dreadful world this would be without this quality – the opposite existences here contended for? Imagine all things in the world to be white! No contrast in coloring! Universal insanity must result." *CHC*, 404.

[98]*JD*, 25:166.

[99]Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 2:18. Roberts believed that God lovingly yearns for his children to succeed. He laments and suffers along with them in their mistakes. He can truly empathize with them since he himself is in the same process of development. Ibid., 4:71.

Widtsoe reflected upon God's purpose in sending his spirit children to earth, and observed that God's plan to exalt these lesser intelligences required that they exercise their free agency and experience the joys and sorrows that come from their free choices. Evil was understood as anything that opposes the divine plan for human exaltation. Because evil is necessary for God's children to exercise their free choice, God cannot and will not prevent his children from taking actions that are detrimental. As a result, God is not responsible when they turn away from his plan and commit evil against themselves.[100] Indeed, each spirit child knew the kind of world he or she would face. The preexisting, conscious spirit children received full knowledge of the world into which they would be born. President Kimball taught that "we understood well before we came to this vale of tears that there would be sorrows, disappointments, hard work, blood, sweat, and tears."[101] Because of this human foreknowledge, Madsen encouraged Mormons to avoid asking why God allowed pain. Instead, they should ask themselves in jest "why did I get myself into this?" This would be the more accurate question since each people knew in advance what hardships awaited on earth.[102] Ostler summarized this theodicy:

> In Mormonism, the concept of inherently free wills possessed by uncreated selves and the nonabsolutist notion of omnipotence absolve God from any complicity in

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[100]Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation,* 205.

[101]Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 31.

[102]Truman G. Madsen, *Radiant Life* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), in LCL, 58. Ostler gave three reasons why God is relieved from the responsibility of evil. First, he cannot intervene and violate free agency. Second, he cannot change the eternal laws of the universe. Third, he will not prevent evil, which will result in a "greater good" – often turning out to be the exaltation of a person who succeeds in difficult circumstances. Ostler, "The Mormon Concept of God," 87-88.

the world's moral evils, the uncreated, impersonal, and morally neutral environment of God mitigates his responsibility for physical evils.[103]

The Mormon Neo-Absolutist View of Omnipotence

Since arising in the 1950's, neo-absolutists have attempted to return to the early LDS views of God's nature. By adopting a minimalist methodology, which they believe frees them from the doctrinal teachings of past church leaders these theologians have taught that God is infinite in his nature. Since he is absolute and incapable of being limited, he must possess all power without limits and therefore cannot progress in power.

The Absolute Nature of God

Neo-absolutist Mormons do not deny the eternal environment of God, but they ignore the logical implications that these eternal entities logically have upon God's attributes. Neo-absolutist Mormons believe that they are not proposing *a* Mormon view of God's nature, instead they adamantly insist that they are teaching *the only* possible Mormon view of God's nature.[104] Stephen E. Robinson boldly claimed that "Mormons

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[103]Ibid., 88. Also see Hanson, *Mormonism and the American Experiment*, 73; Paulsen, "Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism," 147; Bennion, "A Mormon View of Life," *Dialogue* 24 (1991), 61; Sears, "Determinist Mansions in the Mormon House?" 141; Madsen, *Radiant Life*, 56; idem, *Eternal Man*, 19; Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), in LCL, 106; Sears, "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology," 127; John S. Harris, "Risk and Terror," *Dialogue* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 155; Ardeth Greene Kapp, *Rejoice! His Promises Are Sure* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1997), in LCL, 82; Truman G. Madsen, "Smith, Joseph: Teachings of Joseph Smith," in *EM*, 4:1342.

[104]Robinson demonstrated the characteristic neo-absolutist intolerance for the finite God of traditional Mormonism. Instead of offering arguments against the finite Mormon views, Robinson dismissed these views as the objections of "whiz kids" who are insubordinate to God's revelations. This narrow view of doctrine contrasts sharply with the greater openness to diversity in early and traditional Mormonism. Those movements taught specific theological views, but they were more accepting of diverse views within the church. Matthew Connelly, Craig Blomberg, and Stephen E. Robinson, "Sizing up the Divide: Reviews and Replies," *Brigham Young University Studies* 38, no. 3, 1999: 176.

attribute to God every honor, power, glory, and perfection that Evangelicals do."[105] Likewise, Bruce R. McConkie taught BYU students that "the greatest truth known to man is that there is a God in heaven who is infinite and eternal; that he is the creator, upholder, and preserver of all things."[106] These theologians do not recognize distinct periods of LDS doctrine such as early Mormonism and traditional Mormonism, because they believe that the church has always taught that God is absolute. Robert L. Millett denied that Joseph Smith ever envisioned a "finite God," or changed his views over time.[107]

The Selective Use of the Canon

Neo-absolutist Mormons rely heavily upon the earlier portion of the Mormon canon such as the Book of Mormon and the initial revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants. They also use the non-canonical *Lectures on Faith* as the normative formulation for Mormon doctrine.[108] For example, they frequently describe God in the language of Doctrine and Covenants 20:17 which taught that "by these things, we know that there is a God in heaven, who is infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting,

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[105]*HWD*, 92.

[106]Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies" [on-line]; accessed 28 March 2004; available from http://emp.byui.edu/marrottr/SevenDeadlyHeresies.htm; Internet.

[107]Robert Millet, "Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism: Orthodoxy, Neoorthodoxy, Tension, and Tradition," *Brigham Young University Studies* 29 (1989): 56.

[108]White has noted that these theologians have attempted to return to early Mormonism by using the revelations of early Mormonism and the *Lectures on Faith*: "Much like the earliest Mormon converts, the latest neo-orthodox theologians rely primarily upon the Book of Mormon, not the story of Joseph Smith's first vision, for their doctrines of deity, human nature, and salvation. This emphasis on the Book of Mormon reinforces a trinitarian and absolute God, while preoccupation with the first vision, a trademark of twentieth-century Mormonism, encourages a tritheistic and anthropocentric God. The post-1841 Nauvoo teachings of Joseph Smith on polytheism, eternal progression, the necessity of human existence, exaltation, and the ultimate human destiny of godhood have become the building blocks of traditional Mormon theology, whereas the basic doctrines of the Book of Mormon, as the neo-orthodox theologians are inclined to argue, have for the modern Mormon, been relegated to the periphery." White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, 139-140.

the same unchangeable God, the framer of heaven and earth, and all things, which are in them."[109] This early revelation was received in 1830, the year in which the church was founded, and it predates the later revelations that taught the coeternal existence entities alongside God. Neo-absolutists use these earlier passages to formulate their views and they intentionally or unintentionally ignore the later revelations and their implications. For example, President Kimball used D&C 20 as the basis for one of his sermons. He preached that "there is a God in heaven who is infinite and eternal. He has *all power*, all might, and all dominion. *There is no power he does not possess* and no truth he does not know. . . . He is the Creator, Upholder, and Preserver of all things."[110]

Robinson's claim that Mormons and evangelicals essentially espouse the same view of about God's nature serves as another example of how these theologians use the canon selectively. To support his claim that LDS God is absolute and infinite, he cited three passages in defense of this surprising claim, which were 2 Nephi 9:20, D&C 20:17, and 88:11-14.[111] The problem with Robinson's claim is that all of the revelations that he cited were received between 1830 and 1832. He neglected the *later* texts which established traditional Mormonism. For example, D&C 93 was received in May 1833, just six months after the reception of D&C 88, and approximately three years after the reception of D&C 20. This revelation declared that intelligence, truth, and the elements are co-eternal with God and independent of him. It laid the foundation for traditional Mormon theology, because it implied that the existence of eternal entities have an effect

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[109]D&C, 20:17.

[110]CR, May 1991, 47 (emphasis mine).

[111]*HWD*, 77-78.

on God's nature. However, Robinson and the other neo-absolutist Mormons do not cite later portions of scripture for their views because after 1833 absolutist language about God disappeared from the LDS canon.

Similarly, Pearson and Bankhead dismissed the idea of a finite God as unbiblical and blamed "rationalists" for creating this false idea of God.[112] They cited sixteen canonical references for their view that God's omnipotence and omniscience are limitless. Not surprisingly, fourteen of these references are from the Book of Mormon. The other references are from the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants that were received prior to 1834. They proved only that early Mormons believed in an infinite God. They cannot prove that Smith did not later become one of their despised "rationalists" or that the church did not follow his transition to traditional Mormon theology.[113]

No Limitations on Omnipotence

On the specific doctrine of omnipotence, neo-absolutists have rejected any limitations on God's power. In the past, traditional Mormons described God as omniscient, yet because all perfections and attributes were considered to be relative terms, they believed that this omnipotence was limited. In contrast, neo-absolutist Mormons have described God's power in terms that are almost indistinguishable from historical Christianity.[114] They do not believe that God's eternal environment limits him.

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[112]Glenn L. Pearson and Reid E. Bankhead, *Teaching with the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1976), 36-37.

[113]Ibid. Also see Robert Millet and Noel B. Reynolds, *Latter-day Christianity: 10 Basic Issues* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Religious Studies Center, 1998), 11.

[114]The only difference between the neo-absolutist and the historical Christian view is that they still reject creation *ex nihilo*, because in their view they deny that God can create or destroy matter.

McConkie was very precise in defining omnipotence so that it excluded the possibility of limitations. He wrote that "omnipotence consists in having unlimited power and God has all power, and there is no power which he does not have."[115] In arguing for God's unlimited power, President Joseph Fielding Smith cited the teachings of his grandfather Hyrum Smith who once proclaimed, "I would not serve a God that had not all wisdom and power."[116] Joseph Fielding Smith then continued his argument by observing if God lacked infinite power then logically there must be a more powerful god above him. The idea that there could be an eternal lineage of Gods, which was abhorrent to Smith, was actually the traditional Mormon view, yet Smith categorically rejected it as an "absurd conclusion."[117] The neo-absolutist idea that God's perfections like omnipotence must be unlimited was a shift from the "dynamic perfection" view of traditional Mormonism to the "static perfection" view of neo-absolutist Mormonism.[118]

Progression in Dominion

While neo-absolutist Mormons affirmed that God once progressed in power, they believe that he *now* progresses only in dominion. Since he possesses "infinite

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However, since they believe that immateriality cannot exist, they believe that their view merely claims that God cannot accomplish what is logically impossible.

[115]*MD*, 544. It is likely that he believed that the limited view of omnipotence was as soul-endangering as the limited view of omniscience. See Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies" [on-line]; accessed 28 March 2004; available from http://emp.byui.edu/marrottr/SevenDeadlyHeresies.htm; Internet.

[116]Joseph Fielding Smith, *DS* 1:5. For the context of Hyrum Smith's proclamation, see *HC*, 6:300.

[117]*DS*, 1:5 Also see Joseph Fielding Smith, CR, April 1917, 2; David H. Yarn Jr., "God," in *EM*, 2:546-47; Glenn L. Pearson and Reid E. Bankhead, *Building Faith with the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 34.

[118]Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 100.

perfection rather than finite perfection," the expansion of glory and dominion is the only type of change possible.[119] The period of time since God gained infinite his power is referred to as an "eternity."[120] Neo-absolutist Mormons believe their view that "God was once a mortal being is in no way inconsistent with the fact that he now has all power and all knowledge and possesses every virtue, grace, and godly attribute."[121]

God initiated the Gospel plan by which he could exalt lesser intelligences. As they are exalted and glorified, he receives increased glory and dominion from the increasing number of his creations. Traditional Mormons believed that God progresses

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[119]*MD*, 566-567.

[120]Neo-absolutists have attempted to reconcile the issue of how a God who progressed in the past could have possessed his attributes eternally. They have two common explanations. First, it is claimed that the phrase "from everlasting to everlasting" that is found frequently in the Book of Mormon refers only to the types of divine attributes which never change. For example, God's "love, constancy, and willingness to bless others" have never changed (Robert and Reynolds, *Latter-day Christianity*, 32). The second explanation is that "eternity" is a reference to "a measure of eternal time" (*MD*, 240). Eternity is defined as a the period of time during which Elohim has been God. There has been an eternity past, there is this current eternity, and there will be future eternities. Ibid. Since the beginning of this eternity when he obtained his absolute status, Elohim has possessed absolute power and knowledge (*DS*, 1:12). Also see Robert L. Millet, *The Mormon Faith: Understanding Restored Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1998), 169; White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?*, 179 Furthermore, eternity is a relative term. Millett and Reynolds believed that "because he has held his exalted status for a longer period than any of us can conceive, he is able to speak in terms of eternity and can state that he is from everlasting to everlasting." The problem with this explanation is that Joseph Smith denied that God had possessed the title of "God" for eternity. He preached, "I want you to understand God and how he comes to be God. We suppose that God was God from eternity. I will refute that idea, or I will take away the veil so that you may see." Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, comp. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1980), in LCL, 342.

[121]Millet and Reynolds, *Latter-day Christianity*, 32. Because of the difficulty of affirming that God was once finite and is now infinite, a few neo-absolutist LDS theologians have expressed ambiguity regarding this doctrine. President Joseph Fielding Smith believed that there were limits to human understanding. He observed that "some people are troubled over the statements of the Prophet Joseph Smith as found in the King Follett sermon delivered in Nauvoo in 1844. The matter that seems such a mystery is the statement that our Father in heaven at one time passed through a life and death and is an exalted man. This is one of the mysteries, and to some it appears to contradict other statements in the scriptures. Naturally there are many things that we will not comprehend while in this mortal life and we will not be able to fathom all of the difficulties that lie before us" (*DS* 1:10). Stephen Robinson denied that the LDS canon even attempts to teach about the past life of God. He writes, "I suggest that no biblical passage intends to inform us about the condition or career of God before the beginning or after the end of eternity. The Bible neither affirms nor denies what God may or may not have done or have been in any

both in power and in dominion while neo-absolutist Mormons believe that his progression is now limited to the latter.[122] McConkie explained that "he is progressing in the sense that his creations increase, his dominions expand, his spirit offspring multiply, and more kingdoms are added to his domains."[123]

Acceptance of Historical Christian Theodicies

Because neo-absolutist theologians view God as absolute, infinite, and possessing all power and knowledge, they have abandoned the finite theodicy of traditional Mormonism. They cannot appeal to God's external, eternal environment for the explanation of evil, even though they accept the eternality of the intelligences, time, space, matter, and laws. They believe that nothing can condition the power of God. Consequently, neo-absolute theodicies resemble the classical theodicies used by Christian theologians throughout the centuries. White explained that "because of their concept of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and/or omnipresent, some neo-orthodox theologians are hesitant to explore traditional Mormonism's finite God as a potential solution to the problem of evil."[124] There are no neo-absolutist appeals to the necessary existence of evil because in their view God's absolute power can restrain even evil. President Kimball

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theoretical prior eternity" (*HWD*, 90). It is astounding that Robinson makes this claim since the past mortal life of God has been celebrated by Mormon leaders and theologians for over one hundred and sixty years.

[122]*DS*, 1:7.

[123]*MD*, 238-239. Also see Robert L. Millett and Joseph Fielding McConkie, *The Life Beyond* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 149-50.

[124]White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, 166.

preached that while God does not always choose to spare humans pain, "the Lord is omnipotent, with all power to control our lives, save us pain, prevent all accidents."[125]

In a similar manner, the traditional LDS appeal to the uncreated nature of matter is not used. Since God has absolute power, neo-absolutists will not attribute natural evil to forces beyond God's control. One contemporary theologian is so committed to the absolute power of God that he has almost rejected the idea that God cannot create or destroy matter. In personal correspondence with an evangelical scholar, Robinson has expressed his personal view that God created the elements from chaos rather than believing that the elements themselves are eternal.[126] This is a significant concession for a Mormon scholar since historically the church has denied that the elements were ever created. In the neo-absolutist view, God is all-powerful even over the elements; therefore, no material being can prevent his will from being accomplished.

Neo-absolutists have also ignored the traditional Mormon argument that God is unable to prevent evil because of the eternal libertarian free agency of the intelligences. The timeless God of Mormon neo-absolutism sees the end from the beginning and plans everything to accomplish his purposes. This is not the traditional Mormon view of God bound in time and limited in his ability to predict and react to human free agency.[127] It will be demonstrated in chapter five that one of the results of this neo-absolutist view is a

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[125]Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle*, 96.

[126]Copan and Craig, "Craftsman or Creator?," 105-06.

[127]Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Book Company, 1979), in LCL, 37.

lower estimation of human value, ability, and goodness. Humans are merely contingent creatures in a universe in which only God exists necessarily.[128]

Unresolved Tensions in the Mormon View of Omnipotence

The early Mormon view of God's nature and his omnipotence was coherent. An absolute God who created everything *ex nihilo* and who alone possesses necessary existence must be absolutely omnipotent. If Joseph Smith had left the church with only the earlier revelations, which supported this view, then there would be no tensions in this Mormon doctrine. However, the later revelations of Joseph Smith implied that there were limits on God's power in light of the co-eternal entities which exist alongside him. This was the legacy of Joseph Smith which established the traditional Mormon view of omnipotence. The traditional Mormon view was also logically consistent because the absolute descriptions of God in the earlier canon were no longer interpreted literally. It was argued that only in the limited, local, human perspective does God possess all power. In contrast to this coherence found in the early and traditional Mormons views, the neo-absolutist view of omnipotence is not logically coherent because it accepts the Mormon metaphysics of traditional Mormonism and yet still proclaims that God's power is completely unlimited.[129] Several Mormon scholars have accused them of retaining historical Christian ideas about God's nature because of their sentimental attachment to them:

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[128]Yarn, *The Gospel: God, Man, and Truth*, 152; also see O Kendall White Jr., "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," *Dialogue* 5 (Summer 1970): 13.

[129]This is also the result of their assumption that Joseph Smith's revelations complement rather than contradict the nature of God taught in the Bible. Neo-absolutists want to espouse the historical Christian view of God's nature, yet they are trapped by the Mormon metaphysics revealed by Smith.

> The Mormon theologians, generally, while assuming the truth of their Prophet's declarations on the relation of God to uncreated selves and the uncreated world, have nevertheless usually followed the thought patterns and terminology characteristic of traditional absolutism in their descriptions of God. They not uncommonly define God as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, for instance, while at the same time inconsistently defending a form of polytheism and asserting that God has achieved his present status by obedience to law.[130]

The failure of neo-absolutist Mormons to reconcile the early Mormon view of omnipotence with the traditional view of omnipotence is evidence that there are unresolved tensions in Mormon doctrine. Unless the LDS church, which has embraced neo-absolutism for almost the last fifty years, returns to the finite view of God's nature taught by traditional Mormonism these tensions will remain unresolved. At present, this unresolved conflict in the doctrine of God is evident in the teachings of the leading LDS leaders and scholars and it argues against the LDS proclamation to the world that is the restoration of doctrine truth.

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[130]McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion,* 106.

CHAPTER 5

NATURE OF HUMAN BEINGS

Anthropological doctrines have always been important to the Mormon church. One of Joseph Smith's stated goals was to teach the truths of God so that he could "exalt man."[1] In many ways, the Mormon church has developed its beliefs about the nature of God in light of its beliefs about the nature of humans. For example, B. H. Roberts believed that a key to Mormon doctrine was its unique knowledge that "God must be in the same form as man."[2] This belief has led Mormons to conclude that there is quantitative but not qualitative difference between God and humans which can be bridged.

Mormonism has unresolved doctrinal tensions that result from the conflict between its absolute and finite conceptions of God's nature. Smith's shift between these two views of God occurred because his view of human nature changed from a pessimistic, finite view to an optimistic view of humans as "co-equal" with God.[3] Historically, these shifts in Mormon anthropology have caused shifts in other doctrinal areas such as the doctrines of God's nature.

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[1]Joseph Smith, *TJS*, 352.

[2] B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book Company, 1994), 1:135.

[3]Joseph Smith, *TJS*, 353.

The Early Mormon View of Human Beings

Humans as Finite Creatures

The early Mormon canon portrayed humans as contingent, finite, and weak creatures who are continually sustained by their Creator. There was a sharp dichotomy between humans and God. Ostler labeled this earliest period of Mormon doctrine as a time of "absolutistic preconceptions."[4] Three prominent canonical themes established this radical difference between God and humans. First, God was proclaimed to be absolute in knowledge and power. In the words of King Benjamin, Mormons should "believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things, both in heaven and in earth."[5]

Second, the creation of humans from the dust of the earth meant that they are utterly dependent on God. In the same sermon, King Benjamin sought to show his people their lack of worthiness compared to God: "And now I ask, can ye say aught of yourselves? I answer you, Nay. Ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth; yet ye were created of the dust of the earth; but behold, it belongeth to him who created you."[6]

Third, humans have fallen even lower than their originally created contingent status because of the "great transgression" which resulted in each person becoming "less than the dust," "carnal," "worthless," "fallen," subject to all manner of infirmities in body

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[4]Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1982): 59.

[5]Mosiah 4:9. Also see Mosiah 3:5; 3:17, 18, 21; 4:6; 5:2, 15; 2 Nephi 9:6; Words of Mormon 1:7; Jacob 2:5; Alma 44:5; D&C 20:17.

[6]Mosiah 2:25. Also see Mosiah 4:2; D&C 77:12.

and mind, "stiffnecked," and "an enemy of God."[7] Joseph Smith's early public teaching reflected this view of humans as fallen and sinful. On one occasion, he proclaimed that "there is one thing under the sun which I have learned and that is that the righteousness of man is sin because it exacteth over much."[8] In another sermon, he conceded that "I do not think there have been many good men on the earth since the days of Adam." [9]

Other Mormon leaders reflected his early negative assessment of humans. Apostle Orson Pratt described this world as a "fallen world" which is far from the presence of God.[10] Warren A. Cowdery wrote in an 1835 article in the *Messenger and Advocate* that although each person is more noble than the lower creatures on earth, he or she is still "dependent on the great first cause and is constantly upheld by him."[11]

Similarities to Protestant Views

Scholars have noted the similarities between the early Mormon views of humans and the beliefs of Protestant and Catholic churches during the same period.[12] McMurrin believed that it was not until Smith's years in Nauvoo from 1839 to 1844 that

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[7]Helaman 4:26; Mosiah 2:10-11, 3:19, 4:2,5, 19-21. Alexander noted that this sermon by King Benjamin exemplifies the early view of man. Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," *Sunstone* 22 (1999): 17.

[8]Joseph Smith, *TJS*, 317.

[9]*HC*, 5:401. Smith also wrote to his wife, Emma, about his anguish over the pride of man which he observed during his 1832 visit to New York City. Joseph Smith, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), in LCL, 252.

[10]*JD*, 21:198.

[11]Warren A. Cowdery, "Letter Number 2," *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 8 (May 1835), in LCL, 113.

[12]Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 59.

Mormon doctrines became distinct from Protestantism.[13] More specifically, Alexander argued that 1835 was the year that the church began to shift away from Protestant doctrines.[14] Prior to this year, because of their shared belief in the "perfectibility of man," the closest Protestant groups to Mormonism were the Methodists and Disciples of Christ.[15]

The Effects of the Fall

In an early revelation, Joseph Smith learned that the Fall was necessary for the fulfillment of God's plan for human happiness.

> And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden . . . . and they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin . . . . Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.[16]

In order for Adam and Eve to exercise their free agency and to begin their upward journey toward exaltation, they had to transgress God's commandment. The result was that they became mortal and fallible. Smith attempted to teach that Adam and Eve's action caused spiritual and temporary death while officially denying the doctrine of original sin.

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[13]Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 68.

[14]Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 17. In the years after 1835, the later half of the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price were received.

[15]Ibid.

[16]2 Nephi 2:21-22, 24.

Despite Smith's effort, the Book of Mormon still contains "a form of the doctrine of original sin."[17] For example, Mosiah 3:19 taught that humans are guilty before God: "For the natural man is an enemy of God." The Book of Mormon also taught that Adam's transgression transmits sin to humanity.[18] However, 2 Nephi 9:6 explained that the resurrection *has completely overcome* the effects of the Fall.[19] Likewise, speaking of the death brought by Adam, Helaman 14:16 asserted that it had been overcome for *all humanity* by the death of Christ: "Yea, behold, this death bringeth to pass the resurrection, and redeemeth all mankind from the first death--that spiritual death."[20] The belief that humans are "carnal," "sensual," and "devilish" was never exactly similar to the historical Christian doctrine of original sin, because all early Mormons believed that every human had been freed automatically from the effects of the Fall through the atonement.

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[17]Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 17.

[18]Ibid.

[19]"For as death hath passed upon all men, to fulfill the merciful plan of the great Creator, there must needs be a power of resurrection, and the resurrection must needs come unto man by reason of the fall; and the fall came by reason of transgression; and because man became fallen they were cut off from the presence of the Lord" (2 Nephi 9:6).

[20]Because of the ambiguity regarding how the early church interpreted these scriptures, scholars are divided over the issue of whether the early LDS church believed in an actual doctrine of depravity. Some have argued that a form of the doctrine of human depravity was taught during the initial years. See Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 17. Also see Hanson, *Mormonism and the American Experiment*, 73; McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, 67-68; O. Kendall White, Jr., *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), xix. Others have denied that the doctrine of depravity was taught in the early Mormon canon by anyone, especially Joseph Smith himself. See Collin R. Mangrum, "Mormonism Philosophical Liberalism and the Constitution," *Brigham Young University Studies* 27, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 128; Truman G. Madsen, "Smith, Joseph: Teachings of Joseph Smith," in *EM*, 4:1341. Because of the Book of Mormon passages that taught the belief in an absolute God and finite humans, it is likely that the church believed in some form of human depravity.

Doctrine and Covenants 93:28 taught that men are now "innocent," and that each person is now "free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself."[21] As with other doctrines, Smith's view of human nature began to change later in his life. As the years passed and new revelations were received, Smith desired to "exalt man" by teaching the new doctrines in which man was "co-equal" and "co-eternal" with God.[22] A logical consequence of this progressive view of humans was that as Smith's depiction of God's nature became finite and limited and humans became necessary and unlimited.

The Traditional Mormon View of Human Beings

Upon the receipt of Doctrine and Covenants 93:29 in May 1833, Joseph Smith learned that humans do not have a contingent existence. Since "man was also in the beginning with God," he must be eternal and necessary. The eternality of humans caused a shift in his view of human nature which continued as he received subsequent revelations. By 1835, the new direction of Smith's view of humans was apparent and it became a foundational view of the church during his final years in Nauvoo.[23]

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[21]2 Nephi 2:27.

[22]*DJS,* 346.

[23]Lyon observed that "while the Bible and Book of Mormon have accounts which are now used to support the doctrine of a pre-earthly existence, little use was made of these verses by the Saints prior to the Nauvoo period." Edgar Lyon, "Doctrinal Development of the Church during the Nauvoo Sojourn, 1939-1946," *Brigham Young University Studies* 15 (Summer 1975): 439; also see Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 60; Charles Harrell, "The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830-1844," *Brigham Young University Studies* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1988), 77.

The Eternality of Humans

In the King Follett Discourse, Smith formally established the doctrine that "the first principles of man are self-existent with God."[24] While it took several years for the idea that humans are eternal to disseminate throughout the church, the theological impact of this doctrine steadily increased among the church leadership. Apostle John A. Widtsoe later wrote, "the doctrine of the eternal nature of man is the most characteristic of the gospel."[25] Roberts believed that humans were as eternal as God because they possess "the same kind of substance or essence" as deity.[26]

Traditional Mormon theologians drew several important conclusions from their belief in the eternality of man. First, humans are ontologically necessary beings who exist with God, not because of him.[27] This led them to esteem humans more highly and to abandon the hints of the pessimistic view of humans that early Mormonism inherited

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[24]*DIJ,* 45.

[25]John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft 1937), in LCL, 16. Mormons commonly assume that the idea of preexistence was understood at the beginning of the church. This is a mistaken view since it was only later that the church understood passages in the Book of Mormon as veiled references to the doctrine of preexistence. Orson Pratt explained that he was able to discern the doctrine in the Book of Mormon only after reading portions of Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible. See *JD*, 15:249. Harrell believed that until the later revelations were received the saints still believed that God created each soul: "While a rudimentary concept of preexistence began to take hold in the Church by the mid-1830s, it was still quite different from our current thinking. It appears to have merged with creationist thinking to produce a notion similar to contemporary preexistencism. The creationist view, that the human spirit was a fiat creation *ex nihilo*, is nowhere contradicted in the earliest revelations given through the Prophet Joseph Smith." Harrell, "The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830-1844," 81.

[26]Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 2:8. Also see Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 70-71.

[27]Madsen listed six perennial philosophical issues which he believed that only the Mormon view of human eternality can resolve. These included the problem of human identity, the paradoxes of creation, the mind-body problem, the nature of human freedom, the problem of evil, and the problem of self-identity. Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1966), in LCL, 14.

from traditional Christianity. Widtsoe was certain that humans were eternal, valuable, and noble because "God also needs us."[28] McMurrin showed how this belief that humans are necessary completely reversed a basic doctrine of traditional Christian theology:

> In traditional Christian theology, the primary sin of man, the sin of pride, is his rebellion against his own contingency, his denial of his finiteness, his setting himself thereby in opposition to God . . . . In principle, at least, Mormonism is opposed to this description of the human predicament, the Mormon conception of man having far more in common with the typical modern religious liberalism or even humanism than with either secular or religious existentialism.[29]

Similarly, Apostle Hugh Brown taught that since people exist on earth as a combination of "eternal spirit" and "eternal elements," their future exalted status will be positive and joyous.[30]

Second, traditional theologians concluded that humans are eternal and essentially independent of God. This belief that humans are independent free agents required the redefinition of omniscience. Traditional theologians like Brigham Young, James Talmage, John Widtsoe, and B. H. Roberts proclaimed that God possesses extensive, but not exhaustive foreknowledge.

Third, traditional Mormons recognized that God's power must be partially limited by the existence of eternal, autonomous intelligences. Madsen summarized the independence of these intelligences: "God, man, Satan, and his hosts are independent.

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[28]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 28. Ostler concluded that man has the property of self-sustenance. Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books Inc, 2001), 122.

[29]McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, 4.

[30]Hugh B. Brown, *Continuing the Quest* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1961), in LCL, 209. Also see John H. Gardner, "A Godlike Potential," *Dialogue* 6 (Autumn-Winter 1971): 145.

One cannot force another."[31] Accordingly, traditional Mormonism redefined omnipotence in light of the eternal environment of God and especially the existence of these intelligences.

Eternal Free Agency and Spirit Birth

Following the course marked out by Joseph Smith, traditional Mormon theologians accepted the eternality of intelligence and the positive assessment of human potential. However, there were disagreements among theologians during the initial period of traditional Mormon theology, 1834 to 1915, over the eternality of man's free agency. Most theologians correctly understood that Smith had taught that not only was intelligence eternal, but that individual intelligences had always been self-conscious and capable of exercising free agency. A minority of theologians disputed this claim and argued that intelligence was an eternal substance or undifferentiated mass out of which individual self-conscious intelligences were organized during a spirit birth. Hyde has given an accurate summary of this issue that divided theologians.

> While the revelations leave no doubt as to the existence of intelligent matter prior to its being organized as spirits, speculation sometimes arises regarding the nature of premortal existence and whether there was individual identity and consciousness prior to birth as a spirit. Some hold that the terms "intelligence" and "intelligences" have reference to a form of prespirit conscious self-existence, which included individual identity, variety, and agency . . . . Others maintain that while these characteristics, attributes, and conditions are eternal, they essentially came together for each individual at the spirit birth.[32]

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[31]Truman G. Madsen, "Smith, Joseph: Teachings of Joseph Smith," in *EM*, 4:1341.

[32]Paul Nolan Hyde, "Intelligences," in *EM*, 2:692.

Joseph Smith had taught that the intelligences of humans were eternal and that these intelligences were granted mortal bodies upon coming to earth. Brigham Young unintentionally contributed to the rise of the minority view that arose after the death of Smith, because he frequently spoke of an additional step in the journey to moral life in which the eternal intelligences had passed through a spiritual birth to spirit parents in order to gain a spirit body. After their spirit births, the children lived in the spirit realm with their heavenly parents until they came to earth and received bodies. He believed that consciousness began at the time of spiritual birth: "Thought originated with our individual being, which *was organized to be* as independent as any being in eternity."[33]

In general, the theologians who adopted Young's view of individuality arising at the time of spirit children's conception were the same theologians who were attempting to retain the early Mormon absolutist conceptions of God.[34] For example, Orson Pratt was one of the first theologians to agree with Young that free agency began with the spirit birth.[35] His brother, Parley Pratt, also advocated Young's view that intelligence was a non-conscious "spiritual element" found in the most basic forms of

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[33]*JD*, 2:135 (emphasis mine). Ostler believed that the Mormon idea of a spirit birth resulted from attempts to reconcile the teachings of Smith with the newer, potentially conflicting teachings of Young. "This concept was an outgrowth of the seeming paradox between the doctrine emphasized by Brigham Young and popularized by Eliza R. Snow's poem, 'O My Father,' that individuals are literally begotten of divine parents and the affirmation of Joseph Smith that humans, in their elementary state, are eternal. As a result, individual pre-existence was thought to begin with literal spiritual birth, while before this birth only disorganized spirit existed." Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 63.

[34]Young's theological views were different from the view held by contemporary neo-absolutists. While it is true that all of these contemporary neo-absolutists theologians believe that free agency arose at the time of the spirit birth, not all theologians who have historically held this view had been absolutistic theologians. Brigham Young is an example of a Mormon who believed that free agency was created yet he held finitistic views of God's nature.

[35]Ibid., 66-67.

matter and energy.[36] These early theologians affirmed that the basic substance of intelligence was capable of being organized into a "spiritual body." At the time of spiritual birth, each newly formed spirit child became "an agent endowed with life, with a degree of independence, or inherent will, with the powers of motion, of thought, and with the attributes of moral, intellectual, and sympathetic affections and emotions."[37]

At the beginning of the twentieth century, this issue arose again as part of a disagreement between Roberts and the LDS First Presidency. Roberts had based much of his theology upon the human co-eternal and co-equal status with God, and when the First Presidency was reviewing Robert's *History of the Church*, Charles W. Penrose and Anthony H. Lund objected to his view that the intelligences were eternal.[38] This tension between Roberts and the First Presidency demonstrates the link between theologians who held absolute conceptions of God and the view that eternal agency began with spirit birth. Penrose believed in an infinite, absolute God who possessed all knowledge and power. As a result, his conception of God fit better with the view that while intelligence is eternal, human identity and free agency were created gifts given to the spirit children by God.

For Penrose, free agency and personal identity began with the spirit birth. He concluded that "the individual, the organized person may have had a beginning, but that

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[36] *JD*, 1:8

[37] Ibid.

[38] Thomas G Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," *Sunstone* 22 (1999): 22. Roberts complied with their wishes and removed this teaching from the *History of the Church*, although he later included the same teaching in his influential *Seventy's Course in Theology* despite their continued objections. Ibid.; Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 68-69.

spirit of which and by which they organized never had a beginning."[39] It was intelligence as "primal particles" which were eternal.[40] In contrast, Roberts wrote extensively about a more finitistic view of God which fit with his belief that man's free agency and identity are eternal.

This tension between absolute and finite conceptions of God can also be seen in two different approaches to the King Follett Discourse. Penrose doubted the accuracy of the recorded accounts of the sermon because of the radical nature of Smith's alleged words. In contrast, Roberts trusted the authenticity of the recorded accounts because he believed that it was in the King Follett Discourse that Smith's ideas about God and humans were stated most explicitly.

The majority of traditional LDS theologians interpreted Joseph Smith's public discourses and the canonical writings to mean that the distinct, individual intelligences that compose each person are uncreated and eternal. The public teachings of Smith favor this interpretation, even though this view is probably not reconcilable with his earlier canonical teachings about the contingency of humans. Smith equated eternal intelligence with "the soul – the mind of man – the immortal spirit."[41] He also spoke of humans as having existed eternally "upon the same principles as God."[42]

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[39]Ibid., 26:27.

[40]*JD*, 26:28.

[41]*DIJ*, 44; Since Smith thought of the mind of humans as immortal and eternal, it would be difficult to argue that Smith did not think that conscious thought was eternal.

[42]Ibid.; White argued that for Smith "intelligences" meant the conscious minds of humans. White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, 69.

Ostler viewed these intelligences as "differentiated, individual, autonomous entities," because Smith had taught that they had exercised free agency in their act of choosing to come to the earth. In addition, Smith taught that the intelligences were at different levels of development because in eternity past, they made choices resulting in their different levels of development.[43] Since Smith used the terms "the mind of man," "soul," "spirit," and "intelligence" interchangeably, his claim that the "mind" of each person is like a ring without beginning or ending supports this interpretation.[44] After Smith, traditional theologians continued to argue that intelligences must have possessed agency from eternity since they developed different traits and characteristics.[45] Roberts was convinced that intelligences are "self-conscious," possess the "power of deliberation," and have the "power of choosing one thing instead of another."[46] Each

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[43]Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 62.

[44]*DIJ*, 124; also see Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 2:8-9; Jay E. Jensen, "Spirit, " in *EM*, 4: 1403-04; Richard N. William, "Soul, " in *EM*, 3:1392; Mark Nolan, "Materialism and the Mormon Faith," *Dialogue* 22 (Winter 1989): 70.

[45]Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1939), in LCL, 13. Theologians on both sides of this issue affirmed the fact that the intelligences had developed at different speeds and to different levels; however, it was the traditional Mormons who believed in eternally self-conscious intelligences who were better able to account for this phenomena. See Brigham Young, *JD*, 6:97; B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), in LCL, 1:457; Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 13-14; George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, ed. Jerreld L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1987), in LCL, 13; First Presidency, "Mormon View of Evolution," in *MFP* 5:243:244; Howard W. Hunter, *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter: Fourteenth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 12; Hyrum L. Andrus, *Liberalism, Conservatism, Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1965), 77; Neal A. Maxwell, "A More Determined Discipleship," *Ensign* 9 (February 1979): 69; Ardeth Greene Kapp, *Rejoice! His Promises Are Sure* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1997), 82; Lannie Rex Sears, "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard, 1996), 33; Gayle Oblad, "Premortal Life," in *EM,* 3:1125.

[46]Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 2:8-9.

person has an eternal "ego" which is a "self-existent entity."[47] This view was crucial for his traditional Mormon theodicy because he argued that God could not control the evil committed by the intelligences which he neither created nor organized.

For Apostle Widtsoe, speculation regarding the beginning of man was not profitable since not much could be known. Despite this claim, he held a specific view of intelligence as a "primal personality" which necessarily possessed "the distinguishing characteristic of every intelligent, conscious, thinking being - an independent and individual will."[48] He believed that this characteristic was not an ability given to intelligences at some point because they always possessed by them.

Several scholars have shown that this view is consistent with the other doctrines of the later teachings of Joseph Smith and with his successors.[49] The fact that there has frequently been confusion and conflict between Mormon theologians over the nature of intelligence lends support to the thesis that Smith bequeathed to his church doctrinal tensions rather than greater doctrinal clarity.[50]

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[47]Brigham H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Van der Donckt Discussion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 102.

[48]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 17.

[49]Madsen, *Eternal Man*, 13, 18; also see David Lamont Paulsen, "Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Michigan, 1975), 80; Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," 62-63, 72; Rex L. Sears, "Determinist Mansions in the Mormon House?," *Dialogue* 31 (Winter 1998): 127; Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 23.

[50]LDS president Joseph Fielding Smith abandoned any hope of understanding the nature of the intelligences. He declared that attempts to understand the details of this doctrine were "futile." Joseph Fielding Smith, "Answers to Gospel Questions" (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1958), 4:127. This was a surprisingly candid admission by an LDS president on the ambiguous nature of a LDS doctrine.

The Divine Nature of Humans

Traditional Mormons concluded that because intelligence is eternal and God was once a human, humans must be the same species as God. Since humans were created as the literal offspring of God, there is only a chronological difference between them. They share the same nature because "the human and the divine are not mutually exclusive categories in LDS thought. Mormons insist that the two categories are one."[51]

Joseph Smith taught that humans could follow the path of exaltation to Godhood that the Father and the Son had followed. The reward of the righteous would be "to inherit the same power, the same glory, and the same exaltation, until you arrive at the station of a God and ascend the throne of eternal power, the same as those who have gone before."[52] Building upon these ideas, Brigham Young taught that his free agency was "sacred," because "it is a portion of that same deity that rules in the heavens."[53] God cannot and will not violate this eternal agency, because he gave humans divine attributes like freedom. The agency that he shares with humans is one of the "glorious faculties, with Godlike attributes like those which are incorporated into his own nature."[54]

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[51]Stephen E. Robinson, "LDS Doctrine Compared with Other Christian Doctrine," in *EM*, 1: 401. Seniority and level of advancement were also the only difference between Jesus and the Father. Paul M. Edwards, "Persistences that Differ: Comments on the Doctrine of Man," *Sunstone* 5 (September-October 1980): 46. Also see Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 460. Because God and humans are the same species, " 'divinity' is a fullness of what it means to be human. ' Humanity' and 'divinity' refer to the sets of properties which are severally necessary and jointly sufficient to be human and divine respectively." Ibid., 456.

[52]*DIJ*, 136-137.

[53]*JD*, 10:191.

[54]*JD*, 10:265-266. Traditional Mormons also taught that humans were created in the image of both their Heavenly Father and their Heavenly Mother. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 25. Also see Lorenzo Snow, *The*

No one has ever matched President Lorenzo Snow's excitement over the potential for deity within each person. Because humans are created in the literal image of God, they possess "the nature of deity in the composition of our spiritual organization."[55] Just as the infant son of an earthly emperor may someday gain the kingdom of his father, so each person has the potential to become like God because he has the "same faculties and powers as He possesses."[56] The First Presidency of the church officially endorsed this view in their 1909 proclamation called the "The Origin of Man." They wrote that "man is the child of God, formed in the divine image and endowed with divine attributes . . . capable, by experience through ages and aeons, of evolving into a God."[57]

The traditional theologians of the early twentieth century continued to teach this view of the nature of man. Apostle Roberts cited Doctrine and Covenants 93 when he proclaimed that "the supposed gulf of separation is swept away; that on the one hand the divinity of man is proclaimed, and on the other, the humanity of God."[58] Talmage believed that nature and revelation have proven the truth of "the inviolable law of organic nature – that like shall beget like." For this reason, humans should be considered to be "a God in embryo."[59] Widtsoe frequently taught that people are of "the same race with God" and of "the order of the Gods."[60]

Teachings of Lorenzo Snow: Fifth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 7.

[55]*JD*, 14:302.

[56]Snow, *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, 2; also see *JD*, 26:368.

[57]*MFP*, 4:206.

[58]Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 222. Roberts declared that in essence the intelligences are "all Gods" because they are the offspring of God." Ibid., 257.

The divine nature shared by God and humans has been a frequent sermon topic at the church's semi-annual conferences. Elder Richard rejoiced in a sermon that a glorious inheritance awaits the saints, since they have been given "the very attributes and qualities of deity."[61] In two sermons, Elders Milton R. Hunter and Heber Meeks taught that human life is sacred and valuable because of the divine nature which resides in each person.[62] LDS president Kimball exhorted church members to use "the seeds of Godhood" in themselves as they climb the hard, upward path to perfection. There can be no insurmountable obstacles for a person because "it is within his power to lift himself by his bootstraps from the plane on which he finds himself."[63]

One of the results of this traditional Mormon view was that theologians dismissed the canonical teaching that humans were created from the dust of the ground as mere figurative language. Since the idea of creation from dust emphasized human contingency rather than the necessity of human existence, they ignored the teachings of

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[59]James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith: Being a Consideration of the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), in LCL, 5. Because humans have futures as Gods, they will inherit "boundless possibilities." Idem, "The Earth and Man," *The Instructor* 100, no. 12 (December 1965): 13-14 [on-line]; accessed 25 March 2005; available from http://eyring.hplx.net /Eyring /faq/evolution /Talmage1931.html; Internet.

[60] Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 28, 66. All three theologians accepted Darwin's theory of evolution with a few qualifications. They perceived a strong parallel between the past evolution of man from lower life forms and the future evolution of humans to Godhood.

[61]George F. Richards, CR, October 1914, 16.

[62]Elder Milton R. Hunter, CR, October 1945, 108; Elder Heber Meeks, CR, October 1957, 37. Also see Lowell Bennion, "A Mormon View of Life," 62.

[63]Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 28. Despite the rise of neo-absolutism, some traditional Mormon scholars have continued to argue for the unlimited potential of humans. See William E. Berrett, *Teachings of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1956), 48. Also see Sears, "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology," 43; Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought,* 80; Edwards, "Persistences that Differ: Comments on the Doctrine of Man," 46; Alexander, "The

both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon. Brigham Young claimed to have left this childish belief behind. He preached that he had "banished from my mind all baby stories my mother taught me when I was a child."[64] He noted that if humans had been created out of dust then people would have remained as ignorant as an "adobie to this day."[65]

The Glory of God in the Exaltation of Humans

Joseph Smith's shift away from early Mormon theology included a change in his view of the purpose of the universe. Because he abandoned the early Mormon dichotomy between the creator and the creature, humans were now viewed as co-eternal and co-equal with God.[66] Smith preached that the goal of God is not the glorification of himself. Rather, God takes all actions for the purpose of the exaltation and deification of humans. His highest desire is for people to become like him. In his King Follett Discourse, he proclaimed that "all the spirits that God ever sent into this world are susceptible of enlargement. That God himself - found himself in the midst of spirit and

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Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 24; Douglas F. Tobler and S. George Ellsworth. "History: Historical Significance to Latter-day Saints," in *EM*, 2:596.

[64]*JD*, 2:6-7. Jeffery noted that no traditional LDS leader interpreted the Genesis account literally. Instead, they held that "man came via an act of natural procreation." Duane E. Jeffery, "Seers, Servants, and Evolution: The Uncomfortable Interface," *Dialogue* 8, nos. 3-4 (1973): 56. Roberts also wrote that "the account in Genesis of man's earth origin, of his being made of the dust of the earth, and woman manufactured from man's rib gives in allegory the process of the generation of human life." Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4:45.

[65]Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4:45. Young had a different view of his prophetic authority than Mormon minimalists today. Rather than believing that he was bound by the canon, Young thought that he, as the living prophet, was the final doctrinal authority. He boldly reminded the saints, "I have publicly declared that I do not believe that portion of the Bible as the Christian world do." Ibid.

[66]*TJS*, 353.

glory because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself."[67]

Apostle Orson F. Whitney claimed that God is not a "monopolist" concerning his attributes and perfections. He intends to exalt each person "to his own spiritual stature."[68] Similarly, Widtsoe believed that God could not advance in joy without the exaltation of lesser intelligences.[69] Humans worship and serve God not for his benefit but because this is a necessary step in their exaltation. LDS President Kimball imagined a conversation between God and his premortal spirit children before they came to earth.

> Now the world is for you, and everything that is in it. I want you to be happy and have every necessity and luxury, and all I ask is that . . . you will do certain things that I specify. I don't want your worship for myself. I want you to worship me because it will draw you closer to me. I don't want your tithing but I shall turn it right back to your own good. I will ask you to pray, not because I want praise, but because it will be a development of your soul. I will ask you to keep your lives clean, not to satisfy my ego, but for your good, and every law I give you shall be for your good entirely.[70]

Eternal Progress in Heaven

Since the goal of the universe is human development, traditional Mormons opposed the idea that the focus of heaven will be the worship of God. Widtsoe mocked

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[67]Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph.* comp. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1980), in LCL, 359-60.

[68]Orson F. Whitney, *Gospel Themes: A Treatise on Salient Features of "Mormonism"* (Salt Lake City: n. p. 1914), 5.

[69]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 27; Berrett concluded from his study of the Doctrine and Covenants that man is 'the center and intended benefactor of all created things." Berrett, *Teachings of the Doctrine and Covenants*, 81.

[70]Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 30. McMurrin observed that Mormonism contrasts with traditional Christianity in that "it is not the abject dependence of man in which God finds his

the hope of some that they would be able to spend eternity "gazing upon the face of the Savior."[71] He believed that not only would this be a display of bad manners, but it would not fulfill the purpose of heaven. In his view, the highest hope and privilege of heaven is the continuation of earthly activities.[72] President Cannon rejected the false idea that heaven would be a place where saints would sit passively and "sing praises and songs of joy." Instead of worshipping God, each person will continue to progress forever as he or she continued to develop his or her talents.[73]

The Exaltation of Humans to Godhood

Traditional Mormons believed that faithful saints would be exalted to divine status. Each person had the potential to become as independent, powerful, and glorified as Elohim, the God of this world. They conceded that this deification required divine assistance, but they limited God's role to helping people reach their innate potential. The emphasis was not upon a future of humans abiding with God. Instead, the focus was upon each person becoming like God. Eternal joy would be found when people exercised their divine prerogative to establish new creations throughout the universe and to populate them with their spirit children. It is important to recognize the degree of this anticipated future independence from God, since contemporary neo-absolutist theologians have

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glory." McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, 77.Also see Madsen, "Smith, Joseph: Teachings of Joseph Smith," 3:1342; Bennion, "A Mormon View of Life," 63.

[71]CR, October 1928, 64.

[72]Ibid., 64-65.

[73]Cannon, *Gospel Truth*, 92. Also see Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith*, 432.

denied that Mormons ever hoped for more than the Pauline hope of glorification in Christ.

The first revelations that Joseph Smith received regarding human exaltation were Doctrine and Covenant 76:58, 84:38, and 88:107. All three revelations were received in 1832 and served as the foundation for the traditional Mormon view of human destiny.[74] From 1832 until 1844, the doctrine of human exaltation circulated quietly among the church leaders while further revelations added more details to this new view.

This doctrine emerged fully in the 1844 King Follett Discourse in which it was taught as an established doctrine of the church. In this sermon, Smith preached that each person could become an heir of God and an heir with Jesus. This inheritance consists of the privilege "to inherit the same power, the same glory, and the same exaltation, until you arrive at the station of a God and ascend the throne of eternal power, the same as those who have gone before."[75] Smith drew no distinctions between the deity possessed by God and the level of deity that humans would someday gain. Scholars have noted that Smith's teaching of this doctrine laid the foundation for the "nineteenth century temple ritual."[76]

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[74]Van Hale, "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 213.

[75]*DIJ*, 137. This exaltation would require moral perfection but Smith believed that humans could become perfect in this life. In his closing remarks of the King Follett Discourse, it is clear that Smith believed that he himself had arrived at perfection. He claimed that "I never did harm any man since I was born in the world. My voice is always for peace. I cannot lie down until all my work is finished. I never think any evil, nor do anything to the harm of my fellowman" (*HC*, 6:317).

[76]Douglas Davis, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 91. The temple rituals became a necessary step for those who wanted to qualify "to become creators as the eternal Father and the Son." Edgar Lyon, "Doctrinal Development of the Church During the Nauvoo Sojourn, 1939-1946," *Brigham Young University Studies* 15 (Summer 1975): 445.

Brigham Young continued to teach this doctrine that he called the doctrine of "eternal progression."[77] He taught that "the Lord created you and me for the purpose of becoming Gods like himself."[78] In their status as Gods, exalted humans will create innumerable worlds and will procreate children to inhabit them."[79] These Gods will be as independent of their Father Elohim as he is of his Father because the divine assistance required for such exaltation is only a *temporary* assistance. President Snow coined his famous couplet to describe the future of exalted humans. He said that "as man is, God once was; as God now is, man may be."[80] This joyous future would include being able to "possess the same glory as God."[81] Ultimately, humans will learn to act independent of all forces or powers, even the power of Elohim:

> It is designed that man should act as God, and not be constrained and controlled in everything, but have an independency, an agency and the power to spread abroad and act according to the principle of godliness that is in him, act according to the power and intelligence and enlightenment of God, that he possesses, and not that he should be watched continually, and be controlled, and act as a slave in these matters.[82]

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[77]Lisa Ramsey Adams, "Eternal Progression," in *EM*, 2:465.

[78]*JD*, 3:93.

[79]Ibid. Smith taught a similar idea. See *DIJ*, 98.

[80]Snow, *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow,* 3. Snow formulated this saying as a way of expressing the greatness of the future promised to him by God. He learned of this future through his 1836 patriarchal blessing when he was told that he would become as great as God. Snow clearly understood the theological significance of this promise because he initially believed that this was almost a blasphemous statement. Hale, "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse," 214.

[81]Snow, *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow,* 3.

[82]*JD*, 20:367.

These newly exalted Gods will rule and govern for all eternity while they assist in the exaltation of their own spirit children who will themselves become Gods.[83] George Cannon, President Snow's First Counselor, taught that humans would evolve in knowledge and power until they become divine.[84] He preached that they would have "infinite" and "unlimited gratification" through eternal progression, especially through the procreation of children, which is the "greatest power."[85]

Twentieth century traditional Mormons continued to proclaim the same hope as their predecessors. Widtsoe believed that humans would approach the "likeness" and "position" of God. When humans reach this exalted status then they will posses all divine prerogatives, including the power to control the elements.[86] Roberts dismissed the complaints of critics of the church who cited biblical passages like Numbers 23:18 as the basis for denying that humans could ever become Gods. He argued that the sharp contrast between God and humans found in many biblical passages merely teach that they are currently unlike God. These scriptures were never intended to address the issue of the future of humans who in their exalted states will reach the level of God.[87] President Kimball encouraged the saints to recognize that since they have unlimited potential to

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[83] Snow, *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow,* 138; Also see CR, April 1901, 2.

[84]Cannon, *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, 104.

[85]CR, April 1989, 144.

[86]John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation: Aids to Faith in a Modern Day* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), in LCL, 179, idem, *Rational Theology*, 26; idem, *An Understandable Religion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1944), 38.

[87]Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 94.

become like God, they must strive for perfection.[88] Brown explained the nature of this eternal increase that awaits exalted human beings.

> When we speak of eternal increase, we speak not only of increase of posterity, we speak of increase of knowledge and the power that comes with knowledge; increase of wisdom to use that knowledge and power wisely; increase of awareness and the joy that comes through understanding; increase of intelligence, which is the glory of God; increase of all that goes to make up Godhood.[89]

Stronger Rejection of Original Sin

Traditional Mormon theologians strongly rejected the doctrine of original sin. Early Mormons had denied that Adam's sin was passed to his descendents, yet they retained the belief that through the Fall humans inherit a fallen, evil, and nature. Traditional Mormons who espoused the eternality of humans and their ontological necessity were unwilling to view them as evil in any sense.

Their rejection of original sin and the effects of the Fall can be seen in three areas of their theology. First, they expressed high regard for the nobility of Adam and for his wise action in the garden. He was one of the wisest of all of God's children and his actions were noble. Second, they proclaimed that the human nature was essentially good. Humans naturally choose to love and follow God without any divine assistance. Third, they declared that since each person is moral and virtuous, he or she is capable of choosing good or evil.

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[88]Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 26. Also see CR, April 1952, 24.

[89]Brown, *Continuing the Quest*, 5; also see CR, October 1966, 103.

The Nobility of Adam

Traditional Mormonism revered Adam and Eve for the wisdom which they demonstrated in the garden. In contrast, early Mormon theologians had thought of Adam and Eve in less lofty terms. While their transgression in the garden was necessary for eternal progression, they were not praised for their action. Despite their predecessors more neutral assessment of Adam and Eve, traditional Mormons reflecting on Adam and Eve concluded that the first human couple must be among the greatest of God's children.[90] Brigham Young preached that "we should never blame Mother Eve."[91] Her action in the garden was necessary and without it, humans never could have "possessed wisdom and intelligence."[92] Young viewed Adam so highly that in a famous sermon he proclaimed Adam to be the God of this world: "He is MICHAEL, the Archangel, the ANCIENT OF DAYS! about whom holy men have written and spoken-HE is our FATHER and our GOD, and the only God with whom WE have to do."[93] The Mormons who first heard his sermon understood that this meant that Adam was God the Father. This meant that Elohim must be the father of Adam and therefore he is the grandfather, not father, of human beings.[94]

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[90]The later portion of the canon supported this elevated view. See D&C 78:16, 116; 128:21 and Moses 3:21-25; 5:57-59. Also see McConkie, *MD.* 17-18. Traditional Mormons elevated the greatness of Adam and Eve far beyond even these verses.

[91]*JD*, 13:146.

[92]Ibid. Another benefit of this sin was that Adam and Eve received mortal bodies and thereby could fulfill God's command to procreate. Orson F. Whitney, *The Strength of the Mormon Position* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1917), in LCL, 16.

[93]*JD*, 1:51.

[94]Jeffery, "Seers, Servants, and Evolution." This doctrine was taught repeatedly by Brigham Young, especially in private among the church leadership. It was a controversial doctrine and it eventually

Apostle Whitney also believed that the first parents were honorable in their actions. He introduced into LDS thought two categories of moral actions. Using these two categories, he believed that Mormons could avoid saying that Adam had sinned: "Adam's transgression was *malum prohibitum*, or wrong because forbidden, not *malum in se*, or wrong in itself." In order to qualify as a "sin," Adam would have had to commit a sin that was *malum in se.*[95] Apostle Roberts denounced negative assessments of Adam. No other action "could be more courageous, sympathetic, or nobly honorable" than his actions.[96] Talmage linked the Fall with the future exaltation now available to all humanity. Because of their wise choice, Adam and Eve are "entitled to our deepest gratitude for their legacy to posterity."[97] Widtsoe also argued instead of being negative, the "so-called curse" was "possibly the greatest of all human blessings."[98]

The Moral Goodness of Humans

Joseph Smith intended to "exalt man" and his later views on the necessity of intelligences and the eternal agency of humans achieved his goal. Like Smith, Brigham Young taught the goodness of human nature. Rather than being enemies of God, people

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disappeared from the church. Since that time, the church has vigorously denied that this doctrine was taught. Mormons have repeatedly attempted to give alternate explanations of Young's words. Despite the concerted effort by church leaders, many scholars have demonstrated repeatedly that Young believed Adam was God. See John David Buerger, "The Adam-God Doctrine," *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1982): 14-58. The fact that the doctrine was taught by Young is less important than the fact that Young held such a high view of Adam and Eve, and that his listeners understood his esoteric teachings and accepted it.

[95]Whitney, *The Strength of the Mormon Position*, Also see Orson F Whitney, *Elias: An Epic of the Ages* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1904), 60.

[96]Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4:38.

[97]Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 63; idem, *The Vitality of Mormonism: Brief Essays on Distinctive Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1948), 48.

[98]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 52.

naturally "love and admire righteousness, justice, and truth more than they do evil."[99] He publicly disagreed with Paul's assessment of the natural man. Instead of the natural man rejecting the things of God, Young stated that it is the only unnatural man who rejects the things of God.[100] In his own view, a person "is more inclined to do right than to do wrong."[101]

John Taylor, the third LDS president, argued that each man is a "son of God, possessing noble aspirations" and "holy feelings."[102] It is within the natural capacities and abilities of each person to gain exaltation to Godhood. Humans do not need a transformed nature since they already possess the necessary goodness. Talmage rejoiced that Mormonism ended "belief in original sin, with its dread incubus as a burden from which none can escape."[103] Apostle Brown preached that the Mormon view of life is positive because it affirms that human can choose good over evil.[104] Similarly, Mormon scholar Bennion contrasted the optimism of Mormonism with other religious groups who were pessimistic about humans because of their belief in original sin.[105]

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[99]*JD*, 9:305.

[100]Ibid.

[101]*JD*, 9:240.

[102]*JD*, 8:5.

[103]Talmage, *The Vitality of Mormonism*, 45.

[104]CR, April 1964, 82.

[105]Bennion, "A Mormon View of Life," 59; also see Obert C. Tanner, *Christ's Ideals for Living* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret Sunday School Union Board, 1955), in LCL, 376; Paul R. Crazier, "Embracing the Flesh: In Praise of the Natural Man," *Dialogue* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 107; Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 21; Edwards, "Persistences that Differ," 48; Janice M. Allred, "Toward a Mormon Concept of Original Sin," *Sunstone* 8 (May-June 1983): 14; Bertrand Barriois, "Gnosticism Reformed," *Dialogue* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 252; O. Kendall White Jr., "A Reply to the Critics of the Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy Hypothesis," *Dialogue* 6 (Fall 1971): 100.

Freedom to be Righteous

Traditional Mormons concluded that since there was no original sin, the fall was an upward step, and that humans now have an untainted free agency to choose either good or evil. Each person has libertarian, contra-causal freedom and can choose to turn away from the temptations of sin in this life and toward God.[106] These theologians either ignored the early Mormon canonical teaching that humans are "carnal, sensual, and devilish" or they greatly minimized the effects of the Fall so that it did not directly affect human choices.

Brigham Young believed that all people were capable of "choosing for themselves, whether it be good or evil."[107] On the issue of human freedom, he reversed the biblical imagery of the potter and the clay. Instead of believing that human lives are fashioned and shaped by God's sovereignty, he told his listeners that in contrast to helpless clay, they can shape their own lives and destinies: "You are capable of choosing, you are capable of refusing."[108] In the traditional Mormon view, humans have the ability to resist sin when they are tempted. Furthermore, sin was viewed as individual acts rather than a state or condition. Because sins are acts of disobedience, humans can repent of their sins by simply choosing to cease committing them.[109] Brigham Young taught the

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[106]Blake T. Ostler, "The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace," *Dialogue* 24 (Spring 1991): 60; L. Rex Sears, "Determinist Mansions in the Mormon House?" *Dialogue* 31 (Winter 1998): 115-141.

[107]*JD*, 13:178.

[108]*JD*, 5:341; also see *JD*, 3:267; 9:284.

[109]This view had implications for the traditional Mormon view of salvation. Since humans can stop sinning by an act of will, salvation did not require a supernatural regeneration. White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, 73.

saints that if they were in the habit of sinning, then they should just cease sinning.[110] President Wilford Woodruff spoke about the nature of repentance in one of his sermons. The emphasis upon individual sins rather than a sinful nature is apparent. Repentance is "the forsaking of sin. The man who repents if he be a swearer, swears no more; or a thief, steals no more; he turns away from all former sins and commits them no more."[111] In an *Improvement Era* article, the saints were told that because of the defeat of Satan's plan all people are "endowed with the inalienable right of absolute freedom to choose between good and evil."[112] President Joseph F. Smith concluded that "man can stop sinning and can do right in the future."[113]

While most traditional theologians ignored the effects of the Fall, some traditional theologians believed that the fall continues to have a minimal effect on humans. Roberts acknowledged that to some degree there was an "inclination to evil" in man.[114] Despite this sinful inclination, the human will is not enslaved to sin and can freely choose to act righteously because as Talmage concluded, "heredity is at most a tendency, not compulsion." Because of the eternal and uncreated nature of free agency, each person can choose either good or evil.[115] Roberts taught that humans have an equal

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[110]*JD*, 6:98.

[111]*JD*, 23:127.

[112]J. Preston Creer, "Fruits of the Fall," *Improvement Era* 6, no. 4 (February 1903), in LCL.

[113]Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 98. Also see Cannon, *Gospel Truth*, 16-17; Charles W. Penrose, CR, October 1914, 40.

[114]Brigham H. Roberts, *The Gospel and Man's Relationship to Deity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1965), 179. Similarly, Talmage wrote about a "heritage of sin." Talmage, *The Vitality of Mormonism*, 47.

[115] Talmage, *The Vitality of Mormonism*, 46-47.

ability to obey good or evil.[116] Likewise, President Joseph F. Smith believed that a person could become a slave to sin only through the unwise exercise of free agency. Becoming spiritually enslaved required that a person consistently engage in evil deeds.[117]

President David O. McKay addressed this issue when he wrote that people are able to choose between two natures. Each person is free to choose whether to embrace a good nature or an evil nature.[118] Humans can develop an evil nature and thereby *become* evil, but they were not originally *born* evil. President Kimball was convinced that the only limitations on the goodness of a person are self-imposed.[119] The path to Godhood is not hindered by an evil nature:

> Being a god in embryo with the seeds of godhood neatly tucked away in him, and with the power to become a god eventually, man need not despair. He should not give up. If he has had problems and slipped from the path of rectitude and right, he must stop in his headlong slipping and turn and transform himself.[120]

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[116]Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 2:23. What each person chooses can be good because "there is nothing difficult about this program for progress." Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation*, 186.

[117]Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 53.

[118]David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals: Selections from the Discourses of David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1953), 348.

[119]Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 26. Also see Hunter, *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, 79; Milton R. Hunter, *Will a Man Rob God? The Laws and Doctrine of Tithing, Fast Offerings and Observance of Fast Day* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1952), 80; Michelle Stott, "Of Truth and Passion: Mormonism and Existential Thought," *Dialogue* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 85.

[120]Spencer W. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), in LCL, 163. Humans are free to choose good moral actions because of their eternal free agency. They are also free because the atonement has completely overcome any negative effects of the fall. *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints. 1978), 12; Ostler, "The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace," 21. Because of the atonement, the saints "can forget the sinful past of humanity and look to the future and to opportunities it presents to their dedication and obedience." Douglas J. Davis, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 61. Two Mormon scholars have labeled this view a form of Pelagianism. See McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*; 67, Also see Ostler, "The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace," 63-64.

The Mormon Neo-absolutistic View of Human Beings

The rise of Mormon neo-absolutism in the 1950s was characterized by a diminished, more finite view of man and a corresponding more absolute view of God's nature. Part of the impetus behind this movement has been a new emphasis on the early Mormon canon, especially the Book of Mormon. Even though this new movement has been widely embraced by church's leadership, neo-absolutist Mormons have not succeeded in resolving the tensions inherent in the Mormon view of human nature. In particular, the optimistic view of humans established in the later canon has not been reconciled with the earlier, more pessimistic view of humans taught in the Book of Mormon. Edwards argued that it is impossible for Mormons to establish a coherent, consistent, and enduring view of humans.[121]

O. Kendall White Jr., who coined the term "Mormon neo-orthodoxy" to describe this movement, depicts it as a return to the earliest teachings of the church. He wrote that "much like the earliest Mormon converts, the latest neo-orthodox theologians rely primarily upon the Book of Mormon, not the story of Joseph Smith's first vision, for their doctrines of deity, human nature, and salvation."[122] McMurrin was troubled by this new view of human nature and believed that this movement is a "kind of Jansenist movement in academic circles." The rise of neo-absolutist theology has been the result of LDS scholars attempting to resolve the unresolved tensions in Mormon doctrine.[123]

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[121]Edwards, "Persistences that Differ," 48.

[122]White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, 139.

[123]McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, 67. For McMurrin, traditional Mormonism represented the essence of Mormon theology. Its liberal ideas of humans and its

Humans as Contingent Creatures

Neo-absolutists do not deny the canonical teaching that intelligence is eternal; however, they interpret intelligence in such a way that humans are viewed as contingent creatures. Neo-absolutist Brent Top summarized this belief: "Man did not exist as a separate, individual intelligence prior to spirit birth; the spirit was 'organized' from uncreated eternal elements known as 'intelligence.'"[124] Likewise, Hyrum L. Andrus described the "conscious entity" or "spirit personage" who was organized by God from mere spirit element.[125] He believed that this creation or organization of conscious existence from pre-conscious material was the reason why the Scriptures teach that humans are creatures of the Creator.[126] David Yarn wrote that eternal intelligence was "in the state of chaos, or in some other elementary condition" before God created each spirit child.[127] Even though intelligence, time, space, and matter are eternal, ultimately "God is the cause and the worlds and their inhabitants are effects." For this reason, lowly humans should guard against pride.[128] When humans correctly understand the contingent nature

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finitistic view of God were novel and held great potential. He rejected neo-absolutism as a "betrayal of the spirit and dominant character not only of Mormon theology but also of the Mormon religion." Ibid., 67-68.

[124]Brent L. Top, *The Life Before* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2001), 42.

[125]Hyrum L. Andrus, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1972), 117.

[126]Ibid., 508.

[127]David H. Yarn, *The Gospel: God, Man, and Truth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1979), in LCL, 50.

[128]Ibid., 149. Yarn declared that all things depend on God and "all things center in God."

of their existence then they will "take no special pride in the necessity of their original being."[129]

McConkie made the sweeping claim that "any notion or theory that life, or ego, or agency, existed for each individual prior to the time of the spirit birth is pure speculation, wholly unsupported by any correctly understood and properly interpreted scripture."[130] In his view, the only correct interpretation of the King Follett Discourse affirms that while intelligence is eternal, it was only the "substance" from which God organized each spirit."[131]

With such statements, these theologians attempt to "minimize the implications of man's necessary existence."[132] If humans are contingent, then they must be weak and significantly different from God. Farley believed that since humans are powerless, "condescension is the very essence of God's work and glory." God must stoop very low in all of his interactions with humans.[133] God and humans were no longer viewed as co-

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[129]Ibid., 151. Edwards believed that neo-absolutists have changed the question about the origin of humans so that they can emphasize their contingency and weakness. "For the question is not from what was man created—or did he exist independently—but if that which is, is dependent on God. The LDS Neo-orthodox say yes to the latter but declare the first unimportant." Edwards, "Persistences that Differ," 44.

[130]*MD*, 442. McConkie was known for his broad sweeping generalizations, which often were not technically accurate. In this statement, he dismissed as "pure speculation" the entire traditional Mormon view of intelligence. In essence, he ignored over one hundred years of LDS church history.

[131]*MD*, 77. McConkie did concede that ambiguity occurs because of historical confusion over terminology. He believed that in Mormon scripture "intelligence" refers to both "the primal element from which the spirit offspring were created" and the spirit children (*MD*, 387).

[132]O. Kendall White, "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," *Dialogue* 5 (Summer 1970): 51. Robinson claimed that because God created the souls of each person, the LDS view is not different from the view of some church fathers who believed in pre-existent souls. Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 104.

[133]Brent S. Farley, "The Condescension of the Lamb of God," in *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.* ed. Paul H. Peterson, Gary Layne Hatch, and Laura D. Card (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 102.

eternal laborers together as in the traditional view. Andrus felt that in the Mormon church, many members fail to reflect upon "the great disparity between man and God."[134]

Robert L. Millet cautioned the saints against the human "prideful self that automatically asserts its own agenda."[135] He was concerned that this pride leads people to overestimate their familial relationships with God and Jesus. He wanted them to recognize that Jesus is "Almighty God" and not just an "Elder Brother."[136] It is dangerous for the saints to forget the divinity of God in a mistaken attempt to "humanize him." Instead of being causally irreverent toward God, the discontinuity between God and humans must be recognized and maintained. Unlike traditional Mormons who urged the saints to recognize their similarity and kinship with God, Millett gave this advice.

> Oddly enough, strangely enough, it is not through humanizing Jesus, through trying to make him one of the boys, that we draw close to him and incorporate his saving powers. It is, rather, through recognizing his godhood, his divinity, his unspeakable power. In short, the more I sense his greatness, his infinity, his capacity to transform the human soul, and my utter helplessness without him, the more I come unto him.[137]

The Downward Fall of Humans

Like traditional Mormons, neo-absolutist theologians have affirmed the necessity of the fall as a prerequisite for human exaltation. In *theory*, they still reject the

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[134]Hyrum L. Andrus, *The Glory of God and Man's Relation to Deity* (Provo, UT: Extension Publications of Brigham Young University, 1964), 6.

[135]Robert L. Millett, *Selected Writings of Robert L. Millett,* Gospel Scholars Series (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2000), in LCL, 503.

[136]Ibid. This contrasts sharply with Joseph Smith's stated intension in the King Follett Discourse to show the saints how much they were like God.

[137]Ibid.

doctrine of original sin. However, they differ from the traditional Mormon view of the fall because they emphasize the sinful condition of human nature that resulted from the Fall. They have *implicitly* accepted some form of the doctrine of human depravity human which has led them to conclude that sinful, fallen people desperately need to be rescued from this condition.

Fallen Humans. Traditional Mormonism possessed a favorable view of the entrance of sin into the human race because sin was the condition required for moral probation. Fallen humans could choose to become carnal or devilish, yet the fall did not negate their innate goodness. Because neo-absolutist Mormons have returned to the Book of Mormon for their doctrine of the Fall, they have embraced a different view of human nature in which any potential goodness has been destroyed. The result of the sin of Adam and Eve was a calamitous spiritual death. Andrus wrote that "a good discussion of the Fall need go no further than the Book of Mormon goes.[138] As the result of the Fall, humans enter life spiritually dead.[139] Since neo-absolutists believe that this fallen nature of humans begins with conception, scholars like Millet have attempted to explain how this view is not the dreaded Protestant doctrine of original sin:

> Conception becomes the vehicle, the means whereby a fallen nature - mortality, what the scriptures call "the flesh"-is transmitted to the posterity of Adam and Eve. In short, to say that we are not responsible for the fall of Adam and Eve is not to say that we are unaffected by it. To say that we do not inherit an original sin through the

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[138]Hyrum L. Andrus, *Doctrines of the Kingdom,* Foundations of the Millennial Kingdom of Christ, vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 12.

[139]Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985), 282. Also see Robert L. Millet, "The Regeneration of Fallen Man," in *Nurturing Faith through the Book of Mormon: The 24th Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books Company, 1995), 124.

> Fall is not to say that we do not inherit a fallen nature and thus the capacity to sin. Fallenness and mortality are inherited.[140]

Yarn also cautioned against making the mistake of thinking that the doctrine of the Fall as explained by the Book of Mormon is the "apostate doctrine of depravity."[141] Regardless of their efforts, neo-absolutists face a dilemma. On the one hand, they recognize that since Joseph Smith included a form of original sin in the *Book of Mormon*, they must conclude that "all are fallen. All are lost."[142]

On the other hand, the LDS church has historically rejected as erroneous and dangerous the doctrine of original sin. Mormons publicly espousing the doctrine of original sin would face excommunication. As a result, their attempted resolutions involve *formally* denying original sin while *in substance* essentially teaching the doctrine.[143] This is the reason why evangelical scholar James R. White argued that the neo-absolutist theologians "seem to espouse a position on depravity that implicitly entails a doctrine of original sin."[144]

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[140]Ibid. Andrus made a similar attempt to distance his doctrine from the heretical doctrine of original sin. Andrus, *Liberalism, Conservatism, Mormonism*, 77.

[141]For Yarn, the difference is that "man is not born evil, but innocent." Yarn did not attempt to explain how a person can be born innocent, yet still be "fallen, evil, corrupt, sensual, carnal, and devilish."

[142]Glenn L. Pearson and Reid E. Bankhead, *Teaching with the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1976), 9.

[143]Part of the problem is that since the beginning of the church, Mormons have incorrectly interpreted the Protestant doctrine of original sin. They believe that this doctrine means that each human being is personally held responsible for Adam's specific sin in the garden.

[144]White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, 142. Idem, "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," 18. McMurrin believed that neo-absolutist Mormons were searching through their scriptures for the basis of a "celebration of whatever Augustinian elements may be discerned in the Scriptures." McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, 67.

Andrus argued that the "seeds of death" resulting from Adam's fall "are transmitted to each new embryo at conception.[145] As children mature, it becomes evident that "there are certain corrupt elements" which cause them to rebel against God.[146] Similarly, Yarn argued that the references in the Book of Mormon to humans being "carnal, sensual, and devilish" are descriptions of the human hostility to God which qualify each person for the scriptural designation as an "enemy of God."[147] This alienated status means that they have lost the ability to exercise free agency.[148]

McConkie taught that each person needs a divine rescue because he or she is trapped in a lost state.[149] This condition is more serious than just the inability to change because for people, "their inclination is to live after the manner of the flesh and satisfy their lusts and appetites."[150] Similarly, Millett does not want Mormons to ignore the importance of the doctrine of the Fall because of the LDS church's rejection of the doctrine of original sin. Neglecting the fall would be harmful for Mormon theology because "to fail to teach the fall is to lessen the effects of the atonement."[151]

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[145]Andrus, *The Glory of God and Man's Relation to Deity*, 56.

[146]Ibid., 52; idem, *Liberalism, Conservatism, Mormonism*, 79.

[147]Yarn, *The Gospel,* 55.

[148]Ibid., 33. In the traditional Mormon view nothing could impede the exercise of free agency.

[149]Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 244.

[150]Bruce R. McConkie, *Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie,* ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), in LCL, 73. Also see *MD,* 702; Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998), in LCL, 153; Chauncey E. Riddle, "Devils," in *EM,* 1:379.

[151]Millett, *Selected Writings of Robert L. Millett*, 171. The failure to clarify what Mormons believe about the human sinful condition has led Allred to conclude that Mormonism must develop and articulate its own unique doctrine of original sin. This new doctrine must replace the traditional doctrine of

Ironically, Millett has cited 1 Corinthians 2:14 as a biblical text supporting his view that the natural man is not capable of receiving God's truth. This is the same text that Brigham Young, a traditional Mormon, disputed when he rejected Paul's teaching about the natural man. Young taught that it is actually the natural man who receives the things of God.[152] Because neo-absolutism dominates the church today, many scholars teach this negative, fallen condition of man. The human condition which resulted from Adam's transgression is no longer portrayed as such an enlightened, wise, and noble act. Rather, the "cause of all men being carnal in their nature is directly traceable to the fall of Adam and Eve."[153]

The need for divine assistance. Because traditional Mormonism viewed human nature as essentially good, each person needed only limited assistance from God. It was necessary for God to arrange the atonement of Christ and to strengthen human efforts to serve him; however, each person possessed the intrinsic ability to repent of individual sins. Salvation was an individually initiated change of course away from sinful

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original sin denied by the church. Allred, "Toward a Mormon Concept of Original Sin," 13. She wrote that the "essence of the doctrine of original sin, which I believe we must accept if we affirm the universal need for redemption, is that man must sin; because he is a man, he cannot avoid sinning. A Mormon concept of original sin, then, must explain why man cannot avoid sinning." Ibid., 15.

[152]*JD,* 9:305.

[153]Corbin T. Volluz, "Cry Redemption: the Plan of Redemption as Taught in the Book of Mormon," *Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 151. Also see Hafen Bruce C. *The Broken Heart: Applying the Atonement to Life's Experiences* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989, 131); Robert J. Matthews, *A Bible! A Bible!* (Salt Lake City, 1990), in LCL, 254-55; William R. Bradford, CR, October, 1983, 100-01. Edwards noted that the neo-absolutist view is close to the historical doctrine of original sin: "LDS Neo-orthodoxy appears to accept the effects of original sin. They do not deny the innocence of birth and accept the fall as having some positive effect, but on the other hand they adopt the Christian position that as a result of the fall natural man is God's enemy. In this they come as close to the Christian position as they can without denying Mormonism." Edwards, "Persistences that Differ," 46.

acts and toward God. Because the effects of the Fall were limited, no inherent deficiency or rebelliousness in human beings required divine intervention.

Neo-absolutist Mormons have assessed the human condition differently. Because humans are evil in thoughts and deeds, repentance for individual acts of sin is not sufficient for salvation. Each person needs a spiritual transformation of his or her nature, because it is necessary for God to accomplish a rescue through the "intercession of divine power."[154] The hope of the gospel is that God, not humanity, has the power to save humans from themselves.

> The way to overcome the flesh is not by simply teaching ethics and moral values, as important as they are. Instead, it is by doing those things that will bring into man's life that power, that influence, that regenerating force that we call the Gospel. This divine plan requires faith in Christ, along with dedication and will power to uphold high ethical standards. But it also requires the action of a divine power outside of man's power, as an all-important factor enabling one to achieve the Christian life; and without the influence of his divine power, man cannot achieve the full Christian life.[155]

It is only through a "spiritual birth" that person becomes a "new creature," which enables him or her to escape the "deep abyss of darkness."[156] Marsh envisioned salvation as God transforming the "very nature" of humans who formerly opposed him.[157] The need for divine intervention envisioned by neo-absolutists releases a person from the traditional

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[154]Andrus, *Liberalism, Conservatism, Mormonism*, 77.

[155]Andrus, *The Glory of God and Man's Relation to Deity*, 54; idem, *Liberalism, Conservatism, Mormonism*, 79.

[156]McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 138.

[157]Jeffery W. Marsh, "The Living Reality of the Savior's Mercy," in *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior,* ed. Paul H. Peterson, Gary Layne Hatch, and Laura D. Card (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 169; also see Ezra Benson Taft, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 70; Robert L. Millett, *The Mormon Faith: Understanding Restored Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1998), 33-34;

Mormon demand that he or she achieve perfection during this lifetime. Instead of teaching that people can and must achieve perfection, neo-absolutist theologians concede that even after being transformed, men and women will continue to struggle with sin. They will be completely free from sin only at the resurrection.[158] Saints should be encouraged to fight vigorously against the flesh yet "the pull upon the human system from mortality and the fall will be ever with us."[159]

Deification as Glorification in Christ

Traditional Mormons believed that exalted humans would join the infinite lineage of Gods. Each person had the innate potential to become as glorious and as great as God. Traditional Mormons never envisioned a future in which the newly exalted Gods would continue to worship and serve Elohim. They would retain their familial relationship with Him because all of the Gods are related to each other, but this relationship with God would not one of dependence. The exalted Gods would be free to create and procreate as they eternally advance in knowledge, power, and glory.

Neo-absolutists have attempted to reconcile the exaltation of man with the earlier LDS canon. In their view, humans are contingent and evil creatures, not necessary and noble beings. Since God alone is absolute, the deification of humans cannot be interpreted as an exaltation of them to the level of Godhood possessed by Elohim. Neo-absolutist Mormons have uniformly abandoned the use of "Gods" when describing the

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[158]Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News*. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), in LCL, 19.

[159]Millett, *The Mormon Faith*, 35, idem, *Selected Writings of Robert L. Millett*, 503.

future state of humans and replaced it with "gods." They deemphasize the independence of exalted humans and diminish the importance of their eternal progress through procreation, while emphasizing their continued subjection to God.

President Joseph Fielding Smith taught that even when humans are exalted they will remain dependent on God and will still be "subject to Jesus Christ as their Father in this exalted relationship."[160] Similarly, Andrus envisioned exaltation as receiving "divine endowments" which include the "divine elements that we call glory." Humans will share in God's glory by participating in this elemental substance and such participation will occur for the "purpose of worship."[161] Because they will "enjoy the perfections which the Father has," McConkie anticipated with joy the day when people will be able to know God in an ultimate sense that is possible only for glorified saints.[162] Emphasizing the eternal dependence of humans on God, Robinson also argued that the LDS view is the same view of deification that was taught by the church fathers.

> Whether in this life or the next, through Christ human beings can be given the powers of God and the authority of God. Those who receive this great inheritance can properly be called gods. They are not gods in the Greek philosophic sense of "ultimate beings," nor do they compete with God, the source of their inheritance, as objects of worship. They remain eternally his begotten sons and daughters — therefore, never equal to him nor independent of him.[163]

As joyful, undeserved recipients of continued divine grace, Robinson has argued that each person will still worship the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Humans will

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[160]Joseph Fielding Smith, *Man: His Origin and Destiny* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1954), in LCL, 125.

[161]Andrus, *The Glory of God and Man's Relation to Deity*, 5.

[162]*MD,* 321; McConkie, *The Promised Messiah*, 133.

[163]Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* 68.

continue to honor God in exactly the same manner in which they worshiped him during their mortal existence on earth.[164]

In this view, exaltation is merely the end result of having received salvation. Those who "overcome the world through the atonement of Christ" are the ones who become "gods."[165] Throughout the eternities to come, Elohim will be one ultimate, infinite God who alone is the "source of power and object of worship" for these new "Gods."[166] Millett also wrote that exaltation occurs when the spirit children return to the presence and glory of God that they once left in order to come to this world.[167] These children inherit "the fullness of the spirit and power of the Father."[168] The Father and the Son will always be the recipients of the worship of the saints.[169]

These theologians should be commended for their return to a more biblical view of human glorification; however, they face an difficult problem. Evangelical scholar White explained their dilemma. If Elohim was once a man and rose to Godhood, then Mormons either have to revise their view of his nature or their view of the future state of human glorification. He has been particularly critical of Robinson's view of exaltation.

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[164]Ibid., 66.

[165]Ibid.

[166]Ibid., 69.

[167]Robert L. Millett, *Alive in Christ: The Miracle of Spiritual Rebirth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1997), 82.

[168]Millett, *The Mormon Faith*, 176.

[169]Ibid. Also see Blake T. Ostler, "Bridging the Gulf: Review of *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation,* by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies Review of Books* (1999) [journal on-line]; accessed 1 June 2005; available from http://farms.byu.edu/display.php?table=review&id=319; Internet.

> If exaltation to godhood is, in fact, an act of 'grace,' then a rather obvious question presents itself: Since God himself was exalted to the status of godhood in the same way that men will be, does it not follow that He, too, is a 'god' by the 'grace' of some other 'god' somewhere else? . . . If we will be 'gods' only by an extension of God's power, does it not follow that He is a 'god' only by the extension of His own "God's" power? Is God not likewise limited in His actions by His dependence upon this other being? And could it not be said that we might be better off worshipping this other deity by whose grace the 'god' of this world acts?"[170]

Unresolved Tensions in the Mormon Doctrine of Human Beings

As with other doctrines, Joseph Smith was the father of both the early Mormon view of humans and the traditional Mormon view of humans. Following Smith's early writings, early Mormons held a limited view of humans. However, Smith himself did not remain an early Mormon theologian. He abandoned this view in his later canonical writings and public teaching. Traditional Mormons built upon his new expansive view of human nature and potential, but they could not reconcile it with the earlier scriptures. The neglect of the earlier canonical teachings ended with the rise of neo-absolutism. These theologians developed a more pessimistic view of man. They face a difficult task of trying to develop a consistent view of humans that represents the *entire* canon and all of the *historical* views of their living prophets. Even if they succeed in this dubious task, they are then confronted with a historical problem. If the LDS church is the true church, then they must explain why their canonically harmonized view of humans has not appeared in the church until now. Their failure to establish a scripturally harmonious and

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[170]James R. White, *Is the Mormon My Brother? Discerning the Differences between Mormonism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), 178.

historically documented doctrine of human nature is evidence that there are *unresolved* doctrinal tensions in the LDS church.

CHAPTER 6

THE MEANS OF SALVATION

The theological tensions inherent in Mormonism since the death of Joseph Smith created shifting and conflicting views within Mormon theology over the nature of God and the nature of humans. Because of these changes and the underlying unresolved tensions in LDS doctrine, the Mormon view of the means of salvation has changed over time. The Mormon view of salvation has always involved a combination of human merit and divine grace; however, the balance between these two requirements for salvation and the view of the nature of the divine grace has changed.

These shifts in the view of salvation represent a challenge to church's perpetual claim that without the additional revelations of the Mormon canon, the important biblical doctrines pertaining to salvation cannot be understood.[1] A study of the changing Mormon views of the means of salvation reveals that the revelations of Joseph Smith that actually introduced confusion and tensions into the doctrine of salvation rather than clarity and harmony.

The Early Mormon View of the Means of Salvation

For the earliest converts to Mormonism, many of the doctrines of the church resembled the doctrines of the surrounding Protestant denominations. The claims of

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[1]See Dallin H. Oaks, CR, November 1988, 65.

Smith to have received new and continuous revelations from God drew these new converts into the church. They did not join the church because of novel, radically different doctrines of God, man, or salvation. The unique doctrines of Mormonism developed gradually and steadily over Joseph Smith's lifetime. In many doctrinal areas, early Mormonism resembled historical Christianity. Blake Ostler noted that "the Mormon view of salvation was initially very similar to the conservative Arminian arm of Protestant thought."[2] Like other religious groups during the nineteenth century, Mormonism was partially a reaction against Calvinism.[3] What actually attracted converts to the LDS church was the claim that God was once again speaking through a living prophet and that these newer revelations could resolve many of the raging theological debates.

Fallen Humans in Need of Salvation

Early Mormon theology, grounded in the Book of Mormon, viewed humans as fallen and sinful. In comparison to an absolute and infinite God, they were less valuable than the "dust of the earth."[4] Human beings were created as weak, finite, and contingent beings even before the fall. After the fall, each person became "carnal," "worthless," "fallen," "stiffnecked," and "an enemy of God."[5] Because of the weakness of humans, the Book of Mormon emphasized the need for divine grace in salvation.

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[2]Blake T. Ostler, "The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace," *Dialogue* 24 (Spring 1991): 68.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Mosiah 2:25

[5]Helaman 4:26; Mosiah 2:10-11, 3:19; 4:2, 5; 19-21.

While human effort was still required for salvation, it was *secondary* to divine intervention. Orson Pratt inquired whether people were capable of saving themselves. His answer was an emphatic "no." They could not save themselves because "all were fallen; all were under the dominion and power of Satan. All were spiritually dead -- dead to the things pertaining to righteousness."[6] For such helpless creatures, salvation is possible only by depending "wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save."[7] Alma 22:14 taught that because of the Fall, a person "could not merit anything of himself."[8]

Salvation as a State

The early Mormon view of salvation retained the historical Christian view of salvation as involving a change of spiritual states. Humans are trapped in a miserable state of fallen sinfulness. Only by grace can they enter a state of being justified. By continuing to persevere and to serve God, they would achieve the state of sanctification. Unlike later Mormon theology in which salvation and sanctification were viewed as continual processes, early Mormons thought in terms of states of salvation and sanctification. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 20:30 spoke of justification as a state rather than a process: "And we know that justification through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is just and true."[9]

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[6]*JD,* 19:319.

[7]2 Nephi 31:19.

[8]The Book of Mormon emphasized God's own merits in salvation. Neo-absolutist Millett argued that Mormonism does not teach a "works-righteousness mentality," but of his scriptural references for a grace-oriented approach to salvation are from the Book of Mormon. All that Millet established was that *early* Mormons did not emphasize works. Robert L. Millet, "Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism: Orthodoxy, Neoorthodoxy, Tension, and Tradition," *Brigham Young University Studies* 29 (1989): 61.

[9]Ostler, "The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace," 68.

Salvation from Condemnation Rather than Exaltation to Godhood

One of the defining characteristics of the traditional Mormon view of salvation, the exaltation of humans to Godhood, was completely absent from the early Mormon view of salvation. There are no references to the exaltation of human beings in the Book of Mormon. Instead of considering the possibility that humans could rise to the level of deity, the Book of Mormon focused on the hope that sinful, devilish humans could escape condemnation and eternal punishment in hell. White summarized this view

> Tempered by the perfectionism of the Methodists, the Mormon doctrine of human nature tended toward depravity, while its absolutist and trinitarian concept of God reinforced a notion of saving grace provided by the death and atonement of Jesus Christ. As prevalent themes in the Book of Mormon, these were apparently beliefs of the earliest Mormons.[10]

Comparing the early portion of the Mormon canon with the later portion demonstrates the shift in emphasis from early Mormonism to traditional Mormonism. The Book of Mormon and the first eighty-eight revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants were received before 1833. The subsequent revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price were received between 1834 and 1842. There are discernable differences between the emphases in these two portions of the canon. For example, the words "guilt" and "guilty" occur twenty-six times in the earlier portion of the canon but only four times in the later canon. This corresponds to the early Mormon concern with the sinful condition of humans who need divine forgiveness. In light of the lessened concern for forgiveness in the later portion of the canon, it is not surprising that there are only three references to the "atonement" after 1833. This is a significant decrease from

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[10] O. Kendall White Jr., *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), xix.

the twenty-seven references to the atonement in the earlier part of the canon. Likewise, traditional Mormons were less concerned with the sinfulness of humans and therefore less concerned with the idea of divine wrath. For this reason, it is not surprising that "hell" was mentioned only eleven times in the later portion of the canon in comparison to seventy-seven references in the earlier portion.

The Traditional Mormon View of the Means of Salvation

An Expansive View of Salvation

Traditional Mormonism developed a more expansive view of salvation in terms of both the types of people who would be saved and the future states available to them. The unfolding revelations received by Joseph Smith changed the early Mormon view of the nature and means of salvation from a more restricted view similar to Protestantism to a unique view of salvation that provided for the salvation of almost all people. This expansive view corresponded to traditional Mormonism's emerging view of humans as righteous and virtuous.

An optimistic view of the destiny of humanity. Traditional Mormon theologians more fully developed the teachings in the Book of Mormon regarding the effects of the atonement. Since the atonement of Christ "frees man from the consequences of Adam's transgressions," traditional Mormons proclaimed an optimistic view of salvation.[11] Freed from the effects of the Fall, human beings naturally choose "to accept the terms of the gospel by which" each person will overcome "spiritual death"

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[11]B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book Company, 1994), 1:130.

and thus become "spiritually immortal."[12] The effects of the Fall and the atonement are applied automatically to each individual so that the stage is set for the glorious future of humanity. Larry E. Dahl concluded that the Mormon church "has an optimistic view of the future rewards awaiting mankind in the hereafter."[13]

The salvation of almost all people. The traditional Mormon belief that the vast majority of humans will be saved from condemnation contributed to the optimistic view of human destiny. Even those who devote their lives to wickedness will inherit the lowest heaven, the telestial glory. Doctrine and Covenants 76:109 taught that the inhabitants of the telestial kingdom would be "as innumerable as the stars in the firmament of heaven, or as the sand upon the seashore."[14] Since it is God's desire to save all of his children, all people except the sons of perdition will be saved in the end.[15] Apostle Orson F. Whitney believed that this truth was "Mormonism's astounding declaration."[16]

In the traditional Mormon view, it was so difficult for a human to be eternally condemned that both President Joseph F. Smith and Apostle John A. Widtsoe concluded that Judas probably had not become a son of perdition for his act of betraying Christ. Judas might have to suffer God's punishment in hell for a period of time, but eventually

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[12]B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), in LCL, 3:218.

[13]Larry E. Dahl, "Degrees of Glory," in *EM*, 1:367.

[14]This large portion of the humanity includes "liars and sorcerers and adulterers, and whoremongers, and whoever loves and makes a lie." D&C, 76:103.

[15]D&C, 76:43-44.

he too will reach the telestial heaven.[17] Some of those who inherit the telestial kingdom will first experience God's wrath in hell, but after they have paid for their sins, they will enter the telestial heaven.[18]

Widtsoe rejoiced that Joseph Smith instituted the "correction of this evil doctrine" of literal, eternal punishment of sinners taught by Protestants and Catholics.[19] Only the sons of perdition would never cease experiencing God's wrath. Brigham Young was even willing to consider the possibility that the sons of perdition might escape their torment someday. He believed that God would punish the sons of perdition by making them restart the long journey toward exaltation.[20]

The naturalness of salvation. The traditional Mormon view of man was also positive because each person naturally chooses to love God and obey him. Because of this natural inclination toward the good, Young taught that the "gospel is adapted to the capacity of all the human family." For this reason, accepting the gospel is as easy as building a house or repairing a machine.[21] Joseph Smith also compared obtaining

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[16]Orson F. Whitney, *Saturday Night Thoughts* (Salt Lake City Deseret News Press 1921), in LCL, 321.

[17]Joseph F. Smith, "President Smith's Reply," *Improvement Era* 21 (June 1918), in LCL, 732; John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation: Aids to Faith in a Modern Day* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), in LCL, 212.

[18]Orson F. Whitney, *The Strength of the Mormon Position* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1917), in LCL, 45. The canonical language of "eternal punishment" was reinterpreted so that "eternal" became a description of the God who imposes the punishment for a limited duration. Catherine M. Thomas, "Hell," in *EM*, 2: 585-86.

[19]Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation*, 215.

[20]Their punishment was mainly the anguish of being delayed in reaching the telestial kingdom (*JD* 7:58; *JD*, 2:124). Also see Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation*, 213-14.

[21]Brigham Young, "Speech Delivered by President Brigham Young in the City of Joseph April 6, 1845," *Millennial Star* 6, no. 7 (15 September 1845), in LCL.

salvation to climbing a ladder.[22] Traditional Mormons did not think that salvation involved a radical regeneration or spiritual transformation because humans were already moral and inclined toward God. As a result, it was only natural that humans would be saved.

Salvation after death. In light of their optimistic view of the salvation of almost all human beings, traditional Mormons needed a way to explain how those who had never heard the restored LDS gospel during their lifetime could be saved. Doctrine and Covenants 124:28-36 provided the solution for Joseph Smith.[23] The saints were commanded to perform "baptism for the dead – a vicarious-proxy labor."[24] People who had died without hearing the LDS gospel would have it presented to them after death. Most of them would accept this gospel message and be able to enter either the telestial kingdom or the terrestrial kingdom. Family members or descendants of those who had died could perform the required baptism for them. In this way, those who had died and subsequently received the gospel could enter into the celestial kingdom. Because baptism was a necessary step in exaltation, Smith preached that this ordinance was "the greatest responsibility in this world."[25] Later, Smith developed a second step of an "endowment ceremony" which also needed to be performed for the dead.[26]

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[22]*DJS*, 342.

[23]Also see D&C, 127, 128.

[24]*MD* 73. Smith's initial, temporary solution had been the introduction of a "notion of middle knowledge." D&C 137 had taught that the dead would be judged on whether they "would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry." Ostler, "The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace," 75-76.

[25]*DJS*, 350.

[26]Edgar Lyon, "Doctrinal Development of the Church During the Nauvoo Sojourn, 1939-1946," *Brigham Young University Studies* 15 (Summer 1975): 440-41.

The motivation of the three heavens. Joseph Smith recognized that if almost all people are saved from condemnation, then there must be different levels of reward available for them. He developed the idea of three kingdoms or heavens in a revelation received in February 1832 that became Doctrine and Covenants 76.

> Upon my return from Amherst conference, I resumed the translation of the Scriptures. From sundry revelations which had been received, it was apparent that many important points touching the salvation of man, had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled. It appeared self-evident from what truths were left, that if God rewarded every one according to the deeds done in the body the term "Heaven," as intended for the Saints' eternal home must include more kingdoms than one.[27]

As Smith expanded upon the requirements for entering the telestial, terrestrial, and celestial kingdoms, they became the basis for exhorting Mormons to work diligently so that they could earn their place in the highest kingdom. According to President John Taylor, God would severely test each saint just as Abraham had been tested. He warned them that they must endure the difficult tests which lay ahead of them: "He will take hold of you and wrench your very heart strings." They would not qualify for the highest heaven without passing these trials.[28] Apostle Widtsoe emphasized that all of the church ordinances were necessary steps toward celestial glory [29] Elder Hugh E. Brown believed

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[27]*HC*, 1:245. For a description of the three heavens and the requirements for admission into each one, see D&C 76:50-112.

[28]*JD*, 24:198.

[29]Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation*, 201. The Mormon view of the three heavens motivated saints, but it also drew new converts into the church. Craig Hazen concluded that "given the options offered by religious competitors, Smith and Rigdon may have revealed the most attractive formula on the frontier. They seemed to include the best aspects of all the afterlife scenarios available: postmortem opportunities for salvation, limited punishment for those who really deserve it, and eventual paradise for everyone except (as a popular sense of justice demanded) the devil, his demons, and their intractable followers." Craig J. Hazen, "The Apologetic Impulse in Early Mormonism: The Historical Roots of the New Mormon Challenge," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 2002), 43.

that the glorious possibility of exaltation to "Godlike status" in the celestial kingdom would encourage believers to resist temptations.[30] President Ezra Taft Benson challenged the LDS youth to work hard in order to reach the celestial kingdom which could only be earned through "a great amount of effort."[31]

Salvation Principally through Human Works

Freed from the concern with human depravity found among early Mormons, traditional Mormons believed that human effort, not grace, was the primary means of salvation. They never abandoned the early Mormon idea rooted in the canon that divine grace is given to people, but they diminished the role of grace in salvation. They restricted grace to the atonement, which had overcome all of the effects of the Fall, because human works were the primary means of salvation. Grace functioned only in preparing human beings to work for their salvation. Douglas Davis observed that "the disobedience of Adam and Eve has been countered by the atonement of Christ, so that, as we have already shown, contemporary Saints can forget the sinful past of humanity and look to the future and to opportunities it presents to their dedication and obedience."[32]

Brigham Young repeatedly taught that obedience was the key to salvation. He preached that "obedience is the first law of heaven."[33] Even though the LDS church as a whole was striving toward the establishment of Zion, Young warned church members to remember that each person was responsible for earning enough righteousness to be saved

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[30]Hugh E. Brown, CR, April 1956, 103.

[31]Ezra Taft Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 26.

[32]Douglas Davis, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 61.

because "salvation is an individual work."[34] Only when people had worked as hard as possible for their entire life could they hope in God's grace. They could have confidence that "when we have done all that we can, then the Lord is under obligation and will not disappoint the faithful; He will perform the rest."[35] Traditional Mormons valued their works and efforts because grace was only the final push upward into the celestial kingdom. The vast majority of the distance on the road to exaltation was based upon obedience and effort.

In recent years, neo-absolutists have claimed incorrectly that the Mormon view of salvation has always emphasized grace over works. However, it is only these recent neo-absolutist Mormons who have marginalized works and expanded the role of grace in salvation. Eugene England objected to this neo-absolutist view of salvation because he believed that it was a departure from the unique LDS view of salvation by works. Responding to Stephen Robinson's explanation of salvation, England wrote:

> The bad news, however, is that reading Robinson's discussion of grace and atonement in HWD, especially his sympathetic response to Blomberg's Evangelical formulations, confirmed my feeling that the grace in the bicycle parable is more Protestant than Mormon. Protestant grace, as I understand it, is God freely doing something absolutely crucial *for* and *to* us in order to save us from hell. Mormon grace, on the other hand, involves God freely doing something absolutely crucial to *help* all of us *become* new, saved beings. . . . Mormon grace begins in God's loving response to our intrinsic moral agency and thus emphasizes our choice, "growing in grace," and trying to change ourselves through repentance and righteousness into "new creatures," all of which results in a huge variety of 'degrees' of individual salvation. The crucial difference, as I see it, is that absolute God is *giving* us relief from his absolute demands of justice because we have no merit and a loving Father *helping* us to become Christlike because we can't do it alone."[36]

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[33]*JD*, 16:248.

[34]*JD*, 2:133.

[35]*JD*, 4:91.

[36]Eugene England, "Review of *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in*

Davis has noted that the small amount of the "grammar of discourse of grace" present in the Book of Mormon diminished rapidly in Mormon thought after 1835. As traditional Mormon theology developed, concepts like "justification, grace, atonement, and election" disappeared completely.[37] In the traditional view, faith was understood not as a response to God's gracious initiative but as another required step of obedience to God.

The early Mormon canon and the *Lectures on Faith* had led early Mormons to view faith as confidence in God's character and ability to save humans. In contrast, traditional Mormons like Apostle Matthias F Cowley reduced faith to a mere principle "in the catalogue of righteous principles."[38] Apostle Whitney was proud that Mormonism had restored the lost religious truth that the Gospel of Christ consists of God "rewarding all according to their works."[39] The road to Godhood requires total obedience and purity, according to President Lorenzo Snow, whose greatest joy was that someday ". . . as God now is, man may be."[40]

Apostle Widtsoe stressed that "man must do many things to win salvation in the kingdom of God."[41] Since the grace of God had been given to human beings through

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Conversation by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson," *Brigham Young University Studies* 38 no. 3 (1999): 193.

[37]Davis, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 60. In this view, God was viewed as more of an "enabler" of salvation than the "giver" of salvation. See England, "Review of *How Wide the Divide,*" 90.

[38]Matthias F. Cowley, *Cowley's Talks on Doctrine* (Chicago: Published by Missions of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1911), in LCL, 92. Cowley taught that faith originates within humans and is expressed when a person repents and ceases to sin.

[39]Whitney, *The Strength of the Mormon Position*, 44; Idem, *Gospel Themes: A Treatise on Salient Features of "Mormonism"* (Salt Lake City: n. p., 1914), 24.

[40]Lorenzo Snow, *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow: Fifth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 5.

the fall and the atonement, God's actions had established "the conditions which enable man to win eternal life."[42] For Roberts, the confidence that God had overcome the effects of the fall was the basis for being able to work toward salvation.[43] LDS President Howard W. Hunter taught that God loves obedience more than other trait in his children.[44]

Traditional Mormon theologians today have continued to espouse this view of salvation in which grace is secondary to human works. LDS scholar Truman G. Madsen taught that "Christ saves man from their sins, not in them. He does not impute righteousness where there is none."[45] McMurrin concluded that because traditional Mormonism emphasized works as the chief means of salvation it represents a modern form of Pelagianism.[46]

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[41]Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation*, 75.

[42]Ibid., 190. Widtsoe also taught that salvation was achieved through a daily process of humans living obediently under the law. Ibid., 191.

[43]Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4:94. In the traditional Mormon view of salvation, no person ever exists in a condition in which he or she is actually under the effects of the fall. The effects of the fall are only hypothetical because the atonement has been applied automatically to all people. For this reason, all people have already been regenerated even before they were born. Ostler, "The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace," 63-64. Also see *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, 1978), 12.

[44]Howard W. Hunter, *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter: Fourteenth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 65. Also see Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 69.

[45]Truman G. Madsen, "Smith, Joseph: Teachings of Joseph Smith," in *EM*, 4:1341. Benson listed the many actions that must be taken by the saints before they can be confident that they have done "all we can do" for salvation. Ezra T. Benson. *Come Unto Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1983), in LCL, 6. Similarly, Harold B. Elder Lee taught that salvation is the "reward for a good life." Also see Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1974), in LCL, 334.

[46]Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 74-75, 82. Although this concept of grace is similar to prevenient grace, the difference is that that the LDS notion of grace "does not involve God's moving the human will to faith" (Ostler, "The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace," 81). Bennion believed that the Mormonism limits the role of grace to the atonement)Lowell L. Bennion, *Best of Lowell L. Bennion,* ed. Eugene England (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988), 101). Surveying eighteen years of periodicals,

Salvation through Gradual Character Building

Since traditional LDS theologians believed that works, not grace, were the primary means of salvation, they envisioned salvation a strenuous lifelong program of character development rather than a change of status before God. They were concerned that the saints develop the divine potential inherent within themselves. Unlike their early Mormon predecessors and their neo-absolutist successors, they did not think of salvation as a divine act of justification.

Joseph Smith led the shift from the early Mormon view of salvation as the grace of God being given to fallen humans to the view of salvation as a ladder that people must climb one step at a time.[47] The revelations received by Smith became more specific over time regarding the details of this required obedience. For example, in Doctrine and Covenants 89, received in February 1833, the saints learned that tobacco, wine, and strong drink were prohibited. Obeying this "Word of Wisdom" would be a crucial step in the journey toward salvation. This upward progress through growing obedience was the heart of the gospel that Smith preached:

> We consider that God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect; and that the nearer man approaches perfection, the clearer are his views, and the greater his enjoyments, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin.[48]

Daniel H. Ludlow found only five articles on the subject of grace. Daniel H. Ludlow, *Selected Writings of Daniel H. Ludlow*, Gospel Scholars Series (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2000), 335.

[47]*DJS*, 342.

[48]Ibid., 133.

Brigham Young continued this concern for the incremental spiritual development which would earn salvation. He believed that until the LDS members abandoned their sinful consumption of "deleterious substances" such as coffee and tea, the Son of Man would not return to earth to establish Zion.[49] Because people have been freed from the effects of the fall, it was the responsibility of each person to stop sinning, even in small issues. No divine assistance was needed to overcome any sin.[50] Apostle Roberts masterfully summarized the traditional Mormon view of incremental salvation. He believed that salvation was simply self-conquest through moral growth.

> The attainment of this [required for individual salvation through cooperation with God] condition of Christian righteousness, however, becomes a matter of character building under the favorable conditions provided by the gospel; and character building, even under favorable conditions is a matter of slow, self-conquest.[51]

The Rejection of an Immediacy of Salvation

If character development lies at the heart of salvation, then salvation cannot occur at one moment in time. Consistent with their view that people must work out their own salvation, traditional Mormons scorned any suggestion that repentance or salvation could occur in a single moment. President Joseph F. Smith denied that those who those who commit murder, adultery, or abdominal evil deeds could be saved without a long

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[49]*JD*, 8:64. President Snow preached that since humans can become perfect, God expects them to reach this goal. *JD*, 20:188.

[50]Wilford Woodruff, *JD*, 23:127; Also see Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1939), in LCL, 98; Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 27-28.

[51]Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4:113. Idem, *The Gospel and Man's Relationship to Deity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1965), 208. White has observed that "consistent with its conceptions of God and man, orthodox Mormonism strongly emphasizes the performance of good works. Character defects are to be eradicated by behavioral changes. The individual stops being a sinner by not

process of repentance.[52] Similarly, Apostles Cowley and Whitney both emphatically rejected the idea that Jesus had forgiven the thief on the cross thereby ensuring his salvation. Cowley argued that Jesus never taught "such a heinous doctrine." Instead of being admitted into heaven after his death, the thief began suffering in hell until he had paid for his sins and the claims of justice had been satisfied. Eventually, he would enter the telestial kingdom.[53] This sentence in hell might have take up to a thousand years before he became worthy to be "fitted for the society of Gods and angels."[54]

For the same reason, LDS theologians denied that Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery. President Kimball explained that Jesus merely offered the woman an opportunity to begin the journey to forgiveness. As President Kimball explained, "he was saying, go, woman, and start your repentance; and he was indicating to her the beginning step – to abandon her transgressions. Even Christ cannot forgive one in sin. The woman had neither time nor opportunity to repent totally."[55]

Specific Steps Required for Salvation

As part of their emphasis on works as the principle means of salvation, traditional Mormons focused upon the specific steps required for salvation. President Hunter listed these components of salvation. First, each person must develop faith in

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committing specific acts of sin." O. Kendall White Jr., "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," *Dialogue* 5 (Summer 1970): 21.

[52]CR, October 1907, 7.

[53]Cowley, *Cowley's Talks on Doctrine*, 100-01.

[54]Whitney, *Saturday Night Thoughts*, 291; Also see LeGrand A. Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1950), 176-77.

[55]Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 89-90.

God. Second, each person must work toward forgiveness through a lifelong process of repentance. The third and fourth steps involve receiving baptism and the laying on of hands. Finally, each person must persevere to the end of his or her life through active obedience to the Lord.[56] The failure to complete any of these steps of salvation would prevent a person from reaching their full potential of exaltation to the celestial heaven.

This lifelong commitment to obedience also included participating in temple activities such as baptism for the dead, the sealing of marriage, and the sealing of children. On many occasions, Joseph Smith stressed the importance of the temple service. In his words, Mormons "need the temple more than anything."[57] These required steps for salvations were viewed as the human contribution to salvation and the failure to complete them was tantamount to rebellion against God. Even if God wanted to extend grace to those who had shown partial obedience to him or had completed some but not all of the steps, he could not alter these standards. These principles such as faith, repentance, obedience, and baptism are eternal laws that have an ontological status independent of God. Not only is God incapable of lowering the standards but his own exaltation to Godhood depends upon his continued subjection to them.[58] Since he was once a human

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[56]Hunter, *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, 20.

[57]*HC*, 6:230. President Woodruff strongly rejected the idea among some saints that faith alone could merit salvation. He preached that all of the ordinances were necessary. *JD*, 23:127.

[58]Brigham Young also taught the possibility that if God ceased to obey the eternal laws, then he would cease to be God (*JD* 1:118). Similarly, Apostle Widtsoe believed that "the Lord who is a part of the universe, in common with all other parts of the universe, is subject to eternal universal laws" (John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft 1937], in LCL, 25). In the traditional LDS metaphysics, these principles were never created and have always existed. See Whitney, *Gospel Themes*, 6; Cowley, *Cowley's Talks on Doctrine*, 98; also see Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation.*

who is now an exalted God; therefore, he seeks for his children to obey these principles so that they can follow his upward path to deity.[59]

Exaltation by Works Alone

There was a limited role for grace in the traditional view of salvation; however, exaltation, not salvation, was the ultimate goal of traditional Mormonism. The grace of God, which had been operative in salvation from the grave, did not extend to the process of earning exaltation. Traditional Mormons made clear distinctions between salvation and exaltation. While sometimes the word "salvation" was used as an overarching word to describe the entire gospel program, the idea of salvation was generally restricted to the unconditional resurrection from the dead. Gaining eternal life was gaining exaltation to the celestial kingdom and this required a life of almost perfect obedience. President Kimball explained that Mormons should seek more than mere rescue from the grave.

> Everything we do is with one goal, and that is to make ourselves perfect so that we may be like the Lord and able to have eternal life. The world doesn't know what eternal life is. They talk about being "saved." There is a great difference between exaltation and merely being saved. All will be saved from the grave. No question about it, if they are good and righteous people, they will be saved in some glory. Whether they are Catholics or Protestants or Jews or Gentiles, they will be saved

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[59]Because traditional Mormons focused more on Christ's "active obedience" in Gethsemane rather than his "passive obedience" at Calvary, they placed more significance on his suffering in the garden than on the cross. The suffering of Jesus in the garden was the model of the obedient life. "It was in Gethsemane that Jesus took on Himself the sins of the world, in Gethsemane that His pain was equivalent to the cumulative burden of all men, in Gethsemane that He descended below all things so that all could repent and come to Him")Benson. *Come Unto* Christ, 6). An analysis of sermons preached in General Conferences from 1900 to 2005 demonstrates this emphasis. There were 291 references to Gethsemane in contrast to 172 references to Calvary. Davis also argued that for Mormons, whose view of salvation requires active works more than passive grace, the Christ of Gethsemane serves as the better model. He wrote that "the theological difference between Gethsemane and Calvary, between the agony in the garden and the agony on the cross, would seem to turn on the motivational distinction between activity and passivity." Davis, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 48.

> from spiritual death. But to be "saved" is not good enough. One needs to be exalted to attain the great blessings.[60]

The requirements for entrance into the celestial kingdom were so exacting that many traditional LDS leaders warned the saints that many of them would not gain this exaltation. President Brigham Young lamented that many church members would not make the highest kingdom.[61] Likewise, President Joseph Fielding Smith believed that less than half of the saints would reach the celestial kingdom.[62]

Adamant Rejection of Salvation by Grace

Because human effort was a necessary and substantial component of salvation, the idea of salvation by grace alone was vehemently rejected. No Mormon leader or theologian of any generation has ever accepted the idea of salvation by grace alone, but later neo-absolutist Mormons are more open to the idea that grace the principle means of salvation. In contrast, traditional Mormons labeled any conception of salvation by grace as heretical because it deemphasized works. President Kimball regarded the Protestant view of salvation as a destructive evil rather than just an overemphasis upon grace. He wrote that "one of the most fallacious doctrines originated by Satan and propounded by man is that man is saved alone by the grace of God; that belief in Jesus Christ alone is all that is needed for salvation."[63] McConkie referred to the idea of salvation by grace as "the doctrinal fire – the burning, flaming, heretical fire – that became the second greatest heresy of Christendom."[64]

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[60]Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 49. Also see Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, 26; Whitney, *Gospel Themes*, 23-24; idem, *The Strength of the Mormon Position*, 15; Hunter, *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, 14. The ability of the idea of three heavens to motivate Mormons to work hard was encapsulated in the common adage that "salvation without exaltation is damnation." Davis, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 65; also see Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, 362; Richard Nietzel Holzapfel, "Damnation," in *EM*, 1:354.

[61]*JD*, 3:266.

[62]Joseph Fielding Smith, *DS*, 2:15.

[63]Spencer W. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), in LCL, 201.

[64]Bruce R. McConkie, *Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), in LCL, 70. He concluded that this doctrine destroys the "efficacy and power of the atonement."

The Mormon Neo-absolutist View of the Means of Salvation

Mormon neo-absolutists have returned to the earliest Mormon conception of God's nature. As result of their commitment to a absolute, infinite view of God, they have altered the traditional Mormon view of the means of salvation. They have emphasized the importance of grace over works as the chief means of salvation, although they do not deny the necessity of a small component of works.

The Return to the Early Mormon Canon

Early Mormons developed their view of the means of salvation based on the revelations that had been received by the church to that point in time. Subsequent revelations led traditional Mormons to abandon the early canonical emphasis upon grace and to emphasize works as the primary means of salvation. Neo-absolutists have reversed the traditional Mormon emphasis upon works because they draw their theology primarily from the Book of Mormon. They have also ignored the later scriptures which were central to the traditional view. For example, LDS scholar Robert L. Millett wrote that "it is to the Book of Mormon that we turn to receive the balanced perspective on the mercy and grace of an infinite Savior on the one hand, and the labors and works of finite man on the other."[65] He argued that "the Book of Mormon is a book about merit, but not about the merits of men."[66] His scriptural arguments for grace as the means of salvation rely solely on the Book of Mormon and not the Doctrine and Covenants or the Pearl of Great

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[65]Robert L. Millet, "A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Restoration," in *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior,* ed. Paul H. Peterson, Gary Layne Hatch, and Laura D. Card (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 187.

[66]Ibid.

Price. Apostle Oaks also claimed that the Book of Mormon "contains the fullness of the everlasting gospel in greater clarity than any other scriptures."[67]

As a result of this return to the Book of Mormon, the neo-absolutist view of human nature is less optimistic than the traditional view. The neo-absolutists proclaim God as absolute and ultimate in contrast to humans who are finite, contingent, and sinful. This different perception of God has contributed to the shift from viewing human merit as the primary of the means of salvation to viewing grace as the primary means. White observed how absolutism contrasts with traditional Mormonism.

> While the Mormon neoorthodox doctrine of salvation may be more similar to traditional Mormonism than either its conceptions of man or God, it does depart significantly on occasions, in tone if not in substance, from an orthodox Mormon position. Though basic Mormon beliefs in the afterlife remain intact, a more restrictive pathway to salvation is defined and a greater reliance upon God is demanded. Indeed, it is these trends that constitute Mormon neoorthodoxy's departure from orthodoxy on the question of salvation. A shift from traditional Mormonism's fundamentally man-centered doctrine of salvation to a more Protestant God-centered conception is apparent in Mormon neoorthodoxy's doctrine of grace."[68]

The helplessness of humans. Neo-absolutist Mormons have implicitly accepted a form of the doctrine of original sin. In light of their belief that humans are fallen, they have described the human condition as essentially helpless and in need of divine rescue. "Man is powerless to do anything about this situation," Andrus observed.[69]

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[67]CR, October 1988, 65. Also see Bruce C. Hafen, CR, May 2004, 97; White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, 139.

[68]White, "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," 19.

[69]Hyrum L. Andrus, *Liberalism, Conservatism, Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1965), 77. Some neo-absolutist Mormons believe that if God had not arranged the atonement, then humans would actually possess original sin as taught by Catholics. See Ludlow, *Selected Writings of Daniel H. Ludlow*, 347.

From Robinson's perspective, humans are "estranged" from God and can be reconciled only by the gift of the atonement.[70] According to Robinson, when people recognize that they cannot overcome their sins, then they have taken a major step toward obtaining righteousness.[71] Millett has written that the recognition of helplessness is what prompts people to come to God for salvation. He wrote that "the more I sense his greatness, his infinity, his capacity to transform the human soul, and my utter helplessness without him, the more I come to him."[72]

Deserved condemnation. For neo-absolutist Mormons, humans are helpless in their fallen condition; moreover, they deserve judgment and condemnation. Traditional Mormons rarely mentioned guilt or condemnation because they believed that any guilt was merely a hypothetical concept. Since the atonement automatically restored the noble and virtuous character of humans, these terms were not descriptions that could be applied literally to people. Even though neo-absolutist Mormons believe in the power and efficacy of the atonement for all people, they have focused on the fact that all people were rightly under God's wrath. Robinson has written an extended discussion of the justness of God's potential judgment upon humans. He has argued that saints should be thankful that God had not given them what they actually deserve for their sins. He wrote

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[70]Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), in LCL, 7.

[71]Marvin K. Gardner, "Righteousness," in *EM*, 3:1236. Also see Stephen L. Richards, L., *What is Wisdom?* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1955), in LCL, 419.

[72]Robert L. Millett, *Selected Writings of Robert L. Millett*, Gospel Scholars Series (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2000), in LCL, 503; idem, *Grace Works* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2003), 3; Stephen D. Nadauld, *Justified by Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 2001), 151.

that "it is not an unjust fate that the saints are delivered from. There is nothing wrong with people going to hell – they deserve it."[73]

Emphasis upon faith in god's character. Traditional Mormons viewed faith as merely the first step in the many required steps to salvation. They generally limited faith to the confidence that God would accept them *after* they had completely repented of their sins, been baptized, received the laying on of hands, and persevered to the end. It was faith in the Gospel as a code of laws and principles for progression, of which God was the administrator, rather than a hopeful expectation that God's love had provided for their salvation. Their faith was that at the end of the process they would receive the reward of exaltation which they had so diligently sought. All these elements made this traditional Mormon view of faith very different from early Mormons who stressed that faith was personal trust in God's character rather than a self-developed trait.

Neo-absolutists have returned to the earliest Mormon view of faith that was taught by the Book of Mormon and reflected in the *Lectures on Faith*. Andrus summarized this view of faith as the idea that that "salvation comes primarily as an act of faith."[74] Davis identified this new, emerging view of faith as a "new emphasis upon the more passive acceptance of divine love within that firmly established context of activist

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[73]Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 58.

[74]Andrus, *Liberalism, Conservatism Mormonism*, 81. The *Lectures on Faith* stressed that part of the required faith is confidence that God is forgiving, slow to anger, and accepting of those who fall short of his standards: "But secondly; unless he was merciful and gracious, slow to anger, long-suffering and full of goodness, such is the weakness of human nature, and so great the frailties and imperfections of men, that unless they believed that these excellencies existed in the divine character, the faith necessary to salvation could not exist; for doubt would take the place of faith, and those who know their weakness and liability to sin would be in constant doubt of salvation if it were not for the idea which they have of the excellency of the character of God, that he is slow to anger and long-suffering, and of a forgiving disposition, and does forgive iniquity, transgression, and sin. An idea of these facts does away with doubt, and makes faith exceedingly strong." *LF*, 3:20

Mormonism."[75] For example, Robinson has urged saints to "believe Christ" can save them with their inadequacies rather, and not live as people who only intellectually "believe in Christ," while continuing to struggle with their guilt.[76] Millett also rejected any trust in self-effort to please God.[77]

Pastoral concern for discouraged saints. The neo-absolutist emphasis upon grace and faith is partially motivated by a growing awareness among LDS leaders and theologians that many Mormons struggle with guilt and shame regarding their inability to become perfect. They leaders have expressed surprise that these weary and discouraged saints possess such a deficient view of the Gospel that they have actually thought that the gospel requires perfection. Ironically, these leaders do not recognize that these guilt-ridden church members are the ones who have truly understood the implications of the traditional Mormon view of salvation. In the traditional view, each person was completely responsible for climbing the ladder to salvation and their future destiny was determined solely by their efforts.[78]

In light of this problem, neo-absolutist Mormon leaders have repeatedly urged church members to trust God for their salvation rather than themselves. Robinson

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[75]Davis, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 60.

[76]Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 11.

[77]Millett, *Selected Writings of Robert L. Millett*, 505. Like other neo-absolutist Mormons, Millet affirmed that works are necessary, but argued that they do not constitute self-effort or self-reliance. They are a very small component of the means of salvation. Also see David Yarn, *The Gospel: God, Man, and Truth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1979), in LCL, 72-73.

[78]Two Mormon scholars have wrongly concluded that this misguided quest for perfection among the saints is rooted in the Puritan heritage in America. They have failed to recognize that it is the LDS view of salvation that drives saints to despair. See Erin R. Silva, "Ecclesiastical Implications of Grace," *Dialogue* 25 (Spring 1992): 72-73; also see Jeffery R. Holland, *Trusting Jesus* (Salt Lake City: Desert Book, 2003), 67.

encouraged Mormons to recognize that the atonement of Christ is "a shortcut" to the perfection that they are seeking. Christ is willing to share his perfection with people until they can become perfect themselves.[79]

> In the short run we are considered perfect, accepted as perfect, by becoming one with a perfect Christ. In the long run, this makes it possible for us actually to become perfect in our own right at some future time, but that time is long after the Judgment and long after we have already inherited the kingdom of God through the merit, mercy, and perfection of Jesus Christ. Thus the most important goal in mortality is becoming one with Christ through the gospel covenant and gaining access through that union to his perfection, rather than remaining separate and aloof while trying (fruitlessly!) to generate our own perfection and thereby save ourselves.[80]

Since Robinson cannot eliminate the need for each person to reach perfection, he has moved the deadline for this perfection into the future.[81] Instead of people having to become almost perfect before they receive divine grace, he has argued that *initially* God's grace makes people perfect in this life and then later in the post-mortal realm, they can reach perfection on their own merits. This is a reversal of the traditional Mormon view of the means of salvation as exemplified by 2 Nephi 25:23 which states that grace can only help after people have done "all [they] can do."

Millet has rejected the traditional Mormon tendency to "devise and implement all the behavior modification programs possible."[82] Following Millet's efforts to mitigate

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[79]Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 14.

[80]Ibid., 44; idem, *Following Christ: The Parable of the Divers and More Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1995), 145-46.

[81]The earliest Mormon scriptures required some human merit for salvation.

[82]Robert L. Millett, *Steadfast and Immovable: Striving for Spiritual Maturity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), in LCL, 129; Millett placed such a strong emphasis upon the necessity of receiving divine grace that he was willing to use an illustration of grace taken from an evangelical author, Charles R. Swindoll. Millett, *Selected Writings of Robert L. Millett*, 503. It is common for these neo-absolutist authors to read the writings of evangelical authors and endorse their views about the sufficiency of grace; however, they then add the necessity for some works.

the heavy emphasis Mormon's place on works, Erin Silva has noted the resistance in the Mormon church to a more grace oriented view of salvation. She wrote that "there are those who worry that the doctrine of grace will breed a generation of people in the Church who, on finding grace, will sit back and ride out the journey to salvation on the backs of those who have decided to work and earn their way into the celestial kingdom."[83] Robinson also noted how difficult it is for Mormons to accept grace instead of human effort and was concern that "in the modern Church we similarly have those who will perish rather than accept the grace of God because it seems to them too easy."[84]

Emphasis upon regeneration. Traditional Mormons viewed salvation as a long process of lifetime of step-by-step obedience resulting in character development and self-growth. The different emphasis of the neo-absolutists has been on the need for spiritual regeneration from a sinful, helplessness state into a newfound state of godliness. Andrus chastised religious and political liberals because they were guilty of "stressing ethics and ideals without emphasizing that man must be regenerated by the powers of the Holy Spirit to achieve the Christlike life."[85]

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[83]Silva, "Ecclesiastical Implications of Grace," 84. The resistance to viewing grace as the primary means of salvation arises from the lingering effects of the traditional Mormon view of salvation. Her view of the exclusive role of grace in salvation is similar to the evangelical view of salvation. She argues that salvation is an act of God's grace, and that works are the free, loving human responses to such gracious salvation. Also see Donlu Dewitt Thayer, "Top Kingdom: The Mormon Race for the Celestial Gates," *Dialogue* 22, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 13. Both Silva and Thayer are LDS scholars but not church leaders. No LDS leaders has espoused their view that grace alone brings salvation.

[84]Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 77. Also see Lowell Bennion, "For by Grace Are Ye Saved," *Dialogue* 1 (Winter 1996): 102; Millet, *Grace Works*, 62; idem, "A Different Jesus?," 188; Jeffery R. Holland, "Atonement of Jesus Christ," in *EM*, 1:85.

[85]Apparently, Andrus never realized that he was rejecting the Mormon view of salvation which had dominated the church from 1835 to the 1950s. Hyrum L. Andrus, *Liberalism, Conservatism, Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1965), 90.

The difference between the traditional and neo-absolutist Mormon theological views of the means of salvation can be seen by comparing the views of LDS scholar Millett and President Kimball. Kimball, a traditional Mormon. Kimball proclaimed that "man has in himself the seeds of godhood, which can germinate and grow and develop . . . . It is within his power to lift himself by his very bootstraps from the plane on which he finds himself to the plane on which he should be."[86] In contrast, neo-absolutist Millet has urged the saints to cease striving so that they can accept salvation as a gift. He has aught that achieving salvation is essentially receiving new life in Christ. Entrance into this new spiritual life must be preceded by the choice to "yield to and appropriate his transforming power and stop trying to do everything ourselves."[87]

Works as secondary to grace. Neo-absolutists have not abandoned the necessity of works for salvation; however, their strong emphasis upon has grace led to them to diminish the importance of works. They have marveled at the breadth of power divine grace exerts in the plan of salvation. LDS scholar Lund wrote that "it is probably not possible for man to fully comprehend the extent of the grace of God and all the manifestations through which that grace is exhibited."[88] Apostle McConkie believed that

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[86]Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 28.

[87]Millett, *Selected Writings of Robert L. Millett*, 507; idem, *Steadfast and Immovable*, 135-36. Also see White, "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," 21. Similarly, Lowell Bennion warned against self-effort in combating sin. He wrote, ". . . after a person recognizes his sin and wishes to repent, he often makes the mistake of trying to lift himself by his own bootstraps. That is, he has an internal struggle fighting sin directly. Often the more he concentrates on fighting sin, the more he succumbs to his awareness of its presence." Lowell Bennion, "The Gift of Repentance," *Dialogue* 5 (Autumn 1970): 63.

[88]Gerald N. Lund, "The Grace and Mercy of Jesus Christ," in *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior*, ed. Paul H. Peterson, Gary Layne Hatch, and Laura D. Card, 18-49 (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 20-21; idem, *Best of Lowell L. Bennion,* ed. Eugene England (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988), 114.

God was gracious enough to accept only "relative degrees of perfection" from his children.[89] Not only does God graciously lessen his demand for human works, but also it is divine grace, not human strength, that is allows people to perform the works.

Traditional Mormons limited grace to the atonement, but neo-absolutists have argued that God's grace upholds and strengthens people as they perform the small amount of required works. Like other theologians of this movement, Millett does not recognize how great the difference is between his view and the traditional view of the church. Millet wrote that "to Latter-day Saints, the grace of Jesus Christ is not only a final spiritual boost that will allow us to move into heaven hereafter but also an enabling power, a divine dynamism that enables us to meet life's challenges in the here and now, to do things we could never do on our own."[90] Neo-absolutists have also begun using Pauline language in their doctrines of salvation. Davis cited two reasons for this shift.

> What may be happening in these affirmations of grace by authors such as Mangum, Yorgason, Millett, and Robinson is a twofold development in the turn of the century and millennium LDS life. The one answers the needs of devoted Saints, laboring under apparently impossible goals of achievement, the other displays the preparedness of the Church that now need not fear its distinctive identity to accept wider Christian theological terms. It is as though modern Mormonism feels free to draw on the discourse of grace. This is due, in part, to the influence of Evangelical Christianity in many parts of the world and, partly, to the real pastoral need of a striving Mormon membership.[91]

In particular, these theologians emphasize the nature of justification. Robinson argued that many church members erroneously believe that the gospel requires perfection

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[89]Bruce R. McConkie, CR, November 1976, 106.

[90]Robert L. Millet, *The Mormon Faith: Understanding Restored Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1998), 76; idem, *Grace Works*, 132;

[91]Davis, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 58. White also noted this movement's "affinity with Paul." White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy*, 106; idem, "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," 22.

during this life.[92] He described justification as an event that occurs in the moment we "admit we can't be perfect on our own or save ourselves by our own efforts, and have faith in Christ our Savior."[93]

Millett illustrated the roles of grace and works by describing a situation in which a man is riding up an escalator. The power of the escalator that automatically lifts the man to the next level is comparable to the power of justification. The mere requirement that the man stay on the escalator until it carries him to his destination is analogous to the requirement for works.[94] The role of works in salvation has been minimized but not eliminated. This makes the neo-absolutist view substantially different from the traditional view of salvation in which humans, propelled by their innate goodness and using their own strength, must lift themselves to Godhood.

Because of their partial acceptance of Pauline theology, neo-absolutists have even abandoned the harsh traditional Mormon rejection of the phrase "salvation by grace." While traditional Mormons considered any formulation of salvation by grace to be a heretical, perverse doctrine of the Protestants, neo-absolutist Mormons have now embraced the phrase "saved by grace." They remain inside the doctrinal boundaries of the LDS church because after teaching salvation by grace they add the stipulation that a small amount of good works be performed. For example, Robinson summarized his view of salvation by writing that "the conclusion is inescapable – we are saved by grace."[95]

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[92]Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 42.

[93]Ibid., 43.

[94]Millett, *The Mormon Faith*, 73.

[95]Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 66. Neo-absolutists also emphasize the necessity of conversion and the importance of union with Christ. See Andrus, *Liberalism, Conservatism Mormonism*, 74; Dallin H.

Robinson then proceeded to clarify that the Mormon view of salvation by grace is not the doctrine of salvation by grace *alone*. He noted that "for Latter-day Saints the doctrine of grace does not mean that we are saved by grace alone, that is, without participating in the process in some degree, nor does it mean that salvation is totally without conditions."[96]

Neo-absolutists have attempted to diminish the tension between the LDS view of the means of salvation and the evangelical view. Millett concluded that the argument over whether salvation is by grace or work is "a fruitless argument that generates more heat than light."[97] In his view, the debate over this issue is more a symptom of the human tendency to struggle to achieve "balance" than a real theological issue.[98]

Like other neo-absolutists, Bruce C. Hafen is convinced that the Mormon belief in the importance for salvation is the exact same concern expressed by evangelical leaders throughout the last century. In this mistaken view, they believe that Mormons require no more works for salvation than the works seemingly required by the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer or John MacArthur.[99]

The present state of salvation. Traditional Mormons believed that salvation was a condition achieved only after a lifetime of strenuous obedience. On this journey of

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Oaks, CR November 2000, 37; Robert L. Millet, "Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism: Orthodoxy, Neoorthodoxy, Tension, and Tradition," *Brigham Young University Studies* 29 (1989): 64.

[96]Millet, "Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism," 64.

[97]Millett, *The Mormon Faith*, 74.

[98]Ibid.

[99]Bruce C. Hafen, "Grace," in *EM*, 2:560-63. Also see Richard D. Draper, "The Message Behind the Passive Voice in the Book of Revelation," in *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior,* ed. Paul H. Peterson, Gary Layne Hatch, and Laura D. Card (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 379; Boyd K. Packer, *That All May Be Edified: Talks, Sermons & Commentary by Boyd K. Packer* (Salt

obedience, it was not possible to speak of salvation as a current or present state. They reacted strongly against evangelical ideas such as a current state of "being saved" or having "received salvation." In their view of salvation as a gradual process, they rarely taught the need for a specific moment of conversion.[100] Apostle Oaks explained the confusion which results when Mormons discuss salvation with evangelicals.

> What do we say when someone asks us, "Have you been saved?" This question, so common in the conversation of some Christians, can be puzzling to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints because it is not our usual way of speaking. We tend to speak of "saved" or "salvation" as a future event rather than something that has already been realized.[101]

Rather than fully rejecting the idea of a present state of salvation, neo-absolutist Mormons affirm that there is a sense in which Mormons currently possess salvation. Millet wrote, "I would like to propose a sense in which the theology of Latter-day Saints encompasses . . . the notion of being saved, here and now, in this life."[102] He noted that some people experience "a dramatic, sudden encounter" while others have a more gradual experience.[103] His belief that at least some saints experience an immediate spiritual transformation demonstrates the extent to which the neo-absolutist view differs sharply from the traditional Mormon view.[104]

Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 320-21. Robinson argued that "the old debate about faith versus works is a false dichotomy, a phony either/or." Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 72.

[100]The early Mormon canon did contain the idea of being "born again," but traditional Mormons ignored this idea because it did not fit into their view of salvation. See Alma 5:14, 31; 7:14; Mosiah 5:7; also see *MD*, 100-01.

[101]Dallin H. Oaks, CR, May 1998, 55.

[102]Robert L. Millett, *Within Reach* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1995), in LCL, 73-74.

[103]Millett, *The Mormon Faith*, 84.

[104]Davis, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 58.

Comparing the Neo-absolutist View with the Evangelical View

Scholars frequently ask whether Mormons are Christians. While the answer to this question is broader than just the issue of the means of salvation, this question is often asked regarding the Mormon view on the means of salvation. In light of new view held by neo-absolutists, scholars must determine how this current view of salvation compares to the evangelical view. Unfortunately, this different Mormon view of salvation still falls short of the evangelical view, because even though the importance of works has been minimized, works are still required as the human contribution to salvation.

This requirement for human merit remains an intractable problem for Mormons who earnestly seek for their church to be recognized as "Christian." The LDS church historically has held a synergistic view of salvation in which works are a partial basis for acceptance by God. It appears that neo-absolutists have reached the doctrinal limits of their church. Even if they wanted to affirm salvation by grace *alone*, they cannot affirm this doctrine and still remain in the church.

Evangelical Craig L. Blomberg has reached a similar conclusion. In his view, the Mormon doctrine of salvation is "synergism," specifically the "old Judaizing (Galatian) heresy."[105] For example, neo-absolutist Andrus claimed that ultimately the atonement put Christ in a position over people in which "he might save them from-not-in-their-sins."[106] The LDS view also retains the troubling and unbiblical idea that while humans are relatively unworthy in comparison to the worth of Christ, they still *can* and

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[105]Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *HWD*, 180.

[106]Hyrum L. Andrus, *The Glory of God and Man's Relation to Deity* (Provo, UT: Extension Publications of Brigham Young University, 1964), 35.

must contribute their merit to their union with Christ. Robinson has written that "because Christ and I are one in the gospel covenant, God accepts our combined worthiness, and together Christ and I are perfectly worthy."[107] The evangelical view of salvation, in contrast, affirms the glorious truth that Christ *does* save men and women *in* their sins when they recognize that can contribute *nothing* toward their salvation.

Unresolved Tensions in the Mormon Doctrine of the Means of Salvation

It is evident that the LDS church possesses unresolved tensions in their doctrines. These tensions arise out of the diversity and divergence in the teachings of Joseph Smith. Despite Smith's claims that he possessed the fullness of the gospel and the ability to teach true doctrines, he left his church with at least two theological traditions, traditional Mormonism and neo-absolutist Mormonism. In some doctrinal areas such as the nature of God, the views held by these two traditions are explicitly contradictory and represent logical disjunctions. *Either* God is relatively omniscient and omnipotent as in the traditional Mormon view, *or* he is absolutely omniscient and omnipotent as in neo-absolutist Mormon view. In other areas, like the means of salvation, the tensions between the two traditions are substantial but more subtle.

Neo-absolutist Mormons have endeavored to return to the earliest Mormon view of the means of salvation. They could be commended for this return if their approach had not required ignoring, either intentionally or unintentionally, the later part of the LDS canon and over one hundred years of the traditional Mormon interpretation of Joseph Smith's view of salvation. The issue of the balance between grace and works as

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[107]Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 43.

the means of salvation remains presently unresolved in the church. Is salvation primarily by works as in the traditional Mormon view, or is it primarily by grace as in neo-absolutist Mormonism? This issue poses a significant problem for Mormons to resolve; however, the deeper issues in LDS doctrine lie in the tensions between the conflicting views on the nature of God and the nature of man. It will be shown in chapter seven that the attempts by neo-absolutist Mormons to reconcile their views with the *entire* Mormon canon and with the *entire* doctrinal history of the church have led them to adopt a novel, yet faulty view of faith and reason.

CHAPTER 7

FAITH AND REASON

From its beginning, the Mormon church has claimed that it possesses the fullness of the Gospel. The church has presented its doctrines as the most rational, scientific, and enlightened of all religious faiths. Mormons have invited people to join the one true church that alone possessed all truths, both sacred and secular. It has been demonstrated that there are *unresolved* tensions in Mormon doctrines related to the nature of God, the nature of humans, and the means of salvation. These tensions, inherited from the divergent teachings of Joseph Smith, have led to a mid-twentieth century shift in the Mormon view of faith of reason. This shift further complicates the task of Mormon intellectuals today. Not only are some of the key doctrines of the Mormon faith locked in seemingly intractable tensions, but there are also two conflicting approaches to the issue of faith and reason.

The tensions in most Mormon doctrines can be divided into three distinct periods of development: early, traditional, and neo-absolutist. Historically there have been two LDS views of faith and reason rather than three. This two-fold division exists because the earliest Mormon view of faith and reason, 1830-1835, remained relatively unchanged during the period of traditional Mormonism, 1835 to the 1950s. Over time this view of faith and reason developed within the church and was applied to new scientific developments; however, the view of faith and reason did not change substantially. For

this reason, the view of faith and reason from the birth of the church in 1830 until the emergence of neo-absolutism in the 1950s will be referred to as "traditional" Mormonism.

The Traditional Mormon View of Faith and Reason

Joseph Smith intended to restore the gospel lost during the great apostasy. He was confident that people would recognize the rationality and reasonableness of Mormonism in contrast to the unenlightened, speculations of the apostate churches. Whether the subject was the need for continual revelation, the corporal nature of God, or the preexistence of the soul, Smith believed that his doctrines truths were grounded in reason as well as revelation.

The Rationality of Mormonism

The nobility of human will. Traditional Mormons believed that faith and reason were inextricably linked. The rejection of the doctrine of original sin was partial motivated by their confidence that humans could use their reason to understand God correctly. Unlike Protestants who believed that the Fall had corrupted human nature including human reason, traditional Mormons argued that the atonement had completely overcome the effects of the Fall. Independent human reason was fully capable of discerning truths about God and the world. People were capable of learning about God without divine assistance because they naturally want to love and serve God. President Brigham Young's testimony of how he converted to Mormonism reflected this confidence in human cognitive ability:

> I found all religions comparatively like this -- they were so deficient in doctrine that when I tried to tie the loose ends and fragments together, they would break in my

> hands. When I commenced to examine "Mormonism," I found it impossible to take hold of either end of it; I found it was from eternity, passed through time, and into eternity again. When I discovered this, I said, "It is worthy of the notice of man." Then I applied my heart to wisdom, and sought diligently for understanding. But the natural wisdom and judgment which were given me from my youth, were sufficient to enable me to easily comprehend the discrepancies and lack in the creeds of the day.[1]

This testimony illustrated his teaching that people naturally "love and admire righteousness, justice, and truth more than they do evil."[2] In a similar manner, President John Taylor spoke of the natural, "noble aspirations" of humans.[3]

The Nobility of Human Will. Traditional Mormons also believed that noble humans were noble enough to use their reason to grasp truths about God. The eternal intelligence of each person would be used to discover all truths, including religious truths. Apostle John A. Widtsoe taught that "the mind of man is a noble instrument, a pre-eminent possession, by which he becomes conscious, not only of his own existence, but of the conditions of external nature..."[4] There was no concern that human reason had been corrupted or might be misused. Sterling M. McMurrin noted this high esteem of human reason echoed the Protestant liberal view of humans.

> The Mormon concept of man exhibits the affirmative qualities of the capacity of human reason and the possibilities of free moral endeavor that characterized the Enlightenment thought in the early part of the nineteenth century, that were basic to the liberal Protestantism in the latter part of that century and into the present, and that today lie at the foundations of the typical secular humanism that has issued from American intellectual life.[5]

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[1] *JD*, 2:124.

[2] *JD*, 9:305. Also see *JD*, 9:240.

[3] *JD*, 8:5.

[4] John A. Widtsoe, *In Search of Truth: Comments on the Gospel and Modern Thought* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1930), in LCL, 36.

O. Kendall White Jr. concluded that this positive LDS view of human reason was necessary because the Mormons expected humans to use their reason and their sensory experiences to rise to Godhood.[6] Similarly, David P. Gardner noted that the LDS view of reason and education is unusual in comparison to other religious groups because in the Mormon view, the acquisition of knowledge has eternal significance, whereas other religious groups negate the value of reason and education.[7]

Religious truths as rational and verifiable. Based on the confidence that noble humans would use their rationality to understand divine revelations, traditional Mormons asserted that religious truths are both rational and capable of verification through common sense. Because he believed that the truths of Mormonism were rationally and empirically verifiable, Young thought of the gospel as "natural philosophy." He preached to the saints, "you never heard me preach a doctrine but what has a natural system to it, and when understood, it is as easy to comprehend as that two and two equal four."[8]

Although he frequently disagreed with Young on doctrinal issues, Apostle Orson Pratt agreed with Young's view on the reasonableness of religious truths. Pratt

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[5]Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 110. Also see M. Gerald Bradford, "On Doing Theology," *Brigham Young University Studies* 14 (Spring 1974), in LCL, 335.

[6]O. Kendall White Jr., "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," *Dialogue* 5 (Summer 1970): 23. For a summary of the four stages of Mormon intellectual development, see Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," *Sunstone* 22 (1999): 16-20.

[7]David P. Gardner, "Education: Attitudes toward Education," in *EM*, 2: 444.

[8]*JD*, 4:203.

based his arguments against the apostate doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* on the fact that such a faith-based belief rejected the current scientific theories regarding the eternality of the elements. The Mormon belief in the eternality of matter and spirit, which was itself a form of refined matter, was scientifically tenable. In contrast, the false doctrine of creation from nothing was "a vague, foolish, unphilosophical, absurd, speculation of men who believed in an immaterial god 'without body or parts,' which is equivalent to no God."[9]

One traditional Mormon identified his faith as "the greatest system of philosophy that the world has ever known."[10] It was common for Mormons to expound their doctrinal views by appealing to reason and common sense as well as to revelation. While these leaders did cite the unique LDS revelations in their teachings, they also frequently used reason and common sense as complimentary sources of support for their teachings. For example, Apostle Whitney believed that common sense confirmed the LDS belief that each person would spend eternity accomplishing the same tasks that he or she had performed on earth.[11] Apostle Richard L. Evans reasoned that God would not have sent prophets to lead the former saints without also sending prophets to lead the Latter-day saints. President Howard W. Hunter used a similar argument to explain that the modern church should have the same officers as those mentioned in the New

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[9]Pratt anticipated the day when people would turn from such absurdities and embrace common sense, which was equivalent to the Word of God. Orson Pratt, *Masterful Discourses and Writings of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 61.

[10]Orson F. Whitney, *The Strength of the Mormon Position* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1917), in LCL, 13.

[11]CR, October 1928, 64.

Testament.[12] Reflecting upon this view of faith and reason, John M. Armstrong noted that "reason is used as the mode of revelation."[13]

More recently, LDS scholar Eugene England argued that the historical Mormon view of God's nature was consistent with the deliverances of reason. However, he despaired that neo-absolutist Mormons were abandoning this reasonable view of God:

> I can't help preferring the *rationalistic*, Mormon concept that sees God as an exalted person, existing in time and space and with a real environment of matter and energy and laws which can be organized and created within but cannot be called into being or destroyed or absolutely controlled -- a being whose work and glory it is to help other beings develop in the ways he has developed so they can enjoy his glory also.[14]

Likewise, McMurrin was critical of neo-absolutists who discount the importance of reason for the Mormon faith. He believed their efforts result in a diminishing of the value of rationality in doctrine, which he considered to an abandonment of the sacred Mormon "rationality or reasonableness."[15]

Strong apologetic impulse. Traditional Mormons championed the rationality of the Mormon gospel. Historically, the claimed rationality drew many converts to the church. Evangelical scholar Craig J. Hazen has noted that early converts to the church

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[12]CR, October 1965, in LCL, 115.

[13]John M. Armstrong, "Divine Reason: Historical Development in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 30 (Spring 1997): 7.

[14]Eugene England, "The Good News -- and the Bad, Review of *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*, by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson," *Brigham Young University Studies* 38 no. 3 (1999): 198 (emphasis mine).

[15]Sterling M. McMurrin, "An Interview with Sterling McMurrin: B. Ostler, Interviewer," *Dialogue* 17 (Spring 1984): 33. Because of their commitment to the rationality of divine revelation, traditional Mormons rejected any concept of paradox or mystery. Widtsoe believed that Mormonism differed from religious groups that accepted mysteries. To Widtsoe, God was fully comprehensible because "the conception of a universe directed by a god of intelligence cannot include a god of mystery." John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft 1937), in LCL, 64.

were captured by the logic and reasonableness of the LDS message. They believed that they had grasped objective, reasonable reasons for converting to the Mormon faith.[16] For example, Brigham Young testified to the truthfulness of the Mormon claims that led to his conversion. In his view, Mormonism was the only coherent and consistent system of beliefs.[17] Several scholars have noted that the distinctive teachings of the LDS church seem to have customized to address the religious issues of the 1830's. Gordon S. Wood saw the appeal of the Book of Mormon in its claim to answer theological controversies:

> The Book of Mormon cut through these controversies and brought the Bible up-to-date. It was written in plain biblical style for plain people, It answered perplexing questions of theology, clarified obscure passages of the Bible, and carried its story into the New World. And it did all this with the assurance of divine authority. The Book of Mormon is an extraordinary work of popular imagination and one of the greatest documents in American cultural history.[18]

Similarly, Hazen noted that the Mormon message seemed "to be clearing up intractable doctrinal conflicts and controversies that appeared ever-present on the religious landscape of the new republic – especially in revival regions such as western New York."[19]

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[16]Craig J. Hazen, "The Apologetic Impulse in Early Mormonism: The Historical Roots of the New Mormon Challenge," in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 33.

[17]*JD*, 2:124.

[18]Gordon S. Wood, "Evangelical American and Early Mormonism," *New York History* (October 1980): 380. Craig L. Bloomberg made a similar observation when he explained one of his concerns about the authenticity of the Mormon canon. He wrote that "the whole range of issues that the uniquely LDS Scriptures seek to answer fits perfectly the spirit of the early nineteenth century. It is not difficult to imagine a creative, biblically literate individual, frustrated with the moral corruption of many of the established churches of his day, composing what Joseph Smith claims to have had revealed to him. Once people became aware of the American Indians, surely they would have been curious about their opportunities for salvation prior to the arrival of the Europeans with the gospel. Others were speculating about the same questions. And what about babies who died, and the people in the Old Testament times who seemed to know so little of the gospel?" Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *HWD*, 51-52.

[19]Hazen, "The Apologetic Impulse in Early Mormonism," 43. For example, Joseph Smith created his Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible to eliminate contradictions, clarify difficult passages, and

Positive view of science. Traditional Mormonism possessed an optimistic view of science. Since all truth is God's truth and the human intellect was unaffected by the Fall, science could be embraced as an important source of truth. Science held great promise for teaching people about the universe that God had created. President Brigham Young described God as the "greatest chemist" and claimed that all scientific truths are "embraced" by the Mormon faith.[20] Widtsoe, who was a trained scientist, frequently wrote about LDS zeal for the pursuit of scientific knowledge.[21]

Traditional Mormons concluded that if both divine revelations and the human mind were rational, then there should be no conflict between religious and scientific truths. This was not merely a hope that someday science and religion would agree, but an adamant conviction that every scientific theory, law, or principle was presently compatible with the current teachings of the church. Young preached that Mormons were different from apostate Christianity because "our religion will not clash with or contradict the facts of science."[22] Mormonism would agree with any scientific truth; moreover, Mormonism would *embrace* and *champion* all scientific truth.[23]

Erich Robert Paul observed that in the 1850s, the church's initial positive view of science as reconcilable to its doctrines developed into explicit LDS attempts to

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to expand upon opaque doctrines. Robert J. Matthews, "New Publication of Standard Works," *Brigham Young University Studies* 22 (Fall 1982): 388.

[20]*JD*, 4:203.

[21]John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), in LCL, 142.

[22]*JD*, 4:117. Young pointed to the Mormon rejection of the scientifically untenable view of creation *ex nihilo* as an example of the agreement between science and Mormonism.

[23]*JD*, 9:149.

demonstrate that specific scientific truths directly supported the claims of Mormonism.[24] During the period from 1890 to the 1940s, Mormon leaders labored to correlate scientific theories and facts with religious ideas. Both Mormon theologians and professional scientists such as Richard R. Lyman, Joseph F. Merrill, James E. Talmage, John A. Widtsoe, and B. H. Roberts taught that that the great truths of science were actually the truths of the Mormon religion.[25] For example, Widtsoe believed that science and religion possess the same foundation and therefore must always agree, because gospel doctrines, like scientific truths, "rest on demonstrated truths that lie at the foundation of all sound, acceptable thinking."[26] This belief in the compatibility of Mormonism and science was also the product of the traditional Mormonism abolishment of any distinction between the realms of sacred and secular. Since no realms of life were purely secular, there could no realms of knowledge outside of the Mormon gospel. [27]

Miracles as natural law. The strong association between religious truths and scientific truths led traditional Mormons to redefine miracles in a way that would prevent them from conflicting with natural law. Since the natural laws of the universe were part of the eternal laws that were ontologically independent of God, they concluded that any miracles preformed by God must have utilized undiscovered scientific principles.[28]

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[24]Paul, "Science and Religion," 1272.

[25]Ibid., 1271-72.

[26]Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 10-11.

[27]Ralph C. Hancock, "Reason and Revelation," in *EM*, 3:1193. Also see David P. Gardner, "Education: Attitudes Toward Education," in *EM*, 2:444; White, "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," 21.

[28]As argued previously in chapter 4, eternal laws were one component of God's eternal environment that traditional Mormons believed limited the omnipotence of God. Also see Widtsoe,

Young claimed that if humans "understood the process of creation, then there would be no mystery about it, it would be reasonable and plain, for there is no mystery except for the ignorant."[29] Since eternal scientific laws govern everything, God must work miracles by using his vast knowledge of scientific principles. This denial of the supernatural nature of miracles contributed to the fervent LDS rejection of creation *ex nihilo*.[30]

In Young's views, it was the unsurpassed knowledge of eternal laws that allowed Jesus to command and direct the elements in order to accomplish his miracles.[31] Only the ignorance of humans leads them to label his amazing accomplishments as miracles. The so-called miracles of God are merely beyond the current understanding of human beings.[32] Young believed that the enlightened Mormon perspective on miracles would be more acceptable for unbelievers than the apostate Christian view that science and religion can conflict with each other.[33] McMurrin has concluded that because of the Mormon view of natural law "from the divine perspective, there are no miracles."[34]

Rational Theology, 25; Orson F. Whitney, *Gospel Themes: A Treatise on Salient Features of "Mormonism"* (Salt Lake City: n. p., 1914), 6-7.

[29]*JD*, 14:117.

[30]See *HC*, 308-309. Also see Brigham Young, *JD*, 13:249, 18:232; idem, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 48, 100, 441; James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith: Being a Consideration of the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), in LCL, 30.

[31]*JD*, 13:141-42.

[32]*JD*, 13:142.

[33]Young sympathized with irreligious people who had rejected apostate Christianity: "I am not astonished that infidelity prevails to a great extent among the inhabitants of the earth, for the religious teachers of the people advance many ideas and notions for truth which are in opposition to and contradict facts demonstrated by science, and which are generally understood." *JD*, 14:116.

[34]Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 19.

God as the source of all knowledge. Scientific truths were not the only "worldly" truths embraced by traditional Mormonism. Brigham Young proclaimed that Mormonism "embraces every principle pertaining to life and salvation, for time and eternity. No matter who has it. If the infidel has got truth it belongs to 'Mormonism.'"[35] Young's successor, John Taylor, echoed the same view. Since Mormonism included every truth from every field of learning, he claimed that the LDS church was "open to truth of every kind, no matter whence it comes, where it originates, or who believes in it."[36] Another LDS President, Joseph F. Smith, espoused the view that any true principle found in any religion was included in the Mormon faith.[37]

Apostle Whitney illustrated this idea by applying it some of the greatest thinkers in history. He believed that men like Plato, Confucius, and Ralph Waldo Emerson had drawn their inspiration and truth directly from God. Even though they did not recognize God as the source of their great thought, they were in essence teaching God's truths as their own. Each thinker drew so heavily upon the wisdom and power of God that Whitney as declared, "their strength is part of his omnipotence."[38]

Apostle Widtsoe valued science highly because it demonstrated the truth of Mormonism. As a scientist himself, he believed that scientific investigations supported the Mormon religion. He wrote that "science is daily confirming the truth of the universe

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[35]Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 3. Young frequently taught on this subject. See *JD*, 4:203, 10:266, 15:127, and 18:232.

[36]*JD*, 16:370.

[37]CR, April 1909, in LCL, 7.

[38]Whitney, *The Strength of the Mormon Position*, 24.

– embracing philosophy of the unlearned founder of 'Mormonism.'"[39] Reflecting upon Mormonism's embrace of all avenues of truth, President David O. McKay preached that the mission of the LDS church was to spread truth throughout the world. Since the Mormon faith incorporates all of the knowledge found in the world, the truth proclaimed by Mormonism is not restricted to "the narrow limits of dogma or creed."[40]

Openness to the Theory of Evolution. The optimism about science led many traditional Mormon theologians to either embrace the theory of evolution or express openness to it.[41] The church never officially expressed a position on the issue of evolution yet overall the church was more amenable to evolution than other religious groups. Traditional Mormons did not write extensively on the subject; however, their general approach was positive and sharply contrasted with the later neo-absolutist rejection of evolution as an abhorrent evil. Jeffery observed that "compared with the output of other religious groups, Mormonism has produced a rather tiny body of literature

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[39]John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith as Scientist* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), in LCL, 147-48.

[40]CR, April 1968, 93. McKay demonstrated his commitment to this expansive belief in the ability to recognize God's truth in every field of knowledge through his continued efforts to maintain neutrality on the official LDS view of evolution.

[41]The only aspect of evolutionary theory that troubled some Mormons was the rejection of the idea of the fixity of species. See John Taylor, *Mediation and Atonement: An Examination into and an elucidation of the Great Principle of the Mediation and Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: Desert News Company, 1882), in LCL, 164-65. These theologians did not doubt that evolution had occurred. Rather, they were concerned with the specific mechanisms of evolution. Even though they had general questions about parts of the evolutionary theory, their concerns never prevented them from accepting evolution. Duane E. Jeffery, "Seers, Servants, and Evolution: The Uncomfortable Interface," *Dialogue* 8, nos. 3-4 (1973): 44. Jeffery concluded that "the doctrine of species fixity was virtually ignored by official Mormon spokesmen. When they did broach the subject, their statements were very general and in no real way proscriptive from a professional's point of view. The authors were not speaking to professionals, however, and the sentiment of their statements took on the flavor of the theology of their day. In the light of subsequent research and observation, such a sentiment is unfortunate; it mars a rather neat record. It is quite evident, however, that a doctrine of species fixity was not a matter of prime concern in the nineteenth-century Church." Ibid., 52.

that deals directly with the matter of evolution."[42] In the absence of an official position on the issue of evolution, many church members implicitly accepted the idea of evolution.

Young exemplified the traditional Mormon approach to evolution. He preached that the time in which the origin of life occurred was irrelevant: "Follow it back, no matter whether it be for six thousand years, six millions, six million millions, or billions of years, the figures and numbers are immaterial, I must have come from some source, my natural philosophy teaches me this."[43] On another occasion, he admitted that he did not know the duration of each day of creation.[44] He also espoused a general belief in the fixity of each species and taught that "every species is true to its kind."[45]

The issue of evolution was addressed several times at the beginning of the twentieth century. A 1909 statement by the First Presidency entitled the "Origin of Man" reminded the saints that evolution was one of the "theories of men" and reaffirmed a central Mormon belief that Adam was "the first man upon this earth."[46] Since many traditional Mormons were able to affirm both the primacy of Adam and the theory of evolution, this pronouncement did not lead to a rejection of evolution among Mormons.

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[42]Ibid., 45.

[43]*JD*, 13:249.

[44]*JD*, 18:317.

[45]*JD*, 8:30. Jeffery argued that although this statement *appears* to be a definite rejection of evolution, the context makes this conclusion tenuous. "The hyperbole here [in *JD* 8:30 – Young's words] is evident, and strictly speaking, completely disrupts the point its author is making. As it is, it certainly does not constitute a statement against the scientific version of changes in species. Modern evolution texts carry many statements concerning developmental canalization and genetic homeostasis, which express these same concepts. But with all that, there is still, in President Young's words, a sentiment toward fixity of species -- again subject to whatever is meant by 'species.' " Jeffery, "Seers, Servants, and Evolution," 51. The fact that statements like this one from Young and other did not clearly reject evolution is important since modern neo-absolutist Mormons wrongly conclude that all Mormons have always rejected evolution.

[46]*MFP*, 4:205.

Just one year after this declaration, an article in the LDS periodical *Improvement Era* expressed openness to the possibility that the human body had evolved.

> Whether the mortal bodies of man evolved in natural processes to present perfection, through the direction and power of God; whether the first parents of our generations, Adam and Eve, were transplanted from another sphere, with immortal tabernacles, which became corrupted through sin and the partaking of natural foods, in the process of time; whether they were born here in mortality, as other mortals have been, are questions not fully answered in the revealed word of God.[47]

In 1931, Apostle Talmage published a 1931 article in the church periodical *The Instructor* with the church's permission in which he responded to a rising wave of anti-evolutionary rhetoric in the church[48] He argued for a gradual development of life on earth.

> From the fossil remains of plants and animals found in the rocks, the scientist points to a very definite order in the sequence of life embodiment. . . . Geologists say that these very simple forms of plant and animal bodies were succeeded by others more complicated; and in the indestructible record of the rocks they read the story of advancing life from the simple to the more complex, from the single-celled protozoan to the highest animals, from the marine algae to the advanced types of flowering plant -- to the apple-tree, the rose, and the oak.[49]

While Talmage was believed that a gradual process produced plant and animal life, he did not accept a gradual origin for humans. He was confident that as science continued to progress all apparent conflicts between the scientific and religious accounts of the origin of man would be resolved.[50] His confidence in the eventual harmonization of both accounts flowed from his central conviction that "within the Gospel of Jesus Christ there

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[47]"Priesthood Quorum's Table," *Improvement Era* 13, no. 6 (1910), in LCL.

[48]Jeffery, "Seers, Servants, and Evolution," 65. This rising opposition to evolution emerged in the 1950's as a key component of neo-absolutism.

[49]"The Earth and Man," *The Instructor* 100, no. 12 (December 1965) [on-line]; accessed 25 March 2005;available from http://eyring.hplx.net /Eyring /faq/evolution /Talmage1931.html; Internet.

[50]Ibid.

is room and place for every truth thus far learned by man or yet to be made known."[51] Other Mormons of the same period such as B. H. Roberts and John Pack also advocated the same openness to evolution.[52] Widtsoe argued that the age of the earth could not be determined definitively. "The days of creation could have been literally twenty-four hour days, one thousand years in duration, or an "immensely long periods of time."[53]

The traditional Mormon approach to evolution became threatened in the mid-twentieth century by the rise of neo-absolutism. In 1954, Joseph Fielding Smith published a influential anti-evolutionary book entitled *Man: His Origin and Destiny*. Despite this first salvo of the neo-absolutist attack upon science and evolution, traditional Mormon leaders like President David McKay continued to preserve the official neutrality of the church on the issue of evolution. In response to a letter in 1957 asking if Smith's book and views were endorsed by the church, McKay reiterated the neutrality of the church:

> On the subject of organic evolution, the Church has officially taken no position. The book "Man, His Origin and Destiny" was not published by the Church, and is not approved by the Church. The book contains expressions of the author's views for which he alone is responsible.[54]

The Mormon Neo-Absolutist View of Faith and Reason

The rise of neo-absolutism in the 1950's shifted the Mormon view of faith and reason. There were several factors that led to this change. First, their view of human

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[51]Ibid. For humans to have evolved *physically* from a lower life form was feasible for traditional Mormons because humans are now evolving *spiritually* toward Godhood. Ibid.

[52]Jeffery, "Seers, Servants, and Evolution," 64; James Gary Bergera, *The Lord's University: Brigham Young University, A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985), 131.

[53]Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation*, 146.

[54]David O. McKay to William Lee Stokes, 15 February 1957, "Letter from President McKay to," 15 February, 1957, [on-line]; accessed 25 March 26 2005; available from http://eyring.hplx.net/Eyring /faq /evolution /McKayStokes1957.html; Internet.

nature had become more pessimistic than the view of traditional Mormonism. Second, they advocated the virtue of obedience over intellectual understanding.

Third, their minimalist methodologies allowed them to ignore past contradictory doctrinal teachings rather than attempt to reconcile them. Fourth, they were attempted to evade the logical implications of the later canonical teachings that had established the eternal environment of God. Neo-absolutists have returned the LDS church to the earliest theology of Joseph Smith; however, the cost has been that they have abandoned the historical Mormon understanding of the relationship between faith and reason.

The Sinful, Fallen State of Humans

Neo-absolutist Mormons have adopted a pessimistic view of human nature that contrasts strongly with the optimistic traditional view of humans. They rely upon the earlier portion of the Mormon canon and ignored the later portion of it. As a result, they concluded that humans are sinful from birth. Hyrum L. Andrus attributed the sinfulness of man to "certain corrupt elements" in humans.[55] Likewise, Glen L. Pearson and Reid E. Bankhead taught that even though the doctrine of original sin is not true, humans are still sinful: "All are fallen. All are lost."[56]

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[55]Hyrum L. Andrus, *The Glory of God and Man's Relation to Deity* (Provo, UT: Extension Publications of Brigham Young University, 1964), 56.

[56]Glenn L. Pearson and Reid E. Bankhead, *Teaching with the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1976), 9. Also see Hyrum L. Andrus, *Doctrines of the Kingdom*, Foundations of the Millennial Kingdom of Christ (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 3:12; David H. Yarn, *The Gospel: God, Man, and Truth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1979), in LCL, 55; Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 244; Robert L. Millet. "The Regeneration of Fallen Man," in *Nurturing Faith through the Book of Mormon: The 24th Annual Sidney B.*

Distrust of Human Rationality

In the neo-absolutist view, the effects of the fall extend even to human reason. Humans struggle not only against their own sinful, corrupt desires but also against the corruption of their cognitive faculties. Human rationality has been viewed with suspicion because it is believed that humans most often use it as an instrument of rebellion against God. Apostle J. Reuben Clark argued that human reason caused the great apostasy. After the death of the apostles, church leaders started spending "their time and talents, and they were great, in trying to rationalize the Gospel of Jesus Christ."[57] Another apostle noted that throughout history, humans have used reason to oppose God: "More than once it has been the leader in an insurrection against the government of God. It has often accepted a retainer, prepared the papers and acted as leading counsel in the great case of Man V. his Maker."[58] President Joseph Fielding Smith also valued revelation and religious truth over the suspect value of "the philosophy and wisdom of the world."[59]

Apostle Bruce A. McConkie taught that the deepest truths about God lie beyond the ability of humans to comprehend them. He asked rhetorically, "Can man comprehend God? Can the finite envision the infinite, the worm comprehend the universe, and the dust of the earth conceive of the grander of the galaxies of the

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Sperry Symposium, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books Company, 1995), 124; idem, *Selected Writings of Robert L. Millett*, Gospel Scholars Series (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2000), in LCL, 171.

[57]CR, April 1952, 95.

[58]Apostle Henry D. Moyle, CR, October 1953, 9.

[59]CR, October 1952, 60. Joseph Fielding Smith's son-in-law McConkie held a similar bias against "intellectuality:" The intellectual approach to life must always be secondary to "spirituality." *MD*, 386.

universe?[60] Likewise, Louis C. Midgley argued that misguided reason had led past generations of saints to ignore unwisely the doctrinal teachings of the Book of Mormon.

> What seems to have led the Saints to neglect the Book of Mormon - there is no denying that, as a rule, we have done that -- is a desire for dogmatic or systematic theology, rather than a yearning for the restoration of a past that can function as a key to understanding our present and future, both as individuals and as a community."[61]

In his view, the current generation of LDS leaders who do not emphasize systematic theology have wisely recognized that scripture alone, not theological systems can answer their questions and provide guidance. This devaluing of reason has not escaped the notice of concerned traditional Mormons. White argued that the neo-absolutist "fear of reason and education also indicates a basic lack of faith in man."[62] Paul M. Edwards traced this distrust of reason to the neo-absolutist emphasis upon humans as contingent beings. Unlike traditional Mormons who believed that humans are necessary beings with noble intellectual abilities, neo-absolutists have argued that humans are contingent beings. For this reason, they have questioned the veracity of the deliverances of human reason. He wrote that "they admit to the fact that they are disillusioned with man, with the concept of his reason, and certainly with his knowledge."[63] Leonard J. Arrington, a renowned LDS

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[60]McConkie, *The Promised Messiah*, 9; idem, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985), 82, 109, 121; also see Boyd K. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1975), in LCL, 367.

[61]Louis C. Midgley, "Prophetic Messages or Dogmatic Theology? Commenting on the Book of Mormon: A Review Essay. Review of *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Volume I - First and Second Nephi, Volume 2 - Jacob through Mosiah* by Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet," *Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies Review of Books* (1989): 93-94.

[62]White, "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," 18. For White, these contemporary Mormons are also abandoning the traditional Mormon faith in empiricism. Ibid., 23.

[63]Paul M. Edwards, "Persistences that Differ: Comments on the Doctrine of Man," *Sunstone* 5 (September-October 1980): 48.

historian, interpreted this development in neo-absolutism as a shift from the traditional unified view of faith and reason to a dichotomy between the trustworthiness of the teachings of LDS leaders and the unreliability of secular learning and reason.[64]

Limited capacity of the human mind. For traditional Mormons who emphasized the eternality and ontological necessity of each intelligence, the human mind had unlimited potential to learn, grow, and develop. Traditional Mormons believed that the human mind might presently have limitations, but they also believed that eventually the mind of each person would comprehend all things, even the deep truths about God. In contrast, neo-absolutists have emphasized the finitude and weaknesses of humans. As a result, they have no confidence in the capacity of the mind to grasp divine principles. Joseph Fielding Smith compared the limited capacity of humans to understand God's truth to the inability of first graders to comprehend algebra.[65] Neo-absolutist leaders now have encouraged the saints to receive divine truths in a spirit of submissiveness and reverence rather than in a rebellious spirit of rationality.

Apostle Neal A. Maxwell criticized the sinful human tendency to question rather than to accept God's revelations. He wrote that "rather than being meek and accepting, rather than pondering, we immediately want to fit that truth into our finite framework of logic or to connect it with our limited experience."[66] Since God does not

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[64]Leonard J. Arrington, "The Intellectual Tradition of the Latter-day Saints," *Dialogue* 14 (Spring 1969): 20-21. Also see Douglas Davis, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 36-37.

[65]Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1958), 3:112.

[66]Neal A. Maxwell, *That My Family Should Partake* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1974), in LCL, 4.

owe human beings any explanations for his truths, his revelations should be received without hesitation or reflection. Even if questioning the revelation was not irreverent, Maxwell believed that "our limited, finite minds could not contain many answers even if God choose to give them to us."[67] Because they believe that the mind is not a reliable interpreter of divine truth, neo-absolutists have been relatively disinterested in systematizing the doctrines of the church.

There is a superficial similarity between the neo-absolutist distrust of systematized doctrines and the early Mormon avoidance of creeds and confession. In both periods of time, the emphasis was upon the revelations themselves, with little reflection being given to their logical implications. The significant difference between the two groups lies in their different reasons for shunning doctrinal systems. Early Mormons possessed a strong belief in the rationality and comprehensibleness of divine revelation. Since all humans are capable of understanding revelation and forming their own views, official creeds and confessions were too restrictive. Joseph Smith and other early Mormon leaders were confident that the saints would discover for themselves the correct meaning and interpretations of the revelations. They opposed *official formulations* of doctrine not because they believed that systematized beliefs were unimportant, but because they believed that each Mormon should have their own *private formulations* of doctrines.

In contrast, neo-absolutist Mormons dislike systematic theology because they believe that systematizing divine revelation is a futile task. Their beliefs about the non-

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[67]Neal A. Maxwell, *For the Power Is in Them* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1970), in LCL, 29; also see McConkie, Joseph Fielding, and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), in LCL, 2:39.

propositional nature of the revelations themselves and the weaknesses of the human mind have convinced them that reflecting about divine truths is worthless at best and dangerously rebellious at worst. A symptom of the lack of theological reflection in the LDS church today is that contemporary Mormons do not understand the doctrines of their faith as well as Mormons of previous generations. Ironically, Stephen E. Robinson has recognized the symptoms of this problem at Brigham Young University but has failed to diagnose the disease.

> What I noticed about my students was that, as we moved in class from peripheral doctrines and practices of the Church to the central doctrines of the gospel, many of them became less and less sure of themselves - they were soft in the middle. Some were even more comfortable defining themselves in terms of what they didn't believe (predestination, original sin, and so forth) than in terms of what they did believe. A significant minority did not understand scriptural doctrines such as salvation by grace, justification through faith in Christ, sanctification, atonement, and the meaning and terms of the gospel covenant. They were well taught in the peripherals but not in the vitals of the restored gospel.[68]

Acceptance of mysteries and paradoxes

Traditional Mormons claimed that the presence of mysteries and paradoxes in the theology of apostate Christian groups was evidence that these groups lacked the fullness of the gospel. They denounced paradoxes and mysteries in doctrines as signs of weaknesses. They believed that the truths of the gospel restored through the living prophets were completely consistent and entirely unambiguous. In contrast, because they distrust human reason, neo-absolutist have embraced and celebrated mysteries and paradoxes. For example, President Joseph Fielding Smith encouraged Mormons to focus upon the principles that God had clearly revealed and not to bother with the mysteries

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[68]Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), in LCL, 9-10.

which they could not understand. There were truths which God might never reveal to humans.[69]

These theologians frequently accept mysteries and paradoxes in the doctrine of God's nature. Mormon theologians have frequently encouraged the saints to accept truths such as God's exhaustive foreknowledge based on faith rather than on rational arguments.[70] Robinson has proclaimed that the only acceptable LDS view of God is that he is infinite. He has refused even to respond to the philosophical and logical objections raised by Mormon scholars who believe that God's knowledge and power must be limited by Mormon metaphysical commitments. He has dismissed as "whiz kids" those who argue that logically the Mormon God cannot be absolute. He rejects as irreverent their efforts to tell "an infinite God what He can or cannot be or do."[71]

Traditional LDS scholar White has criticized neo-absolutist Mormons for avoiding the logical problems inherent in their views. Instead of addressing these challenges, they "absolve themselves from any intellectual effort by laying their problems in God's lap."[72] Likewise, McMurrin has lamented the loss of the unique, rational, Mormon finitistic approaches to religious problems:

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[69]Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*

[70]Glen L. Pearson and Reid E. Bankhead, *Building Faith with the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 95. They attempt to avoid the charge that Mormonism is "anti-rational" by claiming that only God can define what is rational. ibid., 98-99 However, some traditional Mormons believe that this is a form of irrationalism. See Edwards, "Persistences that Differ: Comments on the Doctrine of Man," 49. also see David L. Paulsen, "Doctrine, Harmonization of Paradox," in *EM*, 1: 403.

[71]Matthew Connelly, Craig Blomberg, and Stephen E. Robinson. "Sizing up the Divide: Reviews and Replies," *Brigham Young University Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 175-76.

[72]O. Kendall White, Jr., "A Reply to the Critics of the Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy Hypothesis," *Dialogue* 6 (Fall 1971): 98-99.

> Today, much of that strength [for the task of reconciling revelation with culture and faith with science and philosophy] is gone as Mormonism suffers the impact of religious and social conservatism, as the Mormon mind, in the general pattern of contemporary religion, yields to the seductions of irrationalism, and as the energies of the Church are increasingly drained by practical interests.[73]

Following the Prophets Rather than Reason

The task of neo-absolutist leaders and theologians is not enviable. Their attempt to establish an absolute view of God and a finite view of man requires that they ignore over one hundred years of traditional Mormon teaching.[74] They are also forced to ignore the logical implications of the eternality of time, space, matter, and laws. It seems that their disdain for human rationality is partially a result of their inability to reconcile the tensions in their doctrines handed down by Joseph Smith. They counter the difficult doctrinal and philosophical questions asked by church members by instructing them to obey the church leadership and by extension the revelations of God, rather than to seek intellectually satisfying answers to their questions. The virtue of individual intellectual inquiry, which was once treasured by traditional Mormons, is now seen as veiled rebellion against God.

Since these leaders believe that the intellect can mislead the saints, reliance upon the church leadership is crucial. Apostle Marion Romney preached that the saints should follow the prophet without reservations because God will never allow a prophet to

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[73]McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, 111.

[74]Blake T. Ostler referred to this phenomenon as an institutional loss of memory. Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God.* Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), 298. Richard D. Poll attributed this loss of memory to the church's neglect of a sense of history (Richard D. Poll, "God and Man in History," *Dialogue* 7 [Spring 1972]: 102). Also see Sterling M. McMurrin, "An Interview with Sterling McMurrin: B. Ostler, Interviewer" *Dialogue* 17 (Spring 1984): 20.

mislead the church.[75] This often repeated claim in the contemporary LDS church differs from the traditional Mormon view that church leaders should be followed only if they are correct.[76] Traditional Mormons discouraged blind obedience because they believed that each person could evaluate the truthfulness of each leader's words. It was each individual's responsibility to evaluate the teachings of their leaders.

For neo-absolutists, rejecting the teachings of the leadership of the church is tantamount to apostasy and this could result in the loss of eternal life.[77] President Benson affirmed the virtue of obedience even in the face of seemingly erroneous teaching on secular matters, because the living prophet is the final source of authority on all subjects:

> Sometimes there are those who feel their earthly knowledge on a certain subject is superior to the heavenly knowledge which God gives to his prophet on the same subject. They feel the prophet must have the same earthly credentials or training which they have had before they will accept anything the prophet has to say that might contradict their earthly schooling. How much earthly schooling did Joseph Smith have? Yet he gave revelations on all kinds of subjects. We haven't yet had a prophet who earned a doctorate degree in any subject. We encourage earthly knowledge in many areas, but remember if there is ever a conflict between earthly knowledge and the words of the prophet, you stand with the prophet and you'll be blessed and time will show you have done the right thing.[78]

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[75]CR, October 1960, 78.

[76]Even the earliest neo-absolutist Mormons called for obedience to the Standard Works rather than obedience to the church leaders. Joseph Fielding Smith was quite clear regarding the primacy of the canon over the church leadership: "You cannot accept the books written by the authorities of the Church as standards in doctrine, only in so far as they accord with the revealed word in the standard works. Every man who writes is responsible, not the Church, for what he writes. If Joseph Fielding Smith writes something, which is out of harmony with the revelations, then every member of the Church is duty bound to reject it. If he writes that which is in perfect harmony with the revealed word of the Lord, then it should be accepted." Joseph Fielding Smith, *DS*, 3:203.

[77]Ezra Benson Taft, "Fourteen Fundamentals of Following the Prophet,; [on-line]; accessed 15 October 2006; Available from http://www.lds-mormon.com/fourteen.shtm; Internet.

[78]Ibid.

On another occasion, Benson wrote that obedience to those authorized by God has always been the key to the Christian life.[79] He challenged the saints to "choose between the reasonings of men and the revelations of God."[80]

Revelation over Reason

President Joseph Fielding Smith was instrumental in shifting the LDS view of faith and reason. He claimed, "Any doctrine, whether it comes in the name of religion, science, philosophy, or whatever it may be, if it is in conflict with the revealed word of the Lord, will fail."[81] In McConkie's effort to elevate reason over revelation, he argued that "modern Christendom" suffers from many errors because churches are led by intellectual rather than spiritual leaders.[82] The kind of knowledge that leads to righteousness and truth in the church could come only from revelation.[83] He desired to see Mormons follow church leaders instead of their own understanding.[84] This is a different view of revelation and reason than held by traditional Mormons who never envisioned the possibility that revelation and reason could conflict. As a result, they never assigned greater importance to one or the other since they would always be complementary.

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[79]Ezra Taft Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 332.

[80]Ibid., 354.

[81]CR, October 1952, 60.

[82]Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 3:84.

[83]*MD*, 427.

[84]Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies," [on-line]; accessed 28 March 2004; Available from http://emp.byui.edu/marrottr/SevenDeadlyHeresies.htm; Internet.

The strength of the neo-absolutist commitment to revelation over reason was also demonstrated in the teaching of former BYU President Dallin H. Oaks. He valued education and intellectual pursuits, but he believed that with regard to religion, there is a "primacy" of revelation over reason. Reason and revelation are two completely separate realms of knowledge. Each one has its own realm in which it has primacy. Reason is the primary means for obtaining secular knowledge while revelation is the primary means of obtaining sacred knowledge.[85]

Not all neo-absolutists explicitly demote the role of reason. Some implicitly accomplish this by simply ignoring the use of reason. Stephen D. Nadauld listed several ingredients for faith including human witnesses, reading scripture, and personal religious experiences. In his extended discussion of the ways that people can develop faith, he never discussed the role of reason or intellectual arguments for faith.[86] Erin R. Silva is critical of this emphasis upon the infallibility of human leadership. She wrote that "it is the gospel of works which has led us to believe that we must 'follow the brethren' because they have earned their leadership positions through dedication, hard work, and spiritual superiority. We seem to have created our own Mormon cult of personality."[87]

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[85]Dallin H. Oaks, *The Lord's Way* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1991), in LCL, 58, 71-72.

[86]Stephen D. Nadauld, *Justified by Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 2001), 56. John M. Armstrong provided a succinct summary of the two LDS views of faith and reason. The traditional Mormon view was the "compatiblist view" that "holds that some truths can be learned either by reason or revelation." The rival view, which represents neo-absolutism, believe that that reason is a "fumbling, degenerate, substitute for revelation." John M. Armstrong, "Divine Reason: Historical Development in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 30 (Spring 1997): 7.

[87]Erin R. Silva, "Ecclesiastical Implications of Grace," *Dialogue* 25 (Spring 1992): 79. Eugene England warned that the neo-absolutists theologians were making two mistakes. First, they were moving closer to evangelical theology. Second, they were adopting the typical evangelical intolerance for doctrinal differences. Eugene England, "Review of 'How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation," *Brigham Young University Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 196, 200.

The Lesser Value of Education

It is not surprising in light of their view of fallen humans and revelation as distinct from reason that neo-absolutists do not value education as highly as traditional Mormons did. Because of their new approach to faith and reason, they have reinterpreted the teachings of the canon and of Joseph Smith which were used by traditional Mormons to support their positive view of education. When education is valued by these theologians, it is sacred rather than secular education that is important for life and for salvation. White noted with concern that "in contrast with traditional Mormonism's commandment to seek knowledge, secular as well as religious, in order to be saved (exalted) neo-orthodoxy requires only religious knowledge."[88] David Yarn's view of the value of education illustrates this concern. He argued that the "primary benefits" of secular learning are "temporal."[89] Secular learning is no longer to be viewed as steps toward greater advancement and exaltation. Instead, only "redemptive" knowledge is certain to bring post-mortal benefits.[90]

Traditional Mormons had taught that the acquisition of all types of knowledge was prerequisite for salvation, yet this view has fallen into disfavor among neo-absolutists who emphasize grace over works as the primary means of salvation. Andrus wrote that "instead of placing primary emphasis upon the role of man's intellect as a means of attaining knowledge and intelligence, the gospel teaches us that salvation comes primarily as an act of faith by which man may acquire truth by revelation in the new

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[88]White, "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," 21.

[89]Hyrum L. Andrus, *God, Man, and the Universe,* Foundations of the Millennial Kingdom of Christ (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft. 1968), 191.

[90]Ibid., 193.

sphere of spiritual life."[91] It is sacred knowledge alone preserves the spiritual life of the learner.

A Suspicion of Science

Part of the appeal that Mormonism possessed for early converts was that it allied itself with science in the pursuit of the truth. Traditional Mormons proclaimed that the truths of the LDS gospel included all fields of knowledge including science. Only the apostate religious groups of Christendom held beliefs that were hostile to science. Neo-absolutist Mormonism has adopted a different approach to science which is consistent with its denigration of humans, reason, and, education. This newer approach conflicts with the history of how the LDS church has treasured the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Similarly, McConkie believed that the only type of knowledge required for salvation is religious knowledge. Despite the long history of traditional Mormons embracing science as valuable, McConkie adamantly denied that knowledge of science held any spiritual benefits for Mormons.[92] At best, science is now viewed as a purely secular pursuit that is peripheral to the gospel. At worst, science is potentially hostile to the gospel because it is contains impious theories and ungodly speculation which could undermine the gospel.

David H. Bailey has argued that there has been a slow rise of this veiled hostility toward science since the 1930s.[93] An indication of the emergence of this new approach to science was the debate among the LDS leadership over whether B.H.

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[91]Hyrum L. Andrus, *Liberalism, Conservatism, Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1965), 80-81.

[92]*MD,* 426.

[93]This was the beginning of the movement that emerged fully as neo-absolutism in the 1950s.

Robert's manuscript, *The Truth, the Way, and the Life*, should be published by the church. One of the issues was that Roberts had included the scientific theory of evolution. While affirming the reality of Adam and Eve, he also made provision for the existence of "pre-Adamites." In the end, the leadership chose not to give Roberts permission to publish the book.[94] Between the 1930s and the 1950s, the rising tension between the competing traditional and neo-absolutist views of faith and reason became more apparent. Even though Joseph Fielding Smith was the first prominent neo-absolutist and had led the attack on Robert's manuscript, he himself was not allowed to publish his book, *Man: His Origin and Destiny*, until 1954. The publication of his book, which showed great antagonism to science in general and evolution in particular, heralded the ascendancy of neo-absolutism in the church's hierarchal leadership organization.[95]

Since the 1950s, the majority of the church's leaders have held neo-absolutist views. The traditional Mormons remaining in the church have been less vocal and forceful in arguing for their views even when they have led leadership positions. For example, LDS President McKay was a traditional Mormon yet he rarely opposed neo-absolutism in the church other than continuing to note that the church's official stance on evolution was neutrality. As a result, the most prominent LDS teachings in the last fifty years have come from neo-absolutists, especially regarding the relationship of faith and reason. President Harold B. Lee, a neo-absolutist, preached that the gospel was the weapon that would defeat all false beliefs including scientific beliefs.

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[94]David H. Bailey, "Science and Mormonism: Past, Present, and Future," *Dialogue* 29 (Spring 1996): 82. The manuscript was eventually published in 1994. See B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology,: The Masterwork of B.H. Roberts* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates), 1994.

[95] Jeffery, "Seers, Servants, and Evolution," 65.

> And by that same token, we might say that the greatest weapon against all untruth, whether it be in science, so-called, or in the philosophies of the world, or in communism, or what not, the greatest weapon is the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which preached in power will be a bulwark against these false ideas in the world today.[96]

Because of the many public statements against evolution, Mormon church members have begun to view science as a potential enemy rather than as an ally. They are generally unaware of the LDS church's past neutrality toward the theory of evolution. One leader claimed that "the greatest challenge to belief in Christ today is the fast-spreading denial that He is the Creator, coming from men who would supplant the revealed truth with the very tenuous and fragile theory that the universe and all life came about in some mysterious, spontaneous, accidental manner."[97]

An Intense Rejection of Evolution

LDS neo-absolutists have demonstrated a range of responses in their rejection of evolution. The majority have rejected it harshly as an ungodly theory that is incompatible with Mormonism. A few have conceded that the issue has not been definitely settled by revelations and that the church has no official position on the issue even though they themselves do not believe in evolution. The result has been that most Mormon church members reject evolution as at best a misguided theory and at worse a form of heresy.

President Joseph Fielding Smith forcefully and explicitly rejected all components of evolutionary theory. He wrote, "I tell you, life did not commence upon

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[96]CR, April 1964, 23.

[97]Mark E Petersen, CR, April 1983, 63.

this world spontaneously."[98] He rejected the spontaneous development of life on earth based upon objections common cited by Protestants and Catholics. In addition, he added a unique Mormon objection to spontaneous generation. Since Moses 3:5-7 teaches that God created everything spiritually before creating it physically and the spirit of each person is eternal, Smith argued that no aspect of life originated on earth.

> It is true that all life does come from the same source, but that is not the scum of the sea, a jellyfish, or a pollywog. God, our Father, is the creator of life, and he placed life on this earth in varied forms, and also on other worlds. He will continue his work on this earth and upon other planets, or worlds, which will take the place of this earth when it has been exalted and gone on to its celestial glory. He will continue to bring to pass his purposes by peopling worlds and bringing to pass the immortality and eternal life of his children.[99]

For Smith, there were almost as many scientific problems with the theory of evolution as there were religious problems.[100] He adamantly taught that Mormonism and evolution were incompatible because they both make mutually exclusive claims. Therefore, one must be false if the other was true. Since there could not be any reconciliation between the LDS faith and evolutionary theory, he scorned theistic evolutionists as "weak-kneed and unbelieving religionists."[101] He also believed that satanic deception was the only reason why a person would accept the evolutionary theory.[102]

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[98]Joseph Fielding Smith, *DS*, 1:141.

[99]Ibid. He also argued that Mormon doctrines were intended to ennoble humans, whereas the evolutionary theory is "debasing."

[100]Joseph Fielding Smith, *Man: His Origin and Destiny* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company), in LCL, 138-39, 144-45. 1954.

[101]*DS*, 1:143.

[102]Smith, *Man: His Origin and Destiny*, 138.

McConkie's leadership position allowed him to propagate his anti-evolutionary views throughout the church. His book *Mormon Doctrine* has become a household reference for Mormons who use it as a resource for understanding their faith. In this book, he summarized nine key areas of LDS doctrine which he believed were incompatible with Mormonism. He listed these doctrines as the truths that would have to be abandoned in order to accept evolution: The existence of God, the pre-existence of life before the creation of the world, the "paradisiacal state" of the original creation, the nobility of Adam, the fall, , the young age of the earth, the destiny of humanity, and the atonement.[103] In his sermon entitled the "Seven Deadly Heresies," evolution was identified as one of the heresies because it threatened the doctrine of the atonement.[104]

> I believe that the atonement of Christ is the great and eternal foundation upon which revealed religion rests. I believe that no man can be saved unless he believes that our Lord's atoning sacrifice brings immortality to all and eternal life to those who believe and obey, and no man can believe in the atonement unless he accepts both the divine sonship of Christ and the fall of Adam. My reasoning causes me to conclude that if death has always prevailed in the world, then there was no fall of Adam that brought death to all forms of life; that if Adam did not fall, there is no need for an atonement; that if there was no atonement, there is no salvation, no resurrection, and no eternal life; and that if there was no atonement, there is nothing in all of the glorious promises that the Lord has given us. I believe that the Fall affects man, all forms of life, and the earth itself, and that the atonement affects man, all forms of life, and the earth itself.[105]

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[103]*MD,* 251-255.

[104]McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies."

[105]Ibid. Jeffery has surveyed survey popular Mormon literature and found a deep bias against evolution: "Available works are usually the product of individuals who labor under the apparent belief that the concept of evolution per so is a threat to the survival or vitality of Mormonism, and that by attacking evolution they become defenders of the faith. Not only do such authors perceive evolution as a deep and fundamental threat to their personal religious convictions, but by various devices they try to convince us that their bias is also the official, or at least necessary, doctrine of the Church. Statements to the effect that one cannot harbor any belief whatsoever in any version of evolution and still be a real Latter-day Saint, or that evolution is the deliberate doctrine of Satan and a counterfeit to the gospel, that it is atheistic, communistic, etc., are not at all rare in the Mormon culture and popular literature." Jeffery, "Seers, Servants, and Evolution," 42.

Since this initial wave of anti-evolutionary teaching, neo-absolutist leaders have continued their criticism of evolution. Apostle Boyd K. Packer argued for the fixity of the species and stated that "surely no one with reverence for God could believe that his children evolved from slime or from reptiles."[106] President Benson admonished Mormons to teach the Book of Mormon in the home and in the church in order to "expose and combat the falsehoods in socialism, organic evolution, rationalism, humanism, and so forth."[107] Current LDS president Gordon Hinckley has taught that he affirms the spiritual evolution of man through exaltation while denying the theory of organic evolution.[108]

The Toleration of Evolution as Speculative Theory

As a theological movement in the contemporary Mormon church, neo-absolutism does not support or advocate the theory of evolution although some of its theologians have expressed openness on the issue of evolution while not embracing it themselves. Apostle Hugh B. Brown encouraged the Mormons to "develop a questing spirit."[109] He then noted the disagreements between scientists and theologians over the creation story. Rather than insisting that they make a particular decision on this issue, he observed that since past Mormon leaders had not reached a definitive conclusion on the issues, then church members should not feel pressure to take a particular view of evolution. Each church member has the freedom to evaluate the evidence for and against

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[106]CR, October 1984, 66.

[107]Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, 60-61.

[108]Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1997), 298.

[109]Hugh B. Brown, *Continuing the Quest* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1961), in LCL, 200.

evolution and to make responsible judgments. He believed that the most important principle to remember was that ultimately the religious and scientific accounts would not conflict.[110] He encouraged dialogue on the issue of evolution since the "free exchange of ideas is not to be deplored as long as men remain humble and teachable."[111]

The publication of two articles published in the official LDS periodical *Ensign* in the 1980s has demonstrated that there is some toleration in the church for the discussion of evolutionary theory.[112] F. Kent Nielsen wrote that the current limitations of scientific inquiry have naturally led to indefinite conclusions about the natural order. While he affirmed the value of continuing scientific studies of the natural order until the Lord reveals the fullness of the truth. When God has made everything known, then the ultimate compatibility of religious and scientific truths will be seen. Until then, he expressed his confidence that scientists "can continue to supply us with helpful knowledge about our present, mortal sphere, or even with ideas about how things might have occurred in the past if the processes under consideration really were uniform over the necessary length of time."[113]

In another article, BYU professor of geology Morris S. Petersen cited Talmage's belief that Mormonism was open to every form of truth including scientific

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[110]Ibid., 200-01, 205-06.

[111]Ibid., 205.

[112]Bailey believed that the harshest responses to evolution ended in the 1980s. Since that time, there has been a lessening of the virulence of the opposition to evolution. He was optimistic that opposition to evolution might continue to dissipate because "the literalism which has dominated LDS literature during the last forty years may have peaked." Bailey, "Science and Mormonism," 84.

[113]F. Kent Nielsen, "The Gospel and the Scientific View: How Earth Came to Be," *Ensign* (September 1980): 75-76.

truths. He then discussed the different yet complimentary roles and purposes of religion and science.[114] He also urged patience and humility as the saints await the resolution of the challenges that arising in attempting to resolve the claims produced by the two different means of pursuing truth. Petersen viewed his own experience as an example of how science can lead to deeper spiritual reverence. He wrote that "as a Latter-day Saint geologist, I consider myself fortunate indeed to have the opportunity to study rocks and fossils as evidences of God's creation of our earth. Everything I have learned of the grandeur of the Creation has strengthened my resolve to learn more of our Heavenly Father and live as He would have me live."[115]

While not as official as articles appearing in Ensign, articles in the *Encyclopaedia of Mormonism* have received the approval of the church prior to publication and therefore portray views that are at the least acceptable within the church.[116] A survey of the articles pertaining to the issue of evolution demonstrates a greater openness than most Mormon writings of recent decades. For example, the article on "evolution" by William E. Evenson emphasized the official neutrality of the church on the subject. At the same time, it maintained the bedrock Mormon belief that Adam must have been the first human on earth. It also expressed the hope that even though the purpose of the scriptures was not to reveal how God created life on earth, he may

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[114]Morris S. Petersen, "I Have A Question," *Ensign* 17, no. 9 (September 1987): 28-29 [on-line]; accessed 26 March 2005; available from http://eyring.hplx.net/Eyring/faq/evolution/Ihaq1987.html; Internet.

[115]Ibid., 29.

[116]See David H. Ludlow, "Preface," in *EM*, 1:lxi; idem, "Acknowledgments," in *EM*, 1:lxiii. The church required that some articles on more controversial issues like evolution be revised multiple times. Bailey, "Science and Mormonism," 85.

someday reveal that truth to the church.[117] In a similar manner, John L. Sorenson wrote that on the issue of the origin of man, Mormons do not believe that the exact "biological or cultural mechanisms might has produced *Homo sapiens*" are importance issues. The salvation of men and women does not hinge on the specifics of God's methods of creation. He observed that both Mormons who accept evolution and those who reject it can support their views by citing the canon and the teachings of church leaders.

The Unresolved Tensions in the Mormon View of Faith and Reason

The unresolved tensions in Mormon doctrines pertaining to the nature of God, the nature of man, and the means of salvation have created a corresponding tension in the LDS view of faith and reason. During the years of traditional Mormonism, the church correctly taught that its doctrines were harmonious with the deliverances of reason. It also claimed that its truths were compatible with the leading scientific theories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as the eternality of time, space, matter, and scientific laws. There was a logical coherence in its doctrines because both God and humans, though at difference stages of development, are finite beings in an infinite universe. This consistency encouraged LDS leaders to claim that their faith was rational, understandable, and straightforward. There were no deep, hidden truths about God or inexplicable mysteries and paradoxes.

The attributes of God were redefined by traditional Mormons in light of his eternal, external environment. Omniscience was necessarily limited by the eternal, libertarian free will of humans and God's status as a joyful, eternal leaner. Omnipotence

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[117]William E. Evenson, "Evolution," in *EM*, 2:478.

was understood to be God's possession of all powers and abilities that did not conflict with the eternality of matter or laws. Organic evolution was typically accepted since it reflected the same principle of advancement from simple to complex found in the traditional Mormon belief that humans could progress to Godhood.

The neo-absolutist efforts to return the modern LDS church to the earliest doctrines of the church have created doctrinal tensions. Historically, these theologians have effective ignored the entire traditional Mormon doctrinal history in the church. By explicitly urging Mormons to return solely to the canon, they have implicitly urged them to disregard that the teachings of previous generations of LDS leaders.. This is minimalist approach and it cannot be reconciled with the church's teachings regarding the authority of the living prophets and importance of the teachings of the general authorities.

Doctrinally, neo-absolutists have embraced contradictory views that require the devaluing of rationality, philosophy, and science. By espousing an absolute, unconditioned view of God while retaining the traditional Mormon metaphysics in which God has a external environment, they have led the church into a different approach to revelation and to the relationship between faith and reason. In this view, revelation and reason can conflict and Mormons are urged to side with faith and revelation and against reason and science. This new theological direction has weakened the rational appeals of the Mormon faith.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The Presence of Unresolved Tensions in Mormon Doctrine

It has been demonstrated that there are unresolved tensions in several Mormon doctrines. These tensions are substantial and significant differences in the ways that the church has formulated its doctrines throughout its history. In the doctrines of omniscience, omnipotence, the nature of humans, and the means of salvation, the church has taught conflicting views in the periods of early Mormonism, 1830-1835, traditional Mormonism, which existing during most of the church's history between 1835 and the 1950's, and contemporary neo-absolutism.

Most LDS theologians especially in recent years have overlooked the existence of these tensions by essentially ignoring the doctrinal history of their church. Those who have recognized the existence of these tensions have attempted to resolve these contradictory teachings but have not succeeded. The neo-absolutist attempt to ignore these tensions by abandoning the traditional Mormon view of faith and reason has only created greater intellectual problems for the church. The task of reconciling these different teachings is of vital importance for a church that claims to have exclusive possession of the fullness gospel. While it has only been argued that these tensions exist and that they are *presently unresolved*, it is likely that these tensions are *irresolvable,*

which would present a direct challenge to the authenticity of the Mormon faith. The root of the seemingly intractable problems for Mormons is that Joseph Smith left the church with two radically different theological systems. Since he never repudiated his early doctrinal views, even while he later proclaimed substantially different views, he was in essence the father of two theological systems. Both early Mormonism and its theological progeny, neo-absolutism, legitimately claim to be based upon the teachings of Smith. At the same time, the traditional Mormonism which Smith fathered toward the end of his life draws its support from both his later teachings and from the logical implications of his earlier views.

The doctrine of divine omniscience possesses deep tensions. Mormons have both adamantly proclaimed and vehemently denied the exhaustive foreknowledge of God. Early Mormons continued the historical Christian view that God knows all things past, present, and future. Their view was buttressed by the earlier portion of the LDS canon, especially the Book of Mormon. They were confident that God's nature was absolute and infinite; therefore, he must possess all knowledge. However, when Joseph Smith and his successors recognized that both the libertarian free agency of eternal intelligences and the eternal law of progression required that God continue to learn new truths, they redefined his attribute of omniscience.

This view, in which God's knowledge of the future continues to advance, dominated the church for over a hundred years until the rise of neo-absolutism. Beginning in the 1950s, neo-absolutist theologians rediscovered both the historical Christian view of God's knowledge, rooted in the Old and New Testaments, and the early Mormon view of his knowledge, grounded in the early portion of the LDS canon. Either

intentionally or unintentionally, they ignored the traditional view of their processors and the implications of the canonical teachings of Smith. This has led them to return to an absolute, rather than finite, view of God's nature. Unfortunately, they have proclaimed confidently, yet erroneously that their view that God possesses all knowledge is *the only* acceptable LDS view.

In a similar manner, Smith's changing theological views *initially* gave rise to an early Mormon view of divine omnipotence and then *later* to the contrasting traditional Mormon view of omnipotence. The initial canonical revelations of Smith were full of reference to omnipotence both as a divine title and as an essential attribute of God. The "Lord Omnipotent" who was "all-powerful" had no limitations on his power. If he lacked any power, then he would have been an inadequate object of faith. This view changed with the reception of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. No longer could God be viewed as the sole, absolute all-powerful God since he essentially co-exists alongside eternity entities such as time, space, intelligences, matter, and moral and physical laws.

Traditional Mormons retained a view of omnipotence, but it was they redefined so that omnipotent mean that God could accomplish anything as long as it did not conflict with the components of this eternal environment. The traditional view of omnipotence became the basis for their unique theodicy in which God bears no responsibility for evil because he cannot control much of his environment. More recently, neo-absolutists have returned to the early canon and now teach that God has all power without limits. Ignoring the physical limits logically entailed by his environment, these

theologians mistakenly believe that *the historical* Mormon view of omnipotence is that God has all power to accomplish anything that he desires.

Joseph Smith began his church with a view of human beings that resembled the historical Christian view. The Book of Mormon reflects a stage of his thought in which the Fall of human beings tainted their nature. While the atonement assured that people would not be judged for original sin, they were still fallen, devilish, carnal, and rebellious toward God. As he later reflected upon the Doctrine and Covenants which taught that human intelligences are eternal can rise to Godhood, Smith's view of human beings changed radically. He began to view human nature optimistically and to teach that humans are naturally good, noble, and honorable. After Smith's death, Brigham Young continued to proclaim this high view of the noble human nature.

In contrast to the long held traditional Mormon view of human nature, neo-absolutists have once again concluded that humans are sinful, lowly, finite, and weak. Citing only the early portions of the canon, they have insisted that the church never taught such a blasphemous, lofty view of humans. They are able to teach that man is a finite, limited creature of an infinite, limitless Creator only by ignoring the history of their church's doctrines and the rational implications of the necessary of human existence.

The Mormon doctrine of the means of salvation reflects a similar tension. Since there were two shifts in the Mormon view of human nature, there were also two shifts in how Mormons perceived the balance between grace and works as the means of salvation. In the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith emphasized the need for humans to receive divine grace in salvation. He taught that works were required for salvation, but

they were clearly secondary in importance to divine grace. When he later elevated the ontological status of humans and raised his estimation of human nobility, the primacy of grace as the means of salvation was replaced by the primacy of works.

Salvation became a natural process that humans could achieve with effort. Each person had the intrinsic ability to climb the ladder of salvation with minimal divine assistance. The height that each person reached on the ladder of salvation would correspond to which of the three heavens that he or she earned. In contrast to this view, neo-absolutists, drawing primarily upon the Book of Mormon, have preached that humans are weak, helpless, and in need of divine rescue. They have returned to Smith's earliest view of humans; therefore, they emphasize grace over works. Consequently, they warn against pride and self-reliance without recognizing that they are in essence repudiating the traditional Mormon reliance upon self-effort.

Joseph Smith believed that Mormonism was rational, logical, and coherent. His confidence in the restoration of the gospel came from his belief that the average person could perceive the truthfulness of his doctrines. His theology was not consistent with the teachings of the Old and New Testaments, but he explained away any conflicts with the Bible by arguing that evil, apostate priests and translators had removed important doctrines from the original text. In addition, he created his Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible so that Mormons could reconcile the Bible with his new teachings.

Traditional Mormons after Smith continued to believe that their doctrines could withstand scientific, philosophical, and logical scrutiny. They succeeded in maintaining intellectual cogency because they reinterpreted the teachings of the Old and New Testaments and the early Mormon canon in light of Smith's new doctrines. For

example, omniscience and omnipotence were redefined in light of the logical limitations on these divine attributes.

Neo-absolutists, who should be commended for their renewed interest in the Old and New Testaments, have mistakenly formulated their doctrines based upon the Bible and Book of Mormon without adjusting these doctrines in light of traditional Mormon metaphysical commitments. They proclaim God as absolute in a universe in which he logically cannot be absolute. They teach that he has exhaustive foreknowledge in a universe in which the future is yet undetermined. God is viewed as all-powerful in a universe full of other entities that are eternally necessary and cannot be controlled.

These neo-absolutists have responded to challenges regarding the coherence of their doctrines by fleeing to an innovative, new LDS approach to faith and reason. Instead of continuing the traditional Mormon commitment to the value of rationality, science, education, and secular knowledge, these theologians have adopted a view which is at best fearful of reason and at worst, irrational. This shift in the Mormon view of faith and reason has created even greater problems for their theological views, and it threatens to undermine the rational appeal of traditional Mormonism.

The Significance of Doctrinal Tensions

The Mormon church claims to possess the fullness of the gospel. It is believed that Joseph Smith restored all of the precious doctrinal truths that had been lost or corrupted during the great apostasy. Implicit in this exclusive claim to truth is the belief that the doctrines of the church are unchanging. Indeed, the doctrines of the church are believed to be the same doctrines taught by Adam. The presence of tensions in some of the central doctrines of the Mormon faith presents a challenge to the truthfulness of the

doctrines themselves. The shifting and competing doctrinal views in the church's history as espoused by its leaders and theologians raise difficult questions that have not yet been answered by Mormon intellectuals. For example, what is *the Mormon* view of omniscience? Is it the exhaustive foreknowledge of God as taught by the Book of Mormon, or is it the limited omniscience championed by President Brigham Young? Which of these two views is *the* restoration of the truth?

Another implication of these tensions is that the church cannot legitimately claim that its views have not been held by other religious and philosophical groups. Contemporary, Mormon neo-absolutist theology resembles evangelical theology just as traditional Mormon theology resembled process philosophy, existentialism, Pelagianism and Manichaeism. If Mormon doctrine was historically consistent, then the church could simply claim that it was the source of all truth and that similarities to other groups merely indicated that the truths of Mormonism had been recognized by others. However, since Mormon doctrines have varied, LDS doctrines are susceptible to sociological analysis. It appears that these doctrines have shifted in response to different cultural and social forces. This further weakens the claim of the church to be *the* restored church.

Further Areas of Study

There are several areas of further study that would be profitable for evangelical scholars. First, continued dialogues with Mormons should be pursued. The contemporary neo-absolutists who have returned to the Mormon canon have also started reading evangelical scholars. It is not uncommon for them to attempt to support their views by

appealing to the writings of evangelicals like C. S. Lewis and John MacArthur.[1] While many of them do not realize the vastness of the divide between their faith and the faith of historical Christianity as represented by these evangelical authors, it is possible for these Mormons to continue to abandon the more heterodox views of the church's past and to move toward more doctrinal orthodoxy. This does not mean that Mormonism can simply shift a few of its views and then become a Christian denomination, but if Mormon leaders continue to embrace views that are more biblical, then the task of evangelizing Mormons will become easier. Dialogues with Mormon theologians provide an excellent avenue for communicating evangelical theology to the LDS church.

The recognition that the LDS church does not have a uniform doctrinal history should lead to clarifications regarding the views of the Mormons involved in any future dialogues. Dialogues between a self-identified traditional Mormons and evangelicals would be particularly insightful. Neo-absolutist scholars like Robinson should be encouraged to continue participating in dialogues as long as they admit that their views are neo-absolutist and not the historical, traditional views of the LDS church. Perhaps evangelicals could participate in a dialogues with both traditional and neo-absolutist Mormon scholars.

Second, the minimalist approach to determining doctrine should be examined in more detail. Because several influential contemporary Mormon scholars are attempting to restrict the sources that can be used for studying LDS doctrines, a broader, more comprehensive, survey of their methodology would be valuable. Comparing their

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[1]Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 66; Robert Millet and Noel B. Reynolds, *Latter-Day Christianity: 10 Basic Issues* (Provo: Foundation for Ancient

approach to previous generations of Mormon theologians would provide a helpful historical critique of their claim to posses the only accurate method of determining doctrine. Such examination of how Mormon doctrine has been formulated in every generation of the church would have obvious benefits for evangelical studies of the LDS church. Third, the theology of early Mormonism has been largely ignored by Mormons and evangelicals. Because of the unwarranted assumption that Joseph Smith taught consistent doctrines over his lifetime, few scholars have specifically studied the early portion of the LDS canon prior to 1834 and Smith's earliest public teachings. Examining the journals of Mormon leaders from this period and analyzing the writings of the critics of the early church would contribute to understanding the specifics of Smith's earliest theology and its changes over time.

Fourth, the neo-absolutist shift away from a view of faith that is grounded in reason has encouraged contemporary Mormons to think about their faith in subjective rather than objective terms. A study of how the Mormon church has appealed to potential converts in every generation would be insightful in answering questions about the contemporary church. For example, does Mormonism hold the same appeal today for intellectuals and trained scientists that it once held? Perhaps the continued growth of the Mormon church today is partially a result of the new, more subjective approach of neo-absolutists. Since most potential converts are not given as many objective arguments and evidences for the LDS faith, it is possible that this approach is being well-received in a postmodern society.

Research and Mormon Studies and Religious Studies Center, 1998), 29; Bruce C. Hafen, "Grace," in *EM*, 2:561.

Fifth, Mormonism has historically drawn part of its identity from its rejection of historical Christian doctrines. Since the time of the first vision, the church has denigrated historical Christian beliefs as products of the great apostasy, although it is not clear that Mormon leaders have always understood the precise nature of the doctrines that they have rejected. For example, the historical Christian doctrine of original sin has been frequently misinterpreted to mean that each person will pay the penalty for Adam's actual transgression. A comprehensive study of how Mormons have misperceived the doctrines of historical Christianity would be advantageous.

Sixth, the Mormon church has taught that the great apostasy began when simple gospel truths were unwisely Hellenized and simple faith was foolishly replaced by creeds and confessions. Many evangelical scholars have defended historical Christianity against this charge made by Mormons and other religious groups, however, little attention has been paid to the similarities between Greek philosophy and Mormon doctrine. Some doctrines of traditional Mormonism appear quite Platonic. God was depicted as a demiurge or craftsman working with preexisting materials. The Mormon idea of eternal laws seems similar to the Platonic forms. Mormonism also espouses what appears to be a form of religious naturalism. Like ancient atomism, Mormonism believes that time, space, and elements are eternal. These similarities are significant enough to warrant a comparative study of Mormon doctrines and Hellenistic philosophy.

A Proposal for Future Apologetics

It is important for evangelical scholars to continue studying Mormonism. The rapid growth of the church will continue to affect the lives of evangelical Christians as opportunities to share the gospel with Mormons will only increase over time. It is no

longer necessary to live in the mountainous western states in order to encounter large Mormon communities who are working hard to gain acceptance as a Christian denomination. In addition, the growing Mormon scholarly community inside and outside continues to publish apologetic works intended to promote the spread of the Mormonism.

While it is valuable to compare LDS doctrine to biblical principles in order to demonstrate their incompatibility, it is also possible for evangelicals to critique the Mormon church by formulating arguments from within the Mormon faith. There are tensions in Mormon doctrines that can be used for arguing against the Mormon doctrines themselves and then by extension the church itself. It is possible that Mormon members will be more open to evangelistic discussions of what their church has taught in the past than typical arguments against their unique revelations and their idiosyncratic practices such as baptisms for the dead. For many Mormons who have never heard of the traditional doctrinal views of leaders like Brigham Young, Lorenzo Snow, B.H. Roberts, an introduction to the past beliefs of their church may lead them to question the claim of their church to possess the fullness of the gospel. For example, it is commonly assumed among contemporary Mormons that God has exhaustive foreknowledge. For these members, discovering that Mormon leaders in the past honored God for his role as eternal learner may be perplexing. Similarly, traditional Mormons commonly thought of God as having all power; therefore, learning that traditional Mormons conceived of the possibility that God could lose his status if he broke eternal laws could be troubling for them.

A Call for Doctrinal Teaching

Mormonism presents challenges for evangelicals, but it also presents opportunities. In an age when postmodernism has lead many people in society to oppose the very idea of absolute truth and to adopt different forms of religious pluralism, Mormons still believe in absolute truth. There is an opportunity for evangelical scholars and ministers to teach the doctrines of the faith to evangelical church members who are ordinarily uninterested in doctrine but who suddenly become interested in learning about their own faith when confronted at their doorstep by members of the Mormon faith. In daily life, evangelicals should seek opportunities to present the historical Christian faith to Mormons with the hope that God will call from among them many who will be saved.

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ABSTRACT

UNRESOLVED TENSIONS IN THE MORMON DOCTRINES OF GOD, MAN, AND SALVATION DURING THREE CRITICAL PERIODS OF DEVELOPMENT

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This dissertation argues that there are unresolved doctrinal tensions in several Mormon doctrines. While many Mormon scholars have assumed that the same doctrinal views have been taught since the founding of the church in 1830, the weight of historical evidence argues directly against this assumption and indirectly against the church's claim to have exclusive possession of true doctrines. There have been three periods of doctrinal development in the Mormon church. During the first five years of the church's existence, 1830-1835, Joseph Smith taught the doctrines of early Mormonism. From 1835 until the 1950s, the doctrines of traditional Mormonism were taught. Mormon neo-absolutist, which arose in the 1950s and has sometimes been referred to it as Mormon neo-orthodoxy, has attempted to return to the more absolute, infinite view of God early Mormonism.

Early Mormons taught that God was completely omniscient and omnipotent. There was no knowledge or power that God did not possess. Traditional Mormons redefined God's nature in light of the emerging unique Mormon metaphysics. Since God exists within an environment of intelligences, matter, time, space, and laws, he cannot be

completely omniscient or omnipotent. Mormon neo-absolutist have returned to the early Mormon view that God possesses all knowledge and power without limitations.

Early Mormonism taught that humans are finite, fallen, and sinful creatures who must be saved from condemnation primarily through the means of grace. Traditional Mormons embraced Joseph Smith's later teachings that humans have the same ontological status as God; therefore, they developed a more optimistic view of human nature and the potential for human exaltation to divine status. Humans could be exalted primarily through human effort and assisted only to a lesser degree by the grace of God.

These historical changes in Mormon doctrines have contributed to a shift in the Mormon view of faith and reason. Until the rise of Mormon neo-absolutism, Mormons believed that their faith was rational and reconcilable with science. Because neo-absolutists have not been able to reconcile their views of God with the unique Mormon metaphysics, they have diminished the value of reason, science, and education for faith.

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