

REVISED AND EXPANDED

MORMONISM

101

*Examining the Religion
of the Latter-day Saints*

Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson



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To our children:
Kristen, Kendra, and Jamin McKeever,
and Carissa, Janelle, and Hannah Johnson.

Psalm 127:3 says, “Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward” (ESV). May you always realize the love your dads have for you, but especially the abundant love and mercy of your Father in heaven who gave His Son so that we might experience everlasting life.

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Preface

MORMONESE:

Aaronic priesthood: Originally conferred to Joseph Smith in 1829 by John the Baptist. Qualified males who are 12 years or older can hold this priesthood.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: The official name of the church. We will typically refer to the church as “Mormon” or “LDS” and its followers as “Latter-day Saints” or “Mormons.”

Christianity: One of two possible meanings: the church in New Testament times or the church that was later restored by Mormon Church founder Joseph Smith.

General Authority: One of the top male leaders in Mormonism.

general conference: An assembly of LDS membership held semiannually in Salt Lake City, Utah. General authorities and other leaders give official teachings from the pulpit of the Conference Center, located across the street from Temple Square.

Melchizedek priesthood: Originally conferred to Joseph Smith by the New Testament apostles Peter, James, and John. Qualified males who are 18 years or older can hold this priesthood.

Mormonism: The beliefs and practices as taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

On October 7, 2012, Apostle Robert D. Hales gave a general conference talk titled “Being a More Christian Christian.” After providing general definitions of terms such as the “atonement,” “grace of God,” and “scriptures,” Hales explained, “With these doctrines as the foundation of our faith, can there be any doubt or disputation that we, as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, are Christian?”¹ A

year and a half later, on April 25, 2014, radio/TV political commentator Glenn Beck—a Latter-day Saint—told a Christian college audience, “I share your faith. I am from a different denomination, and a denomination quite honestly that I’m sure can make many people at Liberty feel uncomfortable. I am a Mormon, but I share your faith in the atonement of the Savior Jesus Christ.”²

Are these faithful Latter-day Saints correct? Should Mormonism be viewed as just another Christian denomination? Can it really be said that Mormons and Christians have a “shared faith”? Whenever we go to churches to share our information with Christian congregations, we are typically told by some afterward how they did not know so many differences existed between Mormonism and biblical Christianity. Because it can be so confusing to ascertain the differences between Mormonism and biblical Christianity, we decided to first publish *Mormonism 101* with Baker Books in 2000. Over the years, a number of Christians have told us how this resource helped them to better understand the theology of Mormonism. Others have even shared how the original edition helped them eventually leave the LDS Church and become Christians. Allow us to provide some background information and give you, the reader, a chance to understand our motives and purposes in revising this book.

Testing Everything

Together, the authors have spent a combined total of more than seven decades studying the religion of the Latter-day Saints. Jesus Himself said that the truth will set a person free; in fact, we are commanded to believe in God with our heart, soul, *mind*, and strength (Mark 12:30). In a romantic relationship, it’s natural to want to know as much as possible about the other person before committing to marriage. A person in “love” may be driven by pure emotion and thus overlook warning signs about their friend who lies about past history, has bill collectors at the front door, and won’t allow anyone to look at personal email messages. How many times have we heard those going through divorces say, “If I had only known about . . . before I got married”?

In the same way, the Bible has made it clear how there are many false prophets in the world who dress up as wolves in sheep’s clothing. Those who are emotionally in love may look past the sharp teeth and dog-like

tail poking out from the back of the facade. In matters of eternal consequence, taking someone's word for something as important as spiritual truth can be the most dangerous thing anyone can do. (See Matt. 7:15; 1 John 4:1.) Just as there are a myriad of pyramid schemes put together by shysters intending to separate the gullible from their money, there are also many false prophets promoting illegitimate ways to reach God and gain His approval. Truth seekers have been commanded to be like the Bereans who were considered to be most "noble" in Acts 17:11 because they double-checked the Scriptures to see if Paul, a legitimate apostle of God, was correct.

Instead of merely taking at face value the word of our nice neighbors or the sharply dressed and polite missionaries at the front door, we should "test everything" (1 Thess. 5:21 ESV). Thus, our objective in *Mormonism 101* remains the same as when we first wrote it: to take the authoritative claims of the Mormon leadership and see how they compare with the teaching of the Bible. We will write in as straightforward a fashion as we can while doing our best not to delve into areas that go beyond an overview format.³ All in all, we believe a close examination is the only way to determine whether or not Mormonism is just another form of Christianity.

Just What Is Authoritative?

Although we will provide more detail in chapter 18, it is important at this point to quickly explain our philosophy when it comes to understanding LDS doctrine. According to the LDS leadership, any doctrinal teaching that disagrees with the general authorities should not be considered authoritative. Errors in understanding Mormon doctrine include relying on the words of individual members or following the latest trends coming out of LDS Church–owned Brigham Young University. Although we will quote a number of people who are not or have never been a part of the church's top leadership, we will generally cite official sources that, we are told, can be trusted as being authoritative. As one church magazine explains, LDS doctrine can be found in very specific places:

Teach the doctrine. Approved curriculum materials from the Church, such as scriptures, general conference talks, and manuals, contain doctrine—eternal truths from God.⁴

The first area of authority is the church's unique set of scriptures: the Bible (specifically the King James Version),⁵ the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Together these written books are called the Standard Works. While we personally do not believe the latter three books qualify as scripture, Mormons generally do, and so we will quote often from these sources.

It must be understood that Mormonism is a hierarchal religion, based on the authority that founder Joseph Smith claims to have received from God when he “restored” Christian principles after a 1,700-year apostasy. In Mormonism, this authority comes through the LDS priesthood. There are two divisions of the priesthood: the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods, both of which are held only by males. The Aaronic priesthood is known as the “lesser” priesthood and is made up of deacons (12 years old), teachers (14 years old), priests (16 years old), and bishops (the leader of local bodies of LDS believers). Meanwhile, the Melchizedek priesthood is named after the priest mentioned in Genesis 14 and D&C 107. The offices in this branch are elders, high priests, patriarchs, seventies, and apostles. The senior apostle is also called the president or prophet.

For reference, here are the names of the sixteen presidents/prophets of the church (current at the time of this writing) as well as the years they served as the church's top leader:⁶

1. Joseph Smith (1830–1844)
2. Brigham Young (1847–1877)
3. John Taylor (1880–1887)
4. Wilford Woodruff (1887–1898)
5. Lorenzo Snow (1898–1901)
6. Joseph F. Smith (1901–1918)
7. Heber J. Grant (1918–1945)
8. George Albert Smith (1945–1951)
9. David O. McKay (1951–1970)
10. Joseph Fielding Smith (1970–1972)
11. Harold B. Lee (1972–1973)
12. Spencer W. Kimball (1973–1985)
13. Ezra Taft Benson (1985–1994)
14. Howard W. Hunter (1994–1995)
15. Gordon B. Hinckley (1995–2008)
16. Thomas S. Monson (2008–)

The president has two counselors; together these three men are called the First Presidency. The First Presidency, the twelve apostles, and a group of men known as the Seventies are called general authorities. When these leaders speak—whether through official declarations, church handbooks, or at the biannual general conferences—members are told to carefully consider their teachings as authoritative and trustworthy. In the October 2012 *Ensign* magazine, the administrative manual *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* is quoted as saying:

Teachers and leaders use the scriptures, the teachings of latter-day prophets, and approved curriculum materials to teach and testify of the doctrines of the gospel. Approved curriculum materials for each class or quorum are listed in the current Instructions for Curriculum. As needed, teachers and leaders supplement curriculum materials with Church magazines, particularly the general conference issues of the *Ensign*.⁷

Just because a past leader has spoken authoritatively on a topic does not necessarily mean that particular teaching is taught today. For example, President Brigham Young taught that Adam was God and the “only God with whom we have to do” in an 1852 general conference message;⁸ this “Adam-God” teaching was later abandoned after Young’s death in 1877. Mormonism is a dynamic religion that has undergone a number of theological changes over the years. At the same time, the leadership gives no wiggle room when it comes to blatantly disagreeing with a position contrary to *current* LDS teaching. If there is a public dispute on doctrine, the dissenting members—not the leaders—are the ones who are corrected or even disciplined, which could include disfellowshipping or excommunication. Thus, when the current LDS leadership speaks, it is not considered to be just their mere “opinions” but rather imperatives that the membership is mandated to follow, regardless of how this may contradict the personal convictions or revelations of any member.

When *Mormonism 101* was originally published, some Latter-day Saints complained that we were creating our own version of Mormon doctrine by taking LDS teachings out of context. The claim is that we were setting up the informal logical fallacy known as a “straw man argument,” just as what was described in this LDS Church resource:

A common tactic used by those who are trying to destroy faith is called a “straw man” argument. This is done by setting up a false image—a straw man—of the

truth and then attacking the false image in order to convince others the true image is false. A simple example of this is a child accusing parents who won't let him play until he gets his work done of not wanting him to have any fun. This is faulty reasoning, but it is often used to deceive others. Sometimes others claim that Latter-day Saints believe something that we don't believe. They claim that the false belief is false and then show that it is false. It has nothing to do with what we really believe but is an attempt to make us seem to be in error.⁹

No matter how we put it, some proponents of Mormonism will continue to make this accusation about our reporting and analysis. As we have said, we are not as interested in what an individual Latter-day Saint believes as much as what the church leadership is teaching. Thus, we have replaced a number of older quotes from the original edition of our book with more up-to-date resources; whenever possible, we will try to provide material from leaders and sources emanating from LDS Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. We have scoured the dozens of current LDS Church writings and have read a great number of conference talks, using these in a liberal fashion as support for what we say Mormonism is teaching.

In fact, some readers may feel that we “over quote” the leaders and manuals, but we will do this on purpose at times, just to make it clear that what we are saying really *is* current LDS doctrine and not just our personal misunderstanding of Mormonism. Not everyone will agree with our conclusions, but we want the reader to know that our goal is to be accurate in our description of LDS doctrine. Mormons are free to believe whatever they would like, even if those beliefs disagree with the teachings of current LDS leadership in their speeches and writings.

Every reader approaches the table with rose-colored glasses, or presuppositions, just as we have our own. When we present the Christian position, you should know that we are Christians (Protestant-based) who hold to conservative biblical beliefs. Our doctrines may differ from those coming from Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or mainstream Protestant backgrounds. All in all, we do our best to hold to the Bible as our authoritative guide, believing that true worship of God is of the utmost importance.

Is This Book “Anti-Mormon”?

In answering the question “Why does Mormonism arouse such animosity among so many?” Joseph Fielding McConkie writes: “If Mormonism

were not true, it could be ignored. The fact that Satan and his cohorts cannot leave it alone is an evidence of its truthfulness.”¹⁰ For those who will want to disregard what we have to say and even label this book as “anti-Mormon”—a term we dislike because “Mormon” is a common nickname for a Latter-day Saint—please understand that we love the Mormon people. This is the reason why we even moved our families from California to Utah. It is true that we are against *Mormonism* because we believe this religious system robs people of the ability to truly have a relationship with the God of this universe, but please don’t doubt our sincerity and concern for civil dialogue and mutual respect for Latter-day Saints.

In fact, we agree with President Brigham Young when he said,

Be willing to receive the truth, let it come from whom it may; no difference, not a particle. Just as soon receive the Gospel from Joseph Smith as from Peter, who lived in the days of Jesus. Receive it from one man as soon as another. If God has called an individual and sent him to preach the Gospel that is enough for me to know; it is no matter who it is, all I want is to know the truth.¹¹

And we are in line with President John Taylor when he taught,

If any person in the religious world, or the political world, or the scientific world, will present to me a principle that is true, I am prepared to receive it, no matter where it comes from.¹²

All in all, we will do our best to be respectful with our approach. Know that we don’t hold any animosity toward Latter-day Saints, many of whom we call family, friends, and neighbors. Be assured that we are moved with the same compassion felt by the LDS missionaries and lay members who attempt to defend what they believe to be true. While the facts as presented in this book may be ignored by certain readers who would question our motives, we echo the apostle Paul when he addressed the church of Galatia: “Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?” (Gal. 4:16). This book is the result of our concern for those who belong to the LDS faith as well as for those Christians who want to better engage Latter-day Saints in healthy dialogue.

We have revised the format of this book and included several new features. At the beginning of each chapter, we provide common LDS vocabulary words and their basic meanings in what we call “Mormonese.”

Discussion questions are provided at the end of each chapter, which can be helpful in a group format.¹³ And to put a close to the chapter, we include a “Final Thought” paragraph. The chapters do not need to be read in chronological order; we have written this book so that each chapter stands on its own. Our goal is to lay out the differences for the layperson in a “101” introductory way, regardless of the reader’s previous knowledge of the Mormon religion.

For further information about Mormonism, we direct you to our website, www.mrm.org. This site contains many articles, videos, and podcasts that can help you better understand the differences between Mormonism and Christianity. We invite your comments and questions.

For more information about the differences between Mormonism and Christianity or to receive our free newsletter, *Mormonism Researched*, please write us!

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To God be the glory!

Other books by the authors:

(McKeever and Johnson). *Answering Mormons’ Questions: Ready Responses for Inquiring Latter-day Saints*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2013.

(McKeever). *In Their Own Words: A Collection of Mormon Quotations*. Kearney, Nebraska: Morris Publishing, 2010.

Latter-day Saint Abbreviations

D&C Doctrine and Covenants

BOM Book of Mormon

LDS The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS Church)

PoGP Pearl of Great Price

Notes

1. *Ensign* (November 2012): 90. *Ensign* is a monthly magazine published by the LDS Church since 1971 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).

2. Beck spoke at the final convocation of the school year at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA. See Eric Johnson, “What Glenn Beck didn’t explain at last month’s convocation talk at Liberty University,” Mormonism Research Ministry, <http://www.mrm.org/glenn-beck-liberty>.

3. One critic of our original book claimed that we were trying to *hide* information in the endnotes. Please know, however, that not putting the information in at all would be a more correct description of *hiding* information. Additional points and a slightly deeper analysis will be placed in the endnotes to maintain an introductory level throughout the main text. More help can be found in another book we wrote titled *Answering Mormons’ Questions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), which discusses specific issues talked about in this book. We will refer to *Answering Mormons’ Questions* often because its chapters expound further on many topics covered here.

4. *Ensign* (July 2014): 10. Boldface in original.

5. While the King James Version is officially used by Latter-day Saints, we will often quote the English Standard Version for easier readability. We will indicate these occasions by listing ESV at the end of the citation. Please know that a Bible translation is nothing more than taking the words from the original biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek) and putting them into comparable words (in English). If you are a Latter-day Saint, please don’t let our quotations from a modern translation stop you from utilizing the King James Version—or even Joseph Smith’s Inspired Version for that matter.

6. When the current president dies, the apostle with the most seniority becomes the new president.

7. *Ensign* (October 2012): 11. This is section 5.5.4 in the church handbook.

8. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, ed. George D. Watt (Liverpool, England: F. D. Richards, 1854–86), 1:51.

9. *Book of Mormon Student Manual: Religion 121–122* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 216. For a list of fifteen common logical fallacies, see the Appendix.

10. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1998), 54–56.

11. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 16. This was the first LDS Church manual of a series featuring different LDS presidents over the next two decades. In 2015, the church covered the teachings of Ezra Taft Benson. During these two decades, members studied two chapters of that year’s book each month, meeting twice a month on Sundays for group studies. We will feature these volumes throughout our book, as the Latter-day Saint ought to be very familiar with the manuals.

12. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: John Taylor* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 215.

13. A leader’s guide to *Mormonism 101* is available at www.mrm.org/mormonism-101-study-guide.

Introduction

A Short History

The story of Mormonism begins on December 23, 1805, when Joseph Smith was born to a farming couple in Sharon, Vermont. Like many other families searching for a better life, the Smiths moved west, settling down thirty miles east of Rochester, New York, in a town called Palmyra. The story of Mormonism really takes shape in Palmyra. Today Smith's faithful followers revere him as a latter-day prophet, chosen by the Almighty God to "restore" true Christianity after a seventeen-century absence from the earth. To many non-Mormons, he is a manipulator who deceived his followers and introduced teachings that hardly reflect the Christian faith.

Though there have been several versions of what Joseph Smith experienced in those early years, most Mormons are familiar with an account written by Smith in 1838. It tells of a fourteen-year-old Smith who wanted to know which of all the churches was true. He said that a passage from the New Testament book of James led him to a grove of trees near his family's farm where he was visited by two personages, God the Father and Jesus Christ. The young Smith claimed these personages told him that all of the Christian churches were wrong, their creeds were an abomination, and their leaders were all corrupt.

As expected, this message of a complete apostasy of the Christian faith did not sit well with the local clergy. Many Christians immediately cast a suspicious eye on the young man who claimed to have had an audience

with God and lived to tell about it. Bear in mind that the United States was at that time experiencing the effects of the Second Great Awakening. Revivals were commonplace. For Smith to claim that God did not approve of what many Christians thought was a great work of the Holy Spirit was unthinkable and even blasphemous. Undaunted, Smith continued to insist that his vision was true.

In 1823, while Smith prayed in his bedroom, he claimed that he received another heavenly visit, this time by an angel who introduced himself as Moroni. During his earthly life, Moroni was a great warrior who lived among an ancient people called Nephites. He was a descendant of a Jewish family who escaped the capture of Jerusalem by sailing across the ocean to the Western Hemisphere about six hundred years before the birth of Christ. It was allegedly this same Moroni who, prior to his death, buried a set of gold plates on which was inscribed a record of the ancient American people. Smith was chosen to retrieve that record, but it was several years before he was given permission by the angel to do so. Before leaving, Moroni also warned Smith that he should show the plates to only a select few. Eventually a total of eleven men were chosen to “see” the gold plates, although some later confessed that they saw them only with the eye of faith.

The angel is said to have appeared to Smith on several other occasions until the time finally came to retrieve the Nephite record. On September 22, 1827, Joseph Smith, now almost twenty-two years old, was entrusted with the gold plates and commenced the translation of the “Reformed Egyptian” characters into English.

In April 1829 Smith was joined by Oliver Cowdery, a third cousin of Joseph’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith. Cowdery, a schoolteacher by profession, became Smith’s principal scribe. Both Cowdery and Smith claimed to have been visited by John the Baptist while praying in the woods near the Susquehanna River in May of 1829. It was here that both men were ordained and received the Aaronic priesthood, known in Mormonism as the lesser priesthood. At a later point in time the two men were ordained to the Melchizedek priesthood, or greater priesthood, by the biblical apostles Peter, James, and John. The exact date of this event is a matter of controversy.

On April 6, 1830, Joseph Smith founded the “Church of Christ” (not affiliated with the Church of Christ denomination) with five of his close followers. By the end of the year, this number grew to almost three hundred members. Smith’s prophetic inclinations compelled him to move his church to several locations. In August of 1831, a small group of Latter-day

Saints moved into an area twelve miles west of Independence, Missouri. Smith prophesied that it was in this area where the New Jerusalem would be built. On August 3 Smith laid a cornerstone for a temple, and even though he predicted that this location would become a gathering place where the Saints would wait for the millennial reign of Jesus Christ, his prophecy would never be fulfilled. The great influx of Mormon settlers into the area, coupled with Smith's predictions that "Zion" would be established and the time of the "Gentiles" would soon come to an end, led to many hard feelings between the Mormons and the non-LDS Missourians.¹ The all-important gathering of the Saints was short-lived. Within three years the Saints were forced to leave Independence, and the temple never became a reality.

The Saints moved north and settled for a while in an area called Far West, Missouri. Smith again predicted that a temple would be built, but eventually the Saints were forced to leave this place as well. Hostilities between the Mormons and their Missouri counterparts erupted in such violence that both sides came to an impasse. In October 1838 Mormons attacked a group of Missouri militiamen who were holding three LDS men prisoner. This led to the slaughter of seventeen Latter-day Saints at Haun's Mill one week later. Joseph Smith was arrested and charged with treason. He spent several months in the dungeon of the Liberty Jail until he was allowed to escape in April of 1839.

In the meantime, the Saints had moved to a swampy area on the banks of the Mississippi River known as Commerce, Illinois. Enduring sickness and disease, they were successful in turning the once uninhabitable land into a city that attracted followers from all areas. Commerce later became the city of Nauvoo; within a short period of time, it rivaled Chicago in size. But even here, trouble did not elude Smith and his followers.

The rapid influx of Latter-day Saints to Nauvoo once again made the church both an economic and political threat in the eyes of the local residents. Joseph Smith was elected mayor, and several of his close associates eventually came to hold a number of political offices as well. Compounding the problem was the increasing number of dissidents who had grown to distrust the Mormon prophet. Many of these men were once close advisors to Smith, and some were successful businessmen in Nauvoo. Accusations between Smith and his detractors fueled the tension. Eventually some of the dissidents printed a newspaper called the *Nauvoo Expositor*. As its name implied, the purpose of the paper was to expose Joseph Smith as a false prophet who had exceeded his authority as mayor and was involved

with secretly practicing “spiritual wifery,” also called plural marriage or polygamy.

The Nauvoo city council quickly reacted by declaring the *Expositor* a nuisance. Under the orders of Joseph Smith, the city marshal destroyed the offending publication and the printing press as well. Of course, this only infuriated Smith’s enemies all the more. Negative sentiment increased immediately in Nauvoo and its neighboring communities. Amid threats of violence against himself and his followers, Smith placed Nauvoo under martial law on June 18, 1844. In doing so, he mobilized the Nauvoo Legion, an army of several thousand men who had sworn to protect Smith to the death.

When news reached Illinois governor Thomas Ford, he intervened and suggested that Smith order his army to back down. He then ordered Smith to turn himself in to the authorities in nearby Carthage in the hope of settling the many differences that had escalated over the past several days. On June 25 Smith traveled to Carthage. However, he was once again arrested and incarcerated in the “debtor’s cell” at Carthage Jail. With him were his brother Hyrum, John Taylor, and Willard Richards.

On June 26 the Illinois governor went to Smith’s cell for a personal interview. After the meeting, Governor Ford traveled to Nauvoo but left a small contingency of guards known as Carthage Greys, many of whom were hardly sympathetic to the Mormon prophet. In the late afternoon of the next day, a mob attacked the jail, rushing up the stairs to the cell that housed Smith and his colleagues. Leaning against the door, the incarcerated men attempted to defend themselves. Smith, who was armed with a pistol smuggled to him by one of his visitors, opened fire on the attackers. His six-shot pistol² discharged only three times, but according to eyewitness John Taylor, all three bullets hit their mark. Still, there was no way that the small group of men could overpower the mob. A musket ball penetrated the cell’s wooden door and hit Hyrum in the face. He fell back, with his last words allegedly being “I am a dead man.” John Taylor was shot several times but was able to find cover under the bed. According to the official account, Smith then leapt toward the window of the cell and cried out, “Oh Lord, my God.” Some believe he was attempting to give the Masonic signal of distress, but his unfinished cry went unheeded. As he reached the window, he was shot several times and fell two stories to the ground below. The mob then finished the deed by shooting Smith one more time. Only Willard Richards escaped without injury. Today Latter-day Saints hail Smith as a martyr, “a lamb led to the slaughter.”³

None of those involved in the murders were found guilty. For a time, there was an uneasy peace between the Mormons and their non-Mormon neighbors. The problem now facing the Saints was finding a successor to Smith. It came down to two men: Sidney Rigdon and Brigham Young. Rigdon had been a part of the Mormon movement almost from the beginning. He was a former Church of Christ minister who once espoused the teachings of Alexander Campbell. In addition, he was a gifted orator who, after joining the fledgling church in the early 1830s, quickly became the right-hand man of Joseph Smith. Rigdon often was unwilling to avoid controversy, a trait that caused him conflict with both Smith and his colleagues on more than one occasion.

Standing in the way of Rigdon was Brigham Young, a convert to the church in 1832. Young did not see Rigdon's close association with Smith a reason for his becoming Smith's successor. Young claimed that the authority to choose a new prophet lay with the Council of the Twelve. It was decided that both men would have their opportunity to address the Mormon membership. When all was said and done, Young became Mormonism's second prophet, seer, and revelator. Rigdon later fell into obscurity.

The church remained in Nauvoo, and the temple that Smith had begun years earlier was finished and dedicated in April 1846. However, when it seemed apparent that those who were bent on seeing the Saints leave the area would never cease in their efforts, plans were made to move west to



Two pistols were smuggled into the Carthage Jail, one of which was used by Joseph Smith to shoot three people in the gun battle.



The death masks of Joseph (left) and Hyrum Smith (right) are housed in the Church History Museum in Salt Lake City.

avoid further clashes. On February 24, 1846, hundreds of Latter-day Saints left Nauvoo and crossed the frozen Mississippi River into Iowa. By the middle of May, it was estimated that nearly twelve thousand Mormons had fled.⁴

Many Mormons chose to live on Indian land in Iowa in an encampment that would be called Winter Quarters; others traveled to nearby Council Bluffs. Thousands of Latter-day Saints were scattered in Iowa until the spring of 1847, when the first party of emigrants headed toward the Salt Lake Valley. On July 21, 1847, a detachment of Saints led by apostles Orson Pratt and Erastus Snow was the first to cast eyes on Mormonism's new home. Brigham Young, suffering from an attack of "mountain fever," arrived three days later on July 24. By the time Young arrived, Pratt's company was already busy building irrigation ditches.

Salt Lake City became the new headquarters of the LDS Church; though many of the Mormons set up their abode in the Salt Lake Valley, many more began settlements throughout what is today the state of Utah. Young

became the territorial governor in September 1850. Any privacy the Saints once had was soon lost, thanks in large part to the gold rush of 1849 as well as the completion of the transcontinental railroad, both of which brought many non-Mormon “Gentiles” west.

In 1852 Apostle Orson Pratt, under the direction of Brigham Young, proclaimed the doctrine of plural marriage as a belief of the LDS Church. This teaching became so prominent in the Latter-day Saint faith that some leaders even claimed it was necessary for salvation. However, the controversy surrounding this teaching threatened to prevent Utah from achieving statehood in the United States. To alleviate this and other problems, the doctrine was officially abolished in 1890 with what has become known as the Manifesto. But the stigma of polygamy still haunts the Mormon Church today.⁵

Misunderstandings and mistrust plagued the Saints for years following the Mormon emigration to Utah. The most serious conflict took place in 1857 when, unknown to Brigham Young, President James Buchanan had him replaced as territorial governor. Having been led to believe that the Mormons were in a state of rebellion against the United States, President Buchanan sent a contingent of soldiers to ensure that Young would relinquish his position. Apparently the president failed to explain this to Young, who assumed the Mormons were once again going to be forced from their homes. When Captain Stewart Van Vliet entered Salt Lake City to make arrangements for provisions, he was surprised to find that the Mormons were expecting a hostile invasion. Despite denials from Van Vliet that the army had any intention of driving out the Saints, the Mormons continued to prepare their defense. Young devised a strategy that bought the Saints some time. Rather than fight the encroaching army, small units of Mormons delayed their arrival by blocking roads, creating cattle stampedes, and setting fires. These delays prevented the army from arriving in Salt Lake City before winter set in. The tactic worked, and the “Utah War” of 1857 failed to become the potential bloodbath many Mormons feared.

Although tragedy on a military level was diverted, the Utah War did have its casualties. A wagon train of emigrants from Arkansas on their way to California traveled through Utah during this tumultuous time. The Mormons were instructed not to sell supplies to outsiders because of the perceived threat. This circumstance compelled the wagon train to travel south into an area north of St. George, Utah, called the Mountain

Meadows. This treatment served to infuriate the emigrants who began to make their feelings known. Rumors circulated that some of the emigrants had participated in the Missouri persecutions, and it was also rumored that they had the gun that killed Joseph Smith. Soon tensions escalated.

While the Arkansas emigrants camped at the meadows before crossing the desert, local Indians attacked them. This led to a conspiracy between local Mormon leaders and the Indians. As a result, a total of 120 men, women, and children were viciously killed in what has become known as the “Mountain Meadows Massacre.” All of the Mormon participants took an oath of silence, and the Indians were blamed for the atrocity. Although Brigham Young knew the details within days of the incident, no one was held accountable for another twenty years. In 1877 John D. Lee became the lone scapegoat for this event. He was executed by a firing squad as he sat on his coffin.

For many years a small monument marked the grave of several victims of the massacre, but few details were given to explain what exactly happened on that day in 1857. In 1990 a new marker was placed on the site, yet no information of the Mormon involvement in the massacre was added. Finally, in what many hail as an effort of reconciliation, the LDS Church dedicated a new memorial in September 1999 that admitted to Mormon participation in the event. On the 150th anniversary of the event (September 11, 2007), Henry B. Eyring, a member of the First Presidency, gave a talk at the site where he expressed “profound regret” for the “undue and untold suffering experienced by the victims and their relatives.” However, he stopped short of offering the apology that several of the descendants of massacre victims had hoped would be forthcoming. When some erroneously assumed that his “regret” was actually an apology, LDS “Church leaders were adamant that the statement should not be construed as an apology.” Church spokesman Mark Tuttle stated, “We don’t use the word ‘apology.’ We used ‘profound regret.’”⁶

It is doubtful that the struggles of the nineteenth century will ever become a vague memory among Latter-day Saints. The suffering and hardships faced by the early Mormon pioneers will continually be pushed to the forefront by LDS leaders who understand that loyalty to heritage is a very powerful force. It is this legacy that compels many Mormons to remain in the faith, regardless of the myriad doctrinal problems. Still, the doctrinal inconsistencies cannot be overlooked, for those who hope to be true worshipers of God must worship Him in truth (John 4:24).

Notes

1. Mormon apologist David J. Ridges explains, “It should be pointed out that for Latter-day Saints, ‘Gentile’ generally means ‘not Latter-day Saint,’ although the meaning also extends to include ‘not Jewish’ and ‘not Lamanite.’” David J. Ridges, *Mormon Beliefs and Doctrine Made Easier* (Springville, UT: CFI, 2007), 114.

2. For many years this gun has been displayed at the Church History Museum located across the street west of Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah.

3. For more on the topic of Smith’s martyrdom, see chapter 36, “Why would Joseph Smith be willing to die as a martyr if he didn’t believe God spoke to him?” in our book *Answering Mormons’ Questions*.

4. Not all Latter-day Saints ventured west with Brigham Young. Emma Smith, Joseph’s widow, had a strong dislike for Young. She remained behind with her three sons. The oldest, Joseph Smith III, later became president of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), which is today called the Community of Christ, based in Independence, Missouri.

5. While those found practicing plural marriage are promptly excommunicated from today’s LDS Church, we have found that many who have a very limited understanding of Mormonism may think that Mormon men still have more than one living wife. For more information on the subject of plural marriage, see the last part of chapter 16 in this book as well as chapter 6, “Why do so many equate our church to splinter groups when we no longer practice polygamy?” in our book *Answering Mormons’ Questions*.

6. Paul Foy, “Mormon Church Regrets 1857 Massacre,” September 11, 2007, http://www.foxnews.com/printer_friendly_wires/2007Sep11/0,4675,PioneerMassacre,00.html.

Examining the LDS Concept of God

1 | God the Father

Some who write anti-Mormon pamphlets insist that the Latter-day Saint concept of Deity is contrary to what is recognized as traditional Christian doctrine. In this they are quite correct.

William O. Nelson, director of the LDS Church's
Melchizedek priesthood department¹

MORMONESE:

child of God: A spirit born in the preexistence as the offspring of Heavenly Father and one of his heavenly wives.

creeds: Statements of summary belief put together by early Christians, including the Apostles' Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the Nicene Creed, all of which are rejected in Mormonism.

First Vision: Joseph Smith claimed that God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him in 1820. He said that they told him how all the Christian churches were not true.

God the Father: Also known as Elohim or Heavenly Father. Has a physical body and is worshiped by Latter-day Saints.

Godhead: Three gods—God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost—who, while distinct in being, are one in purpose.

godhood: Humans have the potential to eventually become like God the Father.

gospel: All doctrines, principles, laws, ordinances, and covenants necessary for a Mormon to receive godhood.

Heavenly Mother: While not mentioned in LDS scripture, the implicit doctrine that God the Father needed a wife (and ultimately, wives) to produce spirit children in the preexistence. She is not to be worshiped nor prayed to.

Holy Ghost: Third member of the Godhead, sometimes described as the Holy Spirit while at other times described as distinct from the Holy Spirit.

intelligences: This can refer to either the preexistent spirit offspring of God or individual eternal entities that existed before the preexistence. At one time every person existed in this state.

Inspired Version of the Bible: Also known as the Joseph Smith Translation. Joseph Smith made “corrections” to the King James Bible and claimed to finish this work on July 2, 1833.

mortality: The “second estate,” life on earth, where people have freedom to determine whether or not to follow God.

preexistence/premortality: The “first estate” where the spirit offspring of God existed prior to their mortal existence on earth.

restoration: Since Christianity ceased to exist soon after the deaths of the biblical apostles, God returned the authority of the true church through Joseph Smith in 1830.

Few would debate that the concept of God is paramount in any belief system. If two people hope to consider themselves of the same faith, they need to agree on their definition of the Almighty God. If they cannot agree on this vital point, they would be deceiving themselves and others to say that their faiths are the same.

Many laypeople in the Mormon Church insist that the God they worship is the same God worshiped by millions of Christians throughout the world. The problem with this assumption is that it does not concur with many statements made by the LDS leadership. Speaking about God the Father, the *Gospel Principles* church manual reports, “His eternal spirit is housed in a tangible body of flesh and bones (see D&C 130:22). God’s body, however, is perfected and glorified, with a glory beyond all description.”² Besides quoting anthropomorphic passages (i.e., God taking on human characteristics, such as actions, emotions, and physical features), the Mormon cannot point to any biblical passages to support the case that God the Father has a physical body. Quoting Stephen E. Robinson, BYU professor Charles R. Harrell says “that the doctrine of the corporeality of the Father is not explicitly taught in the Bible.”³

According to LDS leaders, this version of God is not understood by those outside the LDS Church. Apostle Quentin L. Cook wrote, “Among the first principles lost in the Apostasy was an understanding of God the Father.”⁴ The misunderstanding of God extends to anyone outside the

LDS Church today. President Gordon B. Hinckley taught, “Other people do not understand the true nature of God. They are still bound by the old Nicene Creed of the fourth century, which I cannot understand. But we have a perfect knowledge of the nature of God that has come through the First Vision of the Prophet Joseph.”⁵

Mormon leaders falsely assume that a nonhuman God cannot be a personal God. Yet numerous biblical passages definitively prove how God desires to have an intimate relationship with humankind. In fact He gave His only Son to make it possible! Consider, for instance, 1 Peter 5:7, where Christian believers are told to cast all their cares on God. Why? Because He is a personal God who cares for His creation. To those who have sinned, God lovingly calls them to “reason together” with Him (Isa. 1:18).

When Christians say that God is “incomprehensible,” they do not mean that God is an irrational or confusing being. It is difficult, if not impossible, for finite humans to fully understand the infinite God. While describing the greatness of God in 1 Timothy 6:16, Paul explained that God dwells in unapproachable light. Because of our limitations, we can never expect to fully comprehend every aspect of the Creator. As Isaiah 55:8 says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.”

Christian thinker A. W. Tozer wrote,

A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to the temple; where it is inadequate or out of plumb the whole structure must sooner or later collapse. I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God. . . . Wrong ideas about God are not only the fountain from which the polluted waters of idolatry flow; they are themselves idolatrous. The idolater simply imagines things about God and acts as if they were true.⁶

Tozer added,

When we try to imagine what God is like we must out of necessity use that-which-is-not-God as the raw material for our minds to work on; hence, whatever we visualize God to be, He is not, for we have constructed our image out of that which He has made and what He has made is not God. If

we insist upon trying to imagine Him, we end with an idol, made not with hands but with thoughts; and an idol of the mind is as offensive to God as an idol of the hand.⁷

When we compare the attributes of the God of the Bible to the attributes that LDS leaders have applied to their God, it is apparent that major differences do exist.

Not Eternally God

Was God always God? Not according to Mormonism. A church manual explains, “It will help us to remember that our Father in Heaven was once a man who lived on an earth, the same as we do. He became our Father in Heaven by overcoming problems, just as we have to do on this earth.”⁸

The teaching that God was once a man can be found in a late sermon by Joseph Smith. In 1844 a Mormon elder by the name of King Follett was “crushed in a well by the falling of a tub of rock.” At Follett’s funeral Smith delivered a sermon that has come to be known as the King Follett discourse. It was later reprinted in its entirety in the May 1971 edition of the official LDS magazine *Ensign*. According to Smith,

It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God. . . . He was once a man like us; . . . God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith [1976], 345–46).⁹

In a 1945 priesthood study course published by the church, Seventy Milton R. Hunter wrote,

In June of 1840, Lorenzo Snow formulated the following famous couplet: “As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become.” This doctrine, when first announced by the Prophet and later restated by Elder Snow, was astounding to Christendom, since the teachers as well as the laity had long ago ceased to regard man as a being of such magnitude. Even today it is still a doctrine understood primarily by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹⁰

One manual explains:

This is a doctrine which delighted President Snow, as it does all of us. Early in his ministry he received by direct, personal revelation the knowledge that (in the Prophet Joseph Smith's language), "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens," and that men "have got to learn how to be Gods . . . the same as all Gods have done before. . . ." [*Teachings*, pp. 345–46.] After this doctrine had been taught by the Prophet, President Snow felt free to teach it also, and he summarized it in one of the best known couplets in the Church in these words: "As man now is, God once was; As God now is, man may be."¹¹

Snow's couplet has been repeated many times by LDS leaders and church publications as being true.¹²

God the Father lived on a world similar to this earth. Mormon Apostle Orson Pratt taught:

We were begotten by our Father in heaven; the person of Father in Heaven was begotten on a previous heavenly world by His Father; and again, He was begotten by a still more ancient Father; and so on, from generation to generation.¹³

Apostle Orson Hyde said:

Remember that God, our heavenly Father, was perhaps once a child, and mortal like we ourselves, and rose step by step in the scale of progress, in the school of advancement; has moved forward and overcome, until He has arrived at the point where He now is.¹⁴

This idea that God was once a human who became God at a certain point in time is foreign to biblical Christianity. Logic would demand that if the Mormon God had to *attain* the position he now holds, then he could not be the eternal God of the Bible. Meanwhile, Mormonism teaches that men and women were created to become gods and goddesses in the next life. A church reference manual explains, "You are a literal child of God, spiritually begotten in the premortal life. As His child, you can be assured that you have divine, eternal potential and that He will help you in your sincere efforts to reach that potential."¹⁵ Another manual reports, "God's work and glory is to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of His children."¹⁶

According to the *Ensign* magazine:

The stunning truth, lost to humankind before the Restoration, is that each of us is a god in embryo. We may become as our heavenly parents. We, too, in exalted families, may one day preside in our own realms, under him who is our God and our Father forever.¹⁷

Despite the limitations that Mormon leaders place on God, the Bible is very clear that God has neither beginning nor end. Words such as *eternal* and *everlasting* emphasize the fact that God's perfection transcends time. He always was God and always will be God. Consider the following verses:

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. (Ps. 90:2)

Thy throne is established of old: thou art from everlasting. (Ps. 93:2)

Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? (Isa. 40:28)

For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy. (Isa. 57:15)

Philosopher and mathematician William Dembski, a committed Christian, writes,

God did not depend on any preexisting entity separate from God—no preexisting stuff, no autonomous principles, no other gods. Indeed, for God to have employed such an entity in the primal act of creation would have meant that something outside of God had a separate existence from God. Orthodox Christian theology, by contrast, affirms that there is but one God, that this God is the source of all being, and that nothing exists self-sufficiently apart from this God.¹⁸

Not Immutable

According to LDS teaching, God gradually progressed to the position and power he now holds. President Brigham Young explained, "The doctrine that God was once a man and has progressed to become God is unique to this Church. How do you feel, knowing that God, through His own

experience, ‘knows all that we know regarding the toils [and] sufferings’ of mortality?”¹⁹

If God the Father once lived as man on another world and had a God before Him, then we must wonder whether or not He sinned during His mortality. Acknowledging that some Mormons believe God was a sinner, one LDS apologetic website explains, “Does it really matter all that much? Whether it is true or it is not, does anything change? Knowing details of God’s previous mortality doesn’t change the fact that our Heavenly Father is still our Heavenly Father, who loves us very much.”²⁰

Yes, this issue really does matter! Biblically speaking, God’s perfection means that He never needs to change in a metaphysical or moral sense. As His nature remains constant, so, too, His desires and purposes never change. As the psalmist correctly pointed out in Psalm 102:27, “But thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end.” In an expression that could not be made any clearer, Malachi 3:6 says, “For I am the LORD, I change not.” And James 1:17 declares that there is no variation or “shadow of turning” when it comes to the Father of lights.

There is no fluctuation in God’s divine character. The perfect God of the Bible has no need to change. If He were to better Himself, it would show that He *was* not perfect. Should He make Himself worse, it would show that He *is* not perfect. In the words of Christian theologian Herman Bavinck, “Whatever changes ceases to be what it was.”²¹ The idea that God is immutable should bring comfort to His people, since they can be assured that God would never change anything affecting their salvation. While humanity struggles with sin and thus alters its relationship with God, it is not God who wavers, because He is always constant.

Some have asked why the Bible speaks of God as “repenting.” It would seem that if God was the one who declared all things to happen in precise order, nothing could possibly catch Him unawares. Was God really unsure if Adam and Eve would sin and produce some of the most evil offspring imaginable? Or was God surprised when the wicked citizens of Nineveh repented in the Old Testament book of Jonah, thus “sidetracking” God’s impending judgment? Not at all. The Bible often uses anthropomorphic language—words describing God in human terms.

Since it is God who declares the end from the beginning, it would be inconceivable to think that God could change His mind as humans do. We change our minds as a result of previously unavailable information. God, however, knows all things. There is nothing new for Him to evaluate.

When God chose not to bring judgment on Nineveh, it was not because He literally “changed his mind.” Quite the contrary, His decision to spare the city was actually an example of His immutability, or His constant nature. Jonah recognized this, for in his anger he confirmed that God was gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness (Jonah 4:1–2). Jonah understood why God would not destroy the city. It was based on the fact that God consistently forgives those who are repentant. Jeremiah 18:7–10 sheds light on this issue:

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. (ESV)

What appears to be a case of God changing His mind is really nothing more than God’s unchangeable response to people changing *their* minds. Should Mormons fail to see this attribute as defined in the Bible, they would do well to read Moroni 8:18 in the Book of Mormon. It says, “For I know that God is not a partial God, neither a changeable being; but he is unchangeable from all eternity to all eternity.” Mormon 9:19 strongly adds these words:

And if there were miracles wrought then, why has God ceased to be a God of miracles and yet be an unchangeable Being? And behold, I say unto you he changeth not; if so he would cease to be God; and he ceaseth not to be God, and is a God of miracles.

According to Mosiah 3:5 and Moroni 7:22, God is God “from all eternity to all eternity” and from “everlasting to everlasting.” Third Nephi 24:6 and Mormon 9:9–10 add that He does not vary or change. To explain how LDS apologists try to minimize these verses, BYU professor Charles R. Harrell writes,

When Mormons today read passages proclaiming that God is “from everlasting to everlasting” (Moro. 7:22), one interpretation given is that God had an eternal existence as an intelligence and eventually became a human being and then a God. But this doesn’t really address the several scriptures cited above that suggest that God was *God* from all eternity. Some LDS doctrinal

expositors have expressed the view that God has been eternally God only in a relative sense or from our finite point of view. Others explain that, in the Bible, eternity means “an age” which has a beginning and an end, so he is God from an age past to an age to come. Eternity has also been interpreted to mean “that existence gained by exalted beings,” rather than duration of existence.²²

After providing a few more LDS explanations, Harrell continues, “One wonders if any of these explanations was necessary for the original audience of the scriptures who seemed to be comfortable taking the eternality of God at face value.”²³ He’s exactly right.

Not Self-Existent

Unique to Mormonism is the idea that all humans (and gods) once existed as undeveloped “intelligences.” By following laws and principles that Mormons believe are eternal, each intelligence progresses until godhood becomes possible. Joseph Smith taught that his God, by obedience to these eternal laws, now 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.”²⁴ However, Mormonism does not trace this long procession of deities to one specific first cause. Instead, it is assumed that a myriad of gods preceded the LDS God and that he himself is the offspring of one of these gods.

On this subject Brigham Young taught the following:

How many Gods there are, I do not know. But there never was a time when there were not Gods and worlds, and when men were not passing through the same ordeals that we are now passing through. That course has been from all eternity, and it is and will be to all eternity.²⁵

Mormonism also has its share of mysteries. For example, Young admitted that trying to understand how the first God came to be God was difficult.

Many have tried to penetrate to the First Cause of all things; but it would be as easy for an ant to number the grains of sand on the earth. It is not for man, with his limited intelligence, to grasp eternity in his comprehension. . . . It would be as easy for a gnat to trace the history of man back to his origin as for man to fathom the First Cause of all things, lift the veil of

eternity, and reveal the mysteries that have been sought after by philosophers from the beginning.²⁶

While it is admittedly difficult to comprehend the existence of a God who has always existed, it is neither implausible nor unbiblical. On the other hand, Mormonism's view of God is both implausible and unbiblical. It is also illogical since it raises several questions as to how the first intelligence was able to elevate himself to the position of deity. What allowed for this first intelligence to be first out of the "starting gate" toward godhood? How was he able to comply with the many requirements necessary to reach such a position? Following this logic, other questions are raised:

- As mentioned earlier, the Mormon God is subject to laws that are alleged to be eternal. How can this be if there is no such thing as an eternal lawgiver in Mormonism?
- If becoming a human and living in a sin-tainted world is necessary for godhood, how did the first God get his human body? Who made the world that he supposedly lived on?
- If the purpose of going through mortality is to overcome sin, who was it that defined sin? How could this first God overcome something that could not have been defined?

Mormonism's lack of a first cause is what makes understanding this LDS doctrine problematic. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet claim that "God is the giver of the law, the author and maker of it."²⁷ This statement could only make sense if the God of Mormonism was eternally God. Since he was not, he cannot be credited with making laws that are eternal.

The Bible teaches that God is *the* First Cause. He is self-existent, or *uncaused*, and therefore not dependent on anything for His existence. God is life, and it is because of Him that we have life. All creation exists due to the purpose and will of God Himself. To assume that there were other gods before the God of the Bible refutes Isaiah 43:10, which declares, "I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me." When God said in Isaiah 48:12, "Hearken unto me, O Jacob and Israel, my called; I am he; I am the first, I also am the last," He allowed no room for any assumption that He came along later in the creation process.

Not Transcendent

God is distinct from His creation and the universe. When discussing the transcendence of God, we need to consider a number of aspects. Not only is the “person” of God unlike human beings, but His moral character is also unique. He is infinitely exalted above all that He has ever created. Mormon leaders have not hidden the fact that they believe God is an exalted human being. Joseph Smith said, “That which is without body or parts is nothing. There is no God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones.”²⁸ A student manual explains,

Modern revelation declares that Heavenly Father “has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s” (D&C 130:22). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints accepts Genesis 1:26 and Moses 2:26 literally. As children of our Heavenly Father, our physical bodies and our spirit bodies are in His image.²⁹

The God of the Bible loathes the idea of being likened to His creation. In Psalm 50:21 He chided His people for trying to make such a comparison when He declared, “These things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you” (ESV). Numbers 23:19a says, “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind” (ESV). And in Romans 1:22–23, Paul said only fools attempt to change the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man. While pagan religions tend to make their gods in the fashion of some created thing, the God of the Bible will have none of it. In His prohibition of graven images, God eliminated the possibility of imagining a form that they might suppose represented the true God. Whereas Joseph Smith claimed that He physically saw God, John 1:18 reports, “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (ESV).³⁰

Some have used the anthropomorphic language of the Bible to assume that God does in fact inhabit a body similar to ours. However, verses that speak of God having arms (Deut. 33:27), hands (2 Chron. 6:4), feet (Ps. 18:9), ears (2 Sam. 22:7), and so on, are never meant to be taken any more literally than those passages that speak of God having wings (Ps. 17:8) or the ability to breathe smoke out of His nostrils and fire from His mouth (2 Sam. 22:9).³¹

Not Omnipotent

According to Apostle Orson Hyde:

There are Lords many, and Gods many, for they are called Gods to whom the word of God comes, and the word of God comes to all these kings and priests. But to our branch of the kingdom there is but one God, to whom we all owe the most perfect submission and loyalty; yet our God is just as subject to still higher intelligences, as we should be to him.³²

While many LDS leaders have taught that their God Elohim is omnipotent (all-powerful), several factors belie this thought. Since Mormonism has reintroduced polytheism to the modern world, the question is, who among the many gods is the “most powerful”? Some Mormons dodge this dilemma by insisting that the word *omnipotent* does not mean “all-powerful” but rather refers to being “unlimited in power.” Even this definition does not help solve the problem, since the Mormon God cannot create *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing, which “was not the invention of early Christian theologians who had imbibed too much Greek philosophy. Rather, Jews and Christians alike believed it long before it was formalized as a doctrine.”³³ The Mormon God’s ability to *create* is limited by the fact that he is only able to organize already existing matter. Apostle John Widtsoe said, “God, the supreme Power, cannot conceivably originate matter; he can only organize matter. Neither can he destroy matter; he can only disorganize it. . . . The doctrine that God made the earth or man from nothing becomes, therefore, an absurdity.”³⁴

Although faithful Mormons hope to someday achieve the status of deity, they concede that they will never rise above the preeminence of Elohim. Even as gods, exalted Mormons will always be subservient to him. In the same way, Elohim will never rise above those gods who preceded him. Contrary to this opinion, the Old Testament is replete with accounts that demonstrate the superior power of the God of Israel. Whether it was Moses versus Pharaoh’s magicians or Elijah against the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, God’s authority always reigns supreme. What may be seen as a contest between deities was really nothing of the kind.

The book of Job contains four chapters in which God personally proclaims His omnipotence to His suffering servant. When He was finished, Job had to admit, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose

of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2. ESV). Unlike the deities worshiped by the pagan world, the God of the Bible does whatever He pleases (Ps. 115:3). With Him all things are possible (Matt. 19:26).³⁵ The God of Christianity is omnipotent and answers to no one.

The Bible also never hides the fact that the God of both the Jews and Christians is the “God of gods.” Five times this expression is used to demonstrate that the God of the Bible is the sovereign and powerful God of creation (Deut. 10:17; Josh. 22:22; Ps. 136:2; Dan. 2:47; 11:36). Although it would be easy for a Mormon to misuse this phrase and try to say it proves the existence of other gods, this idea is not consistent with the many passages of Scripture that insist there is no other God than He Himself (Deut. 4:35, 39; Isa. 45:5–6; 46:9; Mark 12:32). Contrary to pagan belief, God is above anything man might think is a god.

Not Omnipresent

According to Mormon theology, no member of the LDS Godhead has the ability to be truly omnipresent. A Mormon educator writes, “There is a false doctrine held by many religions that God, personally, is omnipresent. And this leads to a false belief that He is indefinable and completely indescribable, is everywhere present, fills the immensity of space, and is yet so small that He dwells in everyone’s heart, etc.”³⁶ The God of Mormonism cannot be personally present everywhere because he dwells in a finite body. Brigham Young stated, “Some would have us believe that God is present everywhere. It is not so. He is no more every where present in person than the Father and Son are one in person.”³⁷ Not only are Mormonism’s versions of God the Father and Jesus unable to be in more than one place at a time, but this limitation also applies to the Holy Ghost. Page 32 of *Gospel Principles* states, “(The Holy Ghost) can be in only one place at a time, but His influence can be everywhere at the same time.”

The God of the Bible is described much differently. Explaining God’s omnipresence, Christian theologian R. C. Sproul takes particular notice of the prefix *omni*. He writes:

The “omni” relates not only to the places where God is, but also to how much of Him is in any given place. God is not only present in all places but God is fully present in every place. This is called His immensity. Believers

living in New York enjoy the fullness of the presence of God while believers in Moscow enjoy that same presence. His immensity, then, does not refer to His size, but to His ability to be fully present everywhere.³⁸

When Solomon dedicated the Jerusalem temple, he fully recognized that such a building could never actually house the person of God. In his dedicatory prayer, Solomon declared God's omnipresence when he proclaimed, "Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee" (1 Kings 8:27). Isaiah 66:1 adds, "Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me?" In Proverbs 15:3 Solomon expressed both God's omnipresence and omniscience when he stated, "The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good." The prophet Jeremiah also extolled God's omnipresence when he wrote Jeremiah 23:23–24: "Am I a God at hand, saith the LORD, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the LORD."

God's omnipresence is demonstrated by the fact that He has no body. While God is present everywhere, He does not fill space. The concept of a God of spirit is taught ever so precisely in John 4:24, which states that "God is a Spirit." To alleviate this problem, LDS leaders have insisted that this passage was mistranslated. Joseph Smith, in his Inspired Version of the Bible, actually removed the troubling words.

While some Mormons may counter by insisting God *has* a spirit, this passage does not allow for such an interpretation. Since God is Spirit, it stands to reason that He is also invisible (see Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27).

Conclusion

A Gospel Topics essay ("Are Mormons Christian?") posted on an LDS Church website explains, "Although the doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints differs from that of the many creedal Christian churches, it is consistent with early Christianity. One who sincerely loves, worships, and follows Christ should be free to claim his or her understanding of the doctrine according to the dictates of his or her conscience without being branded as non-Christian."³⁹ Yet how can this be? Many claim to "love" and "follow" Jesus—including Muslims and New Age adherents—but if their stated beliefs are not "Christian," can it be said

they are “Christian”? If Mormonism’s perception of God—arguably the most important teaching to the foundation of any religion—is contrary in every way, shape, and form to biblical Christianity, should Christians readily accept Mormonism as just another “denomination” of Christianity? The answer seems obvious.

Discussion Questions

1. When a Christian says that God is incomprehensible, what does that mean? Does it bother you, as a Christian, that there are some things about God that cannot be understood? How do you reconcile your lack of knowledge with the existence of a God whom we cannot fully grasp with human minds?
2. Brigham Young said that the idea that God was once a man and progressed to be God was “unique to this Church.” In what ways is the LDS God unique? How does this version of God differ from what the Bible teaches? Are there any Bible verses you can use in support of your views?
3. What are the implications if God has not always been God? For instance, is it possible that God the Father was a sinner? If something like this is true, would this change the way you viewed and even worshiped God?

Final Thought

The Westminster Confession of Faith says that the chief end of man is to “know God” and “enjoy Him forever.” Unfortunately, Latter-day Saint theology tends to simplify God and turns Him into nothing less than a glorified human being. This is a tragic mistake because the God described in the Bible was never a human, has always been God, and is not limited to being in one place at one time. While we may not fully grasp the attributes of God, thus prohibiting humans from putting Him into a box, Latter-day Saints are also limited in their understanding because they cannot explain how God became God. If only former humans can achieve exaltation, we must reject the biblical truth of Genesis 1:1 that God was in the beginning. Mormonism turns this teaching on its head, for if there is a primary cause, it must be a man who started it all.

Notes

1. *A Sure Foundation: Answers to Difficult Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1988), 93.

2. *Gospel Principles*, 2nd edition (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 6. Because it is a very popular church manual that is often used with potential or new converts, we will quote liberally from *Gospel Principles* (updated in 2009) and refer to it in the main text by its title.

3. Charles R. Harrell, “*This Is My Doctrine*”: *The Development of Mormon Theology* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 131. As of this writing, Harrell is a Latter-day Saint who often does not support the traditional LDS interpretations of biblical passages.

4. *Ensign* (February 2012): 33.

5. *Ensign* (February 2007): 8. For more details about the First Vision and how God the Father and Jesus supposedly appeared to Joseph Smith, see chapter 31, “How do you account for Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’?” in our book *Answering Mormons’ Questions*.

6. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperOne, 1961), 3–4.

7. *Ibid.*, 8.

8. *Gospel Fundamentals* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2002), 7.

9. *Gospel Principles*, 279; ellipses in original.

10. Milton R. Hunter, *The Gospel through the Ages* (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1945), 105–6. According to this book’s preface, “This book is designed primarily for a course of study in the Melchizedek Priesthood quorum of the Church. It is to be used by all high priests’, seventies’, and elders’ classes in their weekly meetings beginning January 1, 1946. . . . The volume has been written and published under the direction of the General Authorities.”

11. *The Life and Teachings of Jesus & His Apostles Course Manual Religion 211–212*, 327, as taken from an address by Joseph Fielding Smith at Snow College, May 14, 1971, 1–8; ellipses in original.

12. For example, see *Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Resource Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 64; *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: George Albert Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 70–71; and *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012), 83. In an article in *Ensign* (February 1982): 39–40, Gerald Lund answered the question, “Is President Lorenzo Snow’s oft-repeated statement—‘As man now is, God once was; as God is, man may be’—accepted as official doctrine by the Church?” He concluded, “It is clear that the teaching of President Lorenzo Snow is both acceptable and accepted doctrine in the Church today.”

13. Orson Pratt, *The Seer* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 1990), 132. Being a polygamist, the LDS Elohim physically created spirit children with his heavenly wives. All spirit beings in existence were produced this way. The Heavenly Mother doctrine finds no scriptural support from the four written LDS scriptures. Apostle Bruce R. McConkie said the Heavenly Mother doctrine was an “unspoken truth,” Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 516. The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* admits that Latter-day Saints must “infer from authoritative sources of scripture and modern prophecy that there is a Heavenly Mother as well as a Heavenly Father. . . . Today the belief in a living Mother in Heaven is implicit in Latter-day Saint thought,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., s.v. “Mother in Heaven,” 2:961.

14. Hunter, *Gospel through the Ages*, 104–5. This originated with Orson Hyde, *Journal of Discourses*, ed. Watt, 1:123.
15. *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 74.
16. *The Pearl of Great Price Teacher Manual: Religion 327* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 12.
17. *Ensign* (June 1993): 10.
18. *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, s.v. “Transcendence,” accessed May 29, 2014, www.designinference.com/documents/2003.10.Transcendence_NDOCApol.pdf.
19. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*, 34.
20. “Mormonism and the Nature of God,” *FairMormon*, accessed May 29, 2014, http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormonism_and_the_nature_of_God/Was_God_once_a_sinner.
21. Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh, United Kingdom: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 147.
22. Harrell, “*This Is My Doctrine*,” 128; italics in original.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *The Pearl of Great Price Student Manual: Religion 327* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 37, which quoted from *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1973), 6:312.
25. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, ed. Watt, 7:284.
26. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*, 31; ellipses in original. This was first reported in Watt, ed., *Journal of Discourses*, 7:284.
27. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 1:193.
28. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 42.
29. *Pearl of Great Price Student Manual*, 8.
30. To counter the idea that nobody has seen God, some Mormons have responded that Jesus has been seen by humans. Since Jesus is God, therefore they conclude that God has been seen by humans. The logic is faulty. According to the context of the passage, John 1:18 is not referring to Jesus, the Incarnation of God, but rather God the Father. This Word that became flesh (Jesus) was made known by the Father (John 1:1, 14).
31. For more on this topic, see chapter 16, “If God is spirit, why did Moses say he saw God face-to-face?” in our book *Answering Mormons’ Questions*.
32. Orson Hyde, “A Diagram of the Kingdom of God,” *Millennial Star* 9 (January 15, 1847): 23–24, as quoted in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1993), 299. According to Ehat and Cook, there was “probably no clearer statement of Joseph’s theology” than this editorial by Orson Hyde, 297.
33. Francis J. Beckwith, et al., ed. *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 97. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig wrote an excellent chapter titled “Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the Mormon Doctrine of Creation and a Defense of *Creatio ex nihilo*,” which we recommend for further research on this important topic.
34. John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology as Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1965), 12.
35. This attribute should not be construed to mean that God, in His infinite perfection, could or would ever do anything contrary to His righteous nature. To be clear, God can do all things that are *possible* but nothing that is *impossible*. Miracles requiring God’s intervention are possible only when God is involved, even though the act may go against

natural causes. However, God cannot accomplish illogical acts. For example, He cannot go against His nature by lying, acting contrary to His word, or sinning in any way. Just as it is impossible to create a three-sided *square* or become a married *bachelor*, so God—who is the creator of logic—cannot do the absurd. This is because, by definition, a three-sided object is a triangle, and someone who is married is not a bachelor.

36. Ridges, *Mormon Beliefs and Doctrines Made Easier*, 221. Although he doesn't say so, Ridges is referencing a pre-April 1990 version of the LDS temple ceremony in which Lucifer, Adam, and the apostle Peter are interacting. When Lucifer is asked by Peter what he was doing, Lucifer replied, "Teaching religion . . . a religion made of the philosophies of men, mingled with scripture." Adam, though, said he could not comprehend it, adding, "They preach of a God who is without body, parts, or passions; who is so large that he fills the universe, and yet is so small that he can dwell in my heart; and of a hell, without a bottom, where the wicked are continually burning but are never consumed. To me, it is a mass of confusion." Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Evolution of the Mormon Temple Ceremony 1842–1990* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 2005), 81–82.

37. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*, 29. See also Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 23–24.

38. R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1992), 43.

39. "Are Mormons Christian?," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed May 29, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/topics/christians>.