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A Historiographical Approach

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## I. Introduction

In 1844, Joseph Smith gave a sermon that is now referred to as the "King Follett Discourse" (KFD). The doctrines put forth in KFD represented a sharp break from existing Christian theological orthodoxy. Indeed, those doctrines are still opposed to virtually all other Christian orthodoxies. Even though today's Mormon Church rejects many of these doctrines, they nonetheless had an important role in the development of contemporary Mormon theological orthodoxy, and their validity remains a matter of fierce debate among Mormon theologians.

KFD is clear and straightforward. Its main contentions are:

1. God was once a man; he became God through a process of spiritual development.

2. Human beings can become demi-Gods, or at least God-like, if they undergo a similar process.
3. Although there is a single supreme God, there also exist several lesser gods.
4. Although God did create the world, he did not do so *ex nihilo*; rather, he did it by working with pre-existing materials: he did not *create* the world so much as he *organized* it.
5. A given human being has always existed and will always exist: being human entails existing eternally, and existing eternally entails having always existed.

2-4 are corollaries of 1. Given that God was once a man, it follows that other humans can become Gods; and given that humans can become Gods, it follows that multiple gods exist. And given that God was once a person, it follows that, if he created the world, it was by reconfiguring existing materials.

It is not hard to understand what Joseph Smith is saying. What is hard to understand is why he said it. What exactly was his reasoning? What exactly was he hoping to accomplish?

In KFD, Smith puts forth arguments for his assertions, and those arguments are reasonably clear. But in KFD, Smith was not presenting the conclusions of arguments; he was presenting a vision: a clear, unequivocal, and extremely heterodox vision as to the nature of God and man's relationship thereto. And those arguments, even if assumed cogent, simply wouldn't lead anyone, including Joseph Smith himself, to accept such a vision. The merits of that vision lie in that vision itself, not in Joseph Smith's arguments for it, and the question remains: Where did Smith's vision come from?

A related question is: What did that vision lead to? In particular, what were its consequences for Mormonism? What role does it have in contemporary Mormon thought and how did it come to have that role?

This paper discusses a series of attempts to answer these questions, thereby showing how these beliefs have changed over time. The works discussed are: "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse" (1978), by Van Hale; "The Idea of Pre-

Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought” (1982), by Blake Ostler; “Elohim and Jehovah in Mormonism and the Bible” (1986), by Boyd Kirkland; “The Development of the Mormon Doctrine of God” (1989), also by Boyd Kirkland; Exploring Mormon Thought: Volume 1, The Attributes of God (2001), by Blake Ostler; “The Weeping God of Mormonism” (2002); “William Phelps's Paracletes” (2009), by Samuel Brown; and “What Is the Nature of God’s Progress?” (2021), by Matthew Bowman. The present work discusses these works in chronological order, taking note of cases where a given work either builds on or diverges from one of its predecessors in the series.

## **II. Smith’s Arguments for 1-5**

We will start by stating the arguments for 1-5 that Joseph Smith presents in KFD.

Smith’s argument for 1 is extremely straightforward: God resembles a man; therefore he is a man, albeit an exalted one. In Smith’s own words:

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... God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible, -- I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form -- like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked and conversed with him, as one man talks and communes with another” (Smith pp. 4-5). The argument here is the same: God resembles Adam, a human being; therefore, God is himself a human being.” (Smith pp. 3-4).

Let us restate this argument in our own words. We converse with God as we do with other humans. Jesus is the son of God, and Jesus cannot be the son of God unless God is human.

(If I am a human, my father is human; if my father is a panther, then I am a panther, not a human.) Also, God resembles Adam, who was a human being; indeed, in creating Adam, God created a replica of himself. For these reasons, God must himself be human.

This argument makes a number of assumptions, in particular that we do in fact converse with God and, more generally, that the Bible is factually accurate. But *given* those assumptions, it does stand to reason that God is a person. In the Bible, God thinks and emotes like a person; and his existence and nature become very hard to explain except on the assumption that we either (i) came from him, in which case he is a human or proto-human, or (ii) he came from us, in which case we are proto-Gods. Though not necessarily definitive, this line of reasoning certainly represents one way of modeling the data generated by the assumption that the Bible is literally accurate.

With respect to 2, it is ultimately a corollary of 1, this presumably being why Smith endorsed it.

With respect to 3, it too is a corollary of 1: if self-improvement is the road to Godliness, then it stands to reason that there are degrees of Godliness and that, besides God himself, there are many lesser Gods. That said, Smith provides exegetical arguments to the effect that, according to the Bible, there are multiple gods, for example:

I shall comment on the very first Hebrew word in the Bible; I will make a comment on the very first sentence of the history of the creation in the Bible -- *Berosheit*. I want to analyze the word. *Baith* -- in, by through, and everything else. *Rosh* -- the head. *Sheit* -- grammatical termination. When the inspired man wrote it, he did not put the baith there. An old Jew without any authority added the word; he thought it too bad to begin to talk about the head! It read first, "The head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods." That is the true meaning of the words. *Baurau* signifies to bring forth. If you do not believe it, you do not believe the learned man of God. Learned men can teach you no more than what I have told you. *Thus the head God brought forth the Gods in the grand council* (Smith p. 5).

With respect to 4, this too is a corollary of 1. Smith also provides an independent argument for it:

You ask the learned doctors why they say the world was made out of nothing; and they will answer, "Doesn't the Bible say He *created* the world?" And they infer, from the word create, that it must have been made out of nothing. Now, the word create came from the *baurau* which does not mean to create out of nothing; it means to organize; the same as a man would organize materials and build a ship. Hence, we infer that God had materials to organize the world out of chaos -- chaotic matter, which is element, and in which dwells all the glory. Element had an existence from the time he had. The pure principles of element are principles which can never be destroyed; they may be organized and reorganized, but not destroyed. They had no beginning, and can have no end.

There are actually two arguments here: one exegetical, the other philosophical. The exegetical argument is to the effect that, properly translated, the Bible says that God did not create the world so much as he organized it into existence. The philosophical argument is to the effect that, although the veritable building blocks of existence can be arranged in different ways, they are inherently incapable of being created or destroyed, the implication being that God could only have organized them, not brought them into existence.

With respect to 5, Smith puts forth three distinct arguments.

Argument #1: *God is immortal. People are God-like. Therefore, people are immortal.*

In Smith's own words:

We say that God himself is a self-existent being. Who told you so? It is correct enough; but how did it get into your heads? Who told you that man did not exist in like manner upon the same principles? Man does exist upon the same principles (Smith, p. 7).

Argument #2: *People are immortal. People could not be immortal if they were created. Therefore, people are immortal.*

In Smith's own words:

I am dwelling on the immortality of the spirit of man. Is it logical to say that the intelligence of spirits is immortal, and yet that it had a beginning? The intelligence of

spirits had not beginning, neither will it have an end. That is good logic. That which has a beginning may have an end. There never was a time when there were not spirits; for they are co-equal [co-eternal] with our Father in heaven.

*Argument #3: Intelligence cannot possibly be created. To create is to assemble, and there is no way to assemble intelligence. It either exists or it doesn't; and if it does, it is by virtue of being a fundamental constituent of reality. This means that it cannot be destroyed, since to be destroyed is to be disassembled; and it also means that it has always existed, since to come into existence is to be assembled.*

In Smith's own words:

Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age, and there is no creation about it. All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement (Smith, p. 8).

The implication underlying all of these arguments is that people are mini-Gods and must therefore be immortal, given that God is immortal. Consequently, 5 is ultimately a corollary of 1. 1 is to the effect that God is an exalted man. Therefore, when coupled with the assumption that God has always existed and always will, 1 entails 5.

In conclusion, 1 is the essence of the KFD, and 2-5 are merely corollaries of 1.

### **III. "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse" (1978) by Van Hale**

**Summary:** The most important contentions within KFD, at least in terms of its impact on Mormonism, are (this is a direct quotation from Van Hale, p. 213):

1. Men can become Gods.
2. There exist many gods.
3. The gods exist one above another innumerably, and
4. God was once as man now is.

Smith had put forth each of these doctrines prior to giving the KFD. Smith publicly affirmed (1) before publicly affirming any of the others; and judging by Smith's writings, he appears to have accepted 1 before accepting the others. This indicates that he did not come to accept them simultaneously. And the evidence---his writings and sermons---suggest that he accepted them sequentially, in the order given above. The evidence also suggests that he came to accept each one gradually. In each case, he started with vague anticipations of the idea in question, and over time he developed those anticipatory ideas into the idea itself.

It is unclear exactly how Smith came to accept 1-4. Judging by his writings, it appears to have been on the basis of direct revelations supplemented by careful, if questionable, textual analysis of Scripture.

Nonetheless, before giving the KFD, Smith publicly endorsed each of 1-4. Because of this, many in the just-founded Mormon Church regarded Smith as a "heretic" and "blasphemer." Indeed, there was such intense rancor towards Smith that he feared for his own life. Despite the pressure he was under to do so, Smith never softened his positions.

Even though Smith had publicly endorsed each of 1-4 before giving the KFD, it was in the KFD that he united these positions into a single coherent vision, and for this reason the KFD did more than any of Smith's previous sermons to shape Mormon thought. Consequently, even though many of Smith's contemporaries in the Mormon Church regarded each of 1-4 as heresy, each of them became pillars of Mormon theology.

*Commentary:* Van Hale's position is that Smith arrived at 1-4 one-by-one and, moreover, that he arrived at each gradually. This is consistent with what Smith says in his sermons; for in his pre-KFD sermons, he does not state them as starkly as he does in KFD.

But another possibility is that, long before giving the KFD, he had already completely accepted each of 1-4 but, not wanting to alienate his colleagues and followers, refrained from stating them as directly as he did in KFD.

I personally believe this to be the case, suggesting some references in footnote 1. Smith had a religious epiphany at age 14, and this epiphany involved his accepting 1-4 in exactly the form in which he states them in the KFD. Not wanting to be ostracized, he held his tongue over the next few decades and spoke his mind only after he had acquired a certain degree of standing and only, moreover, when he suspected that he only had a short time to live.

#### IV. “The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought” (1982)

by Blake Ostler

**Summary:** In KFD, Smith asserts that human beings, like God, cannot come into existence and must therefore have always existed, this being the doctrine of “pre-existence.” Smith’s reasoning is that, although minds can obviously change, they cannot be assembled. Therefore, they either exist or they don’t; if they do, they have always existed.

A corollary of the doctrine of pre-existence is that God cannot bring people into existence. God is omnipotent in the sense that he can do whatever can be done, not in the sense that he can do what it is logically impossible to do; and for the reason just given, it is logically impossible to bring a mind into existence. For this reason, the doctrine of pre-existence is heretical, at least relative to Christian orthodoxy.

Smith did not arrive at the doctrine of pre-existence instantaneously. He developed it over time. We know this from his writings. This doctrine, though heretical relative to Christian orthodoxy, has roots in Western philosophy. Leibniz held a version of it. (According to Leibniz, minds are “monads” that cannot be created or destroyed.) Plato also held this view, at least implicitly, his position being that minds are “simples” that, as such, cannot be created or destroyed and must therefore exist eternally, in both directions.<sup>1</sup> []

Post-Smith Mormon theologians were less willing than Smith to depart from Christian orthodoxy and therefore had difficulty compatibilizing the doctrine of pre-existence with what they wanted Mormon theology to be. At the same time, Mormon theologians were under pressure to accept this doctrine, given that KFD is to a large extent definitive of Mormon theology. As a result, Mormon theologians continue to debate the merits of this view.

**Commentary:** The doctrine of pre-existence is in fact heretical—and for more than one reason. First, it does at least arguably imply that God’s power is limited. More importantly, it puts people on the same footing as God. If people have always existed alongside God, then not only did God not create them; they are in some respect his peers. The doctrine of pre-existence thus underscores Smith’s main point in KFD, namely, that God was once a man and, therefore, that people can achieve God-status. Finally, for the reasons given earlier, I personally believe

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s note: Plato also held that we have a priori knowledge that we inherited from our past selves, and this doctrine is consistent with his view that we have always existed.



that Smith arrived at the doctrine of pre-existence instantaneously; I believe that it was part of the religious epiphany he had as a 14-year-old. His position on the matters appears to change in writings, but the reason, I propose, is that he was becoming more comfortable stating what he already believed.

## **V. “Elohim and Jehovah in Mormonism and the Bible” (1986) by Boyd Kirkland.**

**Summary:** According to Christian orthodoxy, God (Jehovah), Jesus, and the Holy Ghost are different embodiments of a single entity, as opposed to being altogether distinct entities. In other words, orthodox Christianity is unitarian, as opposed to trinitarian. This is a consequence of the fact that Christianity is monotheistic; for Christianity could not be monotheistic unless God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost were indeed distinct entities, given that each is a divinity, and therefore a God, of some kind or other.

In Mormonism, God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost are indeed distinct entities. This is largely thanks to Joseph Smith’s work. At the beginning of his career, Smith was a unitarian. But his views shifted over the years. In his Lectures on Faith, he takes the position that Jesus, being the son of God, must indeed be distinct from God. This was one of his first breaks from a unitarian view. In that same work, he takes the view that the Holy Ghost is the mind of God, as opposed to being an aspect of God. Later, he simply takes the position that the Holy Ghost is distinct from God, any relationship between them being one of kinship or similarity.

There are innumerable references in scripture to various different gods. Consequently, Smith’s trinitarianism has a solid basis in scripture, however heterodox it may be with respect to Christian orthodoxy.

**Commentary:** Christian authorities clearly want to conceive of their religion as being monotheistic. To this end, they hold that God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost are “one”, even though they cannot possibly be one. Assuming scripture to be accurate, Jesus is indeed the son of God, not God himself; the Holy Ghost is a benevolent but impersonal force; and God is an exalted person-like being. In Christianity, there is a single *supreme* divine being, but there are at least three divine beings. Therefore, Christianity isn’t strictly monotheistic, and Smith is simply calling Christianity out on this fact.

The KFD is not directly concerned with the identity, or lack thereof, of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. But the KFD explicitly states that, although there is only one supreme God, there are multiple gods, and it is therefore compatible with trinitarianism. Also, in the KFD, Smith explicitly references the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and it appears to be his intention in doing so to refer to three distinct entities.

## **VI. "The Development of the Mormon Doctrine of God" (1989) by Boyd Kirkland.**

*Summary:* Early in his career (from around 1820 to around 1835), Smith had an unambiguously monotheistic position. During this period, he produced a translation of the Bible, now known as "Joseph Smith's Translation" (JST); and in JST, he deliberately omitted statements that could be interpreted as alleging the existence of multiple gods. He also altered parts of the new testament that could be taken to support the position that God and Jesus are distinct entities.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, Smith's outlook gradually became less monotheistic. In the (1835) "Lectures on Faith", Smith, who presided over the committee that wrote the lectures, regards God and Jesus as distinct entities. As for the Holy Ghost, he holds it to be identical with the mind of God—a position intermediate between regarding it as "one" with God and regarding it as altogether distinct from God.

Beginning in 1835, Smith began to study Hebrew, and this appears to have accelerated his shift from monotheism to polytheism. The likely reason is that, when reading scripture in the original Hebrew, he found that many distinct terms, likely having a plurality of different referents, had been indiscriminately translated into English as "God" or "Jehova."

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<sup>2</sup> To quote Kirkland: "Several scriptural passages given through Smith indicate clearly that he saw no contradiction in having one god simultaneously be the Father who sent Jesus as well as Jesus himself. For example, Ether 4:12 in the Book of Mormon plainly states, 'He that will not believe me will not believe the Father who sent me. For behold, I am the Father.' A close examination of Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible (JST) also reveals his early monotheistic beliefs. Smith consciously attempted to remove all reference to a plurality of gods from the King James Bible (KJV). He also changed several passages to identify more clearly the Father and the Son as the same god. For example, he revised Luke 10:22 (in JST) to have Jesus teach that 'no man knoweth that the Son is the Father, and the Father is the Son, but him to whom the Son will reveal it'" (Kirkland 1989, p. 1).

During Smith's so-called "Nauvoo" period (1839-1844), Smith's theology underwent several additional shifts, many of them described in the (1842) "Book of Abraham." God, he came to believe, himself has a father. God, though supreme, belongs to a "council of Gods." Both God and Jesus are corporeal. Finally, human beings can become Gods. These ideas are put forth in the (1844) KFD.

*Commentary:* As previously stated, there is a respect in which Smith's theology is heretical; but there is a deeper sense in which it isn't. If Jesus really is the son of God, then God is human. And if God is human, then humans can become gods.

Here I would like to venture a speculative point. Judaism is and always has been resolutely monotheistic. Historically, monotheism is more the exception than the rule. Christianity may represent a revival of polytheistic instincts. For a variety of reasons, early Doctors of the Church did not want to openly embrace polytheism. At the same time, they needed there to be at least two divinities, God and Jesus, since the latter's divinity is the cornerstone of Christianity. Consequently, Church Doctors affirmed, absurdly, that God and Jesus, though two, are one. As for the Holy Ghost, this, I speculate, was posited as a way to let God and Jesus be one: though obviously distinct, they both partake of this "Holy Spirit." But after being posited, so I would further speculate, the Holy Ghost simply became a third divinity, forcing Church Fathers to say that God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost, though three, are one.

In any case, Joseph Smith's theology doesn't have this problem; he simply says that God and Jesus and any other existing divinities are simply distinct. Finally, the cornerstone of Smith's theology is that Jesus was divine, this being why Smith's theology is indeed Christian. But given that Jesus was obviously human, it logically follows that his father is human, this being what Smith's theology explicitly says; and it logically follows from this that human beings are capable of becoming godly, which Smith's theology also explicitly states.

## **VII. Exploring Mormon Thought: Volume 1, The Attributes of God (2001) by Blake Ostler**

*Note:* The following summary is concerned only with two sections of Chapter 3, namely, "The Lectures on Faith" and Joseph Smith and the Foundational Scriptures", as these are the most relevant parts of this work.

**Summary:** Throughout his career, Smith was concerned with the question: What must God be like if human beings are to have the kind of relationship with him that they are supposed to have? In other words, what must God be like if he is to discharge his duties towards human beings?

In taking this question as primary, Smith was breaking with Christian tradition as well as philosophical tradition. Philosophers of religion and Christian theologians tend to focus on logical puzzles relating to God's existence and nature. (For example: If God is all-knowing, then he knows what it is like to suffer; but he cannot know what it is like to suffer unless he is vulnerable and therefore not all-powerful: so how can God's omnipotence be compatibilized with his omniscience?) Most Christian theologians take as a given God is all-knowing and all-powerful and then try to reconcile that with the presumption that God cares about us and is otherwise sufficiently human to serve as our guardian. Smith starts with the assumption that God is psychologically able and willing to serve as a guardian and attributes only as much power and sapience to God as is compatible with this fact.

Relatedly, Smith's theology, unlike traditional Christian theology, is not concerned with providing logical proofs of God's existence. No attempts are made to deduce God's existence, let alone his nature, from first principles—to show, for example, that God, *qua* perfect being, cannot fail to exist; or to show that God's existence is a precondition for natural law. For Smith, God is known through revelation or on the basis of the testimony of those who have had such revelations. This is significant because attempts to prove that God exists inevitably turn Him into an impersonal force or principle, stripping him of his ability to have a relationship with us: If “God” is “a maximally perfect being”, “a guarantor of natural law”, or an “unmoved mover”, then he is unlikely to be sufficiently like us that we could possibly have a meaningful relationship with him.

Also, Smith does not hold that God is all-knowing or all-powerful. He holds that he is *as* knowing and powerful as he can be *while* still being able to be emotionally invested in us.

For traditional Christian theology, God does not change. For Smith, God is capable of changing. This is a corollary of his view that God is able to have emotional ties to us. A being that doesn't change at all doesn't change for us, and a being that is completely unresponsive to us doesn't care for us and is not otherwise our guardian. Smith's belief that God was a man is consistent with his position that God changes.

Smith's theology changed over the years. But all of the changes that occurred in his theological system were internal to the assumption that God is first and foremost a being who is sufficiently like us that he can have a relationship with us.

In Smith's theology, God is "immanent" in the spatiotemporal world, meaning that he is present throughout it, in much the same way as gravity or light. Because God is immanent, we can interact with him; if he were detached from reality, we couldn't.

According to Smith, *all* reality is animate; indeed, reality consists of consciousness that is individuated into discrete consciousnesses. At the same time, Smith does not hold that God *is* this generalized consciousness; he holds that God is but one of the many consciousnesses into which it is individuated, with the qualification that he is the most important one.

Smith started off as a strict monotheist and ended up as a polytheist. According to the theology that Smith accepted at the end of his life, God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost are distinct entities but they jointly constitute a single "Godhead."

**Commentary:** Practicing Christians operate on the assumption that God cares about them and also has the power to act on his concern for them. Christian theologians start with the assumption that God is utterly perfect or otherwise not of this world and then trying to reconcile that with the presumption that God is caring. This is an exercise in futility. An all-knowing creature wouldn't care about us. For it would be emotionally completely different from us; indeed, it wouldn't have any emotions at all, since emotion presupposes partiality and therefore ignorance. An all-powerful being wouldn't care about us; for such a being would have no vulnerabilities and would therefore have none of the emotions that presuppose vulnerability—meaning that it would have no emotions at all and would therefore have none concerning us. If one's starting point is that God is all powerful or all-knowing or otherwise perfect, there is no way to explain why he would care about us.

Smith sidesteps this problem. Smith's starting point is that God cares about us and guides us, and he attributes the requisite properties to God—in particular, the requisite levels of sapience and power. And in taking that as his starting point, Smith is able to validate religious practice. From the viewpoint of a religious person, God's primary function is to guide us and care about us. That being so, he must be *relatively* powerful and knowing, but he needn't be absolutely so.

## VIII. “The Weeping God of Mormonism” (2002) by Eugene England.

**Summary:** In the Book of Moses, written or otherwise channeled by Joseph Smith in 1830, God addresses Enoch, a prophet, and discusses how upset he is that human beings mistreat each other. In the process, God actually weeps. Enoch is puzzled, since he cannot understand how an all-powerful being would feel the need to weep. For one only weeps when one lacks control, and God is presumably always in control. Enoch says as much to God, and God responds by saying that his powers are limited. In particular, he cannot do away with human freedom without doing away with human beings themselves, which he does not wish to do, since human beings are his most valued creation.

Of course, God could still obliterate human beings. But he chooses not to because he cares about them, and he cares about them because he has emotions, and he has emotions because is *not* all-powerful. He is certainly relatively powerful, but he is sufficiently lacking in power that his psychological constitution is still basically that of a human being, with the result that he can emote.

Thus, Joseph Smith does not attempt to reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing God. Rather, Smith denies that God is all-powerful. And there is independent support for this position. For an all-powerful God couldn’t emote and therefore couldn’t emote about us; and such a God would not be *our* God, even though he was indeed God.

**Commentary:** For Smith, God is our protector, which means that he is powerful enough to protect us without being so powerful as to lack the ability to care about us. England’s article does a good job of making it clear that is indeed how Smith conceives of God.

## IX. “William Phelps’s Paracletes” (2021) by Samuel Brown

**Note:** This article consists of two parts: “Paracletes” by William Phelps, along with a preface by Samuel Brown. “Paracletes” is a work of Mormon fiction written in 1845. I will summarize “Paracletes” itself and then briefly summarize Brown’s take on it.

**Summary of “Paracletes”:** “Paracletes” is a fictionalization of Joseph Smith’s view as to how God, with the help of other lesser gods, brought humans into existence. “Paracletes” is

primarily concerned with the backstory, that is, with the activities of these various gods prior to, and involved in, the creation of human beings.

The story is quite byzantine, but the gist is easily stated. God existed before human beings did. But he did not exist alone. He existed along side many lesser gods. Indeed, he was part of a veritable world consisting of gods. Moreover, God, though supreme, worked together with a “council of Gods.” God’s relationship to the council-members was not that of lord to vassal but was rather that of chairman to board-member: he had the final vote, so to speak, but he cooperated with the council-members, giving weight to their input, rather than simply issuing orders.

One day, God and the council decide that it behooves them to create a world of self-aware, intelligent but mortal beings. These creatures are to have “agency”: the ability to make their own decisions. God and the council consider various different possible worlds that these creatures might inhabit, each with its own merits and demerits. None of these worlds will be perfect, they realize, since these creatures will have agency, which they will inevitably abuse. But the objective is not to create a perfect world; it is to create a world where humans have the opportunity to perfect themselves.

God and the council finally choose a world to actualize. They call it “Idumia.” When actualizing Idumia, God does not act alone. He works with the council and also with his son, who functions as his right-hand man. The son is not referred to as “Jesus” but that is clearly who he is. One important fact about the actualization-process is that God creates a first man, in whom he partially embodies himself.

***Summary of Brown’s Preface to “Paracletes”:*** “Paracletes” provides a vivid representation of Smith’s thought concerning the origins of humanity, specifically God’s role therein. By presenting the intricacies of Smith’s thought in the form of a story, “Paracletes” makes those intricacies intelligible and in the process illuminates otherwise obscure aspects of Mormon theology.

***Commentary:*** “Paracletes” does *not* provide a useful illustration of Smith’s thought: it actually obscures it. The material on which “Paracletes” is based is drawn from the periphery of Smith’s thought, but it treats it as being central to his thought, making Smith’s theology seem cartoonish and arbitrary.

The essence of Smith's theology is given by the aphorism (due to Lorenzo Snow): "As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become." In other words, God is an evolved man, and a human being can therefore evolve into a state of relative Godliness. This entails that Godliness comes in degrees, and it therefore entails that there are, or at least could be, various beings having varying degrees of God status. The motivation for this position is that unless God is at least partly human, he is unlikely to have the ability or inclination to function as our guardian. "Paracletes" spins off this defensible idea into an L. Ron Hubbard style fantasy.

#### **X. "What Is the Nature of God's Progress?" (2021) by Matthew Bowman**

**Summary:** The essence of KFD and indeed of Smith's theology is that God was human and only became a God through a process of self-actualization. Later Mormon theologians had no choice but to accept some version or other of this claim, but many balked at accepting it outright and opted for softened versions of it. For example, some held that, although God has become more godly over time, there was never a time when he was not God. Others held that, although God himself was always a God, there have existed human beings who achieved a certain degree of godliness.

There have also been Mormon theologians who pushed back against this tendency, by advocating the very theology that Smith advocated. Because Smith's theology is consistent with the supposition that creatures evolve, it had support from evolution-positive Mormon theologians, of whom there were many in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century owing to the widespread evolutionary-mania that had taken hold of thinkers of the time.

Mormon theology as a whole has remained in a limbo between Smith's own theology and these softened versions of it.

**Commentary:** Bowman writes that:

Orson Pratt took the notion that God was not always God seriously, but he offered a more abstract version of divine progress than the lineal parentage statements of Young or Hyde, instead teaching that in some way God's divinity is eternal and self-existent. From the King Follett Discourse, Pratt posited that "the primary powers of all material substance must be intelligent" and that therefore the totality of that intelligence, which was interconnected, self-existent, and eternal, was in fact what Pratt called the "Great God." The being humans



called “God,” then, partook of the eternal divine attributes that the “Great God” had always possessed as a singular manifestation of the eternal principles of divinity. Pratt thus insisted that “God” in the form of the “Great God” had indeed always existed and always possessed all the attributes of divinity, but that any particular “God” who entered into communion with the “Great God” might indeed have had a history of growth and change. He thus saw both eternity and progress in Smith’s ideas (Bowman 2021, p. 4).

What would Joseph Smith say about Pratt’s position? He would reject it. According to the KFD, God was once a man and he developed a god. What Pratt puts forth is incompatible with this doctrine of Smith’s. Pratt’s position is pantheism coupled with the position that matter is in fact sentient. Pratt’s position is therefore very far from—and logically incompatible with—the position that some person became what is now God. Pratt, as Bowman observes, is one of the most “Smith-positive” theologians in Mormon theological history: and yet Pratt’s theology repudiates the very essence of Smith’s theology, namely, the contention that God was once a man. This shows how intensely Mormon theologians resisted Smith’s doctrines, even while having to operate within a framework at least partially defined by those doctrines.

Bowman gives other another striking example of this ambivalence in Mormon thought, writing that:

Far more controversial than the debate over God’s origins has been the notion only hinted at in Smith’s discourses: that God continues to progress. Woodruff recorded Joseph Smith describing Jesus’s intentions in the King Follett Discourse: “I will give to the father which will add to his glory, He will take a Higher exaltation & I will take his place and am also exalted.” This implied, at least, that God the Father’s divinity continues in some way to expand. For some, the idea was self-evident, and those who were most vocal in insisting that God did progress also tended to argue that God’s progress was qualitative: that God is increasing in knowledge and power, changing and developing even as human beings do the same... As the twentieth century went on, however, [such] ideas were increasingly marginalized. Rather, many Church leaders came to conclude that in referring to “higher exaltation,” Joseph Smith meant that God’s glory increased as Jesus worked out his mission and human beings progressed. They found the notion that God continues to gain knowledge and power incompatible with scriptural declarations that God possesses all power and

wisdom. Elder Neal A. Maxwell worried that “some have wrongly assumed God’s progress is related to His acquisition of additional knowledge. . . . Mortals should not aspire to teach God that He is not omniscient by adding qualifiers that He has never used in the scriptures. Job rightly asked, ‘Shall any teach God knowledge?’”<sup>24</sup> McConkie said, “God is not progressing in knowledge, truth, virtue, wisdom, or any of the attributes of godliness. . . . He is progressing in the sense that his creations increase, his dominions expand, his spirit offspring multiply, and more kingdoms are added to his domains.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, McConkie, whose mind worked in definitives, denounced as one of his “Seven Deadly Heresies” the idea that “God is progressing in knowledge and is learning new truths. This is false—utterly, totally, and completely. There is not one sliver of truth in it. (Pratt, 2021, p. 70-71).

There is no doubt as to what Smith’s position in the KFD was: God continues to learn and to grow. An immediate corollary is that God is not omniscient and never was. In the above passage, we learn of two schools of thought in within Mormon theology. According to one of those schools, Smith indeed said that God continues to acquire knowledge. According to the other, Smith did not say that, and it is to be rejected as “heresy.” Once again we see how profoundly ambivalent the Mormon Church is about Smith’s doctrines. On the one hand, it operates within a framework defined by them. On the other hand, the doctrines it officially countenances are simply incompatible with them.

Taken as a history of Mormon theological thought, Bowman’s article is unexceptionable. That said, I personally feel that it should be supplemented with a follow-up paper that is concerned with the question: Is anything left of Smith’s thought in contemporary Mormon theology? For it seems that the history of Mormon theology is a history of attempts to run away from Smith’s thought under the pretext of developing it, and it is worth investigating to what extent this is actually the case.

## **Conclusion**

According to orthodox Christian theology, God has a dual mandate. On the one hand, he is supposed to be all-knowing and all-powerful. On the other hand, he is supposed to care about us.

These are incompatible mandates. Orthodox Christianity suffers from this incoherence because it starts with the supposition that God is perfect and on that basis tries to validate the presumption that God is emotionally invested in us. But there is no way to do this since an all-powerful, all-knowing being wouldn't have emotions and therefore wouldn't have any emotions concerning us.

There is the additional fact that the concept of a sapient, all-powerful being is incoherent. Being sapient involves being responsive to change; being responsive to change involves being vulnerable; and being vulnerable involves not being all-powerful. Sapience is therefore incompatible with omnipotence.

Also, according to orthodox Christian theology, God has a human son but is not himself human or otherwise biological, which is absurd. Finally, God and Jesus, though related as father and son, are supposed to be one entity, which is absurd.

Orthodox Christian theology is therefore incorrigibly incoherent, and the reason is that it starts with the incoherent supposition that God is absolutely perfect.

Joseph Smith's theology is free from these incoherencies. This is because it starts with the supposition that God is our guardian, and it attributes only as much power and sapience to him as is compatible with that supposition. A God that cares about us, Smith realizes, must be a God that is capable of changing and evolving. Coupled with the fact that, by supposition, God is a kind of exalted human, this suggests that God is a highly evolved person---a being that started off as a person and developed into a God. Consequently, Smith's theology, unlike orthodox Christian theology, is compatible with the fact that Jesus, God's alleged son, is a person. Finally, God and Jesus are distinct in Smith's theology, as they must be, given that they are related as father and son.

It is not clear exactly what motivated Smith to accept these views. In the King Follett Discourse (KFD), he provides both broadly philosophical and narrowly exegetical justifications for his views. The philosophical justifications are similar to those just given. The philosophical arguments are much more compelling than the exegetical arguments, and it stands to reason that he produced the exegetical arguments after philosophical insights had already led him to accept those positions. Moreover, these philosophical insights were coded into a religious epiphany, since they would likely not otherwise have compelled Smith to break so completely from Christian orthodoxy.

We have reviewed eight works concerning Smith's theology. With one exception, each did a creditable job of illuminating either some aspect of Smith's theology, as represented in the KFD, or some aspect of its backstory or effect on Mormon theology. The exception was Samuel Brown's "William Phelps's Paracletes." This comprised the text of William Phelps's Paracletes, a work of theological fiction, as well as Samuel Brown's assessment of its significance. The Paracletes is supposedly a fictionalization of Smith's views as to what was involved in God's creating man. But it is in fact based on material that is on the periphery of Smith's system or is simply absent from it and connected only by literary license on Phelps's part. As a result, Smith's cogent and carefully thought-out theological system is falsely represented as an absurd fairy tale spun out of whole cloth; and Brown's contention that the Paracletes "provides a crucial window on the complex network of beliefs undergirding [Smith's theology]" is not accurate.

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