



# A Closer Look

## at the Mormon Concept of God

*"It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God . . ." (Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church)*

Mormon leaders often like to portray their faith as merely another branch of Christianity which, unlike other branches of Christianity, preaches the entirety of Christ's gospel. However, most people, even some Mormons, are unaware of how radically the Mormon view of God differs from the picture of God one finds in the Bible and traditional Christian theology.

### **Understanding the Biblical Christian Concept of God**

In order to compare and contrast the Mormon concept of God with the biblical/Christian concept of God, we must first fully understand what we mean by the biblical/Christian concept.

Though there are numerous aspects to God's nature that we could examine (such as that He is a Trinity), for our present purposes it is sufficient to say that the God of biblical Christianity is at least (1) personal and incorporeal (without physical parts), (2) the Creator and sustainer of everything else that exists, (3) omnipotent (all-powerful), (4) omniscient (all-knowing), (5) omnipresent (everywhere present), (6) immutable (unchanging) and eternal, and (7) necessary and the only God that exists. Let us now briefly look at each of these attributes.

**1. God is Personal and Incorporeal.** According to the Bible, God is a personal being who has all the attributes that we may expect from a perfect person: self-consciousness, the ability to reason, know, love, communicate, and so forth. This is clearly how God is described in the Scriptures (see Gen. 17:11; Ex. 3:14; Jer. 29:11). God is also incorporeal. Unlike humans, God is not uniquely associated with one physical entity (i.e., a body). This is why the Bible refers to God as Spirit (see John 4:24).

**2. God is the Creator and Sustainer of Everything Else that Exists.** All reality has come into existence and *continues* to exist because of God. Unlike a god who forms the universe out of preexistent matter, the God of the Bible created the universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). Consequently, it is on God alone that everything in the universe, indeed, the universe itself, depends for its existence (see Acts 17:25; Rom. 11:36;

2 Cor. 4:6; Col. 1:16,17; Heb. 11:3; Rev. 4:11).

**3. God is Omnipotent.** Omnipotence literally means “all-powerful.” When we speak of God as omnipotent, this should be understood to mean that God can do anything that is consistent with being a personal, incorporeal, omniscient, omnipresent, immutable, wholly good, and necessary Creator. That is to say, since God is perfect, He cannot sin; because He is personal, He is incapable of making Himself impersonal; because He is omniscient, He cannot forget. This is supported by the Bible when its writers assert that God cannot sin (see Mark 10:18; Heb.6:18), cease to exist (see Ex. 3:14; Mal. 3:6), or fail to know something (see Job 28:24; Ps. 139:17-18; Isa. 46:10). Since God is a perfect being, He is incapable of acting in a less than perfect way—which would include sinning, ceasing to exist, and being ignorant. None of this counts against God’s omnipotence (or “ability to do everything”), since, as St. Augustine points out, “[n]either do we lessen [God’s] power when we say He cannot die or be deceived. This is the kind of inability which, if removed, would make God less powerful than He is . . . It is precisely because He is omnipotent that for Him some things are impossible.”<sup>2</sup>

**4. God is Omniscient.** God is all-knowing, and His all-knowingness encompasses the *past, present, and future*. He has absolute and total knowledge. Concerning God’s unfathomable knowledge, the psalmist writes: “How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you” (Ps. 139:17-18). Elsewhere he writes, “Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit” (Ps. 147:5). The author of Job writes of God: “For he views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens” (Job 28:24). Scripture also teaches that God has total knowledge of the past (see Isa. 41:22). Concerning the future, God says: “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (Isa. 46:10). Elsewhere Isaiah quotes God as saying that knowledge of the future is essential for deity (see Isa. 41:21-24), something that distinguished God from the many false gods of Isaiah’s day.

**5. God is Omnipresent.** Logically following from God’s omniscience, incorporeality, omnipotence, and role as Creator and sustainer of the universe is His omnipresence. Since God is not limited by a spatiotemporal body, knows everything immediately without benefit of sensory organs, and sustains the existence of all that exists, it follows that He is in some sense present everywhere. Certainly it is the Bible’s explicit teaching that God is omnipresent (see Ps.139:7-12; Jer. 23:23-24).

**6. God is Immutable and Eternal.** When a Christian says that God is immutable and eternal, he or she is saying that God is unchanging (see Isa. 46:10; Mal. 3:6; Heb. 6:17) and has *always existed as God* throughout all eternity (see Ps. 90:2; Isa. 40:28; 43:12-13; 57:15; Rom. 1:20; 1 Tim. 1:17). There never was a time when God was not God. Although God certainly seems to change in response to how His creatures behave—such as in the case of the repenting Ninevites—His nature remains the

same. A God who is responsive to His creatures is certainly consistent with, and seems to be entailed by, an unchanging nature that is necessarily *personal*.

Although all biblical Christians agree that God is *eternally* God, they dispute whether He exists *in* time (i.e., the temporal eternity view) or *out of* time (i.e., the timeless eternity view).<sup>5</sup>

**7. God is Necessary and the Only God that Exists** The Bible teaches that although humans at times worship some beings as *if* these beings were really gods (see 1 Cor. 8:4-6), there is only one true and living God by nature (see Isa. 43:10; 44:6,8; 45:5,18, 21-22; Jer. 10:10; John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:4-6; Gal. 4:8; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Tim. 2:5). Moreover, since everything that exists depends on God, and God is unchanging and eternal, it follows that God cannot *not* exist. In other words, He is a *necessary* being, whereas everything else is contingent (or dependent on God for its existence).

### **The Mormon Concept of God**

Although there is certainly disagreement among Mormon scholars concerning some precise points of doctrine, it is safe to say the LDS church currently teaches that God is, in effect, (1) a contingent being, who was at one time not God (not necessary and not eternally God); (2) limited in *knowledge* (not truly omniscient), *power* (not omnipotent), and *being* (not omnipresent or immutable); (3) one of many gods; (4) a corporeal (bodily) being, who physically dwells at a particular spatiotemporal location and is therefore not omnipresent like the biblical God (respecting His intrinsic divine nature—we are not considering the Incarnation of the Son of God here); and (5) a being who is subject to the laws and principles of a universe He did not create.

The Mormon concept of God can best be grasped by understanding the overall Mormon world view and how the deity fits into it. Mormonism teaches that God the Father is a resurrected, “exalted” human being named Elohim who was at one time *not* God. Rather, he was once a mortal man on another planet who, through obedience to the precepts of *his* God, eventually attained exaltation, or godhood, himself through “eternal progression.” The Mormon God, located in time and space, has a body of flesh and bone and thus is neither spirit nor omnipresent. Joseph Smith, founder and chief prophet of Mormonism, asserts:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! . . . I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute this idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see. . . It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with Him as one man converses with another, and that He was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ Himself did; and I will show it from the Bible . . . Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves, and be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.<sup>6</sup>

The Father has a body of flesh and bone as tangible as man's. . . .<sup>6</sup>

*Omniscience*, according to Mormon theology, is one of the attributes one attains when reaching godhood. Mormons appear to be divided, however, on the meaning of omniscience. It seems that some Mormons believe omniscience to mean that God has absolute and total knowledge about the past, present, and future.<sup>6</sup> This view is consistent with the biblical view. However, the *dominant* Mormon tradition teaches that God increases in knowledge and, consequently, *God does not have absolute and total knowledge.*<sup>7</sup> This is why Brigham Young, Smith's successor as president of the Mormon church, and his counselors pronounced (both in 1860 and 1865) *as false doctrine* Orson Pratt's claim that "God cannot learn new truths."<sup>8</sup> Ironically, Pratt's claim is consistent with the biblical view of God. Wilford Woodruff, a recognized Mormon authority, taught, "God Himself is increasing and progressing in knowledge, power, and dominion and will do so worlds without end."<sup>9</sup> And yet another church authority, Lorenzo Snow, declared, "We will continue on improving, advancing, and increasing in wisdom, intelligence, power, and dominion, worlds without end."<sup>10</sup>

Once Elohim attained godhood He then created this present world by "organizing" both eternally preexistent, inorganic matter and the preexistent primal intelligences from which human spirits are made. Mormon scholar Hyrum L. Andrus explains:

Though man's spirit is organized from a pure and fine substance which possesses certain properties of life, Joseph Smith seems to have taught that within each individual spirit there is a central primal intelligence (a central directing principle of life), and that man's central primal intelligence is a personal entity possessing some degree of life and certain rudimentary cognitive powers before the time the human spirit was organized.<sup>11</sup>

For this reason, Joseph Smith wrote that "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be."<sup>12</sup> In other words, *man's basic essence or primal intelligence is as eternal as God's and was not created by God.*

The Mormon God, by organizing this world out of preexistent matter, has granted these organized spirits the opportunity to receive physical bodies, pass through mortality, and eventually progress to godhood—just as this opportunity was given him by his Father God. Consequently, if human persons on earth faithfully obey the precepts of Mormonism they, too, can attain godhood like Elohim before them. Based on the statements of church authorities, some Mormon scholars contend that a premortal spirit is "organized" by God through "spirit birth." In this process, human spirits are somehow organized through literal sexual relations between our Heavenly Father and a mother god, whereby they are conceived and born as spirit children *prior* to entering the mortal realm (although all human persons prior to spirit birth existed as intelligences in some primal state of cognitive personal existence).<sup>13</sup> Since the God of Mormonism was himself organized(or spirit-birthed) by his God, who himself is a "creation" of yet another God, and so on forever, Mormonism teaches that the God over this world is a contingent being in

an infinite lineage of gods.<sup>34</sup> This is why Joseph Smith can declare, "Hence, if Jesus had a Father, can we not believe that *He* had a Father also? . . . I will preach the plurality of the Gods."<sup>35</sup> Brigham Young clearly understood the logic of Smith's theology: "How many Gods there are, I do not know. But there never was a time when there were not Gods and worlds."<sup>36</sup> Thus, Mormonism is a polytheistic religion which denies that God is a necessary being who has eternally existed as God.

Mormonism therefore teaches that certain basic realities have *always* existed and are indestructible even by God. In other words, *God came from the universe; the universe did not come from God* (although he did form this planet out of preexistent matter). For Mormonism, God, like man, is merely another creature in the universe. In the Mormon universe, God is not responsible for creating or sustaining matter, energy, natural laws, human personhood, moral principles, the process of salvation (or exaltation), or much of anything. In fact, instead of the universe being subject to Him (which is the biblical view), the Mormon God is subject to the universe. The Mormon God is far from omnipotent. He is not the God of the Bible.

CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF GOD <sup>37</sup>	MORMON CONCEPT OF GOD
1. Personal and incorporeal	1. Personal and corporeal (embodied)
2. Creator and sustainer of contingent existence	2. Organizer of the world, but subject to the laws and principles of a beginningless universe
3. Omnipotent	3. Limited in power
4. Omniscient	4. Increasing in knowledge*
5. Omnipresent in being	5. Localized in space
6. Unchanging and eternal	6. Changing and not eternal (as God)
7. Necessary and the only God	7. Contingent and one of many gods

\*Some Mormon authorities disagree on this point.

## NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* 7 vols., introduction and notes, B.H. Roberts, 2d rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: The Deseret Book Company, 1978), 6:305. (Hereafter HC)
2. Saint Augustine, *City of God* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1958), 5.10.
3. See Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 119-38; and Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 73-83.
4. HC, 6:305-6.
5. *Doctrine and Covenants*, 130:22.
6. See, for example, Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies," speech at Brigham Young University, 1 June 1980.
7. For an overview of the differing Mormon views on God's omniscience, see Blake T. Ostler, "The Mormon Concept of God," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Summer 1984): 76-80.
8. According to Ostler (in *Ibid.*, 76), these official pronouncements are recorded in James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965-75), 2:214-23; and *Millennial Star* 26 (21 Oct. 1865): 658-60.
9. Wilford Woodruff in *Journal of Discourses, by Brigham Young, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, His Two Counsellors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others*, 26 volumes, reported by G.D. Watt (Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1854-1886), 6:120. (Hereafter JD)
10. *Conference Report*, April 1901, p. 2.
11. Hyrum L. Andrus, *God, Man and the Universe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 175.
12. *Doctrine and Covenants*, 93:29.
13. Bruce McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 386-87, 516-17, 750-51.
14. See HC, 6:305-12.
15. HC, 6:476,474. See also McConkie, 577.
16. Brigham Young in JD, 7:333.
17. This chart, changed slightly for this pamphlet, originally appeared in Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish, *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis*, Studies in American Religion, vol. 55 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 38.

**Francis J. Beckwith, Ph.D.** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Whittier College (Whittier, Calif.).

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