

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## “Then Shall They be Gods ...”

### The Mormon Restoration of Deification

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The fluidity and materiality of the Mormon view of God enables it to capture the essential sameness of Jesus Christ with us in a most striking manner. Mormons go so far as to insist that God was once a man just like us, which can sound confusing, but it is, in a way, the flipside to the belief that we will become, in the afterlife, just like him.

—STEPHEN H. WEBB<sup>1</sup>

In a “blessing meeting” of 1836, Joseph Smith Sr. (the prophet Joseph Smith’s father) told Lorenzo Snow, a potential convert, “You will become as great as you can possibly wish—EVEN AS GREAT AS GOD—and you cannot wish to be greater.”<sup>2</sup> Snow was shocked, calling the declaration a “dark parable.” Four years later, however, he (now a converted Mormon) received an “extraordinary manifestation” in which the mystery of the dark parable was revealed.



At the time, I was at the house of Elder H. G. Sherwood; he was endeavoring to explain the parable of our Savior, when speaking of the husbandman who hired servants and sent them forth at different hours of the day to labor in his vineyard [Matt 20:1–16]. While attentively listening to his explanation, the Spirit of the Lord rested mightily upon me—the eyes of my understanding were opened, and I saw as clear as the sun at noonday, with wonder and astonishment, the pathway of God and man. I formed the following couplet which expresses the revelation, as it was shown me, and explains Father

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<sup>1</sup> Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God*, 247.

<sup>2</sup> Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography*, 10.

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Smith's dark saying to me.... As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be.<sup>3</sup>

Snow felt that the couplet was "a sacred communication," which he revealed only to a few. When he returned from England in January 1843, Snow related the couplet to the prophet Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, Illinois. The founder of the Mormon movement replied: "Brother Snow, that is true gospel doctrine, it is a revelation from God to you."<sup>4</sup>

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## The King Follett Discourse

A year later on April 7, 1844, Joseph Smith preached to a crowd of followers estimated at 20,000 people. To them the prophet daringly proclaimed: "You have got to learn how to make yourselves gods in order to save yourselves and be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done!"

Today this sermon is known as the "King Follett discourse."<sup>5</sup> The discourse had a humble occasion. King Follett, an Elder in the Mormon church, was "crushed to death in a well, by the falling of a tub of rock on him." Joseph agreed to offer his final condolences after a major church conference in the morning. That afternoon, crowds gathered in a grove along the banks of the Mississippi. The prophet, soon to be martyred in an Illinois jail, stood up. His goal was to console his people by edifying them "with the simple truths of heaven." Yet these "simple truths" turned out to be the deepest mysteries and highest revelations Joseph Smith ever made known.

Smith began at creation, and with the nature of God. The nature of God is important, since according to John 17:3, eternal life consists in knowing God, along with Jesus Christ. Smith understood this knowledge of God to mean the knowledge of God's nature. Knowing God's nature is not just a game of theological speculation. One must know the nature of God to have eternal life. Smith determined to preach the knowledge of God. He began by telling his people about "the designs of God for the human race."

First, God Himself who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a Man like unto one of yourselves—that is the great secret! If the veil were rent today and the great God

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 46. Cf. Snow's account given later in life (1901) in Williams, *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, 1–2. For more history on the couplet, its ideas and its influence in the Mormon church, see Huggins, "Lorenzo Snow's Couplet," 549–68.

<sup>4</sup> LeRoi C. Snow, "Devotion to Divine Inspiration," 656.

<sup>5</sup> I use the reconstructed text of Larson, "King Follett Discourse," 193–208. The original notes are printed in parallel columns in Cannon and Dahl, *The Prophet Joseph Smith's King Follett Discourse*. For historical background, see Cannon, "The King Follett Discourse," 179–92; and Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of God*, 108–26.

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that holds this world in its sphere and the planets in their orbit and who upholds all things by His power—if you were to see Him today, you would see Him in all the person, image, fashion, and very form of a man, *like yourselves*.<sup>6</sup> For Adam was a man formed in His likeness and created in the very fashion and image of God. Adam received instruction, walked, talked, and conversed with Him as one man talks and communicates with another.

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Smith knew from the book of Genesis that God had appeared in human form—walking (apparently with legs) in the garden of Eden. Throughout Christian history, the anthropomorphic appearances of God in the Bible were played down. Every sophisticated (that is, Platonist) thinker knows that God is an invisible, incorporeal spirit. This Platonic concept of God was absorbed into Christianity and made staple by the fourth century C.E. (witness Augustine). Smith tosses out this long Platonic heritage without blinking. He spoke from experience. At the age of fifteen, Smith himself had seen a vision of the Father and the Son, and they were both in the shape of a man.<sup>7</sup> In the King Follett discourse, he makes clear that this anthropomorphic shape is not simply a form that God takes on and off in an effort to condescend to human needs. God does not lie in his words or in his appearance. The human form is his true form, the form he has always had. This is the form, or image, in which he created the first human (Gen 1:26)—and through him the whole human race.

Smith then proceeded to unfold God's history. "I am going to tell you how God came to be and what sort of a being He is." God was not, contrary to common opinion, divine from eternity. Rather, the Father "once was *a man* like one of us" and "once dwelled on an earth the same as Jesus Christ himself did in the flesh *and like us*." From this statement, we might think that the history of the Father is like the history of the son: incarnation leads to the assumption of divine power and status. But Smith indicates that the Father never needed to *become* incarnate. Instead, it is of his very nature to be human. As he evolved, the Father presumably took on higher and higher forms of body until he became the refined body (or spirit) he is now.

This story of God's own evolution is distinctive in Christian history. Previous Christian theologians had held up Christ as a forerunner and model of human deification. Now the Father himself, in the long view of history, appears to be an even earlier forerunner and model of human destiny. Lorenzo Snow—who later became the fifth president of the Mormon church, taught that "Through a continual course of progression, our Heavenly Father has received exaltation and glory, and He points us out the same path; and

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<sup>6</sup> Words in italics reflect the independent testimony of Wilford Woodruff, who wrote down the sermon in his journal from notes soon after it was given (Larson, "King Follett Discourse," 194, 198).

<sup>7</sup> For the vision, see Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 1.5–6. Cf. DC 130:22.

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inasmuch as He is clothed with power, authority, and glory, He says, ‘Walk ye up and come in possession of the same glory and happiness that I possess.’ ”<sup>8</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, this idea was “common property” among Latter-day Saints.<sup>9</sup> In 1844, however, Joseph Smith realized the audacity of his theory, and clung to a biblical anchor. “I will show it from the Bible!” he says in the King Follett discourse. The prophet then paraphrases a verse from the Gospel of John: “As the Father has power in Himself, even so has the son power *in himself*.” The verse most closely resembles John 5:26, where Jesus says, “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the son to have life in himself.” At first glance, Smith seems to have misquoted the passage, exchanging “life” for “power.” In the context of John, however, Jesus is indeed speaking about the power of raising people from the dead—and thus giving them life. Just as the Father has life-giving power, so he has given this power to the son (John 5:24–30).

Smith added that the son has power to do “what the Father did.” Here the prophet had in mind Jesus’ remark that comes a little before John 5:26, namely v. 19: “the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.” This is a theology of recapitulation: the son repeats the action of the Father in the world. But if the son repeats the action of the Father, the Father must have once done what the son now does. The son sojourns on earth, but ascends to receive all power in heaven and on earth. This was once the path of the Father, then it became the work of the son. Thus Father and son follow the same course to deification. Humans themselves, Smith taught, are also destined to follow this track. They follow the son who followed the Father. Their destiny is his. History has a single arc, and all who become gods traverse it. The prophet cried out:

You have got to learn how to make yourselves gods in order to save yourselves and be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have done—by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection of *the dead*, from exaltation to exaltation—till you are able to sit in everlasting burnings and everlasting power and glory as those who have gone before sit enthroned.

Deification is a process of cosmic evolution. By small steps and degrees, humans advance into yet higher and higher forms of life. “When you climb a ladder,” Smith notes, “you must begin at the bottom rung.” The higher and higher “rungs” of existence are likened to states of kingship and priesthood on earth. They are positions of power. Eventually these earthly posts of authority lead to cosmic promotion. Humans evolve into cosmic

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<sup>8</sup> Williams, *Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, 3–4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

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kings and queens. These cosmic states are also corporeal states. The redeemed will *sit* enthroned, says Smith—which should not be taken metaphorically. Deified humans will need bodies to sit on their heavenly thrones. Nevertheless, the cosmic bodies of exalted humans must be able to endure what Smith calls the “everlasting burnings.” These fires seem to refer to the celestial bodies above, or possibly to the fiery presence of God himself.

This evolution into higher—indeed, divine—forms of life is what it means, for Smith, to be “heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ” (Rom 8:17). It means, in short, to “inherit *and enjoy* the same glory, powers, and exaltation until you ascend a throne of eternal power *and arrive at the station of a God*, the same as those who have gone before.” This is the path of Jesus Christ. Christ himself was following his Father’s lead. This Father was following his God and Father, and so on, for all eternity.

What does the Father do? He builds a kingdom. But this is no earthly kingdom; it is the world, the solar-system, the whole universe itself. The Father was there “when worlds came rolling into existence.” Christ, accordingly, builds his kingdom as well—this universe. He will hand over this world to God, according to 1 Cor 15:28. By doing this, Jesus “treads in the tracks” of the Father and “inherits what God did before.” As Plato knew, there is no jealousy in the divine choir. “God is glorified,” Smith declares, “in the salvation and exaltation of His creatures.” They will follow in the same path of deification and world-building as Christ.

Deification is part of God’s eternal plan. “The Head One of the Gods,” Smith continued, “called together the Gods and the grand councilors sat in grand council *at the head* in yonder heavens to bring forth the world and contemplated the creation of the worlds that were created at that time.” The depiction of God standing in the midst of the Gods is reminiscent of Ps 82:1: “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment.” The minutes of the most ancient divine council, according to Smith, reveal the creation and deification of human beings. Human beings, by divine ordination, were created to become gods.

In the discourse, Smith immediately proceeded to attack the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, or creation from nothing. The word for “create” in Genesis 1:1 (*bārā*), Smith claimed, means to organize, “the same as a man would organize and use things to build a ship.” Smith infers that “God Himself had materials to organize the world out of chaos—chaotic matter—which is element [*sic*] and in which dwells all the glory.” Matter, contrary to the Platonic understanding, is not opposed to God. Instead, it is a receptacle to house his splendor. The purest elements of matter, says Smith, “may be organized and reorganized, but not destroyed. Nothing can be destroyed. They never can have a beginning or an ending; they exist eternally.”

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Undercutting *creatio ex nihilo* was important for Smith, since it protects the eternity—and eternal dignity—of human beings. Smith shuddered at the thought of human annihilation. He feared that if something is made from nothing—including the human spirit—to nothing it might return. This horrifying prospect contradicted everything Smith knew about the sanctity and ultimate value of the human spirit, as well as God's own history. If God was once a man, he was not made from nothing. Likewise, humans who have the destiny to be gods cannot emerge from pure nothingness. This, then, is the mystery that Smith revealed: the human spirit must be eternal, as eternal as God himself.

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What, then, did God do when he created the first human being? “God made *the tabernacle* [i.e., the body] of man out of the earth,” said Smith, “and put into him Adam’s spirit (which was created before), and then it became a living body *or human soul*.” God made Adam’s body, the prophet claimed, but not his spirit. He could not have made Adam’s spirit, for it is as eternal as God himself. “*Man existed in spirit*; the mind of man—the intelligent part—is as immortal as, and is coequal with, God Himself.” Here, interestingly, Smith’s teaching veers close to Platonism. The second-century Christian Platonist Clement of Alexandria once wrote: “But *we* [humans] are before the foundation of the world, we—because we had to come about in him—are born beforehand in God. We are the rational creations of God’s Reason, through whom we exist from the beginning, for ‘in the beginning was Reason (*Logos*)’ (John 1:1)” (*Protrepticus* 1.6.4). For Smith, however, human preexistence is not only ideal (in the mind of God), but real. Humans were independent spirits in eternity past. There was never a point, then, when humans were not God’s children and heirs.

The eternality of the human spirit as an independent “intelligence” does not mean that this intelligence is incorporeal like a platonic Form. “Intelligence *is eternal*,” preached Smith, “*and exists upon a self-existent principle*. It is a spirit from age to age and there is no creation about it. The first principles of man are self-existent with God.” By nature, then, humans have a certain equality with God. Philippians 2:6 says that Christ, who existed in the form of God, was equal with God. For Smith, the privilege of divine likeness is part of humankind’s eternal constitution.

God, like a great artificer, sends his spirit children into the world with a capacity to grow in intelligence and knowledge. This is the way they are enlarged and improved. It is also the way they are deified.

The Father gives his children the chance to grow just as he did of old. In eternity past, “God Himself found Himself in the midst of spirits and glory. Because He was greater He saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest, who were less in intelligence, could have a privilege to advance like himself *and be exalted with Him*, so that they might have one glory upon another in all that knowledge, power, and glory.” For Smith, deification

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is by grace, even if that grace is built into the cosmos and planted into the human spirit. God, like a good Father, helps his fellow spirits by graciously bringing them up to his level.

Smith concluded the King Follett discourse with a note of consolation. “Your expectation and hope is far above what man can conceive.” This hope has a firm ground. The sermon is no mere idle foray into the ivory castle of Smith’s imagination. The prophet declared that the knowledge he reported had “the authority of the Holy Ghost.” What he preached, he preached “by the testimony of the Holy Ghost that is within me.” In this way, the prophet authoritatively encouraged his people with the hope of re-joining deified loved ones in the upper world. “Some shall rise to the everlasting burning of God, for God dwells in everlasting burnings.”<sup>10</sup>

## Impact

The King Follett discourse is as electrifying today as it was 170 years ago. Due to its shock value, perhaps, it has never been pronounced official Latter-day Saints (LDS) doctrine. Soon after the sermon, faithful followers of Smith called him a fallen prophet since he taught a plurality of gods. In modern times, even committed LDS members—in light of similar criticism—are hesitant about these teachings. Such hesitation, however, does not shake the historical fact that Smith meant the King Follett discourse to serve as inspired teaching. Two months after the speech (June 16, 1844), Smith attacked his enemies in a sermon, strongly reasserting his divine inspiration and divinely inspired power to interpret the Bible.<sup>11</sup> To many Mormons then and now, the King Follett discourse is the culmination of his preaching, the fullness of revelation the prophet bestowed on his people before his martyrdom.

To fully understand Mormon deification, however, we must turn to revelations of Joseph Smith that have attained canonical status. Historically speaking, Mormonism begins with the revelations given to Smith from 1820 until his death in 1844. Deification (which Mormons often call “exaltation”) is not a prominent feature of Smith’s early revelations, in particular, the *Book of Mormon*. The truth of deification is a higher mystery, progressively revealed to the prophet as time went on. It appears that Smith began receiving revelations about humanity’s divine destiny in the early 1830s. Some of these

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<sup>10</sup> For the initial Mormon response to the King Follett Discourse, see Hale, “The Doctrinal Impact,” 209–25.

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<sup>11</sup> The sermon can be found in Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings*, 369–76.

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revelations are printed in the Mormon canonical book called *The Doctrine and Covenants* (DC).

## The Three Kingdoms

Section 76 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*—called the “Vision of the Glories”—is a revelation revealed to Joseph Smith and his associate Sidney Rigdon on February 16, 1832 (twelve years before the King Follett discourse). This revelation flows directly from a reading of Scripture. In fact, the revelation came immediately after Smith and Rigdon read and translated John 5:29: “and they will come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of condemnation.”

The dualism of this passage is stark: there will be life for the good, and judgment for evildoers. For the Mormon prophet, the “fullness of the gospel” (DC 76:14) is more complex than this simple binary. His revelation announces that punishment is eternal only for those who have denied God’s word and thus have (in effect) spat in the face of God. For most, however, hell becomes purgatory: punishment is temporary, souls are given a second chance, and heavenly blessing becomes available after the final judgment. In accordance with the variety of deeds, there are different levels of blessing. There are very few pure evildoers and still fewer sinless saints. A fair and just God does not simply divvy up humanity into sheep and goats, sending one party to everlasting agony, and the other to a monochrome experience of halcyon bliss. Smith’s comment about his revelation appeals to logic and common sense: “It appeared self-evident from what truths were left [in Christian Scripture], that if God rewarded everyone according to the deeds done in the body [cf. 2 Cor 5:10], the term ‘Heaven,’ as intended for the Saints’ eternal home, must include more kingdoms than one.”<sup>12</sup>

In the “Vision of the Glories,” the kingdoms receive names: celestial, terrestrial, and telestial (cf. DC 88:17–31). All three realms of heaven have majesty and felicity, but they ascend in grades of glory. The glory of the lower, telestial realm is like that of the stars (DC 76:81). Those who inherit this kingdom did not receive Christ’s gospel. Nevertheless, they did not deny the Holy Spirit (vv. 82–83). This complex state of affairs results in an equally nuanced destiny. The spirits of these people abide in hell until their promotion in the final resurrection. At the resurrection, these souls come to participate in the glory and powers of the Holy Spirit (v. 86).

Above the inhabitants of the telestial realm are the occupants of the terrestrial kingdom. They too have a complex history. Many “terrestrials” died before Christ. Later, they had the opportunity to hear and receive the gospel when Christ preached to them after his

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 1.245.



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resurrection (DC 76:71–74; cf. 45:54). Few, it seems, reject the message. Accordingly, they go on to receive a share of God’s glory, “but not of his fullness” (v. 76). Their bodies become “terrestrial,” shining like the brilliance of the moon (v. 78). They receive the presence of God’s son, the Mormon second God (v. 77).

Those who receive the highest destiny enter the celestial realm. Even though the inhabitants of the telestial and terrestrial realms live a life higher than (normal) human life, only the peoples of the celestial world are formally deified. They are called “gods, even the sons of God” (DC 76:58, cf. Ps 82:1). “All things are theirs,” said Smith—adapting 1 Cor 3:21—“whether life or death, or things present, or things to come, all are theirs and they are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (DC 76:59). Celestials overcome all things (DC 76:60), just as the faithful in the book of Revelation (2:26; 3:5; 21:7). For them, deification means dwelling in the presence of God and Christ (DC 76:62), and taking part in Christ’s resurrection and rule (vv. 63–67). To fit in the celestial world, these saints receive “celestial” bodies, like in nature to the brilliance of the sun, and “even the glory of God, the highest of all” (v. 70; cf. 1 Cor 15:39–49). In this way, they receive “the fullness of the Father” (v. 71; cf. John 1:16; Eph 3:19; 4:13).

## Biblical Grounds

The relation of these revelations to the Bible is an important issue for traditional Christians. It is impossible to determine precisely how much of Joseph Smith’s ideas derive from his searching study of Christian Scripture and how much from new revelation. Nonetheless, the constant biblical echoes and phraseology reveal his heavy debts to previous revelation. Although the prophet might not have put it this way, his revelation in *Doctrine and Covenants* §76 can be viewed as an illuminating interpretation of Christian Scripture. It seeks, in short, to make revelation clearer—to tune it to reason and make it more faithful to a progressively enlightened concept of God.

To give an example of Smith’s Spirit-empowered (re-)interpretation of Christian Scripture, I point out the three levels of heaven themselves. Although technically not in ancient Scripture, Paul does distinguish three types of glory in 1 Cor 15:41–42: “There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory. So it is with the resurrection of the dead.” In the context of 1 Corinthians itself, Paul’s analogy is rather vague. The term “glory” is never explained, and how he relates resurrected individuals to sun, moon, and stars is left open. Smith’s periphrastic revelation clears up some of the difficulties:

And the glory of the celestial is one, even as the glory of the sun is one. And the glory of the terrestrial is one, even as the glory of the moon is one. And the glory of the telestial is one, even as the glory of the stars is one; for as one star differs

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from another star in glory, even so differs one from another in glory in the teletial world. (DC 76:96–98)

The revelation explains that the different glories correspond to different levels of heaven. Paul also spoke of three heavens (2 Cor 12:2–4)—so this teaching was ready to hand. According to their level of heaven, Smith said, saints shine with different brilliance. He appears to envision different intensities of brilliance within individual levels of heaven. On the lower, teletial level at least, saints shine brighter or dimmer—like the lights of the stars.

When Smith defines deification itself, he continues to speak in Pauline terms:

Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them. (DC 132:20)

In short, godhood means immortality (everlasting continuance) and the possession of power. The power is specifically the power to rule. As in Paul’s teaching, the saints are said to rule angels (1 Cor 6:2–3).

Also agreeing with Pauline thought, the “Vision of the Glories” declares that the saints do not become gods apart from participating in the godhood of Christ. When the son reigns, they reign (DC 76:108). Those in the lower realms of heaven are subordinate to Christ. In Phil 2:10–11, it is said that three levels of being bow to Christ: those on earth, those under it, and those above it. Smith’s revelation makes clear that those who bow the knee to Christ are members of the teletial world (DC 76:109). They become servants of the Most High God, and always subordinate to the divine Christ (v. 112).

## Christ the Exemplar

For Latter-day Saints, Christ sets the pattern of deification. Christ was called “son of God” because at first he did not possess the fullness of the Father (DC 93:14). When he received the fullness, the spirit of Christ became God’s firstborn son. All those begotten through Christ partake of Christ’s glory and become the “church of the firstborn” (DC 93:22, a phrase borrowed from Heb 12:23). Christ’s mission is to deify human beings so “that where I am ye shall be also” (John 14:3, quoted DC 132:23). As Paul envisioned believers being transformed into the “same image” as Christ (2 Cor 3:18), fully redeemed saints will be “made equal” with their Lord, the Lamb of God (DC 88:107).

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Nevertheless, Mormon deification diverges from Christ's story at one point: marriage. Although Christ (at least according to traditional Christian teaching) was not married, marriage is essential to receive deification in the celestial kingdom.<sup>13</sup> *Doctrine and Covenants* speak of three degrees of celestial glory (131:1–4). In order to attain the highest—and divine—level, one must be married “by the new and everlasting covenant,” sealed “by the Holy Spirit of promise” by an anointed priest. This is the language of *Doctrine and Covenants* section 132 (from a revelation recorded on July 12, 1843). Once a couple is “sealed” in marriage, they remain together for eternity. Thus they have the power to continually produce offspring (called the “continuation of the seeds forever and ever,” or “fullness,” DC 132:19). In their afterlives, couples “shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths ... and they shall pass by the angels, and the gods which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things” (DC 132:19).

People who remain single, in contrast, do not have the ability to produce seed or ascend in the spirit world. Those married but not sealed become separate (i.e., divorce) at death, and thus cap their spiritual productivity. They are saved to be sure, but they only become ministering angels, serving those sealed in higher matrimony (132:29).<sup>14</sup>

About a month after Smith received the revelation recorded in *Doctrine and Covenants* 132, he preached a sermon in which he declared “No man can attain to the Joint heirship with Jesus Christ without being administered to by one having the same power & Authority of Melchisedec.”<sup>15</sup> The only one with that power was himself ordained a “King and Priest” of Jesus Christ—the prophet himself. Thus in addition to celestial marriage, deification required initiation into the highest level of Mormon blessing—the Melchizedek priesthood. This gift is sometimes referred to as the “endowment” or “second anointing.” Joseph Smith first administered this special priesthood in September 1843. From that time it has been administered to thousands of Mormons in secret temple rituals.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Shortly before writing this, Karen King of Harvard revealed a Coptic fragment from an ancient gospel referring to Jesus' wife. The papyrus fragment reveals an unknown gospel currently dubbed *The Gospel of Jesus' Wife*. See further <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/faculty-research/research-projects/the-gospel-of-jesus-wife>.

<sup>14</sup> Compare Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings*, 300–301.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Buerger, *Mysteries of Godliness*, 61.

<sup>16</sup> For a history of the endowment ritual in the time of Joseph Smith, see esp. *ibid.*, 35–68.

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## Deification and Grace

In Mormon thought, the deified cannot take credit for their destiny. It is God who subdues all enemies for them, just as he did for Christ (*DC* 76:61, cf. 1 Cor 15:24–28). Nonetheless, in Mormon thinking, grace is not opposed to nature. That humans are naturally fitted by God for deification does not undermine God's grace, but underscores it. In the canonical Book of Moses 1:39 (part of the *Pearl of Great Price*), God reveals his work: to immortalize human beings. This is God's eternal plan.

The Book of Abraham (also in the *Pearl of Great Price*) allows us to glimpse the “back-story” of grace. In eternity past, God found himself among other spirits, less intelligent and less glorious than he. Not satisfied with this inequality, the Father endeavored to bring these spirits up to his fullness. Employing the service of some “noble and great” souls (3:22), God created the earth as a space for the dwelling of spirits (3:24). The earth then becomes their testing ground (3:25). There the spirits are “tabernacled” or clothed in bodies (cf. John 1:14) and given freedom to exercise their will. Those who follow God and his revelation in this life (or “estate”) and the next evolve into gods (3:26).

The eternity of the human spirit is basic to Mormon thought. In the Gospel of John we learn that “God is spirit” (4:24). According to a revelation of Joseph Smith, “man is spirit” as well (*DC* 93:33). Human spirits are eternal. They were in the beginning with the Father, existing as intelligences (93:23, 29). Every human spirit was innocent at first (93:38), but some go astray while in the body. Most spirits, however, graduate to higher levels after their sojourn in the body. The increased glory and intelligence of human spirits advances the glory of God, because the glory of God is intelligence, light, and truth (93:36).

In sum, humans are of the same race as God (cf. Acts 17:28), made in God's image, eternal, and endowed with unlimited potential.<sup>17</sup> One of the first theologians of the Latter-day Saints movement, Parley Pratt, expressed this point as follows:

Gods, angels and man are all of the same species, they comprise a great family which is distributed over the whole solar system in the form of colonies, kingdoms, nations, etc. The great decisive difference between one part of this race and the other consists in the differing degrees of intelligence and purity and also in the difference of the spheres, which each of them inhabit, in a series of progressive Being.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 345–46.

<sup>18</sup> Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology*, 39.

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In the words of Ernst Benz, “Man is of the same family as God and the Gods, but like God himself he must first unfold his being in an act of self-creation through eternal progression.”<sup>19</sup> According to former LDS president John Taylor (served 1880–87), each human being is a “God in embryo” who possesses “in an embryonic state all the faculties and powers of a God. And when he shall be perfected, and have progressed to maturity, he will be like his Father—a God.... As the horse, the ox, the sheep, and every living creature, including man, propagates its own species and perpetuates its own kind, so does God perpetuate his.”<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

To some, the claim that God and humans are of the same species suggests a radically different view of God than that proposed in classical Christian theology. Mormons point out, however, that classical Christian theology itself represents the gradual merging of the Platonic and biblical views of God. This merger only prevailed in the early Middle Ages and never deeply affected the masses of ordinary Christian believers. Augustine, who was raised Christian in the late fourth century, grew up assuming a Stoic view of God as a kind of gas permeating the entire universe.<sup>21</sup> Around age thirty, he converted to the Platonic notion of an incorporeal God in part because it was the theology with the most claim to philosophical respect. Today, however, Platonic theology—which views God as Being itself and beyond earthly sorts of being—hardly carries the same philosophical prestige, and to many seems abstruse and even unintelligible.

Historically speaking, the Platonic view of God has no claim to being the original Christian view. Paul, who saw the divine Christ as Christians’ elder brother (Rom 8:29) and who promised believers a body like Christ’s own body of light (Phil 3:21) was no Platonist. The theological claim of Mormons is that they have restored a pre-Platonic and indeed “original” view of God. Till the present day, this claim continues to be challenged and defended.

Since his death in 1844, Mormon theologians have developed Smith’s understanding of deification in new and creative ways.<sup>22</sup> What is truly distinctive about Mormon deification is the doctrine of spiritual increase: the capacity to enlarge, to be productive, and to create eternally. Paul’s older contemporary Philo of Alexandria likened parents to

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<sup>19</sup> Benz, “Imago Dei,” 212.

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<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Teachings of the Presidents*, 2–3.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, Conf. 7.1.2.

<sup>22</sup> For deification in contemporary Mormon thought, consult the articles on “exaltation” and “deification” in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. See also Roberts, *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 32–43, 135–37; Peterson, “Ye Are Gods,” 471–594; Ostler, *Of God and Gods*, 359–90.

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gods because of their power to create.<sup>23</sup> Mormon teaching ratchets up this insight to a new level. Human gods in the celestial kingdom go on producing more spirit beings, “tabernacling” (i.e., incarnating) them in new worlds, thus playing the role of God the Father. In this way, cosmic evolution advances.

To outsiders, these teachings can admittedly seem like science fiction. Leaving the bizarre aside, however, one must admit that the Mormon doctrine of deification presents something heartwarming. Deification among the Latter-day Saints is not a matter of the lonely individual buried in contemplation. To become a god, one must become a god *in the midst of family*—as a husband, wife, daughter, son, father, or mother progressing with the family into higher and higher levels of godhood. Mormonism does not so much teach the deification of the individual as the deification of the family and the larger family of the church. Godhood is eternal communion, and the increase of this communion with God and with each other. It is not just the rule and domination of other planets; it is the progression and infinite multiplication of love.

In short, Mormon deification connects the saints to their spiritual family. The path to godhood was tread long ago by ancient patriarchs, prophets, and saints. It was tread by Jesus Christ, and even God the Father himself. This connection to cosmic history and a high view of human destiny is delightfully expressed in a poem of Lorenzo Snow which he composed early in 1892:

This royal path has long been trod  
By righteous men, each now a God:  
As Abra'm, Isaac, Jacob, too  
First babes, then men—to gods they grew  
As man now is, our God once was;  
As now God is, so man may be,—  
Which doth unfold man's destiny.<sup>24 25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Philo, *Dec.*, 51, 107, 120; *Spec.* 2.2, 224–25.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, 8–9.

<sup>25</sup> Litwa, M. D. (2013). *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books), 190-204.