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### Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish, *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis*

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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis* (1991), by Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish.

**Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish. *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1991. 137 pp., with index. \$49.95.**

Reviewed by Blake T. Ostler

Recently, Mellen Press published a book by Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish entitled *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis*. The authors claim that their book is the first and only philosophical critique by non-Mormons of the unique Mormon concept of God. They are, however, nearly a century too late to legitimately claim this august distinction. The honor goes to the Reverend Vander Donckt, who ably critiqued the Mormon concept of God in his debate with B. H. Roberts.<sup>1</sup> Beckwith and Parrish's work, however, makes several new claims that are worthy of response.

Beckwith and Parrish's work is divided into five separate sections. The first section outlines "the classical concept of God." The second purports to define "Mormon Finitistic Theism." The third presents an argument against Mormon cosmology based upon the supposed impossibility of an actual infinite. The fourth section critiques the argument of David L. Paulsen, professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University, that the teleological argument better supports the Mormon view of a God who is in some respects conditioned, than the absolute of classical theology. The last section argues that the classical concept of God accounts for the biblical data better than does the Mormon concept they have outlined.

Unfortunately, the authors' attempt to discuss both the classical concept of God and Mormon views suffers from vagueness. The concept of God promulgated by Thomas Aquinas, for example, which is usually associated with a dominant view in scholastic theology, is very different from that elucidated by later

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<sup>1</sup> Vander Donckt, in B. H. Roberts, *Mormon Doctrine of Deity* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1903).

theologians Luis de Molina and Suarez. Arguments of process theologians have been justly criticized for failing to recognize the distinction between what we may call “absolute sovereignty” theologians and “limited sovereignty” theologians. The absolute sovereignty theologians like Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Luther emphasize God’s power and knowledge at the expense of free will, while limited sovereignty theologians like Luis de Molina, James Arminius, and Alvin Plantinga emphasize human free will at the expense of God’s power. The authors constantly equivocate between these two major views. As a result, their analysis is confusing and misses many subtle distinctions which ought to be observed. Indeed, these distinctions are precisely the ones required in order to make sense of the Mormon position.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. God’s Perfection

The authors begin by contrasting their view of the Mormon concept of God with the God of “classical theism.” There is a very basic difference between the Mormon view of perfection and the “classical” view. The “classical” tradition views perfection as static and absolute, an upper limit beyond which it is impossible to progress. From this view of perfection it follows that God is without any parts (metaphysically simple), outside of time (timeless), absolutely unchanging in any respect (immutable), untouched by anything that occurs in the world (impassable), and without any material body (incorporeal). However, in Mormonism, perfection

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<sup>2</sup> It also bears noting that many of the arguments that they offer against a particular “Mormon” concept of God are basically a rehash of arguments presented against process thought in *Process Theology*, ed. Ronald Nash (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987). Process theology, very briefly, views God as a dynamic, self-surpassing being rather than a static absolute. The authors’ arguments against the Mormon view of a universe without temporal beginning are merely warmed-over versions of arguments presented in William Lane Craig’s “Creation ex nihilo” in that collection (*ibid.*, 145–73), although Craig’s presentation is much more lucid. The argument attempting to show the compatibility of foreknowledge and free will is merely a poor revision of Craig’s “Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents” found in the same work (*ibid.*, 95–115). The authors have simply tailored such arguments to particular Mormon beliefs. What is interesting is that process thought and Mormonism are so similar in some respects that arguments against one often turn out to be arguments against the other.

is a dynamic notion that includes interpersonal involvement with an ever-changing world. At any given moment, God<sup>3</sup> is the greatest possible being, but is self-surpassing in each new moment of reality. Whereas the classical God is the creator and sustainer of the world *ex nihilo* (or out of nothing), the Mormon God organizes a chaos of eternally existing mass and energy into a cosmos of order.

The authors argue that criticisms of the classical concepts of perfection by Mormon authors are not successful. One such argument that Beckwith and Parrish wrestle with is whether God is absolutely self-sufficient. Mormons have indeed argued that a God who is absolutely *a se* (or self-sufficient), in the sense that God logically cannot depend on anything else for any of his intrinsic or real properties, raises certain problems.

In particular, Aristotle observed that God, conceived as the Unmoved Mover, would contemplate only his self-perfection, because to contemplate anything less would be an imperfection. Such a view may be fine for Greek metaphysics, but it will hardly do for the Christian notion that God is love—unless this scriptural assertion is interpreted to mean that God is narcissistic self-love rather than other-loving. Further, if God is perfect and needs nothing, what possible reason could he have for creating a less-than-perfect world? He certainly doesn't need our praise (much less our blasphemy) and the creation of such a world adds nothing to God's perfection. In principle, a purely actual God who has accomplished everything possible could not have anything left to accomplish. Because the classical God is simply the apex of all value possible, any creation could only diminish the overall value of the existing universe.

I presented a deductive argument in an article entitled "The Mormon Concept of God," which concluded that if God possesses aseity *in this sense*, then in principle there cannot be any sufficient reason for God to create anything.<sup>4</sup> The authors

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<sup>3</sup> Unless speaking of the individual and separate divine persons, I will use the term *God* to refer to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost united as one God or "Godhead."

<sup>4</sup> In Blake T. Ostler, "The Mormon Concept of God," *Dialogue* 17/2 (1984): 90. More perspicuously, the argument is that the lack of any sufficient reason *external to God* for God to create anything and any reason *internal to God*

respond that I have misunderstood the notion of self-sufficiency on which the argument rests. They claim that the “term *self-sufficient*, when describing the classical God, simply means that God is not dependent on anything else *for his being God*. . . . It follows only that God cannot perform an act which fulfills a lack in his nature (precisely because he lacks nothing), not that He cannot perform any act for which He has sufficient reason to perform” (p. 9, emphasis added).

However, I believe that it is the authors who misunderstand the notion of aseity. For Thomists and other medieval theologians, self-sufficiency means much more than merely that God’s status as God does not depend on anything. Indeed, the very notion of an *actus purus* upon which Aquinas premised his entire theology entails that God cannot be related to or depend upon anything for *any* intrinsic property.<sup>5</sup> There is no potentiality in God to be other than what he just timelessly is. God would be exactly the same in all respects even if the world never existed. He would be just as happy, just as perfect, just as pleased if the entire world never existed—or even if it existed but every person created engaged in murder and rape throughout their lives. Since nothing acts upon God on this view, God’s being in all respects is exactly the same whether the world exists or not. It follows that there is no positive reason for God to create such a world since it literally makes no difference to him—or it.

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would result in a certain necessity of nature which renders God unfree as to whether to create. The argument I presented is as follows:

1. If God possesses aseity and exists, then he is not dependent on anything nor lacking in any conceivable manner (i.e., God is self-sufficient).
2. A self-sufficient being cannot manifest a need nor be enhanced by any action (from 1).
3. Every positive action requires an explanation sufficient to account for it (criteria of sufficient reason).
4. Creation of the cosmos is a positive action.
5. A self-sufficient being could not manifest a reason sufficient to explain why it preferred existence of the cosmos to its nonexistence (1, 2).
6. Hence, God did not create the cosmos (3, 4, 5).

<sup>5</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *God and the Order of Creation*, vol. 1 of *Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), 26.

The authors fail to understand the difference between their view and the Thomist view of God. They have assumed a single “classical” concept of God identical to the evangelical view they present, and that certainly is not the case. For example, the authors implicitly reject the Thomist view of aseity. Instead, they accept the view that some of God’s intrinsic properties are dependent upon what humans do, since they assert that God’s “relational knowledge” is different depending on what happens in the world. Moreover, they assert that what we do matters to God (p. 17). Presumably, according to this view God has a good reason to create, i.e., it makes him happier and it matters to him that we exist. But then, God *depends* on the world for his knowledge and internal emotions. Thus this God is *not* self-sufficient in his intrinsic being. Their view is therefore more moderate than the Thomist view that I criticized. I would concede that my criticism does not apply to the concept of God fashioned by the authors. However, this concession does not diminish the force of the argument against the Thomist view of God.

The authors face problems of internal consistency at this point because they adopt the Thomist argument that, in all respects, “God is the best, always has been the best, and always will be the best” (p. 14). Aside from the fact that *best* is a term of comparison and God can’t be compared to anything according to their view, I think the authors would have to admit that God is better or happier as a result of creation. He is happier if we accept him than if we reject him. He may not be any more or any less God, but he is in some respect better if the world exists. Thus God is dependent on the world for at least some of his intrinsic properties (i.e., his emotional response and knowledge of which possible things are actual) and can be *better* depending on how contingent things turn out which are not fully up to him.

## 2. God’s Power

The authors go on to argue that the classical God is unlimited in power, whereas the Mormon God has “limited power” (pp. 10–11, 40–41). Describing the Mormon deity as merely “limited in power” is clearly inadequate because it fails to distinguish God from other things limited in power such as humans and

ants. Rather, the Mormon deity should be described as having "maximal power," that is, all the power it is (consistently) possible for one being to have among other free beings. The difference between classical and Mormon views is not that God has all power possible; rather, the difference lies in what limits God's power. The authors assume that God is not limited by any *nonlogical conditions*, whereas the Mormon deity must contend with uncreated matter and intelligences. They argue that the Mormon God has less power than is possible and thus is not really all-powerful. However, they fail to provide a consistent notion of omnipotence against which the Mormon claim can be compared.

The authors argue that God can do anything, provided that (1) doing it is logically possible and (2) doing it is consistent with God's basic attributes. However, even the authors cannot consistently adopt this notion of omnipotence. For example, God *cannot* bring about my free acts, although the fact that *I* bring about my free acts is (1) logically possible and (2) consistent with God's attributes. Thus the authors' notion of omnipotence is not adequate.

Problematically, Beckwith and Parrish also accept the view that God has middle knowledge or knowledge not only of what *will* happen, but also what *would* happen in any possible circumstance even if that circumstance never occurs (p. 16). It is well established that middle knowledge entails that God is limited by contingent states of affairs that he cannot fully control. Thus if it is true that *if Socrates were created in circumstances of the actual world, then Socrates will freely drink hemlock to end his life*, then it follows that God cannot bring about the contingent state of affairs of *Socrates' existing in the actual world, but Socrates freely refrains from drinking hemlock*. Since every free act open to humans entails a contingent state of affairs which God cannot bring about, it follows that God is rather severely limited by mere possibilities. It thus seems ironic for the authors to chide Mormonism for limiting God's power by eternal actualities when they must limit God's power by mere possibilities.

Indeed, given God's middle knowledge, God is subject to a kind of "fate," as Jonathan Edwards pointed out long ago. Since

God has no control over which “counterfactuals of freedom”<sup>6</sup> are true, it follows that God isn’t fully in charge of things. Sovereignty and power are necessarily shared among many agents and hence God’s own sovereignty and power are limited by the acts of other free agents whom God cannot control. Although Mormonism has long held that power is necessarily shared, such a view is objectionable to the authors since they demand a God with more control and more power because they believe that God is limited only by logic and not by eternally coexisting realities. Yet to be consistent they must limit God’s power in this way.

Nevertheless, the authors could have argued that the actualization of such “counterfactuals of freedom” is merely the result of God’s decision to create free beings *out of nothing*. God could have the power they describe if he had decided to refrain from creating free beings. Thus they may claim that God has more power in their view than the Mormon deity, who is necessarily limited by other free beings, because in their view God is only contingently limited by his own decisions.

However, this argument is not successful because it fails to consider the logic of God as a being existing in an actual world. For example, it seems clear that God cannot *now* bring it about that Lincoln is not shot in 1865, though no doubt at one time God could have prevented it from occurring. Thus what has been actual limits God’s power. It seems rather academic to argue that God can do anything logically possible since God is *now* faced with a world containing free creatures who limit his options. Further, suppose that the world just happens to have always existed of factual necessity. Since God cannot change the past, it follows that God could not change this eternally past fact about the world. Thus it is logically possible that God is limited by the fact that the world has always existed. But if that is true, then it is logically possible that God is conditioned by preexisting actualities even if God has maximal power—or all the power it is consistently possible to

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<sup>6</sup> A counterfactual of freedom is a proposition which describes what a person would freely do if placed in any particular circumstances. A good deal of doubt has been expressed as to the existence of any true counterfactuals of freedom. Though if there are no such true counterfactuals God cannot know them, *pace* Beckwith and Parrish. See William Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), ch. 2.

have given what has obtained in the past. In any case, the authors fail to address these other conditions on divine power which have been well documented in the literature of the philosophy of religion.<sup>7</sup> Given these limitations, the Mormon view of God's maximal power is logically consistent and the authors' view is not.

### 3. God's Knowledge

The authors then move on to define God's omniscience as knowledge of all true propositions, including propositions about future free acts of humans (called by philosophers "future contingent propositions"). They contrast this view with the notion held by some Mormons that God does not know future free acts. However, Beckwith and Parrish mislead readers when they argue that the view that God does not know future free acts (or "future contingent propositions") is somehow the Mormon view and their view is the biblical view accepted by right-thinking evangelicals (p. 127 n. 22). An increasing number of Christian theists in both the Catholic and Protestant camps accept an "open" view of God—the view that God changes in response to the world and that the future is an open realm of as yet undecided possibilities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See for example, George I. Mavrodes, "Defining Omnipotence," *Philosophical Studies* 32 (1977): 191–202; Thomas P. Flint and Alfred Freddoso, "Maximal Power," in *Existence and the Nature of God*, ed. Alfred Freddoso (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1983), 81–113; Edward R. Wierenga, *The Nature of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 28–29. God's temporally indexed, maximal power can be defined as follows: An agent A is maximally powerful at a time *t* if A is able unilaterally to bring about any state of affairs SA such that: (a) SA does not entail that "A does not bring about SA at *t*"; and (b) SA is compossible with all events that precede *t* in time in the actual world up to *t*.

<sup>8</sup> Modern philosophers who believe that God's knowledge of future free acts is open include Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 172–78; A. N. Prior, "The Formalities of Omniscience," *Philosophy* 37 (1962): 114–29; Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*; Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948); J. R. Lucas, *The Freedom of the Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), and J. R. Lucas, "Foreknowledge and the Vulnerability of God" in *The Philosophy in Christianity*, ed. Godfrey Vesey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 119–28; Richard Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), and Clark Pinnoch, Richard Rice, John

Recently, five moderate evangelicals authored a book wherein they argue that the view (held by Beckwith and Parrish) that God is timeless, immutable, and has absolute foreknowledge worships Neoplatonism rather than the biblical God.<sup>9</sup>

### Mormonism, Free Will, and Foreknowledge

The historical tension between foreknowledge and free will is not an issue of Mormon theism vs. evangelical theism as Beckwith and Parrish paint it; rather, it is an issue confronting theists generally. James Faulconer comes as close as anyone to making an accurate statement of the Mormon position regarding God's foreknowledge:

Historically, most Latter-day Saints have taken the first general position: everything is foreseen and freedom remains. Some have taken the second, that God's foreknowledge is not absolute. The third alternative, that human freedom is illusory, is incompatible with LDS belief in genuine free agency and responsibility.<sup>10</sup>

Thus it remains an open question in Mormonism whether foreknowledge and free agency are compatible.<sup>11</sup> I have argued that they are not compatible. The Mormon view that God is involved in "eternal progression" and that a genuine risk is

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Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger in their contributions in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*.

<sup>10</sup> James E. Faulconer, "Foreknowledge of God," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:521-22.

<sup>11</sup> However, it is the position of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that the propositions "There will [at some time] be nothing more to be learned [by God]" and that "the Father and the Son do not progress in knowledge and wisdom because they already know all things past, present and to come" are "false doctrine." The First Presidency under Brigham Young declared these propositions false in a First Presidency statement printed in the *Millennial Star* 27 (21 October 1865): 660; and *Messages of the First Presidency*, ed. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965-75), 2:234.

associated with salvation due to free will (in opposition to Satan's plan, which would have removed all risks) is more consistent with the open view of God. The strong commitment to free agency in Mormon thought is of course basic because it is grounded in Lehi's statement in the Book of Mormon that "it must needs be that there is an opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11). But views about the incompatibility of such free agency and God's foreknowledge should not be labeled "the Mormon view."

### The Incompatibility of Free Will and Foreknowledge

The authors unsuccessfully attempt to defend their view against the argument that if God infallibly foreknows the future, then humans cannot be free. They present a supposed argument purporting to show that foreknowledge is incompatible with free will and then they easily and decisively defeat it (pp. 12–13).<sup>12</sup> Now, I am quite satisfied that the authors have shown that the argument that *they present* is simply (and obviously) invalid. The argument *as presented* commits the obvious modal fallacy that "if x will definitely occur, then x will occur necessarily."<sup>13</sup> However, no one to my knowledge has ever presented the flawed argument which they allege represents the argument given by "some Mormon thinkers." What is worse, they appear to attribute this badly flawed argument to me (pp. 12–13)! But I have never presented such an argument and I do not relish having such a ridiculous argument attributed to me. The argument they present thus represents a straw man.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The (badly) flawed argument presented by Beckwith and Parrish is as follows:

1. God's knowledge of the future is always true.
2. Therefore, God knows what will definitely happen.
3. 'Pat will mow the law on Tuesday' is part of this definite future.
4. Free will is the ability to do otherwise.
5. Therefore, 'Pat will mow his law on Tuesday' could not be otherwise.
6. Therefore, God's omniscience eliminates human free will" (p. 12).

<sup>13</sup> More accurately, this argument commits the fallacy of inferring the necessity of the consequent from the necessity of the consequence; also known as Sleight's Fallacy.

<sup>14</sup> It is amazing that the authors are ignorant of the logical structure of the incompatibility argument because it is probably the most discussed issue in the philosophy of religion in the past thirty years. Literally hundreds of articles and

The modern argument showing that free will is not compatible with foreknowledge is based on the fixity of the past or, in other words, the principle that no person can have power to do anything which entails that God has not always believed what God has in fact always believed. Suppose that God has always believed that I will rob a 7-Eleven at a certain time  $t$ . My refraining from robbing the 7-Eleven at time  $t$  certainly entails that God has not always believed that I will rob at  $t$ . Because God has always believed that I will rob the 7-Eleven at  $t$ , I cannot have the power to refrain from robbing, since this power would entail power to change God's past beliefs. No person has the power to alter the past. Yet to be free with respect to whether I rob, I must have power to refrain from robbing the 7-Eleven at  $t$ . It follows that either God does not have foreknowledge or I am not free.<sup>15</sup>

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books have been published clarifying the logical structure of the argument. See John M. Fischer, ed. *God, Foreknowledge and Freedom* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); Nelson Pike, "A Latter-day Look at the Foreknowledge Problem," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 33 (1993):129-64; John M. Fischer, "Recent Work on God and Freedom," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29/2 (April 1992): 91-109.

<sup>15</sup> The valid, and I believe sound, argument to show that foreknowledge is incompatible with free will is as follows:

1. It has always been true that I will sin tomorrow. (Assumption: Omnitemporality of Truth).
2. It is impossible that God should hold a false belief or fail to know any truth (Assumption: Infallible Foreknowledge).
3. God has always believed that I will sin tomorrow (from 1 and 2).
4. If God has always believed a certain thing, then it is not in anyone's power to do anything which entails that God has not always believed that thing (Assumption: Fixed Past).
5. It is not in my power to do anything that entails that God has not always believed that I will sin tomorrow (from 3 and 4).
6. That I refrain from sinning tomorrow entails that God has not always believed that I will sin tomorrow (necessary truth and from 2; Principle of Transfer of Powerlessness).
7. Therefore, it is not in my power to refrain from sinning tomorrow (from 5 and 6).
8. If I act freely when I sin tomorrow, then I also have it within my power to refrain from sinning (assumption libertarian free will).
9. Therefore, I do not act freely when I sin tomorrow (from 7 and 8).

For an argument using a similar logical structure, see Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 66-69.

Nothing the authors say responds to this valid argument. Since they do not consider this argument, they have not successfully defended the "classical" view of God against this objection.<sup>16</sup>

### Are Scriptures Incompatible with the Open View?

The authors also argue that the scriptures are incompatible with the view that God does not infallibly foreknow all free acts of humans (pp. 119–20). Citing Deuteronomy 18:22, the authors argue that if any prediction made by a prophet could possibly not come to pass, then "in some possible world Yahweh does not speak for Yahweh. Hence only if God has absolute foreknowledge of the future does Deuteronomy 18:22 make sense."<sup>17</sup> This argument fails both logically and in terms of biblical exegesis. As Richard Rice noted of a similar argument presented by Beckwith:

Beckwith ignores the texture and complexity of biblical prophecy. He says nothing about conditional prophecy, and his rigid standard of prophetic authenticity would clearly discredit Jonah, in view of the unfulfilled predictions he made.<sup>18</sup>

How then do those who believe God's foreknowledge is limited explain biblical prophecy and faith in God's certain triumph over evil? God can ensure triumph over evil though the future is not absolutely foreknown because he is like a master chess player.

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<sup>16</sup> In addition, the authors adopt a view of God's knowledge which they cannot consistently assert. If God knows all true propositions about the infinite future, then God has knowledge of a completed and actual infinite. However, Beckwith and Parrish assert that it is logically impossible either for an actual infinite to exist or to complete an actual infinite (ch. 3). It follows that their view of God's foreknowledge is inconsistent with their view that an actual infinite is logically impossible. This position is persuasively argued by William Flanhead, "The Symmetry of the Past and the Future in the *Kalam Cosmological Argument*," and Robert Prevost, "Classical Theism and the *Kalam Principle*," both in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Explanatory Essays*, ed. William Lane Craig and Mark S. McLeod (Lewiston: Mellen, 1990), 99–111, 113–25.

<sup>17</sup> Deuteronomy 18:22 reads: "When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously."

<sup>18</sup> Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 181 n. 76.

Even though he does not know exactly which moves free persons will make, he knows all possible moves that can be made and that he can meet any such moves and eventually win the game. God may lose some pieces during the games, just as some persons may freely choose to reject God and thwart his plans so far as they are concerned individually, but God can guarantee ultimate victory. Those who reject infallible foreknowledge affirm these propositions about God's knowledge of all possibilities:

1. God is omniscient in the sense that he knows all that can be known, but it is logically impossible to know future acts that are free.

2. God knows all possibilities, including the present probability of any future event.

3. God knows now what his purposes are and that he will achieve them.

4. God does not know now, in every case, precisely which contingent possibility will be chosen or become actual.

5. God knows now how he will respond to whichever contingent possibility occurs to ensure the realization of his purposes.

Thus God can ensure ultimate victory and the realization of all of his purposes not because of his omniscience, but because of his almighty power. These features of God's knowledge ensure that God knows all possibilities and future events which are now certain given causal implications (propositions 1 and 2). This view also allows for free choices among genuinely open alternatives (propositions 2 and 4). These provisions suggest that God knows all possible avenues of choices (propositions 2 and 5) and, coupled with God's maximal power, entail that God's plans and declarations of future events will be realized (propositions 3 and 5). Thus a complete picture of God's providence is possible even though God does not have infallible and complete foreknowledge.

Nevertheless, can limited foreknowledge be squared with scriptural predictions of the future? I will argue that: (a) scripture is consistent with limited foreknowledge, and (b) a number of scriptures require limited foreknowledge. There are several different types of prophecy, each of which is consistent with God's limited foreknowledge:

1. *Predictions about what God will bring about through his own power regardless of human decisions.* God can clearly predict

his own actions and promises regardless of human decisions. If human cooperation is not involved, then God can unilaterally guarantee the occurrence of a particular event and predict it ahead of time. For example, God can guarantee that his plan will be fulfilled because he will intervene to bring it about. Thus God can show prophets a panoramic vision of his plan from beginning to end. God can declare that he knows the beginning from the end in terms of his plan and what he will bring about himself: "Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do my pleasure: . . . yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it" (Isaiah 46:10-11). A perfect example of a scriptural passage showing that God knows the future in virtue of what he will bring about through his power is found in 1 Nephi 9:6: "But the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning; wherefore, he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men; for behold, he hath all power unto the fulfilling of his words."

However, the fact that God's plan will be carried out does not mean that he has to know each individual's free actions beforehand. God has prepared a plan to save all persons *if they will keep his commandments*. However, not all persons will be saved, despite his plan, because they are free to reject him. God's plan will be realized, but it is possible that not every person will be finally exalted. God's plan thus involves a risk that not all persons will be saved. There is a clear contingency in God's knowledge with respect to the future free acts of individuals. From the Mormon perspective, one of the primary purposes of life was that God wanted "to see if" persons would keep his commandments when granted significantly free will (Abraham 3:25). This desire to learn whether persons would do what God commanded assumes that God does not have complete foreknowledge.

2. *Conditional prophecies*. Numerous prophecies express what God will do *if* certain conditions obtain. For example, several prophecies are predictions as to what will happen if human beings behave in one way rather than another. Jeremiah 18:7-8 (Revised Standard Version, RSV) is an example of a conditional prophecy: "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation,

concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it.”<sup>19</sup> Conditional prophecies do not require absolute foreknowledge because God waits upon conditions to occur before a course of action is finally decided. Indeed, conditional prophecies are incomprehensible if God has complete foreknowledge. There would be no “ifs,” only absolutes.

3. *Prophecies of Inevitable Consequences of Factors Already Present.* Since God’s knowledge of present conditions is complete, it follows that he knows all things that are inevitable as a causal result of present conditions. He also knows the probability of any future event based on current conditions. For example, a skilled physician can predict the death of certain individuals because the causes of that death are already present. Similarly, God can predict future events that are causally implicated by present circumstances or otherwise inevitable. For example, at the time Christ prophesied that Judas would betray him, Judas had already betrayed him by accepting thirty pieces of silver and by promising the Jewish authorities to identify Jesus at the designated place.

4. *Absolute Election of Nations and Conditional Election of Individuals.* A number of passages in the New Testament speak of God’s foreknowledge in the context of election or foreordination. The New Testament uses a family of words associated with God’s knowledge of the future such as “foreknow” (*proginosko*), “foresee” (*proorao*), “foreordain” (*proorizo*), “foreknowledge” (*prognosis*), and “foretell” (*promarturomai* and *prokatangelo*; see 1 Peter 1:2, 20; Ephesians 1:4–5; Romans 8:28–30; Acts 2:23; 4:28). For example, Ephesians 1:11 discusses God’s foreordination of persons, “in whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined (*prooristhentes*) according to the purpose (*prothesin*) of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will (*kata ten boulen tou thelmatos autou*).” This passage does not speak about what persons do to earn election;

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<sup>19</sup> Numerous examples of such conditional prophecies are found in the Book of Mormon. For example, the Book of Mormon prophets repeatedly testify that “if it so be that they shall serve [God] according to the commandments which he hath given, it shall be a land of liberty unto them; wherefore, they shall never be brought down into captivity; . . . for if iniquity shall abound cursed shall be the land for their sakes” (2 Nephi 1:7).

rather, it focuses exclusively on God's decision to choose a certain group of persons. Now if individual persons were "predestined" or "elected" to salvation on the basis of God's own counsel alone, then free will would play no role in individual salvation. God would arbitrarily damn some and leave others to damnation for no act of their own. Thus it is problematic to assert that such passages relate only to God's action to elect individuals to salvation, as Calvin and Luther claimed.

However, passages speaking about God's election do not address individual election; rather, they speak of the corporate election of Israel, or the church, or of God's people as a whole. In a sensitive and careful analysis of the doctrine of election, William G. MacDonald demonstrates that the biblical doctrine of election invariably refers to corporate rather than individual election.<sup>20</sup> The same conclusion was reached by William W. Klein.<sup>21</sup> Thus election is not a reward for an individual exercise of free will but a divine decision unilaterally made to elect a group of people as his "chosen" or "promised" people. Although the election is certain, the promises made to any individual member of the elect group are conditional upon faithfulness to God. Such corporate election is not inconsistent with individual free will.

It is of course true that God sometimes foreordains individual persons to specific callings. Yet the foreordination of individuals is conditional. For example, God's foreordination of Samson as a chosen vessel did not imply that it was inevitable that Samson would fulfill that calling. In fact, Samson failed. Moreover, individual calls represent a summons to service and not a guarantee of individual salvation based upon acts of free will. Thus no prediction is made about individual acts when an individual is elected or foreordained to a particular calling.

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<sup>20</sup> William G. MacDonald, "The Biblical Doctrine of Election," in *The Case for Arminianism: Grace of God, the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Academic, 1989), 207-29.

<sup>21</sup> William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids: Academic, 1990).

## Biblical Support for the Open View of God

The biblical record gives strong indications that God's knowledge of future free acts is not complete. For example, when God speaks in scripture he uses terms implying uncertainty such as *if* (Heb. *'im*) or *perhaps* or *maybe* (Heb. *'ûlay*). Other scriptures demonstrate that though God had expressed an intention to carry out a certain judgment, God changes his mind when the people repent. Certainly it is impossible to change one's mind if one already knows what will occur.

Some rather strong indications exist in scripture that God does not know all future contingents. First, even though some scriptures present Jesus as omniscient, it is clear that others do not.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Jesus seems to have expected the kingdom of God to come in power and glory before the end of his present generation, even before all of the seventy returned from their missions throughout Judea.<sup>23</sup> But it makes no sense to argue that Jesus must have known that the kingdom was not coming that soon because he was omniscient, for the scripture expressly states that the Son of Man did not know when the kingdom would come. Jesus does not know all things.

In the Hebrew scripture, the word *'ûlay* meaning "perhaps" or "maybe" is used in divine speech. For instance, God is portrayed as saying:

Son of man, prepare for yourself an exile's baggage, and go into exile by day in their sight. . . . Perhaps [*'ûlay*] they will understand, though they are a rebellious house. (NSV Ezekiel 12:2-3)

Thus says the Lord: Stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak. . . . It may be [*'ûlay*] they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way, that I may repent of the evil. (RSV Jeremiah 26:2-3; for other uses of *'ûlay*, see Jeremiah 36:3, 7; 51:8; Isaiah 47:12; Luke 20:13).

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<sup>22</sup> See Raymond E. Brown, "How Much Did Jesus Know?" in *Jesus: God and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 39-102.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-79.

How shall we understand such passages? Terence E. Fretheim, professor of Old Testament at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, suggests that it "seems clear from such passages that God is quite uncertain as to how the people will respond to the prophetic word. God is certainly aware of the various possibilities regarding Israel's response. One might even say that God, given a thoroughgoing knowledge of Israel, knows what its response is likely to be. . . . Yet, in God's own words, God does not finally know."<sup>24</sup> That Fretheim is correct, and that God actually was uncertain as to what Israel would do, is supported by RSV Jeremiah 3:7 and 19:

And I thought,  
 "After she has done all this she will return to me";  
 but she did not return. . . .  
 "I thought  
 how I would set you among my sons,  
 and give you a pleasant land,  
 a heritage most beautiful of all nations.  
 And I thought you would call me, My Father  
 and would not turn from following me.  
 Surely, as a faithless wife leaves her husband,  
 so have you been faithless to me, O house of Israel."

Fretheim observes of this passage; "Here God is depicted as actually thinking that the people would respond positively to the initial election, or that they would return after a time of straying. But events proved that God's outlook on the future was too optimistic. The people did not respond as God thought they would. God's knowledge of future human actions is thus clearly represented as limited."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps those holding that God has absolute foreknowledge will interpret this passage in a manner consistent with the belief that God actually knew what Israel would do and assert that we have an example of the dreaded anthropomorphism of the Old Testament in this passage. Fretheim observes that such readings "buy us an absolute form of omniscience at the price of

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<sup>24</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 45-46.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

placing the integrity of the text and coherence of all of God's words in jeopardy: does God mean it or not? These texts show that Israel's future is genuinely open and not predetermined. The future of Israel does not only not exist, it has not even been finally decided upon. Hence, it is not something that even exists to be known, even if the knower is God."<sup>26</sup> It seems to me that the only way to preserve the integrity of this text is to admit that God experienced, nay suffered, disappointment when he discovered that Israel would reject him, especially after expecting that Israel would love him as a son loves a father.

Exodus 32:7–14 (cf. Deuteronomy 9:13–29), where God is portrayed as changing his mind after a consultation with Moses, is of similar import. Yahweh told Moses that he intended to destroy Israel for having made the golden calf, and Moses objected and actually argued that such a course would be unworthy of God. As Childs observed, the key to understanding the encounter is God's response to Moses: "Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against [Israel] (v. 10)";<sup>27</sup> God had actually formed an intention to execute wrath; it was something that "he thought to do" (v. 14). This passage shows that, while God had decided to destroy Israel, "the decision had not yet reached an irretrievable point; Moses could conceivably contribute something to the divine deliberation that might occasion a future for Israel other than wrath."<sup>28</sup> Remarkably, Moses persuaded God to recant what he had decided to do: "And the Lord repented of the evil He thought to do unto His people" (v. 14). The most faithful way to understand this passage, it seems to me, is to view Yahweh as having formed an intention to do one thing—and thus at one time believing that he would do it—and at a later time changing his mind and coming to believe something different. Yet if God did not know at the time of his conversation with Moses whether Israel would be destroyed, then certainly there were a good many things about the future that he did not know. Some Mormons may point out that when Joseph Smith revised the Bible, he changed all of the passages suggesting that God repented—implying that such

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>27</sup> J. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 567.

<sup>28</sup> Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 50.

changes were made because the Prophet Joseph Smith believed that repentance could not be appropriate to a being that cannot possibly be mistaken about any belief or sin in any way. Nevertheless, the Joseph Smith translation of this passage makes God's change of mind even more explicit, and thus recognizes that God changed his mind: "The Lord said unto Moses, If they will repent of the evil which they have done, I will spare them. . . . Therefore, see thou do this thing that I have commanded thee, or I will execute all that which I had thought to do unto my people" (JST Exodus 32:13-14).

Still other passages suggest that some predictions of future events are conditional and that God does not know precisely what will happen, though he intends to persuade people to freely repent. A good example of such a conditional prophecy is found in RSV Jeremiah 22:4-5: "If (*'im*) you will indeed obey this word, then there shall enter the gates of this house kings who sit on the throne of David. . . . But if (*'im*) you will not heed these words, . . . this house shall become a desolation." Numerous similar conditional prophecies occur throughout the Old Testament, the Book of Mormon, and modern Mormon scripture. Is the *if* in such passages to be taken with full seriousness? For example, the book of Abraham suggests that one of God's purposes in establishing his plan and this earth was to learn something about humans: "We will make an earth whereon these may dwell; and we will prove them herewith, to see *if* they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abraham 3:24-25). It seems to me that this passage doesn't make any sense at all if the future is already determinate and God already knew from all eternity exactly what we will do without actually "seeing *if*" persons will do what he has commanded. Indeed, the very earnestness of mortality in Mormon thought derives its force from the view that the future is genuinely open and as yet undecided and therefore truly up to us to declare to God who we will be—a fact he is waiting with loving interest to discover along with us. God is waiting on us to see *if* we will be faithful.

One final type of text may be taken as evidence that God's knowledge is dependent on what actually happens. In the book of Jonah, the prophet Jonah declared that "yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). In response to this

proclamation, the city of Nineveh proclaimed a fast and repented of its evil ways. "The word of the Lord" came to the king of Nineveh: "Who can tell if (*ʔim*) God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?" (Jonah 3:9). In response to the repentance of the people of Nineveh, God changed his mind and decided not to do what he had declared he would do: "And God saw their works, and they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said he would do unto them; and he did it not" (Jonah 3:10). Jonah's response was undoubtedly similar to what a believer in absolute foreknowledge might experience when expectations about God have been shattered by concrete dealings with God involved in an open future that can have results unanticipated even by God: Jonah was "very angry" with God. Jonah complains: "O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? . . . I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil" (Jonah 4:1). This picture of God presented by patience, kindness, and mercy is possible only within a genuine relationship in which all responses and outcomes are not already determined before the responses and decisions are made. Moreover, if such decisions are not already made, then how can it be that God infallibly knows beforehand what the decision is? Perhaps the book of Jonah can teach us something about God—maybe even something unexpected and outside our preconceived notions about how God must be. As Abraham Heschel commented, "This is the mysterious paradox of Hebrew faith: The All wise and Almighty may change a word that He proclaims. Man has power to modify His design. . . . God's answer to Jonah, stressing the supremacy of compassion, upsets the possibility of looking for a rational coherence of God's ways with the world."<sup>29</sup>

As Clark Pinnock asserted:

According to the Bible, God anticipates the future in a way analogous to our own experience. God tests Abraham to see what the patriarch will do, and then says through his messenger, "Now I know that you

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<sup>29</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 2:66–67.

fear God" (Gen. 22:12). God threatens Ninevah with destruction, and then calls it off when they repent (Jonah 3:10). I do not receive the impression from the Bible that the future is all sewn up and foreknown. The future is envisaged as a realm in which significant decisions can still be made which can change the course of history.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. God's Immutability and Timelessness

The authors next argue that God is unchanging in the sense that his nature never changes. In other words, God has always been and always will be God (p. 14). They argue that if God is immutable in this sense, then it follows that he is also timeless in some sense (p. 15). In contrast, they argue that in Mormonism God was once not God, because he *became* God through a course of moral development. They imply that there was a time when God was not fully divine (p. 43).

This seems to be a bit confused. The fact that God has always been God, or even that he is constant in character and moral resolve, does not entail that he is immutable or timeless. For example, assume that I have had and will always have the same human nature and moral commitments. It does not follow that I am unchanging, much less that I am timeless. I could move from here to there or change my mind while still having the same human nature. Similarly, God could at one time be angry with Israel and at another time be pleased with Israel and yet still be God at both times. Thus God could be both temporal and mutable while still remaining God.

When medieval theologians assert that God is immutable, they mean much more than that God has always had the same divine nature. They mean that none of God's intrinsic properties, whether accidental or essential, could be different. Further, if God is timeless, then God cannot change in any sense. Everything that is true of God is true of him in the single nontemporal instant of

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<sup>30</sup> Clark Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," in *Predestination and Free Will*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 157.

the eternal now.<sup>31</sup> Yet for something to change it must be in time, for it must be characterized at some time before the change differently from some time after the change. Thus the authors are incorrect when they assert that God's immutable nature entails that God is timeless. However, it is true that if God is timeless, then God is unchanging, but in a sense much stronger than they intended.

Though they assert that God does not change in nature and that God is timeless in the sense that God's nature is not within temporal succession, the authors accept that God is changing in his "relational consciousness," for they admit that:

God's relational consciousness changed *when* Ninevah repented—i.e., God chose not to destroy the city—but *His intrinsic inner being* remained constant and immutable (in this case, the moral aspect of His nature). Hence, the change in God's relational consciousness is such that it functions in accordance with His immutable intrinsic inner being. In this sense, God is immutable. (p. 15)<sup>32</sup>

Thus the authors accept that what happens in the world can affect and change "God's relational consciousness" or knowledge of what is happening in the world. However, acceptance of this type of change is clearly incompatible with both God's immutability and timelessness. Recall the story of Jonah and Ninevah which they try to explain away as a counterexample to divine immutability. Before Ninevah's repentance, God had warned through Jonah that "Ninevah will be destroyed" because the people had been wicked. However, the people repented and God was moved by this repentance not to destroy them. At one point in time God intended to destroy Ninevah. At a later point in time, after seeing Ninevah's repentance, God no longer had this

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<sup>31</sup> For discussions of the classical idea of timeless eternity, see Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* V, 6; St. Augustine, *Confessions* II, 12; Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1981): 429–58; and Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), ch. 14.

<sup>32</sup> The authors are here interpreting W. Norris Clarke.

intention. Thus it certainly seems that God changed his intentions as to how he would treat the people of Ninevah. Indeed, the authors assert that God changed this intention "when" or at the time the people of Ninevah repented. But the people of Ninevah repented at a specific temporal time. Thus God was affected and changed his resolve to destroy Ninevah also at this time. But if God changed in this sense then he is both mutable and within time.<sup>33</sup>

The authors also contend that there is no problem in conceiving a timeless God acting in time, for it is possible for God to timelessly will that effects occur in temporal succession (p. 17). I am inclined to agree that it is possible for God to will in timeless eternity and for what is willed by God to occur in temporal time. However, it is not sufficient merely that God timelessly will that a temporal effect occur and that it occur, for it can't be by mere coincidence that what God wills just happens to occur. God's will must somehow be causally *related to the effect in time*. But it is problematic, to say the least, to coherently suppose that a timeless will *causes* the temporal effect, for causation is a temporal relation.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The authors' argument here is merely sloppy, for it is clear that they really don't mean what they say. They don't really mean that God decided not to destroy the Ninevites "when," or at the temporal time that the Ninevites repented. What the authors really mean is that God timelessly knew that the people of Ninevah would repent and that God never had any intention to destroy them (p. 16). They could say that although God told Jonah he intended to destroy Ninevah, God really never had such intention. Since God knew Ninevah would repent, they might argue that God timelessly intended to destroy Ninevah. However, this reading appears to make God a liar as to his true intentions, for he declares through Jonah that he *does* intend to destroy Ninevah. It seems to me that this scripture can be interpreted consistently with the text only if God is limited in his foreknowledge. At the time he threatened destruction he expected Ninevah to continue in its wickedness. He didn't know Ninevah would repent. He was pleasantly surprised when they did repent. This interpretation entails that God's intentions changed when the Ninevites repented and that he is thus mutable and temporal, or changing and within temporal succession.

<sup>34</sup> For example, suppose that God has timelessly willed that it will rain in May 1997. There must be more than just God's willing that it rain and that it in fact rains, for it cannot be just by chance that it rains. God must cause it to rain. But *when* does this cause occur? It seems that God's causal activity cannot remain isolated from temporal succession because a cause must be temporally continuous with the temporal effect. Thus God's will cannot remain untainted by

It is for this reason that I believe it remains problematic to assert that a timeless God creates a world, enters into a relationship or responds to a prayer, for all of these actions presuppose a causal (or at least a dependence relationship) and therefore a temporal relationship between God and the world.

Finally, the authors argue that the notion that God "progresses" or is otherwise temporal is not scriptural. The authors cite several Old Testament texts (Psalm 90:2; Isaiah 40:28; 43:12–13; 57:15) that use the word *'ôlām*, and assume it refers to timelessness (p. 121). However, it merely means an indefinite period of time. It does not mean a timeless eternity.<sup>35</sup> None of the scriptures cited by the authors support any conclusion stronger than that: (1) God's character and commitment are stable and unchanging; (2) God is everlasting or has always existed; and (3) God is immune from the ravages of time. They do not support the stronger claim made by the authors that God transcends all temporal succession and changes in no intrinsic properties.

Almost all biblical scholars agree that God's time is *different* from the time-metric of our world, but that God is involved in a temporal relation to the world.<sup>36</sup> Terence Fretheim concluded:

The God of the OT is thus not thought of in terms of timelessness. At least since creation, the divine life is temporally ordered. . . . God is not above the flow of time and history, as if looking down from some supratemporal mountaintop on all the streams of people through the valleys of the age. God is "inside time," not outside of it. . . . The OT witnesses to a God who truly shares in human history as past, present and future, and in such a way that we must speak of a history of God.<sup>37</sup>

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temporality if God's will is a temporal cause of a temporal effect—God's causal activity of the rain in May 1997.

<sup>35</sup> Ernst Jenni, "Das Wort *'olam* im Alten Testament," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 64 (1952): 197–248, and 65 (1953): 1–35.

<sup>36</sup> See Rolf Knierim, "Cosmos and History in Israel's Theology," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 3 (1981): 71–86; James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, rev. ed (London SCM, 1968); Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 39–44.

<sup>37</sup> Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 43–44.

A number of Old Testament passages clearly entail separate temporal moments in God's internal life:

He will not always chide,  
neither will he keep his anger for ever.  
(Psalm 103:9; cf. Isaiah 57:16; Jeremiah 3:12; Micah 7:18)

His anger is but for a moment,  
and his favor is for a lifetime.  
(RSV Psalm 30:5; cf. Ezra 9:8; Ps. 85:3)

For a brief moment I forsook you. . . .  
In overflowing wrath for a moment  
I hid my face from you,  
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you.  
(RSV Isaiah 54:7–8; cf. Isaiah 26:20; Exodus 33:5)

The same conclusion is supported by the New Testament. The authors cite two texts that use the word *aion*, translated in Romans 1:20 variously as “everlasting” or “eternal,” in the sense of enduring through all time. They also cite 1 Timothy 1:17, which calls God the “eternal king” or “king of ages” (in the KJV)—translating the phrase “*basilei ton aionon*.” It is quite ironic that these texts support the view that God is everlasting—or exists forever in a temporal framework—not the view that he is timeless in the sense of transcending temporal succession.<sup>38</sup>

The most important study on the subject of the concept of “eternity” in the Bible forcefully argues that the idea of an absolute timeless eternity is absent from the New Testament—just as it is from the Old Testament.<sup>39</sup> A similar conclusion was reached in a recent study by Alan Padgett, who concluded: “If the OT and the NT nowhere teach nor imply an absolute timeless divine eternity, how did exegetes and theologians so deceive themselves? Cullman is surely right to point to the influence of Platonism on the Christian tradition.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*, 70th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 18–20.

<sup>39</sup> Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964).

<sup>40</sup> Alan Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 35; cf. 24–37.

Once again we find Beckwith and Parrish chiding Mormons for not worshipping the God of Plato and Aristotle. The God of Abraham is a very different being from the God they propose.

### 5. God as the Source of Moral Values and as Perfectly Good

The authors also argue that God is perfectly good in the sense that he logically cannot fail to be good (pp. 22–23). They assert that, in contrast, it is logically possible for the Mormon God to make morally wrong decisions because he became God by making *free* decisions and could have failed to become God (p. 44). Thus they conclude that their God is a perfectly good God whereas the Mormon God is not. I think that they intend their readers to conclude (though they do not say) that the classical God is morally superior to the Mormon God. However, I believe that this position is rather deceptive because, properly speaking, the classical God is not a moral being in any meaningful sense.

In my view the doctrine of God's essential goodness is a hard pill to swallow. The upshot of the doctrine is that God is not a *moral agent* because it is not possible for God to make any morally wrong decisions. It is certainly no great moral defect to be so virtuous that one does not make morally wrong decisions; it is quite another problem if the reason no wrong decisions are made is that it is *logically impossible to make a wrong decision*. The Mormon God can be relied upon to make morally correct decisions because (1) the Godhead is a perfect loving unity and (2) the individual divine persons have forged a character solidly committed to the good over aeons of time. The Mormon God is a moral being whereas the classical God presented by the authors is not. In my opinion, the Mormon God is the only candidate in the running for a *morally* perfect being.

I also think that the doctrine that moral principles are simply identical to God's will is not philosophically acceptable. While God certainly can impose moral obligations upon his creatures to respond to his commands arising out of his love and gracious acts, the divine command theory presented by the authors entails that good and evil are arbitrary. The authors recognize the problem created by asserting that something is good merely because God

commands it, for God could then command that our entire moral duty consists in murdering six million Jews and that such acts would have to be considered "good." However, they alter this doctrine by locating the source of moral values not in God's will, but in God's nature. Since God's will is subject to his essentially good nature, they claim that God can never will anything evil. Moreover, they argue that moral values are not arbitrary because God's nature is the same in every possible world. However, if God's nature is logically prior to God's will, then God is stuck with whatever his nature happens to dictate—and in this sense moral values are clearly arbitrary. God is not morally free on such a view because he cannot will that his nature be different. Finally, love becomes the ultimate moral principle on such a view rather than God's will—so they effectively abandon the divine command theory they seek to defend. Accordingly, these problems are sufficient reason to jettison the classical view of God's logically necessary goodness. I prefer the Mormon view that sees God as a person who is worthy of praise and worship precisely because he could go wrong, but in the excellence of his personal character has freely decided to do what is good.<sup>41</sup> The bottom line is that the Mormon God is a moral being in the fullest sense, whereas it is doubtful that the God presented by Beckwith and Parrish is moral in any meaningful sense.

## 6. Can the Universe Be Infinitely Old?

Joseph Smith rejected the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, affirming rather that the most basic constituents of the world (intelligences and chaotic matter) are beginningless, self-existent, and uncreated. This view seems to imply that the world's constituents are infinitely old and that there has been an infinite series of events in time. Many of the authors' philosophical objections to Mormon theism are variations of the age-old arguments against the possibility of an actual infinite. The following argument which the authors take from William L. Craig is representative:

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<sup>41</sup> A number of others prefer this view for similar reasons. See A. A. Howsepian, "Is God Necessarily Good?" *Religious Studies* 27 (December 1991): 473–84; Robert F. Brown, "God's Ability to Will Moral Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 8/1 (January 1991): 3–20.

1. The series of events in time is a collection formed by adding one member after another.
2. A collection formed by adding one member after another cannot be actually infinite.
3. Therefore, the series of events in time cannot be actually infinite.

Of course, Mormons will reject both premises 1 and 2. The authors try to prove premise 2 by reducing its negation to an absurdity. If the series of events has no beginning, then every event has been preceded by an infinite number of events. But if one can never arrive at infinity by adding one member after another, one would have never arrived at the present day, because to do so one would have had to "cross" (or complete) an infinite number of days. Or course, if this argument or any of its related variants is sound, then not only are certain formulations of Latter-day Saint theism incoherent, but so also is the deity of process theology, which has always existed in a process of ever greater organizing perfection, and also the temporal deity of Christians elucidated by Nicholas Wolterstorff, Richard Swinburne, etc. In addition, the view of many theologians such as Origen and Thomas Aquinas that God could have created a world from all temporal eternity is similarly rendered false.

The authors argue that because an actual infinite is impossible, an array of Mormon beliefs is false, including the view that the world is eternally old, that beings eternally progress, that an infinite number of spirits exists and that omniscience in a spatially infinite world is impossible (ch. 3). Now this type of argument is not new, and with the exception of its application to particular Mormon beliefs, is merely a rehash of William Craig's arguments against process thought.<sup>42</sup> The argument that an actual infinite is impossible has been accepted by very few philosophers and in fact has been refuted, decisively in my view, by a number of modern philosophers.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the authors dust the argument off

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<sup>42</sup> Beckwith and Parrish's entire argument is dependent upon William Craig almost to the point of plagiarism. See, Craig, "Creation ex nihilo," in *Process Theology*, 143-73.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g., Graham Oppy, "Craig, Mackie, and the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument," *Religious Studies* 27 (June 1991): 189-97; Adolph Grünbaum, "The Pseudo-Problem of Creation in Physical Cosmology," *Philosophy of Science* 56

for another round and imply that Mormons should jump ship because they have an argument to show that their world view is false.

To understand whether, and if so how, an actual infinity is possible has been a vexing problem from antiquity, at least since Zeno formulated his famous paradoxes.<sup>44</sup> Zeno argued that in order for the arrow to reach the target or the hare to catch the tortoise, they would first have to traverse an infinite number of halfway points. But this was logically impossible. I think that we are justified in seeing such infinity arguments as a sleight-of-hand trick like Zeno's paradoxes, for even though a baseball must pass through an infinite number of halfway points to reach the catcher's mitt, somehow the baseball actually makes it to the mitt, just as the arrow reaches the target and the hare passes the tortoise. The "magic" occurs in distracting attention from the fact that the logic of infinite sets differs from the logic applied to individual members of such sets.

Several different versions of the argument designed to show that an actual infinite is impossible are given by the authors. The first version is roughly that it is impossible to traverse an infinite number of days, for no matter how long one were traveling, one would still only have traveled a finite number of days. Since the universe began "an infinite number of days ago," it could never reach the present. Unless one can reach an "infinite number of days ago" the universe cannot be infinitely old (pp. 55–57).

However, this type of argument commits the (rather obvious) logical fallacy of composition. It assumes that the first day in an infinite set must have the same properties as the infinite set of days, that is, that some day is the "infinitieth day." There is no such thing as a day which occurred an "infinite number of days ago" simply because there is no such thing as the "infinitieth day." The same fallacy is committed when a person asserts that a

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(September 1989): 373–94; Norman Kretzmann, "Creation ab aeterno: Can the World Have Been Created Beginninglessly?" forthcoming; Richard Swinburne, *Space and Time*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1981), ch. 15; Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, ch. 14; John L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 93–94. Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham both rejected infinity arguments based on logic. Kant thought that both the affirmation and the denial of an actual infinity presented antinomies of thought.

<sup>44</sup> See Sorabji, *Time Creation, and the Continuum*, ch. 14.

large crowd of people must be a crowd of large people—and that also is clearly false. It is also like saying there cannot be an infinite number of integers unless one of them is the “infinitieth” integer—which is clearly wrongheaded. Thus one who believes that the universe is infinitely old does not assert that one of those days was the infinitieth day which occurred an infinite number of days ago. Rather, any given day occurred a finite time ago even though there is an infinite set consisting of days during which the world has existed. There simply is no first day, so the argument is invalid.

The authors respond to this type of answer that

actually, the fact that there was no first moment really is of no help. . . . The absence of a first term merely accentuates the problem of affirming an infinite past, . . . for if one cannot in principle reach a day that occurred an infinite number of days ago, . . . this only goes to prove the impossibility of traversing an actual infinite. (pp. 57–58)

Now this is a remarkable response indeed, for the authors claim their argument is even stronger if the premises are false! The reason that one cannot reach a day that occurred an infinite number of days ago is that the very notion is a category mistake. Once again, infinity is a property of the entire set of moments that make up the infinite past, not a property of any individual moment. Thus the entire argument is a disaster in reasoning.

A second argument is based upon the supposed paradoxes that arise from unequal infinities. For example, suppose that we have an infinite set of baseball cards from which we give away 100,000 cards to charity. The authors assume that the number of cards in the infinite set is equal to the set with 100,000 fewer cards because, after all, both are infinite in number. They object, “these conclusions are patently absurd” (p. 66). Now this argument consists of a mistaken view that all infinities must be equal and expresses a mere prejudice against an actual infinite—and nothing more. Once one grasps the intricacies of infinite set theory (which the authors have apparently failed to do) there is nothing

contradictory in unequal infinities.<sup>45</sup> This conclusion may be strange or even exciting, but not incoherent.

The fallacy is that, as the mathematician Cantor has elegantly shown, not all infinite sets must be equal. Cantor bids us to consider two infinite but unequal sets, the set of all ordinal numbers and the set of all even numbers. The coherence of infinite sets that are unequal can be demonstrated by pairing members of each set in a one-to-one correspondence. Even though both sets are infinite, the set of even numbers is only half as large as the set of ordinal numbers. The authors acknowledge a coherent mathematical theory in which infinities are not equal, but they object that a mere coherent theory of infinite numbers does not mean that there could actually be an infinite collection in the real world (pp. 66–67). Yet their claim is precisely that the notion is logically “incoherent.” How can they admit such coherence and yet claim that unequal infinities cannot occur in the actual world? If the notion is logically coherent, then there is a possible world in which it can obtain. The further question as to whether an infinite collection actually exists is not an issue of logic but of empirical evidence—and they offer no evidence that such infinities are impossible in the actual world.

Moreover, there is strong intuitive support for the view that the universe could be infinitely old. One must ask at what point in the past it becomes logically impossible that the world exists. It seems that no matter how far back in time one goes to any particular past moment, it is logically possible that the world existed at that moment. But how large is the collection or series of moments at which it is possible that the world existed? The number certainly appears to be unlimited or infinite. But if the collection of times at which it is possible that the world exists is infinite, it follows that it is coherent to assert that the world is infinitely old. Thus there is good reason to believe that the universe could have existed without beginning.

I judge the arguments of Beckwith and Parrish to show that an actual infinite is impossible to be not only a failure, but a rather miserable failure at that. They offer other arguments, but they can all be answered along lines that I have outlined above.

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<sup>45</sup> See Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 91–95.

## 7. Does Mormonism Better Explain Existence?

In chapter 4, the authors challenge David L. Paulsen's claim that the argument from design supports the God of Mormon theism more convincingly than the God of classical theism.<sup>46</sup> He has argued that while the apparent design in the world points to an intelligent designer, the world's equally apparent disorder and evolutionary development point to an intelligent designer who is not absolutely unlimited or unconditioned. The authors' discussion effectively challenges Latter-day Saint thinkers to explain more clearly how divine theology fits into their total world view, but two of their main objections to Paulsen's argument are seemingly based on misunderstandings. They claim that since the God of Latter-day Saint theism is not a necessary being, he cannot serve as explanation of our world's apparent teleology. But Joseph Smith explicitly taught, and Mormons generally believe, that God *is* a self-existent being—thus there is no possible world in which he fails to exist.<sup>47</sup>

A second main objection is that Latter-day Saint theism "is not the only possible way to explain the disorder and order of the world, since the facts could be explained equally well by a number of different hypotheses, such as an infinite God who is uninterested in immorality, a couple of warring Gods (one good and one evil)" (pp. 104–5). The authors' objection misses the point, for the claim they make is not one that Paulsen has denied. He argued only that Latter-day Saint theism accounts for our world's actual mix of order and disorder more illuminatingly than does classical theism, not that there is no other possible explanation. For example, why would God plod through millions of years of evolution with the entire scene of tooth and claw, blood and pain experienced by animals if he could have created highly evolved organisms instantly? Paulsen shows that Latter-day Saint theism can account for such facts. The authors simply fail to address this issue.

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<sup>46</sup> David L. Paulsen, "Comparative Coherence of Mormon (Finistic) and Classical Theism" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1975).

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., the King Follet Discourse. "We say that God was self-existent[.] who told you so? It's correct enough but how did you get the idea into your heads[?]" in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 359.

One last comment is in order about their final argument. The authors contend (in chapter 4) that only a *logically* necessary God can fully explain the existence of the ordered material universe. The authors nowhere show that God's existence is logically necessary, and very few Christians accept ontological arguments purporting to demonstrate the point. However, they claim that the Mormon God won't do because the Mormon God is himself an organized being in need of explanation. But their argument is wrongheaded twice over. First, God is a necessary being in Mormon thought. Second, their assumption that theism can provide a full explanation of existence is illusory.

Addressing the second point first, theism has no complete explanation of existence. Even if the existence of everything but the classical God can be explained by reference to God, it is still the case that God's decision to create is a matter of ultimately unexplained exercise of free will. Thus, within Christian thought, any attempt to find an ultimate *causal* explanation for why something exists at all is ultimately an unexplained fact.

On the other hand, it seems perfectly acceptable to regard the material universe's existence as not needing an explanation. For example, uniform motion does not need an explanation in Newtonian physics. What needs explanation is change of motion. To remain in motion is *natural* given the Newtonian system of physical explanation. Similarly as the conservation laws of modern science demonstrate, existence is the *natural* state of mass/energy. Given conservation laws, the existence of mass/energy does not need an explanation. Given Mormon cosmology, the existence of mass/energy needs no explanation—it is the *natural* state of the universe. What needs explanation is the intricate design of the universe for human purposes. Thus the entire argument that the authors offer in chapter 4 of their book is based on a questionable assumption, i.e., that the existence of mass and energy is in need of explanation.

## 8. Do Mormons Misconstrue Scriptures?

On the issue of whether the Mormon or the classical concept of God is closer to the biblical portrait, the authors (a) take Mormons to task for imposing their own previously adopted

world view on the biblical text and (b) argue that when the text is allowed to speak for itself, it provides a concept of God that is nearly, if not absolutely, identical with the classical view. With regard to (a), the authors argue:

Mormons begin their interpretation of the Bible with the assumption that Joseph Smith is God's prophet and that his teachings are correct. And since Smith's teachings include the Mormons' unique concept of God, Mormons tend to "find" their view in the Bible. . . . Hence, only by *presupposing* the truth of their position are the Mormons successful in "finding" their concept of God in the Bible. Clearly this is a case of circular reasoning. (p. 109)

No doubt the authors have provided a correct description of how many Mormons interpret the biblical text. But whether this is proper practice or question-begging seems to depend on context. *Within the perspective of the Latter-day Saint community*, this seems to be a perfectly proper way to read the text. Latter-day Saints believe that the biblical text constitutes ancient revelation and that God has resumed (with Joseph Smith) and continues to give (through Smith's successors) revelation in our day. Mormons read the ancient revelations in the light of what they take to be God's total, especially his contemporary, revelation. What could be more reasonable? On the other hand, the authors seem quite right on this point: *over against one who does not accept modern revelation* to thus argue for a Mormon interpretation of the Bible *is* indeed circular and question-begging. However, the authors' objection itself is also question-begging. The prior question to be resolved is: Are Joseph Smith and his successors God's prophets? And this question will have to be resolved on some basis other than a biblical exegesis which *assumes* either that they are or are not.

With regard to (b), the authors attempt to formulate some metaphysically neutral principles of interpretation, and then purportedly use them in reaching the conclusion that the biblical portrait of God just *is* the classical view. Unfortunately, it seems obvious that the authors make exactly the same kind of move they chide the Mormons for making: *assuming* a particular

metaphysical world view and reading the text from that perspective. And they do it, not only by way of violation, but in the very formulation, of their own hermeneutical principles. To demonstrate the latter point first: the authors propose four principles of biblical interpretation: (1) "Permit the text to speak for itself. That is, unless the text is obviously symbolic or figurative, . . . we should stick to the plain meaning of the text, and not read into the Bible doctrines that are otherwise totally foreign to the text." (2) Interpret scriptural passages in light of their immediate and general "spheres of context." (3) Do not "confuse passages that specifically speak of God's *essence* with those which describe God's *relationship* to humans." (4) Do not "reason that because the Bible does not specifically forbid or mention something, therefore the Bible implicitly approves of it" (pp. 110–12). But principle 3 contradicts principle 1. Principle 3 apparently instructs us (and the authors faithfully follow the instruction) to read the text in the light of the Aristotelian-Thomistic doctrine of essence—a doctrine that is totally foreign to the text—rather than permitting the text to speak for itself as required by principle 1.

As an instance of the authors' violation of principle 1, consider their argument that the Bible teaches creation *ex nihilo*. They cite several biblical passages that identify *God* as the creator of all things, and then argue: "Since pre-existent matter would be the *material* cause of the universe, and since this passage teaches that no cause except God can account for the universe, this passage clearly teaches creation *ex nihilo*" (pp. 117 n. 16; 126). The authors assume that biblical writers were familiar with the Aristotelian doctrine of "material cause" and meant to exclude it when they identified God as creator.

Rather than reaching their conclusions on the basis of presuppositionless principles of interpretation, it seems apparent that the authors reach them on the basis of their own *presupposed* world view.

In all likelihood there is no metaphysically neutral way to read the text. If so, why feign one?

## Is Creation Ex Nihilo Scriptural?

Many non-Mormon scholars, who have carefully treated this issue, reject the authors' claims that the Bible (i) teaches that the universe was created by God out of nothing, and (ii) *nowhere* teaches that the world was created out of preexistent matter (p. 116). For instance, with respect to the first claim, Richard Sorabji concludes: "There is no clear statement in the Bible, or in Jewish-Hellenistic literature, of creation out of nothing (in a sense which includes a beginning of the material universe). On the contrary, such a view was invented by Christians in the second century A.D., in controversy with the Gnostics."<sup>48</sup> David Winston concurs.<sup>49</sup> The notion was first expressed by the Christian Neoplatonist Tatian<sup>50</sup> and by Theophilus circa 185 A.D.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, as to the second claim, the Bible contains clear statements of creation out of chaos.<sup>52</sup> Job chapters 28 and 38 refer to God bringing order out of preexisting chaos. Moreover, Genesis 1:1 seems to be a clear reference to creation out of chaos. The *Harper's Bible Commentary* reads:

As most modern translations recognize, the P creation account (1:1–2:4a) begins with a temporal clause ("When, in the beginning, God created"); such a translation puts Gen. 1:1 in agreement with the opening of the J account (2:4b) and with other ancient, Near Eastern creation myths. . . . The description of the pre-creation state in v.2 probably is meant to suggest a storm-tossed sea: darkness, a great wind, the water abyss . . . chaotic forces.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 194.

<sup>49</sup> David Winston, "The Book of Wisdom's Theory of Cosmogony," *History of Religions* 11 (1971–72): 185–202.

<sup>50</sup> Tatian, *Ad Grecos* 5.

<sup>51</sup> Theophilus, *Ad Autolyicum* II, 4 and 10.

<sup>52</sup> See Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948), 1:302–3.

<sup>53</sup> James L. Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 87.

The most respected commentary on Genesis is by E. A. Speiser, who translates 1:1 in the same way (as a temporal clause) and then adds:

To be sure, the present interpretation *precludes* the view that the creation accounts in Genesis say nothing about coexistent matter. The question, however, is not the ultimate truth about cosmogony, but only the exact meaning of the Genesis passages which deal with the subject. . . . At all events, the text should be allowed to speak for itself.<sup>54</sup>

The drama of God's creating by organizing chaos is thoroughly treated by Jon D. Levenson, the Albert A. List Professor at Harvard University:

Although it is now generally recognized that *creation ex nihilo* . . . is not an adequate characterization of creation in the Hebrew Bible, the legacy of this dogmatic or propositional understanding lives on and continues to distort the perceptions of scholars and lay persons alike. In particular, a false finality and definiteness is ascribed to God's act of creation, consequently, the fragility of the created order and its vulnerability to chaos tend to be played down.<sup>55</sup>

If Beckwith and Parrish desire to reject the notion of God's creating by organizing a cosmos out of chaos, they must overlook the primary thrust of the Hebrew Bible. But they are not alone in wearing opaque eyeglasses that blind them to this biblical view, for centuries of theologians steeped in Augustinian theology have done the same.

## 9. Monotheism and a Plurality of Divine Persons

The authors also chide Mormons because they teach that "there exists more than one God [and that] . . . an individual can

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<sup>54</sup> E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: The Anchor Bible Commentary* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 13, emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1987), xxix.

progress to Godhood" (p. 113). They present a statement from an evangelical scholar to the effect that *Elohim* really cannot mean "gods" when referring to Israel's God, and then conclude:

Any "successful" argument from the Bible to defend the Mormon view of polytheism must commit the logical fallacies of argument from ignorance and begging the question, and that is too high a price to pay for "biblical support." Therefore, it is safe to say without reservation that the Bible supports strict monotheism, and hence, denies the existence of any god besides the one true and living God. (p. 114)

The authors give no examples of Mormon usage of scripture, do not explain the biblical support Mormons claim for their doctrine of a "plurality of gods," and generally assume that any Mormon usage of scripture to support their view must be logically fallacious. About the only thing that can be concluded "without reservation" from the authors' smug argument is that the authors have committed the fallacies of hasty generalization and expressing a mere prejudice. Nor do the authors ever explain what they mean by "strict monotheism." However, any Christian who accepts the Trinity surely accepts something less than "strict monotheism."

Take, for example, one of the scriptures cited by the authors to support their view of "strict monotheism": "For there is one God, *and there is one mediator between God and men*, the man Christ Jesus" (RSV 1 Timothy 2:5). If there is only one God, who is this man that is a mediator *between* God and man? Certainly if this one God is the only God, then this mediator is not a God. Yet the New Testament repeatedly claims that this mediator is God. How can we reconcile these two claims?

Or take another example of a scripture quoted by the authors to show that there is only one God; "But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; *and one Lord Jesus Christ*, by whom are all things, and we by him" (1 Corinthians 8:6). If there is one God who is the Father, then who is this second person who is Lord? The use of the term *Lord* was surely understood to be a reference to Yahweh, the God of the

Old Testament.<sup>56</sup> But now we see why the presentation of the authors is less than straightforward—such passages cannot logically be reconciled with the authors' view of God. Consider the following:

- a. There is only one God (Assumption of Strict Monotheism).
- b. The Father is God.
- c. The Son is God.
- d. The Father is not the Son.

The affirmation of any three of these premises entails the denial of the fourth. From premise a, b, and c it follows that the Son and Father are identical—the Sabellian heresy or modalism arose from this view that the Father and the Son are merely different modes of manifestation of the only God. But such a view must deny the very fundamental Christian assertion that the Father is not identical to the Son. The mediator between the Father and humankind cannot be identical to the Father. Yet this appears to be the position taken by the authors.

On the other hand, the authors accuse Mormons of denying premise a, and thus affirming that there is more than one God. Such a position is clearly entailed by acceptance of premises b, c, and d. Whether there is only one God or more, however, depends on the sense in which the word *God* is used. There is an equivocation in the word "God" in this argument. In premise a, if the word "God" refers to the entire Godhead, or the three divine persons who are united as "one divine agency," then it is consistent with the New Testament. Mormons can accept premises b and c only if the word "God" refers to the individual divine persons rather than to "God's essence" or to the Trinity as a whole, as the authors use it. The failure to understand the nature of this equivocation has led to a misunderstanding of the Mormon position by both Mormons and non-Mormons.

A clear distinction between the divine persons allows a coherent notion of three divine persons united as one God. For example, it is coherent to assert the conjunction of: (a) There is only one Godhead; (b) the Father is a divine person; (c) the Son is a

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<sup>56</sup> See Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 96–97.

divine person, but (d) the Father is not identical to the Son. The reason that these propositions are conjointly coherent is that the word "God" functions differently when it refers to the Godhead than when it refers to the individual divine persons.

Beckwith and Parrish fail to understand the different senses in which Mormons—and the biblical record—use the word *God*. For example, it is perfectly coherent to say that in water there is a single molecule of water; yet there are three atoms in this one molecule, two of hydrogen and one of oxygen. Molecules exist on a different level of organization than atoms. Thus on the molecular level of existence there may be only one entity while on the atomic level there are many entities in that one thing. In a similar way, it is coherent to assert that there is a single God or Godhead, yet there are three divine persons "in" God. When the divine persons are united in a profoundly loving relationship it is appropriate to recognize that they *necessarily* act as one being on a new level of corporate existence. There is a single mind in the sense that what one divine person knows, the others know; what one wills, the others will. There is also a single act for any state of affairs brought about by the divine persons acting as one almighty agency. What one does, they all do. Thus, *in this sense*, there is only one God.

The New Testament also uses the word *God* to refer in a unique way to the Father. The Apostle Paul reserves the designator *God* for the Father and refers to the Son by other designators such as *mediator* or *son* or *Lord*.<sup>57</sup> Thus *in this sense* there is also only one God, the Father. A similar emphasis upon the Father as God in a unique sense is found in the Gospel of John. In the Prologue, the Word is truly God, but the fact that he is God in a mode that is distinct from the way that the Father is God is clearly noted by the fact that the term *the God* (*ho theos*) is reserved for the Father, whereas the Word is simply *God* (*theos*): "In the beginning the Word was with the God, and the Word was God, in the beginning the Word was with the God" (John 1:1, literal translation from the Greek). The distinction between the Word and *the God* is also emphasized by the prepositional phrase *with God* or *next to God*—

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<sup>57</sup> Cornelius Plantinga Jr., "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 24–25.

*pros ton theon*. There is thus a very clear distinction between the Father as God and the Word as God, and yet both are God.<sup>58</sup> However, the Son does not do his own will, but the will of his Father, the one who sent him. Though the Son has a will of his own, he subordinates it to the will of his Father, for the Father is "greater" than he (John 17:24; 4:34; 20:26). In turn, the Spirit or *paraklētos* is a separate divine personal being who is subordinate to the Son. Thus the Father is viewed as the generator and sender, as the source or font of divinity of the Son and the Spirit. The latter two may be fully divine persons, but they are derivatively so in dependence on the Father.

Yet the very subordination of wills that distinguishes the divine persons also unites them as one on a new level of existence. The Son does the will of the Father. The Spirit does the will of the Father and the Son. Though the wills of the Son and the Spirit are distinct from the Father's will—they could freely refuse to do his

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<sup>58</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John 1–XII*, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 1:24–25, comments:

The Prologue's "the Word was God" offers a difficulty because there is no article before *theos*. Does this imply that 'God' means less when predicated of the Word than it does when used as a name for the Father? Once again the reader must divest himself of a post-Nicene understanding of the vocabulary involved. . . .

The N[ew] T[estament] does not predicate "God" of Jesus with any frequency. . . . The reluctance to apply this designation to Jesus is understandable as part of the NT heritage from Judaism. For the Jews "God" meant the heavenly Father; and until a wider understanding of the term was reached, it could not be readily applied to Jesus. . . . In [John 1:1] the Johannine hymn is bordering on the usage of "god" for the Son, but by omitting the article it avoids any suggestion of personal identification of the Word with the Father. And for Gentile readers the line also avoids any suggestion that the Word was a second God in any Hellenistic sense.

There is further consideration. . . . [P]erhaps there is justification for seeing in the use of the anathorous *theos* something more humble than the use of *ho theos* for the Father. It is Jesus Christ who says in John xiv 28, "The Father is greater than I," and who in xvii 3 speaks of the Father as "the only true God." The recognition of a humble position for Jesus Christ in relation to the Father is not strange for early Christian hymns, for Philippians ii 6–7 speaks of Jesus as emptying himself and not clinging to the form of God.

will—nevertheless, the Father's will is done because they love him so completely. It is only because this distinction of wills exists that Jesus could say: "Not my will, but thine be done."

The Father, Son, and Spirit are primordially united—a claim made in the gospel of John by use of the Greek words *en* and *hen*, i.e., *in* and *one*. The Father is said to be "in" the Son and the Son "in" the Father, and the Spirit is "in" them both and they "in" the Spirit. Because of this "in-ness," or indwelling one-ness and loving unity, they act as one God. Indeed, if it were proper to identify an "essence" of God, that essence would not be the Platonic absolutes identified by Beckwith and Parrish; rather, that essence is love. God *is* love. That is the scriptural view—not the Neoplatonism assumed by Beckwith and Parrish.

Now for the astounding part. Mortals have been invited "into" this divine unity to be one just as the Father and Son are one: "neither pray I 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" (John 17:20–21). When mortals enter this relationship of divine unity, the scriptures are fairly clear that humans who are so united will share the same glory as the divine persons. As the Seventh Lecture on Faith succinctly put it:

The Lord said unto Moses, Leviticus xix. 2: "Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, 'Ye shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.'" And Peter says, first epistle, i. 15, 16: 'But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, 'Be ye holy; for I am holy.'" And the Savior says, Matthew v. 48: 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.' If any should ask, why all these sayings? the answer is to be found from what is before quoted from John's epistle, that when he (the Lord) shall appear, the saints will be like him; . . . for no being can enjoy his glory without

possessing his perfections and holiness, no more than they could reign in his kingdom without his power.<sup>59</sup>

The Lectures concluded that if persons were invited to be one as the Father and Son are one, then they also share in the same glory enjoyed by the Father and the Son: "These teachings of the Savior most clearly show unto us the nature of salvation, and what he proposed unto the human family when he proposed to save them—that he proposed to make them like unto himself, and he was like the Father."<sup>60</sup> The notion that persons can become like God is expressly stated in the scriptures (1 John 3:2). However, we must be careful to point out that humans can become "gods" only in a subordinate sense. The source or font of all glory and divinity is the Father. This glory is communicated to humans through the mediator. The revealer of this glory and the source of sanctification to become holy as the Father is holy is the Spirit.<sup>61</sup>

Thus it must be concluded that, biblically and historically, Mormons are justified in referring to a plurality of gods *in the sense that* there are distinct divine persons. They are also justified in concluding that the Bible teaches that persons can become like the Father and the Son in a very strong sense. The divine "likeness and image" can be communicated to persons by entering into a relationship of indwelling love and divine unity. *In this sense*, Mormons affirm a plurality of gods or of divine persons. The very notion was derived legitimately from the biblical record.

Mormons are also justified historically and biblically in asserting that there is only one God. First, *God* is used as the peculiar designator of the Father throughout the New Testament (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:6). There is only one source of divinity, only one Father, only one God *in that sense of God*. Second, if *God* refers to some divine essence, to some set of properties necessary to be divine, then there is only one God or divine essence in that sense.

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<sup>59</sup> Lecture on Faith VII, 10, in N. B. Lundwall, comp., *Discourses on the Holy Ghost; also, Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1959), 149.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 16, in *ibid.*, 151.

<sup>61</sup> The notion that humans would be divinized was well established also in Patristic thought. See Keith Norman, "Divinization: The Forgotten Teaching of Early Christianity," *Sunstone* (Winter 1975): 14–19; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 155, 206, 216, 233–34, 259, 265–66, 344–45.

There is only one *theotēs*, *divinitas*, or *deitas*, or one generic divinity or Godhead or Godhood *in that sense* (see Acts 17:29). If *God* is referred to in this sense then it must be used as a predicate adjective rather than a predicate nominative as Beckwith and Parrish use it. That is, the generic divine essence is a set of great-making properties severally necessary and jointly sufficient for their possessor to possess divinity. Each of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost has this essence, though none is simply identical with this essence as Beckwith and Parrish's usage requires. Further, the New Testament teaches that persons can share in this essence or become like God (1 John 3:2). Finally, there is only one God *in the sense that* there is only one divine unity of persons or "Social Trinity." There is only one divine family or community of divine persons in an indwelling relationship of perfect love. All of these senses are thoroughly biblical.

Beckwith and Parrish have played fast and loose with both biblical and Mormon ideas of unity and plurality of God(s). Their own view appears to be thoroughly incoherent unless they believe that the Father and the Son are somehow identical. But that view is certainly not biblical.

### 10. God's Material Body

Finally, the authors argue that Mormons are wrong to view God as corporeal or embodied (pp. 114–16). However, one of the scriptures they cite to prove their point is very interesting: "Behold *my hands and my feet*, that it is I myself: handle me and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, *as ye see me have*" (Luke 24:39). The authors should have asked themselves who was telling his disciples that he is no mere spirit. It is the resurrected Christ—the very embodied being whom Thomas called: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). It seems to me that this scripture supports the view that God is embodied—it certainly does not support the authors' argument that God is incorporeal. This is the reason Mormons believe that God possesses a glorified body. The Son, who is the perfect image of the Father, was resurrected and ascended *bodily* into heaven (Acts 1:9–11). That Christ retained his resurrected body is indicated in the expectation that he will

return "in the same manner" that he "was taken up from you into heaven."

The authors correctly argue that Mormons cannot cite Old Testament passages referring to God's body to support the view that Yahweh possessed a glorified body (pp. 115–16). They argue that God is also said to take on the "form" of a dove, or to be a rock. Yet if these scriptures were taken literally in the way Mormons read references to God's body, then we would have a strange God (p. 116).

However, the authors too hastily conclude that therefore God is "by nature [merely] spirit" (p. 116). These passages legitimately show that Israelites believed that God's spirit has bodily form. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that spirit is somehow contrary to material states.

What distinguishes references to the human form of God from those comparing God to a rock or a mighty fortress is the consistency with which God reveals himself in human form. In a very sensitive discussion of "God in Human Form," Terence Fretheim reviews the appearances of God in vision in the Old Testament and finds it striking that God always appears in human form.<sup>62</sup> "The fact that the human form is constant throughout the literature gives it a level of significance beyond that of other empirical phenomena. It may be said that the human form says something not only about God, but also about the relationship between God and world/people."<sup>63</sup> Fretheim notes that it is a mistake to assume a discontinuity between spirit and materiality in Hebrew thought:

Is the human form one which God *assumes* for the sake of appearance; or is there an essential continuity between the form and God as God is, or both? It would

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<sup>62</sup> In Exodus 24:10, God appears and under his *feet* there is a work of sapphire. God ate and drank with Israel—implying a physical body; Amos 7:7 and 9:1 speak of God standing; Isaiah 6:1 says that Isaiah saw God sitting on a throne; Jeremiah 1:9 affirms that God "put forth his hand and touched [his] mouth"; in RSV Ezekiel 1:26, Ezekiel sees God seated above the "likeness of a throne, . . . a likeness as it were in human form"; RSV Numbers 12:8 tells of speaking "mouth to mouth" and of "the form of the Lord"; RSV Exodus 33:21–23 refers to the "place by" God, and to God's hand and back. Acts 7:56 refers to Stephen's vision of Christ "standing on the right hand of God."

<sup>63</sup> Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 101.

be a mistake to move to a consideration of God as spirit in this connection. It is remarkable how seldom the OT, and even the NT, uses such language to speak of God. . . . The spiritual and the physical/material are not mutually exclusive categories. To speak of God as spirit does not necessarily entail formlessness.<sup>64</sup>

Thus Fretheim warns against the very assumption made by Beckwith and Parrish—i.e., that if God is spirit, then he cannot also have a material form. Yet Fretheim concludes that spirit is not exclusive from the physical/material in the Bible. Thus it is consistent to say that God, *in the sense of* an individual person, has “a body of spirit” (e.g., Ether 3:16). Indeed, David Paulsen has demonstrated that “spirit” was considered to be a species of material states in late antiquity.<sup>65</sup> Fretheim thus concludes:

While final clarity cannot be achieved on this point on the basis of the evidence we have, it is probable that Israel did not conceive of God in terms of formlessness, but rather that the human form of the divine appearances constituted an enfleshment which bore essential continuities with the form which God was believed to have.<sup>66</sup>

I recommend Fretheim’s study to all readers—especially because his conclusions are directly contrary to the claims made by Beckwith and Parrish.

The fact that Israelites believed God had a human form is quite clearly set forth in Genesis 1:26: “God said ‘Let us make man in our image (*demut*); after our likeness (*tselem*).’” That this image and likeness refers to a genetic resemblance is made clear by Genesis 5:1, 3: “And Adam . . . begat a son in his own likeness (*tselem*), after his image (*demut*), and called his name Seth.”

However, it must be clarified that while God may have a bodily form, the individual divine persons are not essentially or

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>65</sup> David L. Paulsen, “Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses,” *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990): 108–9.

<sup>66</sup> Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 105.

necessarily corporeal in Mormon thought *in the sense of* "glorified, resurrected bodies." For Yahweh was already fully God prior to mortal embodiment and resurrection. Further, the personage of the Holy Spirit is divine though as yet not embodied. Further, if "God" is used in the sense of the Godhead, then God *in this sense* does not possess a body in human form. However, if "God" refers to the Father or the Son, then the biblical record fully supports the Mormon view that God has a human bodily form—or more accurately, humans have bodies made after God's image. God is not anthropomorphic; rather, persons are theomorphic.<sup>67</sup>

### Conclusion

Surely Beckwith and Parrish are correct that the Mormon concept of God differs significantly from traditional views. However, their arguments to show that the Mormon view is inconsistent, logically unacceptable, and unbiblical are seriously flawed. Nevertheless, they have made a serious attempt to understand and articulate Mormon doctrines. Their arguments are not based on mere caricatures of Mormonism as is so common in anti-Mormon literature generally. They have attempted to fairly assess Mormon views and to elucidate philosophical objections from the evangelistic perspective.

Unfortunately, they have not been careful when dealing with canons and criteria of sound philosophical argumentation. They play fast and loose with biblical views. Indeed, their myopic scriptural fundamentalism leads them to serious errors in scriptural exegesis.

It is certainly time to assess and define Mormon thought with logical rigor. Perhaps their effort will force Mormons to be careful in the articulation of their own doctrines. However, I believe that Beckwith and Parrish's book will merely further confuse the issues until a more able analysis comes along—I hope sometime in the near future.

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<sup>67</sup> See Ernst W. Benz, "Imago Dei: Man in the Image of God," in *Reflections on Mormonism*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 201–21.