Melodie Moench Charles, “Book of Mormon Christology”

Martin S. Tanner

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Book of Mormon Christology is not a new subject, but it is an important one. Melodie Moench Charles begins her essay on the topic with a personal anecdote. She relates how when teaching an adult Sunday School class (presumably Gospel Doctrine) she discussed Mosiah 15:1-4, which she quotes as follows:

God himself shall come down among the children of men . . . being the Father and the Son—The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and the Son—And they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth. (p. 81)

Charles told her class she “saw no good way to reconcile Abinadi’s [sic] words with the current Mormon belief that God and his son Jesus Christ are separate and distinct beings” (p. 81). According to Charles, because of her remarks, she was accused of “crossing the line of propriety and wisdom” by suggesting that “a prophet could teach incorrect doctrines about God” (p. 81). Charles goes on to say that for pointing out what to her is an “obvious difference” between Abinadi’s statement and “current church doctrine” she was “demoted to teaching nursery” (p. 81).

At this point, the reader is left asking: (1) Why does Charles not see a way to reconcile Abinadi’s statement with current Mormon beliefs? (2) What is this “obvious difference” Charles sees between Abinadi’s and the Latter-day Saint Church’s doctrine of God? and (3) Why does Charles consider a calling to teach nursery a demotion? Although Charles leaves no clue to her thoughts on the last question, she does take a stab at answering the
first two. The cause of the difference between Abinadi’s and the Latter-day Saint Church’s doctrine of God, Charles tells us, is that our idea of a restored gospel leads us to believe “Abinadi’s religious knowledge must match our own regardless of what his words say” (p. 82) while the idea of “modern revelation” or “precept upon precept” has caused current Latter-day Saint Christology to differ from Book of Mormon Christology (p. 82).

To me this sounds more like an unsubstantiated conclusion than an explanation of what the difference is and how it purportedly occurred. Apparently, Charles believes the Latter-day Saint Church has adopted two incompatible positions. First, Elder Bruce R. McConkie has described the Church as one of restored truths:

“[O]ur concern is to be guided by the Spirit and to interpret the ancient word in harmony with latter day revelation.” “As it happens—it could not be otherwise with an unchangeable God—what we have conforms to what the ancient saints had. . . . The everlasting gospel; the eternal priesthood; the identical ordinances of salvation and exaltation; the never-varying doctrines of salvation; the same Church and kingdom; the keys of the kingdom, which alone can seal men up unto eternal life—all these have always been the same in all ages; and it shall be so everlastingly on this earth.” (p. 82)¹

Second, the Church believes that with continuing revelation God will reveal “more knowledge . . . ‘line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little’ ” (p. 82, quoting Isaiah 28:9–13; D&C 98:12; 128:21). Charles somehow believes this new knowledge requires us to reject some of Brigham Young’s teachings as false, to discard prior teachings of Church leaders—like black males not being allowed to hold the priesthood—and to reject some biblical teachings as baby stories that have been outgrown (p. 82). The idea that new revelation may expand and actually be compatible with old revelation, rather than be contradictory to it, seems to escape Charles entirely.

Again, begging the question of what the difference actually is between Abinadi’s Christology and current Latter-day Saint Christology, Charles asserts:

When we explore what the Book of Mormon says, its christology or doctrines concerning Christ differ from the christology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since at least the 1840s. To give the Book of Mormon’s ideas a context this essay will show some of what the Book of Mormon says about Jesus Christ and will compare that with what Jews at the time of Jesus’ birth were expecting the Messiah to be, with what Christians after his death believed he was, and with current Mormon beliefs. (pp. 82–83, emphasis added)

At this point, pulling your hair out, you want to call directory assistance, get Charles’s phone number and ask her what the words difference and differ mean to her here. If they mean “contradictory” and Charles can show that current and past Latter-day Saint Christology, Book of Mormon Christology, and first-century C.E. Jewish messianism are contradictory, then she may have something. But if her idea of “different” means not identical but still compatible, then Charles’s basic thesis is flawed. After all, giving Charles the benefit of the doubt that somehow Abinadi’s Christology is different from current Latter-day Saint Christology, still no problem exists if the ideas are compatible.

Charles seems to believe that Abinadi’s Christology is incompatible with current Latter-day Saint Christology and that the differences she sees are contradictory, because she begins her essay with the thought, “I saw no good way to reconcile Abindadi’s [sic] words with the current Mormon belief that God and his son Jesus Christ are separate and distinct beings” (p. 81, emphasis added).

Charles may not have carefully thought through the issues. The trap she has fallen into is that she equates Christological “differences” with Christological “contradictions.” She seems to believe that if ideas of Christology are different they must be mutually exclusive. This is flawed logic. After all, would it not be astounding, and probably a bit suspect, if current and past Latter-day Saint Christology, Book of Mormon Christology, and first
century C.E. Jewish messianism were identical in every way? For years, scholars have discussed the “difference” in the Christology of each of the Gospel accounts and, indeed, in the other books in the New Testament canon. But most have not come to the conclusion that the Christologies in the various New Testament books are incompatible. At the end of Charles’s introduction, the reader is left wondering exactly what differences she perceives in the Christologies of Abinadi and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Charles’s essay contains other flaws as well. She sometimes claims Book of Mormon Christology is too much like the Bible’s. At other times, she claims it is too different from the Bible’s. Her criteria for deciding which portions are too alike and which too different are never explained.

**Krister Stendahl’s Analysis of Third Nephi**

Before proceeding with her four-part comparison of Book of Mormon Christology, Jewish messianism at the time of Christ, Christian Christology, and current Latter-day Saint Christology, Charles takes a diversion into the ideas expressed by the then dean of the Harvard Theological Seminary, Krister Stendahl. Charles has bought into Stendahl’s idea that 3 Nephi 12–14 was “Joseph Smith’s attempt to improve the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew” (p. 83, emphasis added) by magnifying the Christ found in Matthew into something more. For example, according to Stendahl and Charles, the mortal Jesus in Matthew became supramortal in 3 Nephi; doubting Thomas in Matthew touching Jesus’ wounds becomes in 3 Nephi a multitude doing the same; in Matthew Jesus heals afflicted people he encounters, but in 3 Nephi he heals everyone who is afflicted in any manner; and in Matthew he multiplies existing loaves and fishes, but in

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3 Nephi he creates food *ex nihilo* rather than by multiplying existing food (p. 83). The flaw in Stendahl’s (and hence Charles’s) analysis is that they analyze 3 Nephi 12–14 as if it were simply another version of the actual events portrayed in Matthew, when it is not. With the exception of the doubting Thomas episode, the book of Matthew examples cited by Stendahl all describe Jesus during his mortal ministry. In contrast, the entire episode in 3 Nephi took place *after* the resurrection. Would we expect a resurrected Jesus to act “supramortal”? Of course. In the New Testament Jesus’ actions appear more miraculous after his resurrection as well. He appeared in closed rooms when all the doors were shut (John 20:19, 26); appeared in the midst of the disciples without being recognized (Luke 24:30–32); influenced the same apostles who were bewildered, afraid, and ran away when he was arrested (Matthew 26:56) in such a way that they were made ready (Luke 24:32; Acts 1:3) to go out and preach the gospel to the entire world (Acts 1:8); and departed into heaven while his disciples watched in awe (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9–11). The dichotomy is not between Matthew and 3 Nephi, but rather between the mortal and resurrected Jesus. This is to be expected and is perfectly compatible with New Testament descriptions.

Charles ends her Stendahl analysis with the baffling statement, “Unlike Jesus’ New Testament disciples, good people in the Book of Mormon never had misconceptions about Christ’s identity or his roles because they had almost no ambiguous information to mislead them.” How does Charles come to this conclusion? In what way were New Testament disciples misled? What makes Charles believe good people in the Book of Mormon never had misconceptions about Christ’s identity or his roles? Charles never lets us know how she came to this conclusion. Is she unaware that, according to the Book of Mormon, King Limhi’s subjects, King Lamoni, and many other people prior to the birth of Christ, and

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5 King Limhi’s subjects have such a misconception about Jesus that they killed “a prophet of the Lord, . . . a chosen man of God, who . . . prophesied of . . . Christ” (Mosiah 7:26). The prophet was killed specifically “because he said this [about Christ]” (Mosiah 7:28).

6 King Lamoni believed that Ammon was “the Great Spirit” (Alma 18:2).

7 The Book of Mormon contains several accounts of people who were misled into believing that Christ was just a foolish tradition of their fathers and
others after his coming\(^8\)—all “good people” in the Book of Mormon—had a few misconceptions or at the very least some lack of knowledge about Jesus and his gospel message? The Nephite legacy in the Book of Mormon is one of “good people” who misunderstood Jesus and his message—they failed so completely to live his gospel that they were ultimately destroyed.\(^9\) They were like the Matthean Jews who rejected Jesus’ message and were wiped out in 68 A.D. as Christ had prophesied.\(^10\)

This ends Charles’s introductory comments. Next, she (1) examines what Book of Mormon people believed about Christ derived from their own experiences and from revelations foretelling his coming, (2) compares these beliefs to Near Eastern people’s expectations about their Messiah, whose coming was foretold in Old Testament prophecies, (3) describes Book of Mormon

would not really come. See, e.g., Alma 21:7–11: Aaron asks certain Amalekites whether they believe “the Son of God shall come to redeem mankind from their sins?” He is answered “We do not believe in these foolish traditions.” In 2 Nephi 32:7 we read that Nephi was constrained by the Spirit to stop telling certain people more about the gospel because they would not “understand great knowledge, when it is given unto them in plainness, even as plain as word can be.” In Jacob 7:10–11 the Nephites were chastened because they did not “understand” the scriptures, which “truly testify of Christ.” In Alma 33:16 we read that the people would “not understand” the mercies “bestowed upon them because of thy Son.”

\(^8\) When Christ first appeared to the Nephites he said “ye are weak, that ye cannot understand all my words which I am commanded of the Father to speak unto you at this time” (3 Nephi 17:2). In Mormon 9:7 we read of Nephites who “deny the revelations of God, and say that they are done away, that there are no revelations, nor prophecies, nor gifts, nor healing, nor speaking with tongues, and the interpretation of tongues.” In the next verse the criticism continues, making it clear that these individuals misunderstand Christ’s message: “He that denieth these things knoweth not the gospel of Christ; yea, he has not read the scriptures; if so, he does not understand them” (Mormon 9:8). Toward the end of the Book of Mormon, Mormon himself laments, “O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you!” (Mormon 6:17).

\(^9\) Mormon mourns after the final battle in which the Nephites are slaughtered because they rejected Christ’s message, “Behold, if ye had not done this, ye would not have fallen” (Mormon 6:18).

\(^10\) In Matthew 24:2 Jesus tells his disciples that the temple would be destroyed; this occurred when the Romans sacked Jerusalem in about 70 A.D. Jesus further warned those listening that when the temple was defiled, it was time to immediately “flee into the mountains” (Matthew 24:16).
Christology, focusing on Christ as the Father, comparing this theology to other Christian theology, and (4) examines the current Mormon belief that Jesus is Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament (pp. 83–84).

I. Book of Mormon Christology

Charles begins her discussion of Book of Mormon Christology by summarizing several Book of Mormon scriptures. She begins the third paragraph in this section by saying, “People in the Book of Mormon taught that during his earthly mission in Palestine Jesus would have a mortal body subject to temptation, pain, hunger, thirst, fatigue, sorrow, grief, suffering, and death” (p. 84). So far, so good. Charles then makes the odd comment, “However, Book of Mormon people did not necessarily believe that this meant he actually was mortal during his ministry on earth” (p. 84). In an attempt to bolster this insupportable position that Book of Mormon people did not believe Jesus was mortal, Charles goes on to cite Book of Mormon scriptures about Christ’s earthly ministry wherein he is described as “the Lord Omnipotent” who would “come down from heaven among the children of men” with “power,” that he would perform miracles and suffer “even more than man can suffer,” that he would be called “the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning,” and that his own people, the Jews, would misunderstand and “consider him a man” (p. 84, citing Mosiah 3:5–9, 17). Charles then goes on to quote Book of Mormon scriptures that indicate Jesus was a God during his earthly ministry (p. 85). Charles sees as contradictory, or incompatible, the concept which runs through Latter-day Saint thought as well as through mainstream Christianity that Jesus was both deity and mortal, at the same time, while on the earth.11 This idea

11 See, e.g., William Barclay, professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at Glasgow University, Scotland, in his highly regarded work Jesus as They Saw Him: New Testament Interpretations of Jesus (1962; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), who devotes an entire chapter to Jesus as “man” and another entire chapter to Jesus as “God.” Barclay states:

It may come as something of a surprise to us to find that in the New Testament Jesus is on more than one occasion plainly, bluntly and unequivocally called a man. In Greek there are two words for man. There
is *anthrōpos*, which is the word for man as a human being. It is the
generic word for man as a representative and specimen of humanity.
There is the word *andrē*, which describes a man rather as a husband and a
father, as an individual person, as a male member of the human species.
In the New Testament Jesus is called by both of these words. (Barclay,
*Jesus as They Saw Him*, 14)

Christian devotion has never hesitated to call Jesus God. . . . Ignatius
of Antioch could speak about the "blood of God" [citation omitted].
"There is one Physician," he says, "who is . . . God in man." He urges
his people to act in such a way that Jesus may be "our God in us." He
speaks of Jesus as the God who has given you wisdom." Charles
Wesley in his great hymn sings his love and praise to Jesus: "Amazing
love! how can it be That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?" Isaac
Watts writes: "Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, Save in the death of
Christ, my God." (Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, 20)

Similarly, the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, to which over 100 Protes­tant and Catholic scholars contributed and which is recommended by the North
American Patristic Society, under the entry entitled "Christ, Christology,"
declares: "Christology concerns questions about the nature of Christ's divinity,
and the nature of his humanity, and the oneness or wholeness of his person. . . .
[If both divinity and humanity are necessary [to explain Christ] for reasons of
salvation, then some explanation of his wholeness and oneness as a person is
required." Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 198, emphasis
added.

The creeds of the early church also underscore the fact that Christians have
always viewed Jesus as both God and man. Regarding Jesus, the Nicene Creed
affirms:

We believe in . . . one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only­
begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, *God of God,*
*Light of Light,* *very God of very God.* . . . Who for us men and for our
salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made
man.

"The Nicene Creed," in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*,
series (1886–1890; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 14:3, emphasis
added.

The Book of Mormon acknowledges Jesus' mortality in many places: "he
was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world" (1 Nephi 11:33);
"the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, should manifest himself unto them in the
flesh; and after he should manifest himself they should scourge him and crucify
him" (2 Nephi 6:9); "and they shall crucify him" (2 Nephi 10:3); "Behold, they
will crucify him" (2 Nephi 25:13).

The current Latter-day Saint perspective is no different. In Bruce R.
McConkie’s *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft: 1977), 30, 127–30,
did not spring out of nowhere—significant scriptural basis for it exists.\textsuperscript{12} Certainly, 1 Timothy 2:5 and Romans 5:15 refer to Jesus Christ as a “man.”

Next, Charles mentions that Book of Mormon people living long before Jesus was born knew many specific details about him—that he would be born six hundred years after Lehi and his family left Jerusalem, his mother would be a beautiful virgin named Mary, a new star would appear at his birth, his name would be Jesus; that he would heal the sick, raise the dead, and bear transgressions so much that “blood cometh from every pore”; and that he would be crucified (pp. 85–87). Charles claims that all of these details, except Mary’s beauty, are found in the New Testament Gospels (p. 86). Actually, the idea that blood came from every pore is not biblical either (see Mosiah 3:7 and D&C 19:18). Charles sees the Book of Mormon account of Jesus as containing an “abundance of nonessential details . . . [which] have nothing to do with the redemption of humankind. Why should Book of Mormon people know the town John the Baptist would baptize in or where Jesus’ dead body would lie and how long it would lie there?” (p. 89). How or why Charles thinks these details are “nonessential” we are not told. The writers of the New Testament and today’s readers seem to think these details are essential enough to be included in scriptural writings. If they were essential enough for early Christian writers of the Old World and for current readers, why not for early Christians in the New World?

Charles also claims that “The Book of Mormon’s extensive, specific detailing of events hundreds of years in the future is without parallel in verifiable, before-the-fact prophesies [sic]” (p. 90). Again, Charles is wrong. Well before Jesus’ birth Old Testament we find that Jesus is referred to both as God and also as mortal on numerous occasions.

\textsuperscript{12} “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). This has always been understood by Christians to mean that Jesus, as the Word of God, was himself deity. Romans 9:5 has been interpreted by many Christians to refer to Christ as “God.” Encyclopedia of Early Christianity, 199. John 8:58 is generally thought to be a reference to Jesus referring to himself as “I AM,” the God of the Old Testament. Early and current Christians have thought of Isaiah 9:6 as referring to Christ: “The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”
writers proclaimed: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). “Bethlehem . . . out of thee shall he come forth” (Micah 5:2). “There shall come . . . a rod out of the stem of Jesse” (Isaiah 11:1). “To open the blind eyes” (Isaiah 42:7). “He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:4). “Behold, thy King cometh unto thee . . . riding upon an ass, and upon a colt” (Zechariah 9:9). “He was wounded for our transgressions” (Isaiah 53:5). “I gave my back to the smiters” (Isaiah 50:6). “I was prised at . . . thirty pieces of silver” (Zechariah 11:13). “They pierced my hands and feet” (Psalm 22:16). “I will fasten him as a nail in a sure place” (Isaiah 22:23). “He keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken” (Psalm 34:20). “In my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink” (Psalm 69:21). “They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture” (Psalm 22:18). “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1). If Charles is not convinced by biblical references, perhaps she would consider Dead Sea Scroll references, first discovered in 1947, which scholars agree were written before the time of Christ and which, with precise detail, describe the coming Messiah:

[The Hea]vens and the earth will obey His [God’s] Messiah. . . . [T]he Faithful will He restore by His power. . . . He shall . . . make the blind see, raise up the do[wntrodden.] . . . He will heal the sick, resurrect the dead, and to the Meek announce glad tidings. . . . He will lead the [Ho]ly Ones; He will shepherd [th]em.

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14 Translation of 4Q521 in Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise, The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered (Rockport, MA: Element, 1992), 23, emphasis added. Eisenman is professor of Middle East Religions and chair of the Religious Studies Department, California State University, Long Beach. Wise is assistant professor of Aramaic, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago. Both have published several books and articles on the Dead Sea Scrolls.
Another Dead Sea Scrolls text, first released in November 1991, now often described as the “Pierced Messiah” Text, written before Jesus was born, reports in prophetic detail:

A staff shall rise from the root of Jesse, [and a Planting from his roots will bear fruit.] . . . the Branch of David. They will enter into Judgement . . . and . . . will put to death the Leader of the Community, the Bran[ch of David], . . . with woundings [piercings].

Specific, detailed, before-the-fact prophecies of Christ therefore can be said to exist.

Charles next makes the bizarre claim that, “For Book of Mormon people so far removed from Jesus’ life on earth, many of these details would be only trivia” (p. 90). But Christians today, by almost any standard, are further removed from Jesus’ life on earth than were Book of Mormon people, yet few other than Charles would claim that the precious details we have about Jesus’ life are “only trivia.” Most wish we could find other new sources with new details about Jesus’ life.

II. Near Eastern Messianic Expectations

Charles begins the second section of her article by claiming that “the Israelites in the Near East from the time of Lehi to Jesus’ birth had almost none of this same information about the messiah to come” (p. 90). But as we have already seen to the contrary, they had significant details available.

Next, Charles correctly claims that Israelites at the time of Jesus expected a Messiah who was in some ways different from Jesus (p. 90). The major difference was that the Israelites expected, in part, a political or military Messiah who would overthrow Roman rule by force. Jesus did not do this. However, Charles seems to believe that Jesus did not meet Israelite expectation of a Messiah “descended from King David” (p. 90). In this

15 Ibid., 24-27.
16 Ibid., 29.
she is, of course, mistaken (Matthew 1:1–17; Luke 1:23–38; Acts 13:23; and Romans 1:3). Charles’s mystifying claim that “Even those who were closest to him [Jesus] did not understand his identity or role before his death” (pp. 90–91) is belied by his many followers who described him with titles rendered by scholars in English as “Christ” (Matthew 1:16; 16:16), “Savior” (Luke 2:11; cf. Matthew 1:21), “Redeemer” (Luke 1:68), and “Messiah” (John 1:41; 4:25–26). Charles is correct that Jesus called himself the “Son of Man”; however, highly respected scholars disagree with the assessment of Morna D. Hooker, one of Charles’s cited sources, that “equation of the Son of Man and Messiah makes nonsense of the evidence of the gospels” (p. 91 n. 17). William Barclay, for example, states in no uncertain terms:

It has been suggested that, when Jesus used the title Son of Man, he was deliberately contrasting himself with, and deliberately disowning, the visions of a Messiah who was a supernatural figure of might and power and an apocalyptic wonder-worker, and that he was speaking of himself as humble, human and simple, as unlike as possible to the divine warrior figure for whom so many were waiting. The one fact which makes that suggestion impossible is that it appears that in fact Son of Man was a Messianic title, and a title involved in one of the most superhuman pictures of the Messiah in all Jewish thought.18

James H. Charlesworth says “Son of Man” and “Messiah” clearly are terms for the same individual.19 Robert M. Grant says that Jesus’ followers “called him ‘Son of Man’ or ‘Messiah.’”20 Scripture backs up their position. In 2 Esdras, God the Father says, “My son the Messiah shall be revealed.”21 In the book of Enoch, which emerged between the Old and New Testaments, the title Son of Man is always a divine preexistent messianic

18 Barclay, Jesus as They Saw Him, 71.
figure waiting to be unleashed upon the world.22 In the New Testament, the *Son of Man* is raised from the dead (Matthew 17:9; Mark 9:9), and will sit on his throne of glory and judge the twelve tribes (Matthew 19:28), appear before all inhabitants (tribes) of the earth (Matthew 24:30; Mark 13:26), come again as lightening (Matthew 24:27; Luke 17:24), with his angels, (Matthew 16:27), then reward every man according to his works and establish his kingdom (Matthew 16:27–28). These were all events, beyond human capacity, which could only be accomplished by the Messiah. Hence, contrary to the assertion of Hooker and Charles, it is nonsense to claim *Son of Man* and *Messiah* cannot be equated.

Charles claims that during Jesus’ lifetime, “his followers knew of no god other than the God of Israel” (p. 91). Some of today’s most highly regarded Jewish scholars disagree with Charles. They say:

The Bible is full of references to the belief in and the worship of many gods (polytheism); to the belief in and worship of the God of Israel together with a belief in the gods of the Canaanites (syncretism); and to the belief in a separate god for every people and country (monolatry).23

The Jewish scriptures available during Jesus’ lifetime, in several places, describe or acknowledge the existence of more than one god.24 Paul acknowledged a belief in “gods many, and lords many” (1 Corinthians 8:5). Origen, while head of the Christian Church in Alexandria, Egypt, wrote a commentary on the Gospel of John in which he says:

There are some gods of whom God is god, as we hear in the prophecy, “Thank ye the God of gods,” and “The God of gods hath spoken, and called the earth.”

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22 Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, 78–79.
24 Ibid.
Now God, according to the Gospel, "is not the God of the dead but of the living." Those gods, then, are living of whom God is god. The Apostle, too, writing to the Corinthians, says: "As there are gods many and lords many," and so we have spoken of these gods as really existing. Now there are, besides the gods of whom God is god, certain others.25

Other early Christian leaders had similar ideas.26 Thus, the idea of the existence of more than one god is traceable from Old Testament times, through the time of Jesus, and beyond.

In her blanket claim that the "New Testament has no record of Jesus describing himself as the Israelites' god," Charles overlooks several passages which indicate the contrary. For example, the Jews at one point wanted to stone Jesus for that claim. "The Jews answered him, saying, For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God" (John 10:33). In John's Gospel Jesus is quoted as claiming, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am [YHWH]. Then took they up stones to cast at him" (John 8:56–59). Also, as we


26 For example, Clement of Alexandria, in the second century, reported:

Those who have been perfected are given their reward and their honors. They have done with their purification, they have done with the rest of their service, though it be a holy service, with the holy; now they become pure in heart, and because of their close intimacy with the Lord there awaits them a restoration to eternal contemplation; and they have received the title of "gods" since they are destined to be enthroned with the other "gods" who are ranked next below the savior.


have seen, during his lifetime Jesus was equated by Jews with the Messiah (John 1:41; 4:25–29). By them, he would have been likened to the famous Isaiah passage that describes the Messiah as “The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). Further, prominent New Testament scholars have concluded that Jesus identified himself, indeed proclaimed himself, as the God of Israel.\(^{27}\)

Again, Charles is wrong in claiming that “Paul said that there was no other god but one (1 Cor. 8:4) and this god was the Father (Philip. 1:2; Philem. 3 . . .)” (p. 91). The Apostle Paul indicated that although there are gods many and lords many, to Christians there is but one god (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:5–6). This appears to be a proclamation of monolatry rather than monotheism.

Failing to recognize pre-Christian writings which indicate that the coming Messiah would be killed,\(^{28}\) as well as specific statements to that effect in the New Testament (John 12:32–33; Matthew 26:2, 32), Charles claims that “It was a surprise to those who accepted Jesus as the Messiah that he died on a cross and did not radically improve the world they lived in” (p. 92). This is quite a contradiction to Charles’s statement one page earlier that “Even those who were closest to him did not understand his identity or role before his death, for he did not explain them clearly” (pp. 90–91). Apparently Charles, within the time it took her to write these pages, changed her mind from believing that even those closest to Jesus did not understand he was the Messiah or what the messianic role was, to claiming that Jesus had followers who accepted him as the Messiah who would radically improve the world, but would not die on a cross.

Charles believes that “Rather than being a feature of his mission, his [Jesus’] dying seemed to have cut his mission short” (p. 92). According to Charles, Jesus’ death perplexed his follow-

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\(^{27}\) Barclay, _Jesus as they Saw Him_, 20–37; Margaret Barker, _The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God_ (Louisville: Westminster, 1992), 227–28. According to Matthew 1:23, Jesus was “Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.” Jesus identified himself as the great “I Am” (John 8:55, 59). In John 4:25–26, we read of Jesus proclaiming himself to be Messiah, saying, “I that speak unto thee am he.”

\(^{28}\) Eisenman and Wise, _The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered_, 29, in which it is claimed he will be put to death with woundings or piercings.
ers. They had to figure out how this could be. As a result, she claims, early Christians scoured Old Testament scriptures "with a specific agenda," which was "to match details in the life [and death] of Jesus" with scripture (p. 92). After all, Charles claims, "Almost all Old Testament scriptures that seemed to match details in the life of Jesus were discovered by believers after the fact; they were not part of anyone's prior expectation" (p. 92, emphasis added). Such distorted thinking reveals Charles's own agenda, as well as lack of logic. How in the world would anyone be able before the fact to compare an event in Jesus' life with Old Testament scripture? It was precisely because Jesus' actions, after the fact, were seen to be those of the expected Messiah, that people converted to Christianity. Charles, apparently blind to this, sees Paul's statement that Christ died for our sins "according to the scriptures" and rose again the third day "according to the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4) as Paul's attempt to tie Jesus' actions to scripture without having any specific scripture that he could cite (p. 92). Paul could very well have had in mind Isaiah's statements, "the Lord [YHWH] hath laid on him [the Messiah] the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6) or "in his love and in his pity he redeemed them" (Isaiah 63:9). Paul's statement about Jesus' resurrection could have been referring to Isaiah's statement that "he [the Messiah] will swallow up death in victory" (Isaiah 25:8) or Hosea's statement that the Messiah would "redeem them from death" (Hosea 13:14). Indeed, contrary to Charles's assertion

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29 Before Jesus' birth, according to the Dead Sea Scrolls, the coming Messiah was expected to "make the blind see, raise up the downtrodden," "heal the sick," and "resurrect the dead." Eisenman and Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, 23. These, in addition to many similar Old Testament scriptures, were thought, before Jesus was born, to be prophetic statements about the coming Messiah. "They pierced my hands and feet" (Psalm 22:16); "a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son . . . Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14); "I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King" (Jeremiah 23:5); "Bethlehem, . . . out of thee shall he come forth" (Micah 5:2); "thy King cometh unto thee . . . riding upon an ass" (Zechariah 9:9); "I was wounded in the house of my friends" (Zechariah 13:6-7). During Jesus' lifetime, his actions were interpreted as corresponding to messianic prophecy. See, e.g., John 1:41: "We have found the Messias, which is, being interpreted, the Christ."
(p. 92), it is apparent that the prophets did testify of a coming Messiah.\textsuperscript{30}

Next, without citing examples, Charles says, “The Book of Mormon explained why its people’s knowledge was \textit{so different} from the knowledge of the people in Israel as recorded in the Bible as we have it today” (p. 92, emphasis added). But wait. Earlier in her article, Charles claimed, “The \textit{only} details about Jesus’ earthly life the Book of Mormon includes are those \textit{also} contained in the New Testament” (p. 89, emphasis added). Charles first told us the Book of Mormon is problematic because it is too much like the Bible; now she tells us it has problems because it is too different from the Bible. In neither case does she give us a rationale for these contradictory positions. We are left to wonder what yardstick Charles believes is appropriate to decide when the Book of Mormon is too similar or too different from the Bible to be genuine scripture.

Charles tells us that “committed RLDS and LDS Mormons, and scholars without a bias for or against Mormonism—have suggested . . . that the Book of Mormon . . . was authored by Joseph Smith . . . For these people, explicitly detailed Christian prophecies and concepts are anachronisms that mar the book’s credibility as an ancient document” (p. 94). Does Charles believe these scholars are unbiased because they reached these conclusions or for some other reason? We are never told. As evidence for the idea that the Book of Mormon was authored by Joseph Smith rather than translated with divine aid, Charles recites several examples. First Charles claims that the idea of “infinite sins being remitted only through the atonement of an infinite being in Alma 34 had its origin with Anselm of Canterbury in the twelfth century C.E.” (p. 94).\textsuperscript{31} Unfortunately for Charles’s point here, neither in Alma 34 nor elsewhere does the Book of Mormon speak of “infinite” sins. The only scripture with the concept of infinite sins is in the Bible.\textsuperscript{32} However, the idea that atonement for the sins of the world must be provided by an infinite (or nonfinite) being,
that a human sacrifice would not suffice, is present in the Book of Mormon\(^\text{33}\) as well as the Bible.\(^\text{34}\) If an anachronistic idea is here, it would be that of “infinite sins,” which notion belongs to Anselm of Canterbury alone. And yet, the idea underlying the teachings of the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Anselm is that there has been an atonement wrought by a savior or Messiah sufficient to overcome the sins of the world.

Second, Charles claims\(^\text{35}\) that where “Nephite preachers spoke matter-of-factly about original sin and human depravity” (p. 95) in the Book of Mormon, we have another anachronism indicating that Joseph Smith himself is the author. Perhaps Charles does not cite a specific Book of Mormon passage to demonstrate her point because nowhere does the Book of Mormon contain either the phrase “original sin” or “human depravity.” As evidence for her position, Charles borrows from Blake Ostler the claim that “As portrayed in the Bible, Israelites before Jesus’ time had no notion of being in a fallen state from which they needed saving” (p. 95). This is a curious position. It would seem that any Jew who read the Genesis account and figured out they were not still living in the Garden of Eden and would die some day must have had some notion they were in a fallen state because of Adam and Eve. Further, the Old Testament is replete with the idea that people in general, and Israel in particular, needed saving.\(^\text{36}\) Charles unwittingly disproves her own point when she cites just such a scripture earlier in her article, “Behold, the days come,

\(^{33}\) “For it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice; yea, not a sacrifice of man, neither of beast, neither of any manner of fowl; for it shall not be a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice” (Alma 34:10).

\(^{34}\) See, e.g., “The God of my rock; in him will I trust: he is my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge, my savior” (2 Samuel 22:3); “Great is our Lord, and of great power: his understanding is infinite” (Psalm 147:5); “I, even I, am the Lord and beside me there is no saviour” (Isaiah 43:11); “A just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me” (Isaiah 45:21); “There is no saviour beside me” (Hosea 13:4); “So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation” (Hebrews 9:28).


\(^{36}\) See note 34 above.
saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved" (Jeremiah 23:5–6, cited on p. 90, emphasis added). Charles quotes the scripture in the context of her discussion of messianic expectations that already existed at the time of Jesus. Charles claims, “What those Israelites expected was quite different from what Jesus was” (p. 90, emphasis added).

Third, Charles claims that Joseph Smith deceived us and misrepresented the Book of Mormon as ancient scripture. “For Joseph Smith to utilize the English language with which he was familiar in recording the translation is one thing,” Charles says, but “to create the theology . . . is quite another” (p. 95). But Joseph Smith had to use nineteenth-century English in his translation of the Book of Mormon. After all, what other language and phraseology did he know? What other language would nineteenth-century Book of Mormon readers understand? This Charles apparently acknowledges. However, she provides no evidence for the idea that Joseph Smith created theology in the Book of Mormon that could not have existed at the times asserted in the Book of Mormon. The only examples Charles provides are the ideas of an infinite being and original sin, both of which are found in the Old Testament and are therefore not anachronistic as Charles claims.37 Charles again seems to be saying the Book of Mormon is too different from the Bible to be believed, after earlier saying it is too much like the Bible to be believed.

III. Book of Mormon Christology Compared to Early and Current Christian Christology

The premise of Charles’s third section is that, “According to the Bible, Judaism at the time of Jesus’ birth was monotheistic. Jews believed in only one God” (p. 96). Here Charles’s idea needs refining. It would be more accurate to say that Jews at the time of Jesus were not monotheists, that is, only believed in the existence of one god, but were instead involved in monolatry, that is, the worship of one god. The distinction is important. In many

37 See note 34 above: Genesis 3:13–24.
places, the Bible tacitly acknowledges the existence of more than one deity, but does not sanction the worship of more than one god.38

Next Charles claims, “The Book of Mormon people never were monotheists in an Old Testament sense, so the dilemma of Near Eastern Jewish Christians was never theirs” (p. 96). Charles supports this assertion with Book of Mormon passages in which Nephi, Amulek, and Mormon refer to “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, which is one God (2 Ne. 31:21; Alma 11:44; and Morm. 7:7, 39 emphasis added)” (p. 96). Rather than demonstrating that the Book of Mormon varies from monotheism, however, these passages seem to emphasize its monotheism. Charles claims, “This is a common trinitarian formula” (p. 97). Charles’s analysis here is simply wrong. The trinitarian concept of God hinges on the idea, which Charles correctly acknowledges, of “three distinct persons of one undivided substance” (p. 97). The idea of a single essence in three persons first became official doctrine at the formation of the Nicene Creed in June 325 A.D.40 The concept of a single essence was at that time acknowledged to be unscriptural,41 but the Emperor Constantine forced its adoption as a compromise to avoid fragmentation of the early Christian church.42 The trinitarian concept is not found in the Bible, as notable Protestant and Catholic scholars have readily acknowledged.43 Contrary to Charles’s claim, neither the Book of Mormon passages nor the other sources cited by her contain the

38 The Old Testament is not speaking of idols when it says, “Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods?” (Exodus 15:11) and “God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods” (Psalm 82:1). This idea carries through into New Testament times—Paul says, “For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) But to us there is but one God, the Father . . . and one Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 8:5–6).

39 Mormon 7:7 says “which are one God.”


42 Ibid.

concept that God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost comprise one undivided essence. Charles is just wrong; the trinitarian concept simply cannot be found in the Book of Mormon or the Bible.

But do not fear. Quickly, Charles abandons her claim that this Book of Mormon phraseology “is a common trinitarian formula” (p. 97) for the contradictory position that these passages “in context . . . resemble . . . the heresy of modalism (also known as Sabellianism)” (p. 98). Again, Charles reads into the Book of Mormon passages something that is not there. One page earlier in her article Charles claims to see in the same Book of Mormon passages the trinitarian concept of three separate persons with one undivided essence. Now, instead, she sees the modalistic concept of God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost comprising only one personality (p. 98). The truth is that just as the Book of Mormon is void of the trinitarian concept it is also void of Sabellianism. Nowhere does the Book of Mormon state that God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost comprise just one personality.

But again, not to fear. One page later Charles changes her mind again and professes that modalism and Book of Mormon Christology are incompatible: “On one point, the Book of Mormon’s Christology differs from what early Christian modalists believed” (p. 99).

Again, Charles reads more into the Book of Mormon than the words say. Ironically, she asserts, “To say that ‘oneness’ in these passages refers only to oneness of will, purpose, power, and glory but not oneness of personality, person, essence, or number is imposing an interpretation on the text rather than letting the text speak” (p. 100). This is despite the fact that the text in question never speaks of oneness of personality, person, essence, or number. It would seem that Charles herself is imposing an interpretation rather than letting the text speak for itself. Would Charles assume that the word one in the following passage refers to oneness of personality, person, essence, or number? “There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God” (4 Nephi 1:17). The “one” here, from the context, appears to be of will and purpose. Similarly, in the Bible, Jesus prays to the Father for his disciples to become one
with him in the same way that he is one with his father. Jesus is certainly not praying that he and all his disciples consolidate into one personality, person, essence, or number.

Charles asserts that “in the New Testament Jesus never claims to be the Father as he does in the Book of Mormon” (p. 100). If Charles is trying to imply that this is an anomaly in the Book of Mormon, she fails—in the Old Testament and other writings considered authoritative by early Christians, as well as in the writings of contemporary Christian scholars, Jesus is considered “the Father.” For example, in Isaiah we find a statement, traditionally interpreted by Christians to refer to Jesus, which says, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6, emphasis added). Another Old Testament verse held by Christians to be a description of Jesus as “father” is, “And I will clothe him with thy robe, and strengthen him with thy girdle, and I will commit thy government into his hand: and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah” (Isaiah 22:21, emphasis added). Christians considered Jesus to be the “Father” in a certain sense. The early Christian Church leader Tertullian wrote that some Christians taught that “the Father forsooth was born, and the Father suffered,—God Himself, the Lord Almighty, whom in their preaching they declare to be Jesus Christ.” Professor James E. Smith, regarding the child Jesus, says, “This Child is a Son; he is also the Eternal Father. Later the One spoken of in this prophecy would say, ‘I and my Father are one.’” Professor Richard A. Norris, Jr., observes that some early Christians “maintained that ‘Son’ refers to the humanity of Jesus, his flesh, while ‘Father’ refers to

44 “Neither pray I [Jesus] for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one” (John 17:21–23, emphasis added).


his deity."47 Between A.D. 202 and 231,48 Origen implicitly described Jesus as "the Father" by acknowledging that Isaiah 9:6 refers to Jesus. Yet none of these contexts requires a modalistic or monarchianist interpretation.

Although the Book of Mormon describes Jesus as "the Father" in a few places, it is important to remember that many Book of Mormon passages also distinguish between Jesus and his Father. For example, the Father distinguishes himself from Jesus by introducing him to the Nephites, "Behold my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name—hear ye him" (3 Nephi 11:7). Jesus separates himself from his Father in saying, "I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in which I have suffered the will of the Father" (3 Nephi 11:11). Jesus distinguishes his physical location from that of the Father by saying, "Behold, ye have heard the things which I taught before I ascended to my Father" (3 Nephi 15:1). Jesus and his Father are also distinguished in the Book of Mormon because Jesus is commanded by his Father to go teach a group of people: "But I have received a commandment of the Father that I shall go unto them" (3 Nephi 16:3). Since the term father is a title or description, not a name, it can apply to more than one being at the same time, just like the terms mother, son, and daughter. The terms father and son can of course describe the same person at the same time. Therefore, contrary to Charles's assertions, modalism is not implied by Book of Mormon statements such as, "Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son" (Ether 3:14).

Charles apparently believes that the Book of Mormon Jesus is described in another way that she thinks is an anomaly. "The New Testament never says that Jesus was the god the Israelites in the Old Testament were worshipping" (p. 100). To the contrary, at one point Jesus was nearly stoned for making that claim for himself. His persecutors said, "For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God" (John 10:33). In another New Testament verse Jesus says:

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Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.

Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?

Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am [YHWH].

Then took they up stones to cast at him. (John 8:56–59)

Also, referring to Deuteronomy 32:3–4, Paul seems to identify Jesus as Jehovah at 1 Corinthians 10:4. New Testament scholars conclude that Jesus identified himself as the God of Israel.49 This idea persisted for some time. Origen, in the third century, reported, "And he said, I am the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob. . . . The Savior, then, is the first and the last."50

Charles believes that "Any assessment of Book of Mormon passages showing separate gods functioning simultaneously must also account for Christ’s claims in the Book of Mormon that he was the Father and was the Israelites’ God” (p. 100). How about this: Jesus, who is Jehovah, or YHWH, is the son of El or Elohim, the presiding deity in the divine, heavenly council. YHWH is specifically designated the God of Israel, but Israel knows of other gods, including El. YHWH as Israel’s God is properly addressed or designated as “Father” by the Israelites. However, YHWH’s father, El, is also properly designated “Father” because he is, after all, the father of YHWH. This accounts for the Book of Mormon writers designating Jesus as “the Father,” but still allows for Jesus to have a separate father. The Old Testament backs up this assessment. As one Old Testament scholar describes:

There were many in first-century Palestine who still retained a world-view derived from the more ancient religion of Israel in which there was a High God and several Sons of God, one of whom was Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel. Yahweh, the Lord, could be manifested on earth in human form, as an angel or in the Davidic king. It was as a manifestation of Yahweh, the

49 See note 27 above and accompanying text.
Son of God, that Jesus was acknowledged as Son of God, Messiah and Lord.51

This scholar goes on to clarify the reasons for this conclusion:

All the texts in the Hebrew Bible distinguish clearly between the divine sons of Elohim/Elyon [one of which is Yahweh] and those human beings who are called sons of Yahweh. This must be significant. It must mean that the terms originated at a time when Yahweh was distinguished from . . . El/Elohim/Elyon. A large number of texts continue to distinguish between El Elyon and Yahweh, Father and Son. . . . By tracing these patterns through a great variety of material and over several centuries, Israel’s second God can be recovered.52

A cross-check that substantiates this conclusion is that the phrase Son of God in scripture has two basic roots: (1) sons of El, Elyon, or Elohim (Genesis 6:2, 4; Job 1:6–12, 2:1–6, 38:7; and Daniel 3:25); and (2) sons of Yahweh (Exodus 4:22; Jeremiah 31:9; Hosea 11:1; 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalms 2:7, 89:26). Jesus is always referred to as a son of the former, that is, “son of the Highest” or “Son of the most high God” (Luke 1:32; Mark 5:7). Jesus is never called the son of the latter. He is never called a son of Yahweh or a son of the Lord. Jesus is therefore equated with Yahweh, Lord, a son of El.

We also know that whoever wrote the New Testament translated the name Yahweh by Kyrios, Lord. (See, for example, the quotation from Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love Yahweh your God . . .” which is rendered in Luke 10:27 “You shall love the Lord [Kyrios] your God.”) This suggests that the Gospel writers, in using the terms “Lord” and “Son of God Most High,” saw Jesus as a [divine being different from Elyon, the Most High God] and gave him their version of the sacred name Yahweh.53

51 Barker, The Great Angel, 3, emphasis in original.
52 Ibid., 10.
53 Ibid., 5.
We thus have evidence, outside the Book of Mormon, that Jesus was considered the Israelites' God, contrary to Charles's assertion.

Charles criticizes the Book of Mormon further, claiming it is consistent with modalism because it "show[s] only his [Jesus']" involvement in creation. As 'Father,' Christ is the author or source of creation, not merely the agent or instrument who carries out someone else's will" (p. 101). Charles is wrong again. In Jacob, a text which Charles apparently overlooks, we read:

For behold, by the power of his word man came upon the face of the earth, which earth was created by the power of his word. Wherefore, if God being able to speak and the world was, and to speak and man was created, O then, why not able to command the earth, or the workmanship of his hands upon the face of it, according to his will and pleasure? . . .

Wherefore, beloved brethren, be reconciled unto him through the atonement of Christ, his Only Begotten Son, and ye may obtain a resurrection, according to the power of the resurrection which is in Christ, and be presented as the first-fruits of Christ unto God. (Jacob 4:9, 11)

Here is a creation scripture in the Book of Mormon, which references both Christ and his Father and differentiates between them.

In the next few pages of her article, Charles repeats several Book of Mormon passages in which Jesus and God are described as one God in order to support her proposition that it goes "beyond trinitarianism in advocating the union of Christ and God and in rejecting any notion that Christ might be less than divine or subordinate to God the Father" (p. 103). This is a bewildering statement. Earlier, Charles argues that certain Book of Mormon verses amount to "a common trinitarian formula" (p. 97). In addition, it is inescapable that Jesus is physically separate from and subordinate to his Father in the Book of Mormon, when we read:

He [Jesus] shall be called the Son of God, . . . having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father. . . .
. . . He shall be led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father. (Mosiah 15:2, 7)

What will ye [Nephites] that I [Jesus] should do unto you, when I am gone unto the Father? . . .

[Y]e [Nephites] shall live to behold all the doings of the Father unto the children of men, even until all things shall be fulfilled according to the will of the Father, when I shall come in my glory with the powers of heaven. (3 Nephi 28:4, 7)

When Charles interprets the Book of Mormon as “advocating a union of Christ and God” she is correct if she is talking about a “union” of purpose rather than of persons. After all, the verses Charles quotes indicate a plurality. Her example reads, “And they are one God” (Mosiah 15:4), in which the words they and are are both plurals, numerically more than one. Yet surprisingly, Charles sees this verse as saying that, “there is only one being who is both the mortal/divine Jesus and the divine Father” (p. 102). Abinadi’s words just do not say what Charles wants to read into them.

Charles is wrong again when she claims that Joseph Smith’s 1838 account of his first vision contains a “new element,” which is Joseph’s seeing “two heavenly beings: God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.” Of the ten known accounts of the First Vision recorded firsthand from Joseph Smith, all but one mention that two heavenly beings, the Father and the Son, appeared to him. 54 The earliest of these, the so-called “Matthias” account, was recorded in 1835 by Warren Cowdery, several years before the 1838 account. 55

Charles is right when she says, “Most modern Mormons would resist the idea that Book of Mormon writers envisioned God as one person who assumed three different roles” (p. 103). This is because the Book of Mormon never makes that claim. We never

54 Each of these accounts is recorded verbatim in Milton V. Backman, Jr., Joseph Smith’s First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 155–81.
55 Ibid., 158–59.
find in the Book of Mormon a phrase such as, “God is only one person who manifests himself in three different modes” or any other wording with that meaning.

Charles misses the mark when she next claims that the Book of Mormon portrays “Jesus Christ as the Supreme God” (p. 104). The Book of Mormon does not contain the phrase Supreme God.56

Charles criticizes the Church’s 1916 official statement, “The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve,” by claiming, “The document failed to explain how the term “Father” in this verse [Ether 3:14] applies to Jesus or how Jesus is a literal parent of anyone” (p. 105). Yet Charles acknowledges in her very next paragraph that the First Presidency’s 1916 doctrinal exposition explains that when Jesus is called “Father” it is often in the sense that he is creator (p. 105). It is true that the First Presidency’s exposition does not explain how Jesus is a literal parent. But many Christians, both within and without the Latter-day Saint Church, believe Isaiah prophesied that Jesus would have children:

Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. (Isaiah 53:10, emphasis added)

Charles describes changes in four Book of Mormon verses in which the word Son was allowed to be inserted by Joseph Smith in the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon to clarify which member of the Godhead is being discussed (p. 107). None of these changes alters the meaning or intent of the verses in question. In each case the word Son is inserted to clarify a potential ambiguity.

Charles concludes the third section of her article by speculating that:

It is possible that Smith intended to revise the whole Book of Mormon to reflect tritheism but only barely

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56 The word supreme appears three times in the Book of Mormon—Alma 11:22, 12:32, and 30:44. In none of these instances does the phrase refer to Jesus as “Supreme God.”
began the project. He may have given up, realizing that revising the Book of Mormon's theology would often require major rewriting rather than simple insertions or word replacement. (p. 108)

In a manner only previously attempted by Fawn Brodie, Charles describes a project she believes Joseph Smith contemplated but never actually undertook, even giving us Joseph’s unspoken rationale for giving up the project. Does Charles really expect us to believe she can somehow understand Joseph Smith’s unrecorded thoughts of 150 years ago?

IV. The Latter-day Saint Concept That Jesus Is Jehovah

Charles’s final segment deals with the Latter-day Saint concept that Jesus is Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament. Charles, following Boyd Kirkland’s lead, takes the untenable position that “the earliest serious exponents of this view were apostles George Q. Cannon and Franklin D. Richards in the 1870s through 1890s” (p. 108). This overlooks Book of Mormon language itself, which Joseph Smith and most other members of the Church certainly understood from the time the Book of Mormon was first published in 1830. When the resurrected Jesus descends from heaven to visit the Nephites, we read that he said:

Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth. (3 Nephi 11:14)

In 1836, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery both claimed to have had “Jehovah” appear to them in the Kirtland Temple and say, “I am the first and the last; I am he who liveth, I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father” (D&C 110:3–4). The idea that Jesus is Jehovah therefore originated far earlier than Charles claims.
In an apparent attempt to show that the Latter-day Saint idea of Jesus as Jehovah is inconsistent with the Old and New Testaments, Charles claims:

There is no evidence in the Old or New Testament that this doctrine was taught anciently. The use of the divine names Jehovah and Elohim in the Old Testament never supports the twentieth-century Mormon doctrine that Elohim is the father of Jehovah, that Jehovah, not Elohim, is the God of the Old Testament, or that Jehovah is Jesus Christ. . . . [T]he divine names Elohim and Jehovah are both used unambiguously to refer to the same divine being, the one god of the Old Testament. (p. 109)

Where does Charles come up with this? Recognized experts on the Old Testament take a contrary position. For example, Professor Mark Smith of Yale University states, “The original god of Israel was El. . . . El was the original chief god of the group named Israel. . . . Similarly, Deuteronomy 32:8–9 casts Yahweh in the role of one of the sons of El.”

Margaret Barker, of Oakbrook School in England, and member of the Society for Old Testament Study, explains:

Yahweh was one of the Sons of El Elyon, God Most High. In other words, he [Jesus] was described as a heavenly being. Thus the annunciation narrative has the term “Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32) and the demoniac recognized his exorcist as “Son of the Most High God” (Mark 5:7). Jesus is not called son of Yahweh nor the son of the Lord, but he is called Lord. We also know that whoever wrote the New Testament translated the name Yahweh by Kyrios, Lord. (See, for example, the quotation from Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love Yahweh your God . . . .” which is rendered in Luke 10:27 “You shall love the Lord [Kyrios] your God.”) This suggests that the Gospel writers, in using the terms “Lord” and “Son of God Most High,” saw

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Jesus as [divine] and gave him their version of the sacred name Yahweh.58

Barker goes on to say that the identification of Jesus as Yahweh happened “in the very earliest period; it was in fact, what the Christians were proclaiming when they said that Jesus was Lord. Jesus was Yahweh, the second God . . . [T]he first Christians recognized that Jesus was Yahweh, not that he was in some way equivalent but not identical.”59

V. Flaws in Charles’s Methodology

Several flaws exist in Charles’s methodology. One is that she takes contradictory positions—first claiming that Book of Mormon Christology is trinitarian, then modalistic, then trinitarian, and finally unitarian. Another serious flaw in Charles’s work is that she does not have a consistent, well-thought-out way to judge whether the Book of Mormon is believable. Charles seems to think that differences in doctrine or descriptions over time amount to a flawed theology (pp. 81–82). This position fails to apprehend the concept of modern revelation, so crucial to Mormonism, which leads to progress in understanding: “For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little” (Isaiah 28:10). Regarding the “differences” which she perceives, Charles fails to realize that differences alone do not amount to flawed theology. Flaws are not implied by differences, but by incompatible differences or inconsistencies. Charles wrongly criticizes differences that are not inconsistent.

Another major blemish in her methodology is that Charles sometimes sees the Book of Mormon as flawed because it is too much like the Bible (see, for example, pp. 86–87, 89) while at other times she claims it is too different from the Bible (see, for example, pp. 90, 93, 95). Charles uses no consistent standard to judge the Book of Mormon. These methodological problems make it difficult to take Charles’s conclusions seriously.

58 Barker, The Great Angel, 4–5.
59 Ibid., 221, emphasis in original.
VI. Conclusion

For all its problems, though, Charles has written a thought-provoking article. Some Latter-day Saints need to take time to learn and better understand the Mormon doctrine of deity. A better understanding of the nature of deity would help us all feel better about the passage: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).