

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Is Mormonism Christian?

### A Baptist Theologian Analyzes Stephen E. Robinson's Arguments for Accepting Mormonism as Christian

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In 1991, Latter-day Saint scholar Stephen E. Robinson authored a book entitled *Are Mormons Christians?*<sup>2</sup> Robinson answers that the Mormons are indeed Christian. He supports this contention by listing six bases upon which Mormons are often considered to be non-Christians and seeks to show how none of them affords a sufficient reason not to recognize Mormons as Christians.<sup>3</sup> In 1997 Robinson co-



authored *How Wide the Divide?: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*, with Denver Seminary professor, Craig L. Blomberg.<sup>4</sup> In *How Wide the Divide?* four issues are

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank James Walker and Timothy Oliver of Watchman Fellowship, Inc. for their helpful suggestions and insights. To compare this paper to an earlier, *slightly* different, version of this paper, see "Is Mormonism Christian: An Evangelical Critique of LDS Scholar Stephen E. Robinson's Arguments for Recognizing Mormonism as Christian" in *Journal of Christian Apologetics*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 15-33.

<sup>2</sup> *Stephen E. Robinson, Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), hereafter *AMC?*. Robinson holds both BA (English Literature) and MA (Ancient Scripture) degrees from Brigham Young University, and a Ph.D. in Biblical Studies from Duke University. He has taught religion at Hampden-Sydney College (a Presbyterian-related school) and at Duke University and Lycoming College (both Methodist-related schools). (During his time at Lycoming, he served simultaneously as chairman of the school's religion department and Bishop of the LDS ward in Williamsport. He is believed to be the first Latter-day Saint to chair the religion department of a non-LDS church-owned school.) In addition to articles in a host of scholarly journals, he has authored *The Testament of Adam*, which was published by the Society of Biblical Literature. On the lay level, Robinson has also authored two other books, both written specifically for a Mormon audience, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1992), and *Following Christ: The Parable of the Divers and More Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> *It would have been better for Robinson to title his book, Is Mormonism Christian?*, but some of the emotional force of his argument might have been lost, given that he often speaks of himself or others he knows being told that they are not Christians. Often when Mormons are told that Mormonism is not Christian, they become defensive because they assume that the statement is meant to refer directly to them. The LDS-church-owned Bookcraft Press published the book, and its intended audience was primarily composed of Latter-day Saints. It was, however, widely read by those involved in counter-cult ministries and ex-Mormons.

<sup>4</sup> *Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, How Wide the Divide?: A Mormon & an Evangelical in 102 Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), hereafter *HWTD?*.

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addressed by both authors: (1) Scripture; (2) God and Deification; (3) Christ and Trinity; and (4) Salvation. Each author writes a section on each topic summarizing his respective position and then discusses his misgivings with the doctrinal positions of the group the other represents.<sup>5</sup> At the end of each section, there is a joint conclusion stating areas of agreement and disagreement. The authors wrote separate introductions but the final conclusion was a joint effort. So far as this writer knows, *How Wide the Divide?* is the first effort of its kind involving a Mormon and an evangelical scholar.

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Despite the differences in style between the two books, certain arguments overlap and are present in each. Robinson's basic contention throughout both books is that Mormonism is Christian. This paper will seek to delineate some of the problems with Robinson's arguments.

Robinson's arguments can be divided into two categories: (1) formal arguments; and (2) material arguments. These will be evaluated in order.

## Formal Arguments

There are two formal moves that Robinson makes in each book: (1) he seeks to distance "official Mormonism" from the "non-official" statements of past Mormon leaders; and (2) he seeks to represent the creeds of the church as pagan philosophical impositions upon biblical Christianity that function as extra-biblical sources of authority for orthodox Christians in the same way as the additional books of the Mormon canon do for Mormons.

### *What Is Mormon Doctrine?*

Like a good lawyer, Robinson realizes that if his case cannot be made on the basis of the evidence, he must do all he can to keep the evidence out of court. To this end he argues that Mormons are often accused of believing things that they do not believe. This occurs when one fails to understand exactly what constitutes official LDS doctrine, and takes the musings or speculations of individual LDS leaders, particularly nineteenth century

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The book is somewhat similar in format to InterVarsity's 1988 offering, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*. David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988). See my review of *HWTD?* in *Southwestern Journal of Theology* (Fall 1998): 124-25.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that both men make it clear they speak only for themselves, both believe they speak knowledgeably on the basics of their respective groups. On numerous occasions Robinson makes statements such as "knowledgeable LDS believe," or speaks in the first person plural, "us" and "we" and thus in practice presumes to speak for all LDS.

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leaders, as representing official Mormon doctrine.<sup>6</sup> This, according to Robinson, gives one a distorted view of LDS theology. He defines official LDS doctrine much more narrowly. He quotes from General Authority B. H. Roberts approvingly:

The Church has confined the sources of doctrine by which it is willing to be bound before the world to the things that God has revealed, and which the Church has officially accepted, and those alone. These would include the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price; these have been repeatedly accepted and endorsed by the Church in general conference assembled, and are the only sources of absolute appeal for our doctrine.<sup>7</sup>

Robinson seems well aware that a host of quotations from Mormon leaders of the past can be used to demonstrate that Mormonism is non-Christian. To this Robinson replies that the biblical prophets were speaking for God only when they claimed to be speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, not every time they spoke about God. Mormon critics, according to Robinson, have often distorted what Mormons believe by holding up the speculations and musings of individual Mormon leaders for all to see as if they represented official LDS doctrine.

Robinson asks why LDS leaders are not allowed the same freedom to speak unofficially about God as the biblical apostles. He contends that using non-official statements to show what Mormons believe denies the LDS church its right to self-definition.

At first glance this argument appears somewhat convincing. The issue, however, is not did the apostles say things about God that are not recorded for believers today. Nobody disputes that they did. The issue is, is it reasonable to believe that Paul, Peter, John, or any other apostle contradicted himself or existing Scripture on matters of doctrine?<sup>8</sup> An objective examination of Mormon history leads one to the conclusion that some of the Mormon prophets, speaking publicly in their role as the oracles of God, taught things contradictory both to what others had said and, occasionally, to what they themselves had previously stated, both in print and in preaching.<sup>9</sup> The issue is not one of making

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<sup>6</sup> AMC?, 13-15.

<sup>7</sup> AMC?, 14; emphasis added by Robinson. (B. H. Roberts, sermon on 10 July 1921, delivered in Salt Lake Tabernacle, printed in *Desert News*, 23 July 1921, sec. 4, p.7.). Roberts' quotation from does not meet the criteria given by Roberts. One must assume this is not the "official" position on what constitutes official LDS doctrine.

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately this question may never be fully answered because every extant letter of Paul or John or Peter or any other apostle (where authenticity can be established beyond a reasonable doubt) is canonized within the New Testament.

<sup>9</sup> That Brigham Young publicly taught that Adam was God (which contradicted LDS teaching before and after Young) is beyond doubt for any objective observer, e.g., *Journal of Discourses* 1:50-51; 3:319; 5:331-32.

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everything canonical, but insisting on a certain amount of doctrinal consistency, especially in matters as significant as God, the Scriptures, and Jesus Christ.

A further problem is the fact that a brief perusal of Mormon records as to Mormon practice in the nineteenth century will show clearly to any dispassionate observer that many of the statements that Robinson labels “unofficial” had normative force in the LDS church at that time. This fact leads one to ask, has Mormon doctrine changed?<sup>10</sup>

A further difficulty with Robinson’s defining Mormon doctrine in such a minimalist way is that there are a number of acknowledged beliefs and practices in Mormonism that cannot be supported as “official” according to Robinson’s criteria. For example, Robinson admits that, “[t]he belief that God the Father was once a human rests mainly on *two technically uncanonized sources* (sermons by Joseph Smith and Lorenzo Snow) which have, however, *in effect* become normative.”<sup>11</sup> A brief perusal of official LDS teaching manuals such as *Gospel Principles*<sup>12</sup> and *Achieving a Celestial Marriage* will show that, in training their members, Mormon leaders refer to “non-official” statements by past leaders in the same way that Mormon critics do. Those statements that the current leadership approves are taken as normative while those of which they do not approve are treated as musings, speculations, or anomalies. To put the case charitably, there seems to be some inconsistency in practice on this point.

An additional problem in defining official Mormonism as “canonical Mormonism” is that the Mormon scriptures are not the highest authority in Mormonism—the living prophet is. Robinson himself writes:

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Even Robinson admits that at times Young taught something else concerning God. He explains Young’s apparent contradiction by a scientific term, “anomaly.” An anomaly is something unexpected that cannot be explained by the existing laws or theories, but which does not constitute evidence for changing the laws and theories. *AMC?*, 18. One difficulty with Robinson’s “anomaly” explanation is that anomalies are rare and unexpected. Young stated that Adam was God on many occasions. The LDS literature of his day provides ample evidence that Young intended this teaching to be official. Cf. Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Company, 1972), 173-78. A further historical difficulty is that “the laws and theories,” i.e., practices of the LDS church, *did change* with regard to this doctrine and also after him.

<sup>10</sup> One must also question how faithful Robinson is to traditional LDS theology. Robinson argues that there is a consistency to LDS theology when one does not accept “unofficial” statements as normative. But if the practice of the church at that time seems clearly to accord those statements normative force, what is one to believe?

<sup>11</sup> *HWTD?*, 87; emphasis added. In other words he accepts these unofficial statements as normative.

<sup>12</sup> *Gospel Principles*. Among the sources referenced in the first unit, “Our Premortal Life with God,” are Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1971); Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1977), Joseph F. Smith, “The Origin of Man,” in *Improvement Era*, Nov. 1909; Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1974).

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The direct revelation to a prophet or apostle is immediate and primary, and this is the word of God in the purest sense—as word and hearing rather than as text. ... For Latter-day Saints, the church's guarantee of doctrinal correctness lies primarily in the living prophet, and only secondarily in the preservation of the written text. This is, after all, the New Testament model.<sup>13</sup>

Robinson has not, in fact, accurately described the New Testament model of revelation. Not only did biblical prophets and apostles receive direct revelation, but their words were also tested by the existing Scriptures (the Old Testament). In Acts 17:11 one reads that the Bereans were more noble (a favorite LDS phrase) than those in Thessalonica because they not only received the word that Paul preached, but they also examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said about God was true. New revelations were tested by the written revelation, and sometimes those who claimed to be prophets were found to be false, and condemned as heretics, while those who tested them were commended by the Lord Jesus for doing so (Rev. 2:2).<sup>14</sup>

Robinson is correct, however, when he states that Mormonism's trust is primarily in a person, not the written text of Scripture. Concerning the trust that the average Mormon can have in the General Authorities of the church, he writes:

Now, none of this should be taken to mean that in matters of administration within the LDS church the General Authorities are not inspired or that they must submit every policy decision to the members for a sustaining vote. The revelations recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants, *already accepted* as binding by the Church, along with the ordination to their callings give the Brethren the keys and authority to administer the affairs of the Church as the Lord may direct without their needing a sustaining vote for each individual decision. **Thus the Church in conference sustains only the individuals who hold the keys**, but does not need to sustain separately every detail of their administration. Consequently the policies and procedures of the Church are “official” and “inspired” whenever those holding the keys of that ministry unitedly declare them to be so. Similarly **the revelations already accepted by the Church give to the General Authorities and to many others the right to “preach, teach, expound, exhort”—that is, to**

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<sup>13</sup> *HWTD?*, 57.

<sup>14</sup> It is curious that LDS missionaries ask people to pray about the Book of Mormon (an extra-biblical writing) to know if it is true. Yet nowhere in the Bible itself does one find such a method prescribed as a way of knowing the truthfulness of an alleged word from the Lord.

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**interpret and apply existing doctrines within the context of their individual stewardships.<sup>15</sup>**

The fact that the leaders of the LDS church have the authority to interpret and apply existing doctrines and that their decisions on policies and procedures are “official” and “inspired” means in practice that ultimate authority rests with a select group of men. The court of ultimate appeal in LDS life is not the Bible, nor even the additional Mormon “scriptures,” but LDS leadership. Therefore LDS theology is whatever those who have been given the “keys” by God declare it to be at any particular time.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the church in General Conference sustains only the leaders, not the teachings of the leaders, indicates that Mormonism is a system in which the truth of a teaching is determined by the authority of the leader saying it, not one in which the authority of the leaders is determined by the truthfulness of the teaching.

Robinson seems to want it both ways. When he wants to exclude evidence of embarrassing teaching by Mormon leaders, then the “only sources of absolute appeal” are the written scriptures. When he wants to justify the teachings of Mormon leaders that contradict their predecessors or the scriptures, then the “guarantee of doctrinal correctness lies primarily in the living prophet.”

If the canonical scriptures of the LDS church are true, then teachings that contradict those scriptures are not only additional, they must also be false, and those who teach such things must be false prophets. One may argue, as Robinson does, that these contradictions are not canonical, and therefore not official. But such an argument hardly lessens the seriousness of one who is affirmed as God’s prophet and considered able to

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<sup>15</sup> AMC?, 17 (italics in the original; bold added for emphasis).

<sup>16</sup> In 1980, Ezra Taft Benson delivered a speech at Brigham Young University entitled “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophets” which had these fourteen points: (1) The living prophet is the only man who speaks for the Lord in everything. (2) The living prophet is more vital to us than the standard works. (3) The living prophet is more important to us than a dead prophet. (4) The Prophet will never lead the Church astray. (5) The prophet is not required to have any particular earthly training or credentials to speak on any subject or act on any matter at any time. (6) The prophet does not have to say “Thus Saith the Lord,” to give us scripture. (7) The prophet tells us what we need to know, not always what we want to know. (8) The prophet is not limited by men's reasoning. (9) The prophet can receive revelation on any matter, temporal or spiritual. (10) The prophet may be involved in civic matters. (11) The two groups who have the greatest difficulty in following the prophet are the proud who are learned and the proud who are rich. (12) The prophet will not necessarily be popular with the world or the worldly. (13) The prophet and his counselors make up the First Presidency—the highest quorum in the Church. (14) The prophet and the presidency—the living prophet and the First Presidency—follow them and be blessed—reject them and suffer. Point 2 makes it clear that the prophet has authority over the standard works, while point 3 makes it clear that there can be change in practice and doctrine from one prophet to the next.

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interpret and apply the Scriptures infallibly, teaching things that the modern LDS church does not accept as true. In other words, such contradictory statements may not be official, but they are very significant. Robinson may, for instance, argue that Brigham Young's teaching that Adam was God or Joseph Smith's stating that there were many Gods (with a capital G) is not official Mormonism (and he would be right according to his stated criteria), but he cannot argue that Brigham Young and Joseph Smith did not believe what they said. It hardly seems credible to accept men as true prophets of God while rejecting as "unofficial" their publicly taught heart beliefs on such basic doctrines as the nature of God. This is particularly so given that the Bible makes one's teaching about God one of the tests for a false prophet (Deut. 13:1-5).

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On the other hand, making the living prophet the guarantee of doctrinal correctness obviously leads to an intellectual (not to mention a spiritual) quagmire. Mormon history is full of contradictory statements by the prophets made in the exercise of their prophetic duties of public teaching of the Saints. It was their responsibility to guard the Saints from being "tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14). Yet it is clear to see that the presidents have contradicted each other, a fact even Robinson would not contest.

This entire issue is crucial given the structure of the church. In a system like Mormonism, where apostolic succession is vital, one weak link (false prophet) in the chain brings down the whole system.

## *Are The Creeds Extracanonial Additions To The Bible?*

Robinson argues that there is no real difference between Mormons having extra books of scripture and orthodox Christians having the creeds. In other words, the creeds (particularly Nicea and Chalcedon) function as sources of authority for orthodox Christians.

Robinson rejects the creeds because they use non-biblical language. He argues that Latter-day Saints simply choose to be more biblical in their language than orthodox Christians and that to insist that the language of Nicea or Chalcedon is necessary to make the Scripture clear is actually an attack upon the clarity of Scripture.<sup>17</sup>

The Bible does clearly teach what one must know about the person of Jesus Christ and his relationship to God the Father. The creeds do not have the same authority as Scripture, but the concepts delineated at Nicea and Chalcedon are found in the Bible (whatever one may think of the language used or the metaphysic underlying said language). But as

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<sup>17</sup> HWTD?, 137-38.

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anyone knows who has ever dialogued with a cultist for any amount of time, one must not only be clear enough to be understood, one must also be so clear that one cannot be misunderstood. When examined in context, that is what the creeds are—attempts *by the church* to be so clear as to the meaning of Scripture that there can be no misunderstanding what Christians believe. They are not additions to Scripture and they do not imply that Scripture is not clear enough to be understood. They do, however, spell out explicitly how the Scriptures may *not* be interpreted. In other words the Bible states what Christian doctrine is, the creeds guard against what it is not.<sup>18</sup> Deliberations over terminology resulted from different meanings being attached to biblical terms. New terms were not, as Robinson implies, introduced to change the biblical meaning, but rather to focus it more precisely.

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Robinson's basic contention is not logical. He argues that Mormons should be recognized as Christians who simply reject the creeds. The difficulty is that the two positions (Mormonism and orthodox Christianity) cannot be resolved as agreeing with one another. One may reject the terminology but not the basic conclusions of Nicea and Chalcedon and still logically claim to be Christian. Or one may accept the terminology and reinterpret its meaning (which is what the Arians did until the *homoousios* was added), and still "claim" to be Christian. But one cannot reject both the terminology and the conclusions of Nicea and Chalcedon and claim at the same time to be Christian *along with those who accept Nicea and Chalcedon as faithful to Scripture and representative of Christian belief*.<sup>19</sup> This, however, is precisely what Robinson does. To be logically consistent Robinson should argue that those who hold to Nicea and Chalcedon, at least in their conclusions, are wrong, and therefore non-Christian. Robinson refuses to be logical. He

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<sup>18</sup> That language was a problem may be seen when Athanasius writes that the Arians could affirm anything that the orthodox party could state in biblical terms, because they used the same language but with different meanings (Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians* 1.3.8-9). Mormonism and Arianism both deny the *ontological* oneness (a term Robinson uses, which is neither a biblical nor Nicean term) of the Father and the Son. And like Arianism, Mormonism has its own vocabulary. Sometimes statements are made that sound quite orthodox but are actually the opposite; e.g., a Mormon can affirm the eternity of the Father and the Son, but his meaning is grounded in Mormonism's understanding of "eternity" as but one of an open-ended series of beginnings and endings, each called an eternity. It is also interesting to note that Athanasius refers to Arianism as a *new* teaching, not simply another teaching. The Athanasian party clearly saw themselves as defending original Christianity, not creating a new version of Christianity. Robinson might argue that they did in fact create a new faith, but the evidence does not support such a conclusion.

<sup>19</sup> To his credit, Joseph Smith, Jr. is not guilty of this logical fallacy. In the First Vision, one reads that when he asked what was the correct church to join, Joseph was told: "I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: 'they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.'" *Joseph Smith—History* 1:19.



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argues that all the creed-believing “orthodox” Christian churches are wrong, and that Mormonism, which entirely rejects the creeds, “is Christian, too.” The problem is obvious: one position cannot be right and the other wrong and both be the same thing. One is forced to conclude that the orthodox Christian position represents the true Christian position or Mormonism does, or neither does, but both cannot.

It is clear that neither of Robinson’s formal moves is legitimate. Both cloud the issues, rather than bringing light to the subject. In the writer’s opinion Robinson intentionally diverts the reader’s attention from the truly significant issues by throwing up these smoke screens.

## Material Issues<sup>20</sup>

The material issues this paper will address are: (1) should the Mormon scriptures be accepted as Christian Scripture?; (2) is the Mormon God the Christian God?; and (3) is the Mormon Jesus the Christian Jesus?

### *Should The Mormon Scriptures Be Accepted As Christian Scripture?*

The issue of what is Christian Scripture is crucial when discussing the relationship between LDS doctrine and Christian doctrine. Latter-day Saints recognize as Scripture three books that evangelicals reject. Robinson contends that this should not exclude Mormonism from being recognized as Christian. Is he correct in this?

When discussing the topic of Mormonism’s scriptures, Robinson’s argument is again largely formal. He does not argue for the authenticity of the uniquely Mormon scriptures. Instead, he insists that the additional LDS scriptures are not necessarily contradictory to the Bible. He also stresses that there is no universal consensus among Christians, even to this day, as to what exactly constitutes the canon of Scripture. Thus it is wrong not to recognize Mormons as Christians simply because they do not limit themselves to the same canon of Scripture as “orthodox” Christians.<sup>21</sup>

The issue at hand, however, is not whether or not the additional scriptures of the LDS church are *necessarily* contradictory to the Bible, but whether or not they are *actually* contradictory to the Bible in what they teach. The issue is not simply one of form, but also

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<sup>20</sup> In *HWTD?* four doctrines are addressed: Scripture; God and Deification; Christ and the Trinity; and Salvation. This paper will not address the differences between Mormon and Christian conceptions of salvation.

<sup>21</sup> *AMC?*, 51-55. To exclude Mormons from being Christians on the basis of their having more books of scripture is what Robinson calls the “canonical exclusion.”

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one of content. That the Mormon scriptures differ from the Bible may be clearly seen by contrasting what they teach concerning God with the biblical teaching on God.<sup>22</sup>

Another crucial issue related to the additional Mormon scriptures (that Robinson conveniently ignores) is one of *origin*. Is there, or is there not, reasonable cause to believe that Joseph Smith, Jr. actually heard from God and was truthful in all that he stated? If, after an objective inquiry into the history of Joseph Smith, Jr., there is reason to doubt his veracity and/or personal integrity, then any book that he produces ought not be accepted as *scripture* at face value.<sup>23</sup> In any case it cannot be accepted as Scripture without examination and testing (1 Thess. 5:21).

Robinson rightly points out that those who would declare Mormonism non-Christian on the basis of Revelation 22:18–19, where the reader is strongly warned not to add to or take away from “this book,” fail to understand that the apostle John speaks only of what awaits those who add to or take away from his book of Revelation, not the entire canon of Scripture. He concludes: “Since the Latter-day Saints neither add to nor take away from the text of the book of Revelation, the passage at 22:18–19 does not apply to their acceptance of extrabiblical scriptures.”<sup>24</sup> What Robinson fails to mention is that the founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, Jr., *did* exactly what John warned against—he made changes to John’s book of Revelation in his own “inspired” version of the Bible.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Two contradictions between LDS scripture and the Bible on God are readily apparent. The Bible teaches that: (1) there was no God before Yahweh nor would there be any other thereafter (Isaiah 43:10-11); and (2) “God is Spirit” (Jn. 4:24); cf. Luke 24:39: “a spirit has not flesh and bones . . .” The Mormon scriptures teach that: (1) there was a plurality of gods (Abraham 4:24-5:16); and (2) God the Father has a body of flesh and bones (D&C 130:22). There are other areas (e.g., Christology, pneumatology, soteriology) in which Mormon scriptures contradict the Bible, but in this instance it is sufficient to show that they are contradictory as to God’s nature.

<sup>23</sup> Given the command of 1 John 4:1 to “test the spirits to see if they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world,” one ought not accept any self-proclaimed prophet or his writings at face value. The wise course is to err on the side of caution and take the skeptical approach to purported new revelations from God. Joseph Smith’s differing accounts of the First Vision coupled with the late date of the official version casts doubt on the facticity of Smith’s “encounters” with God. Although one cannot logically conclude that liars cannot tell the truth, one must ask: “Is it logical to believe what someone of (highly) questionable veracity states as to the nature of God?”

<sup>24</sup> AMC?, 46-47.

<sup>25</sup> Smith made what he called an “inspired” translation of the Bible (*JST*). Concerning Smith’s translation Robinson argues that the meaning of “translation” was somewhat broader in 1828, when Joseph Smith produced the *JST*, and that it more properly is understood not as a translation, but as containing “additional revelation, alternate readings, prophetic commentary or midrash, harmonization, clarification and corrections of the original as well as corrections to the original” (*HWTD?*, 63-64). This seems to be a very peculiar use of the term “translation,” and one that is not entirely in keeping with Joseph Smith’s explanation of his work of “revising” the New Testament [Joseph Smith, *History of the Church* (Salt Lake

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Another problem is the fact that there are contradictory things taught *within* the LDS canon. For example, the creation narrative in the Book of Moses has one God creating the earth while the creation narrative in the Book of Abraham has “the Gods” responsible for creating the earth.<sup>26</sup> Given just these problems (many more could be listed) it is extremely difficult to accept the Mormon scriptures as Christian.

## *Is The Mormon God The Christian God?*

The most important question to be asked when evaluating Robinson’s arguments for recognizing Mormonism as Christian is, “Is the God of Mormonism the God of Christianity?” If the Mormon God is not the Christian God then there can be no thought of understanding Mormonism as Christian.

Robinson readily admits that much of what Mormonism teaches about God cannot be found in the Bible. He insists, however, that this does not mean that the Mormon God is not the biblical God, only that LDS modern revelation has explicated some areas concerning God on which the Bible is silent.<sup>27</sup> Concerning God’s corporeality he declares, “I do maintain that the Bible makes no unambiguous statement about the materiality or immateriality of the Father, and that we may therefore think of him either as having a body or as not having a body without ‘contradicting’ the Bible.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, the Mormon understanding of God is *extra*-biblical, but not *un*-biblical. He also admits freely that Mormonism has a different concept of God than “orthodox” Christianity because “orthodox” Christianity has a doctrine of God that is the product of an influx of Hellenistic thought corrupting and distorting the biblical picture of God.

To those who insist that a corporeal God is not consistent with 1 Timothy 1:17, which states, among other things, that God is invisible, he responds that *aoratos* does not mean *invisible*, but simply unseen. The upshot of this understanding of *aoratos* is that one is left with a god who plays hide and seek.

The fact that LDS teach that God has a body does not prevent the Mormon God from being omnipresent, according to Robinson, because God’s omnipresence is *spiritual*, not

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City: Deseret, 1972), 1:323-24. The title page states that the book was published for the Church.] Whatever Robinson’s explanation, one thing is clear: the founder of the LDS church did that which Revelation 22:18-19 warns the reader not to do—add to or subtract from John’s book of Revelation. This presents a serious problem for those inclined to accept Joseph Smith, Jr. as a prophet and the scriptures of the LDS church as true.

<sup>26</sup> Moses 2:1, 3, 10, 25; 3:8; Abraham 4:3-5:15. This is only one of many examples that could be listed.

<sup>27</sup> *HWTID?*, 86.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

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physical, in nature.<sup>29</sup> To those who insist on understanding John 4:24 as teaching the incorporeality of God he replies that the text should be translated “God is Spirit,” not “God is a Spirit.” “Latter-day Saints do not dispute this passage at all, unless it is interpreted as limiting God to being *merely* a spirit.”<sup>30</sup> This limited understanding of God as merely spirit comes from Greek philosophy rather than the biblical witness, according to Robinson. In rejecting Greek metaphysics, he writes, “God is spirit, but he is also element; both aspects of existence are included and encompassed within his glorious being. That he is either one does not limit the fact that he is also the other—and infinitely more.”<sup>31</sup>

Robinson’s argument seems rather disingenuous to those familiar with Mormonism. He is employing the language gap of which he complains in his introductory remarks to take advantage of the evangelical Christian belief that there is an ontological difference between spirit and matter. For example, Robinson argues that Mormonism’s God can be omnipresent because his omnipresence is spiritual, not physical.<sup>32</sup> According to Mormon scripture, however, spirit actually is material: “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; We cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter” (*Doctrine & Covenants*, 131:7–8). It is hard to imagine Robinson is unaware that the *Book of Mormon* teaches that “the spiritual aspect of God’s existence” is coextensive with that of

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<sup>29</sup> *Doctrine and Covenants*, 130:22 (hereafter D & C); *HWTD?*, 88-89. If one is to make sense of LDS statements that God is omnipresent, one must know what LDS mean when they say omnipresent. In *A Study of the Articles of Faith*, (published by the church), one reads:

There is no part of creation, however remote, into which God cannot penetrate; through the medium of the Spirit the Godhead is in direct communication with all things at all times. It has been said, therefore, that God is everywhere present; but *this does not mean that the actual person of any one member of the Godhead can be physically present in more than one place at one time*. The senses of each of the Trinity are of infinite power; His mind is of unlimited capacity; His powers of transferring Himself from place to place are infinite; plainly, however, His person cannot be in more than one place at any one time. Admitting the personality of God, we are compelled to accept the fact of His materiality; indeed, an ‘immaterial being,’ under which meaningless name some have sought to designate the condition of God, cannot exist, for the very expression is a contradiction in terms. If God possesses a form, that form is of necessity of definite proportions and therefore of limited extension in space.

James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith: Being a Consideration of the Principal Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1961), 42-43. The particular copy from which the writer quotes was a gift of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to Fleming Library at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The writer assumes that this means the book at least provides a fairly accurate statement as to what LDS theology actually is.

<sup>30</sup> *AMC?*, 79.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>32</sup> *HWTD?*, 13-14.

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his physical aspect. In a supposed preincarnate appearance, Christ says, "Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; and man have I created after the body of my spirit; and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh" (Ether 3:16). Mormon scriptures render Robinson's argument here very "non-official" (and perhaps even unorthodox by LDS standards).

Another serious defect in Robinson's interpretation of John 4:24 is that in its context this passage involves a discussion of where one ought to worship God, and thus, a question of where one can find God. Jesus responds that the location of worship does not matter. The reason that location is not an issue is because God is not limited to being present in any one location. The reason why God is not limited to one place or another is precisely *because God is Spirit*, not because God is a material being who is spiritually present (materially present in a finer sort of fashion) in all places.

Yet another argument that Robinson uses to deny that John 4:24 contradicts the LDS concept of God having a body is that since Jesus was God, and he had a body, there is no warrant for thinking that God must necessarily be immaterial. In this argument Robinson: (1) blurs the Trinitarian distinctions between Father, Son, and Spirit; (2) ignores the fact that Christ's incarnation took place in time/space, *and the incarnation body was not essential to his nature as Deity*; and (3) ignores the fact that in the incarnation Christ was not omnipresent.

A question related to the corporeality of God is whether or not God was a man prior to becoming God? Robinson affirms that the teaching that God is an exalted man is a linchpin of LDS theology.<sup>33</sup> Yet he says this should not be taken to mean that God is not "infinite and eternal."<sup>34</sup> This, however, contradicts what Joseph Smith, Jr. declared in the King Follett funeral sermon, which Robinson allows has "normative" force in LDS theology, concerning the nature of God. Smith states: "We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea and take away the veil, so that you may see."<sup>35</sup> Thus it is apparent that the Mormon founder, through whom all LDS

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<sup>33</sup> *HWTD?*, 91. He stresses, however, that "more important, more in evidence, more often preached, more often studied, explained and pondered by the Latter-day Saints are the more central doctrines of the gospel of Christ." *Ibid.* To his credit, Robinson does not seem uncertain about the place of this concept in Mormon theology, as Gordon Hinckley, the current LDS president, did when asked whether God was once a man in an interview for *Time* magazine: "I don't know that we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it . . . I understand the philosophical background behind it, but I don't know a lot about it, and I don't think others know a lot about it." David Van Biema, *Time* 150, no. 5, August 4, 1997: 56.

<sup>34</sup> *HWTD?*, 78.

<sup>35</sup> *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith (TPJS)*, 345. Robinson seems to want to have it both ways. He agrees with what Smith teaches in the King Follett sermon when it serves his purposes (God was once a man)

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priesthood and prophetic authority is derived, thought that God was not eternally God. That Smith also believed that God was capable of progressing, and thus not infinite, is evident when he puts the following words in the mouth of Jesus:

My Father worked out his kingdom with fear and trembling, and I must do the same; and when I get my kingdom, I shall present it to My Father, so that He may obtain Kingdom upon Kingdom, and it will exalt Him in glory. He will then take a higher exaltation, and I will take His place, and thereby become exalted myself.<sup>36</sup>

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Should one be perplexed as to how Robinson can claim to stand in continuity with Smith and at the same time teach radically different things about God, one must consider the LDS meaning of eternity. Latter-day Saints teach that there is an endless series of eternities. Robinson touches ever so briefly on this point when he writes, "In regard to the possibility that God was once a man *in some prior eternity before the beginning of this one, ...*" (italics added).<sup>37</sup> Consistent with this (re)definition of eternity is his statement: "I firmly believe God did exist as God 'before all ages' (from the beginning), but that still does not say anything about *before* the beginning."<sup>38</sup> Certainly my understanding of 'eternity' is different from that of the average Evangelical, but it is not without ancient precedent, nor is it internally inconsistent."<sup>39</sup> It is also apparent that Robinson's understanding of time is not biblical. The God of the Bible created all things (John 1:3). A God who did not create time, but instead is himself subject to time, is not the biblical God.

Not only is the Mormon God not eternally God (in the normal sense of the word), he is not the only God. Although Robinson argues that Mormonism is not polytheistic, Joseph

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while disagreeing with Smith on other topics (God's finiteness and non-eternality) taught in the same sermon.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 347-48.

<sup>37</sup> *HWTD?*, 89.

<sup>38</sup> Robinson ignores the fact that the "beginning" of John 1:1 is not the same as the "beginning" of Genesis 1:1. Genesis refers to a moment/place in time/space when God created this world. John, however, contemplates the eternity out of which God, by Christ, created time, space and matter, as is proved by verse 3. God was God, Christ the Word was God, without the existence of space, time and matter — "before," as it were, Robinson's "beginning."

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 90. The precedent he appeals to is first century Judaism: "First -century Jews understood eternity to consist of successive ages or eons — all within the parameters of the beginning and the end." Ibid. He does not support this statement with a reference. The qualification "all within the beginning and the end" seems to speak of one beginning and one end encapsulating successive eons. Apparently this is not how Robinson understands the statement. This only serves to make the point that the crucial issue is meaning, not terminology. Concerning the internal consistency of Mormonism's "eternity" see Francis Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish, *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991) for a discussion of the logical (in)consistency of the Mormon concept of God's relationship to time.

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Smith disagrees.<sup>40</sup> Again, in the same sermon that Robinson allows has normative force, although it is not technically canonical, Smith declares: "... 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. ... The head God called together the Gods and sat in grand council to bring forth the world. The grand councilors sat at the head in yonder heavens and contemplated the creation of the worlds which were created at that time."<sup>41</sup>

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There is yet another area of LDS Theology that is troubling to orthodox Christians—in LDS Theology, God has a wife. In *Achieving a Celestial Marriage* one reads: "Our Heavenly Father and mother live in an exalted state because they achieved a celestial marriage. As we achieve a like marriage we shall become as they are and begin the creation of worlds for our own spirit children."<sup>42</sup> From this quotation one can readily see that God's becoming a God was dependent not only upon his being married but also upon his having the right kind of marriage.

Robinson struggles valiantly to present the God of Mormonism as infinite, eternal, and one of a kind. Yet when one understands the meaning of his terms, the Mormon God is clearly understood to be finite, temporal, and one of many. The similarities are thus more semantic than actual. This cannot be reconciled with the Christian understanding of God.

## *Is The Mormon Jesus The Christian Jesus?*

Robinson contends that LDS Christology is both biblical and Christian, if one does not assume that the *extrapolations* of the Councils are equivalent to the testimony of Scripture.<sup>43</sup> He writes that Latter-day Saints "accept the formula of 'one God in three persons.' However, we believe that the oneness of these three is not an ontological

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<sup>40</sup> HWTD?, 132.

<sup>41</sup> TPJS, 345, 349. In a separate sermon, preached two months later, Smith declares: "In the very beginning the Bible shows there is a plurality of Gods beyond the power of refutation. . . . The heads of the Gods appointed one God for us; and when you take [that] view of the subject, it sets one free to see all the beauty, holiness and perfection of the Gods." (brackets in original) Ibid., 372. It is apparent from this quotation that the God of this earth is not even the highest of the Gods; he cannot be referred to as the almighty in an ultimate sense. James White shows that Robinson disagrees on this point with his BYU colleague, Eugene England, *Brigham Young University Studies* 29 no. 3, 33, cited in James R. White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?: Discerning the Differences Between Christianity and Mormonism* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), 182.

<sup>42</sup> *Achieving a Celestial Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President of The Church Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976), 1.

<sup>43</sup> HWTD?, 133.

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oneness of being (this is a *creedal* rather than a *biblical* affirmation), but a oneness of mind, purpose, power and intent."<sup>44</sup> Concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, he writes:

If by “the doctrine of the Trinity” one means that the New Testament teaching that there is a Father, a Son, and a Holy Ghost, all three of whom are fully divine, then Latter-day Saints believe in the doctrine of the Trinity. . . . However, if by “the doctrine of the Trinity” one means the doctrine formulated by the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon and elaborated upon by subsequent theologians and councils—that God is three coequal persons in one substance or essence—then Latter-day Saints do not believe it.<sup>45</sup>

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He further states:

That God is somehow simultaneously three and one I have no doubt because the Bible and the Book of Mormon both tell me so, but I do not trust the intellectuals of the Hellenistic church to have figured out exactly how this is so (1 Cor. 3:19), nor do I invest their theories and conclusions with the authority of Scripture.<sup>46</sup>

Terms referring to God’s essence (*ousia*) are not biblical terms, but philosophical terms that reflect a concern with questions that, according to Robinson, the biblical writers were not concerned to address.

Robinson argues that the oneness that characterizes the Godhead is found in passages such as John 17:21–23; Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–13; Galatians 3:28, etc. “where the individual disciples can also be ‘one’ in the Father and the Son, or ‘one’ in Christ, or even ‘one’ with each other in Christ—though still remaining separate beings with separate and individual bodies.”<sup>47</sup>

Craig Blomberg points out that the Mormon position of three separate divine beings in the Godhead who are only related by an agreement in mind, purpose, power and intent, leaves room for both polytheism and a denial of the actual deity of the Son and the Spirit.<sup>48</sup> In short the Mormon Godhead more closely resembles a heavenly committee than the properly stated Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>45</sup> AMC?, 71.

<sup>46</sup> HWTD?, 128.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 129-30.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 121. Tom Wright argues persuasively that the doctrine of the Trinity did not develop due to *Hellenistic* influences, but because the early church, still strongly committed to *Jewish* monotheism did not feel free to move toward Tritheism. Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 387.



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What Mormonism teaches about the birth of Christ is a crucial question when seeking to determine whether or not the Mormon Christ is the Christian Christ. Concerning the birth of Christ, Robinson states:

The exact details of how Jesus' conception was accomplished have not been revealed, either in the Bible or in modern revelation.

While it is true that certain LDS leaders (mostly in the nineteenth century) have offered their opinions on the conception of Jesus, those opinions were never included among the official doctrines of the church and have, during my lifetime at least, not appeared in official church publications—lest they be taken as the view of the church.<sup>49</sup>

Robinson is either not telling the truth or sadly mistaken on this point. The official LDS publication, *Family Home Evenings*, signed by the First Presidency, and published by the LDS church in 1972, in the chapter entitled, "Whom Say Ye That I Am?" contains this quotation:

Now, we are told in the scriptures that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God in the flesh. Well, now for the benefit of the older ones, how are children begotten?" I answer just as Jesus Christ was begotten of his father. The difference between Jesus Christ and other men is this: Our fathers in the flesh are mortal men, who are subject unto death: but the Father of Jesus Christ in the flesh is the God of Heaven. ...

We must come down to the simple fact that God Almighty was the Father of His Son Jesus Christ. Mary, the virgin girl, who had never known mortal man, was his mother. God by her begot His son Jesus Christ, and he was born into the world with power and intelligence like that of His Father ...

Now my little friends, I will repeat again in words as simple as I can, and you talk to your parents about it, that God, the Eternal Father, is literally the father of Jesus Christ.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *HWTD?*, 135.

<sup>50</sup> *Family Home Evening* (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1972), 125-26.

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The parents are directed to: “discuss in your own words how Jesus was the only begotten Son of God. You might want do this by using the following illustration on a chalkboard or piece of paper.”<sup>51</sup> (The appendix is a copy of the drawing supplied.)

Ezra Taft Benson, the LDS president from 1985 through May of 1994, wrote: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints proclaims that Jesus Christ is the Son of God in the most literal sense. The body in which He performed His mission in the flesh was sired by that same Holy Being we worship as God, our Eternal Father. Jesus was not the son of Joseph, nor was He begotten by the Holy Ghost. He is the Son of the Eternal Father.”<sup>52</sup>

Latter-day Saints, in Robinson’s opinion, have a type of subordinationism “that was common in the earliest Christian church and was not felt to be contrary to the orthodox Christian faith until after the fourth century.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, he argues, Mormons ought not be defined as non-Christian for believing what many early Christians believed.<sup>54</sup> That Mormon subordinationism is conditional in nature is evident when he writes: “. . . for the divine Son and the divine Holy Spirit are subordinate to the Father and dependent on their oneness with him for their divinity.

They cannot stand alone; they are ‘God’ only as they are one with the Father in the Godhead. If their oneness with the Father should cease, so would their divinity.”<sup>55</sup> The divinity of Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit is thus of a derived nature.

Robinson’s assertion that an LDS type of subordinationism was common in the ante-Nicene church is incorrect.<sup>56</sup> No ante-Nicene Father ever taught what Mormons teach about God the Father and Christ the Son when one examines *exactly what the LDS church teaches* about God the Father and Christ the Son. The issue is not, whether or not one can find some *similarities* between LDS theology and the theology of the ante-Nicene Fathers *at some points*, but whether or not one can say that the ante-Nicene Fathers taught an LDS Christology in the main. The answer is No!

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> E. T. Benson, *Come Unto Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1983), 4. Quoted in Larry E. Dahl, *Ensign*, April 1997, 15.

<sup>53</sup> *HWTD?*, 131.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>56</sup> Robinson does not provide any documentation for his readers other than a single reference to a 25 line article on a double column page in Simonnetti’s two volume Encyclopedia of the Early Church. This article actually states that subordinationist *tendencies* are evident in Justin, Tertullian, Origen, and Novatian. No ante-Nicene Father ever spoke of God once being a man before becoming a God or God having a God above him in the sense that LDS theology does.

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No ante-Nicene Father ever wrote that Jesus Christ was the first-born spirit child of Elohim and the heavenly mother. No ante-Nicene Father ever wrote that Jesus was married and that his deity depended upon his having the proper kind of marriage. And certainly no ante-Nicene Father ever wrote that Jesus was born as the result of a sexual union between God the Father and Mary. All of these positions Mormonism affirms. Robinson is silent on most, if not all, of these points.

## Conclusion

Mormonism cannot be accepted as Christian. There are irreconcilable differences between Mormonism and Christianity concerning the nature of Scripture, God, and Jesus Christ. The apparent similarities between the two systems quickly fade when LDS terminology is properly interpreted. Robinson's arguments ultimately are unconvincing.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Stewart, R. B. (2003). "Is Mormonism Christian? A Baptist Theologian Analyzes Stephen E. Robinson's Arguments for Accepting Mormonism as Christian." *Journal for Baptist Theology and Missions* 1, 1(1), 100–123.