2001

The Development of the Mormon Understanding of God: Early Mormon Modalism and Other Myths

Ari D. Bruening
David L. Paulsen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

This Mormon Studies is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen amatangelo@byu.edu.
The Development of the Mormon Understanding of God: Early Mormon Modalism and Early Myths

Ari D. Bruening and David L. Paulsen


ISSN: 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

I have always and in all congregations when I have preached on the subject of the Deity, it has been the plurality of Gods. It has been preached by the Elders for fifteen years.

I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.²

Joseph Smith, Nauvoo, Illinois, 16 June 1844

So Joseph declared in his last public sermon prior to his death. Unfortunately, according to Kurt Widmer in his recently published book, *Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theological Evolution*,

This article is condensed from a forthcoming book-length study of the issues.

1. Thanks to student research assistants Brent Alvord, Deidre Green, Marc-Charles Ingerson, Jeremy Pettit, Robert Schwartz, Jason Scoffield, and Terra Stark, who have each made significant contributions in the preparation of this review. This project would not have been possible without funding provided by Brigham Young University in the form of an Eliza R. Snow Fellowship, and by the College of Humanities, which granted both a leave and additional research support.


1830–1915, Joseph’s claim is controverted by the historical record (see p. 157; see also chap. 5). Widmer attempts “to establish a proper chronology for the development of Mormon thought, specifically its concept of God” (p. 6). Contrary to Joseph’s own self-understanding, Widmer’s chronology affirms that Joseph’s (and hence, says Widmer, the church’s) earliest (1830–33) understanding of God was “a modalistic form of monotheism” (p. 6; see pp. 31, 36). But according to Widmer, by 14 May 1833, Joseph’s modalism had completely evaporated and had shifted to binitarianism, and, finally, by Joseph’s death in 1844, to a “nascent cosmic henotheism”—the worship of one god without denying the existence of other gods (p. 6; see p. 31). Widmer professes that, for a time in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Brigham Young’s Adam-God theory was widely accepted (see chap. 8), but that by the end of the century Latter-day Saints found themselves with no consensus as to how God should be understood (see p. 7). This confused state of affairs was dispelled by Mormon intellectuals B. H. Roberts of the Council of the Seventy and John A. Widtsoe and James E. Talmage of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Through their efforts, especially those of Elder Talmage, “the past seventy years of doctrinal speculation would be correlated. Talmage’s work attempted to harmonize the fully developed concepts of 20th-century Mormonism with their 19th-century counterparts. The end product . . . [was] the first clear doctrinal statements on the Mormon doctrine of God . . . [and] the birth of a new Mormonism” (p. 7). Widmer categorizes this “new Mormonism” as a refined cosmic henotheism and asserts that this remains the theological position of the church today (p. 6).

That Latter-day Saint understanding of the nature of God has undergone significant development is not at issue. What is at issue is the particular course that this ongoing development has taken. Wid-
Widmer's hypothesized trajectory of this development is not new; many others have defended part or all of Widmer's theory. But despite widespread support for all or parts of Widmer's theory, our research indicates that the major stages in his trajectory (modalism, binitarianism, henotheism) are each strongly disconfirmed in light of the total evidence. To show that this is so is the principal task of this critique.

### Widmer's Developmental Trajectory in Light of the Total Evidence

#### Modalism (1830–33)

"The evidence clearly shows," Widmer says, "that the 1830 Book of Mormon, and subsequently the early Mormon Church, held a modalistic, Christological position" (p. 36). For the first three years of its existence, he claims, the church was "a strict monotheistic Christian sect," holding to a "modalistic form of monotheism" (p. 6). Modalism

---


is a subset of monarchianism, a movement in the second and third centuries that was declared heretical by the Christian church in A.D. 381. Modalism affirms that one and only one person is God, who, nonetheless, appears in three different modes: as God the Father, as God the Son (who was incarnate as Jesus Christ), and as God the Holy Spirit.

By way of contrast with modalism, Christian trinitarianism affirms that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit constitute three distinct persons who together constitute one divine entity. The precise nature of this oneness has been variously interpreted within the Christian theological tradition.

Did Joseph initially understand God to be just one person, as Widmer claims, or did Joseph understand the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to be three distinct persons, as he himself asserts? In answering this question, we will consider the data contemporary with the years 1829 to 1833, the period in which, Widmer argues, Joseph was a modalist. In analyzing this historical data, we use the term modalist to refer to texts that explicitly or implicitly assert that one and only one person is God and antimodalist to refer to texts that explicitly or implicitly differentiate at least two members of the Christian Godhead. Given this terminology, passages affirming or implying trinitarianism would be a subset of antimodalist texts. Most references to God in these documents are evidentially neutral as between these two competing models (hereafter, simply, evidentially neutral). For instance, passages which affirm the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are


7. For instance, the classical trinitarian formula affirms that the three divine persons constitute one metaphysical substance, while social trinitarianism affirms that they constitute one community perfectly united in mind, will, love, purpose, and work. Latter-day Saints typically endorse a position closely aligned with social trinitarianism, although they haven’t officially referred to their position by that name. For a very clear statement of social trinitarianism, see Cornelius Plantinga Jr., “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays, ed. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. and Ronald J. Feenstra (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 21–47.
“one” or “one God” are evidentially neutral. While this language could plausibly be construed as implying modalism, “three persons, one God” is the very essence of trinitarianism. Only passages that assert or imply that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one person would count for modalism. Passages that refer to Christ as “God” or even as “the eternal God” are also evidentially neutral; both models affirm that Christ is God or fully divine. Finally, passages that refer to Christ as “the Creator (or Father) of heaven and earth” are also evidentially neutral; both models affirm that Christ created all things (see John 1:1–3; see also Hebrews 1:1–2).

The Book of Commandments and the Doctrine and Covenants

The best evidence for Joseph’s and his fellow Saints’ earliest understanding of God is found in the revelations he received between 1829 and 1833 as he sought direction from God for establishing the fledgling church both organizationally and doctrinally. Indeed, many of these revelations came in response to members’ inquiries about doctrine. Most of God’s responses to these inquiries came in the form of revelations given by the risen Lord speaking in the first person to or through Joseph Smith. These revelations were made accessible to church members, almost all of them being first published in the Evening and Morning Star, a church-owned newspaper.

In 1833, sixty-five of these revelations were collected and published by W. W. Phelps in The Book of Commandments for the Government of the Church of Christ (hereafter the Book of Commandments), the predecessor of what is now the Doctrine and Covenants. These revelations, together with others, were published again in 1835 in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Unlike other early Latter-day Saint documents, the Book of Commandments was not a translation of ancient writings (as was the Book of Mormon) nor an inspired revision of ancient writings (as were the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible and the Book of Moses). Rather, it is a collection of mostly first-person disclosures by the risen Lord between 1829 and 1833.

8. All biblical references in this paper are to the King James Version.
What use, then, does Widmer make of the Book of Commandments in his reconstruction of the earliest Mormon understanding of God? Surprisingly, almost none. While acknowledging the evidentiary relevance of the Book of Commandments and even asserting that it continues to promote the early Mormon modalistic view of God (see p. 36), Widmer fails entirely to consider its contents. As a result, his reconstruction of what Joseph and the early Saints likely believed about God in the early 1830s fails to take account of the most critical evidence of all—evidence that decisively refutes his thesis.

The revelations received by Joseph before 14 May 1833 and collected in the Book of Commandments and the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants are decisively trinitarian. We have found eighty-three such antimodalist passages, which for ease of presentation we have grouped into six categories. We cannot find a single passage from these revelations that fits a modalistic model better than an antimodalist one.

The first category comprises texts referring to the risen Lord’s ascending to the Father or sitting at the Father’s right hand; these texts constitute some of the strongest evidence against the claim that the earliest Mormon concept of God was modalistic. For instance, in the Book of Commandments XXIV:15–16 (D&C 20:21–24), we read, “Wherefore, the Almighty God gave his only begotten Son, as it is written in those scriptures, which have been given of him, that he suffered temptations, but gave no heed unto them; That he was crucified, died, and rose again the third day, and that he ascended into heaven to sit down on the right hand of the Father, to reign with Almighty power according to the will of the Father.”

9. Widmer presents and attempts to discount the evidentiary weight of two antimodalist passages from revelations given earlier than 14 May 1833 that appear in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants in sections VII and XCI (current D&C 88 and 76, respectively) (see pp. 46–54, especially 49–50; see also note 118, below). See the section below on the Joseph Smith Translation, pp. 120–23.

10. We cite here the earlier Book of Commandments or Doctrine and Covenants versions—we realize that minor differences between these versions and our current Doctrine and Covenants exist, but Widmer is making his point with the earlier versions. Chapter XXIV (D&C 20) of the Book of Commandments, canonized in 1830, is especially important for our study because it was apparently meant to serve as a sort of creed...
Similarly, Doctrine and Covenants XCI:3 (D&C 76:19–23), which was received on 16 February 1832, provides one of the clearest examples of this distinctly antimodalistic language. Not only does this passage describe Jesus Christ and God the Father as two distinct persons in two distinct locations, but this is also the testimony of Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon: “We beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father, and received of his fulness.... And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him, that he lives; for we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the only begotten of the Father.” If Christ is the Father, as modalists claim, how does Christ ascend to himself? Or sit at his own right hand?

Texts that describe the risen Lord as “our advocate” with the Father or as pleading with or praying to the Father represent the second category. Two passages representative of the scriptures in this category are Book of Commandments XXIX:6 (D&C 29:5), which reads, “Lift up your hearts and be glad for I am in your midst, and am your advocate with the Father, and it is his good will to give you the kingdom,” and XLVIII:5–6 (D&C 45:3–5), wherein the Son prays to the Father on our behalf: “Listen to him who is the Advocate with the Father, who is pleading your case before him: Saying Father behold the suffering and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified: wherefore Father spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life.”

The Lord’s description of himself as our “advocate with the Father” is important for our survey of the evidence, for it seems incoherent to believe that he is our advocate with himself. Furthermore, as seen in the Book of Commandments XLVIII (D&C 45), the Lord describes himself as praying and pleading with the Father on our behalf. But how is it possible to pray to and plead with oneself? for the early Saints. It was also very widely disseminated. See Robert J. Woodford, The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1980), 1:287, 293, 299.
Texts in the third category describe the risen Lord's doing or subjecting his own will to the will of the Father. For example, according to Book of Commandments XXXIV:17 (D&C 31:13), "These words are not of man nor of men, but of me, even Jesus Christ, your Redeemer, by the will of the Father," and chapter XVI:2 (D&C 19:2), "I having accomplished and finished the will of him whose I am, even the Father" (see also D&C 19:3–4, 24). The verses that reference both the will of the Lord and the will of the Father and that speak of the Son doing the will of the Father fit much better with a trinitarian model of God than with a modalist one. The latter can coherently reference only one will.

In the fourth category, first-person declarations by the risen Lord claim that God is "my Father." In examining this class of texts, we must keep in mind that the speaker was the postascension resurrected Lord, who had regained the glory he had before the world was. Given a modalist model, it would seem that the glorified postascension Lord would again refer to himself as Father. Instead, he continues to refer to "my Father." To make sense of these kinds of passages, we must assume that the risen Lord is referring to someone other than himself. Consider the Book of Commandments XIV:3 (D&C 16:6). Here the Lord instructs Peter Whitmer to preach repentance "that you may bring souls unto me, that you may rest with them in the kingdom of my Father." Certainly, the glorified resurrected Lord is not his own father.

First-person declarations by the risen Lord that he is the Son of God comprise the fifth category. The revelations received before 14 May 1833 are replete with instances in which the risen glorified Lord continues to refer to himself as "the Son of God." If modalism were true, we would expect him to refer to himself as Father or perhaps even as Holy Spirit. Two representative passages of this category of scripture are found in the Book of Commandments V:10 (D&C 6:21), "Behold I am Jesus Christ the Son of God," and XLIV:1 (D&C 42:1), "Hearken, O ye elders of my church who have assembled yourselves together, in

11. See Book of Commandments XV:17–18 (D&C 18:15–16); XXVIII:5 (D&C 27:14); LIII:38–39 (D&C 50:41–42); LX:2 (D&C 59:2); see also D&C IV:6, 10, 12 (D&C 84:38, 63, 74); LXIV:5 (D&C 66:12); LXXVIII:1 (D&C 99:4); LXXIX:1 (D&C 81:6); LXXXII:1 (D&C 93:5); LXXXIX:1 (D&C 72:4).
my name, even Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, the Savior of
the world.”

The sixth and final category includes passages in which the risen
Lord distinguishes between himself and the Father or otherwise dif-
ferentiates the members of the Christian Godhead. Book of Com-
mandments XXVIII:1–3 (D&C 27:1–2) declares, “Listen to the voice of
Jesus Christ.... For behold I say unto you, that it mattereth not what
ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, when ye partake of the sacrament,
if it so be that ye do it with an eye single to my glory; Remembering
unto the Father my body which was laid down for you, and my blood
which was shed for the remission of your sins.” Likewise, we read in
XXIX:30–31 (D&C 29:27), “And the righteous shall be gathered on
my right hand unto eternal life; And the wicked on my left hand will
I be ashamed to own before the Father.” Will Christ be ashamed to
own the wicked before himself?

Doctrine and Covenants XCI (D&C 76) provides still more evi-
dence incompatible with Widmer’s claim in its description of the
three degrees of postmortal glory. In verse 6 (D&C 76:72–77) of this
section we read of those who shall inherit a terrestrial glory that they
shall “receive of the presence of the Son, but not the fulness of the
Father.” In verse 7 (D&C 76:82–86) we read of those whose degree
will be telestial that they shall receive “of the Holy Spirit through the
ministration of the terrestrial.” In order for those in the telestial king-

12. See Book of Commandments IX:15 (D&C 10:57); X:12 (D&C 11:28); XII:5 (D&C
14:9); XXIX:51 (D&C 29:42); XLIX:14 (D&C 46:13); LIII:23 (D&C 50:27); LV:46 (D&C
52:44); LVII:3 (D&C 55:2); see also D&C VII:2 (D&C 88:4–5); XXII:1, 4 (D&C 68:6, 25);
LXXV:4 (D&C 78:20). Book of Commandments XXIV:15 (D&C 20:21), while not a first-
person declaration by the risen Lord, is very explicitly antimodalist.

13. See Book of Commandments XV:20, 44 (D&C 18:18, 40); XVI:17–20 (D&C
19:16–19); XXIX:9 (D&C 29:8); XLI:5 (D&C 42:3); XLVIII:5–10 (D&C 45:3–8); LII:38
(D&C 50:41); and D&C XCI:7 (D&C 76:106–8); IV:6 (D&C 84:37–38); VII:16, 20 (D&C
88:64, 75); LXXV:1 (D&C 78:4); C:3 (D&C 133:18).
It is difficult to say exactly why Widmer failed to examine this primary archival evidence. All these revelations were given prior to 1833, and they undoubtedly provide illuminating insights into the theological mind of the young Prophet whom Widmer purports to examine. The revelations contained in the Book of Commandments and the earliest edition of the Doctrine and Covenants illustrate clearly that Joseph Smith was not a modalist at the time he recorded them. In fact, this collection of data decisively refutes any such claim.

The Book of Moses

Though Widmer claims that there is “no doubt” that the concept of God portrayed in the earliest Mormon documents is modalistic and that the Book of Moses is no exception (p. 45), he quotes virtually no language from the book to support this claim. The only evidence he draws from the Book of Moses as putative support for early Mormon modalism is the fact that in the Book of Moses creation account, unlike the corresponding account in Genesis, God recounts his creative acts in the first-person singular: “I, God.” By this change in wording, Widmer argues, Joseph was attempting “to show that God, the Father, is the sole agent in creation” (p. 45, emphasis added). Ironically, even the most casual reading of the Book of Moses shows that just the opposite is true: the text makes it clear that both God and his Only Begotten Son were involved in the creation and that they are separate and distinct persons.

Widmer does admit that the Book of Moses includes a reference to “the only begotten” as an active agent with the Father in the creation, but he dismisses this passage as only a “minor reference” and as “a Christian interpolation” (p. 45). Actually, God’s references to his Only Begotten Son as a coparticipant in creation are hardly “minor.” They are pervasive, there being no fewer than twenty-three references to the “Only Begotten Son” in the short text that constitutes the Book of Moses. The Book of Moses does provide a thoroughly Christian rendering of the Genesis creation narrative, but it is a trinitarian rendering, not a modalist one. Indeed, it is a rendering that decisively refutes Widmer’s modalistic thesis.
Let us consider a few examples. (All our citations will be to the present edition of the Book of Moses, but we have checked each against a scanned copy of the original manuscript and find no substantive changes.) The book begins:

And God spake unto Moses, saying: Behold, I am the Lord God Almighty, and Endless is my name; . . . And I have a work for thee, Moses, my son; and thou art in the similitude of mine Only Begotten; and mine Only Begotten is and shall be the Savior. (Moses 1:3, 6)

God then appears again to Moses and shows him many earths and their inhabitants. The narrative continues:

And the Lord God said unto Moses: For mine own purpose have I made these things. . . . And by the word of my power, have I created them, which is mine Only Begotten Son, who is full of grace and truth. (Moses 1:31–32)

In this passage, God clearly confirms that his “Only Begotten Son” was an active agent in creation, and he reiterates this point in the creation narrative that follows:

And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto Moses, saying: Behold, I reveal unto you concerning this heaven, and this earth; . . . by mine Only Begotten I created these things; . . . And I, God, said unto mine Only Begotten, which was with me from the beginning: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and it was so. . . . And, I, God, created man in mine own image, in the image of mine Only Begotten created I him; male and female created I them. (Moses 2:1, 26–27)

As indicated by the plural pronouns, God is here obviously addressing a second person, his Only Begotten Son, or our Savior Jesus Christ, as the narrative has already made clear. He continues this address: “And I, the Lord God, said unto mine Only Begotten, that it was not good that the man should be alone; wherefore, I will make an help meet for him” (Moses 3:18).
In Moses 4, God declares that his Son, who was active with him in the creation, also played a most important role in the precreation council, at which time his Son was chosen to be the Redeemer of the world and Satan was cast out.

And I, the Lord God, spake unto Moses, saying: That Satan, whom thou hast commanded in the name of mine Only Begotten, is the same which was from the beginning, and he came before me, saying—Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor. But, behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever. Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down. (Moses 4:1–3)

Later in the Book of Moses, God grants Enoch a vision of the Son’s incarnation in Christ, his crucifixion, and his descent into hell to redeem the dead. Following this, Enoch sees Christ “ascend up unto the Father” (Moses 7:59). 14

We have set out the portrait of God as it was sequentially unfolded in the visions of Moses and as it was revealed to and dictated by Joseph Smith. That portrait is anything but modalistic. And if, as Widmer wants to claim, the revelations received by Joseph indicate his own theological understanding, then that understanding also seems very clear: it is antimodalistic.

The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible

We next move our analysis of early Mormon documents to a consideration of the Joseph Smith Translation, a source that Widmer

14. Other scriptures in the Book of Moses, which, similarly to the verses cited in the text, differentiate between the Father and the Son are Moses 6:57, 62; 7:24, 39, 45–47; and 8:24.
claims provides further evidence that Joseph Smith was a modalist at the time he took on himself the work of translating the Bible (p. 49). Widmer begins his analysis of the Joseph Smith Translation (hereafter, often, simply JST) by arguing that the clear modalistic statements in this work regarding the nature of God offset the apparently antimodalistic but “ambiguous” passages found in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants Section XCI (now D&C 76). He then goes on to conclude that the Joseph Smith Translation offers indisputable proof that, early on, Joseph held a modalist understanding of God (see pp. 48, 50). Because the JST, except for the Book of Moses, was not published during the Prophet’s life, a study of the JST will not necessarily reveal the doctrines accepted by early Latter-day Saints. On the other hand, the JST is an excellent source of information regarding Joseph’s personal theology and is likely representative of the doctrines he taught to the members of the church at the time his revisions were being made. While the JST provides little, if any, evidence for Widmer’s thesis, a large number of passages from the JST are decidedly antimodalist.

Widmer uses as evidence for his claim of early Mormon modalism five changes Joseph Smith made to the Authorized King James Version of the Bible, the base text of his revisions. Of the five revisions cited by Widmer, four do not provide any evidence for his thesis. Exodus 7:1 reads: “And the Lord said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet.” Joseph changed this to “And the Lord said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a prophet to Pharaoh; and Aaron thy brother shall be thy spokesman.” Exodus 22:28 was changed from “Thou shalt not revile the gods” to “Thou shalt not revile against God.” First Samuel 28:13 was changed from “And the woman said unto Saul, I saw gods ascending out of the earth” to “And the woman said unto Saul, I saw the words of Samuel ascending out of the earth. And she said, I saw Samuel also.” And Joseph changed Revelation 1:6 from “and [Christ] hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father” to “and [Christ] hath made us kings and priests unto God, his Father.” Widmer argues that Joseph changed these apparent references to a plurality of gods in the KJV in order to remove all antimodalistic references from
the Bible. These changes, however, do not actually point to a modalist understanding of God any more than they do to a trinitarian model. Indeed, it seems more likely that what Joseph was changing in these four passages were apparent references to gods other than the Trinity rather than to references indicating a separation of persons in the Trinity. This seems especially clear in the case of Joseph’s revision of Revelation 1:6. His revision leaves intact the separation of Christ from God the Father, while deleting the apparent reference to the father of God the Father.

The fifth passage cited by Widmer is considerably more problematic. Luke 10:22 (verse 23 in the JST) reads: “All things are delivered to me of my Father: and no man knoweth who the Son is, but the Father; and who the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal him.” Joseph changed this to read: “All things are delivered to me of my Father: and no man knoweth that the Son is the Father, and the Father is the Son, but him to whom the Son will reveal it.”

Of all Joseph’s revisions, Widmer correctly claims that this is the strongest change in a modalistic direction. But even after the change, the proper understanding of the passage remains problematic. Contextually, it is important to note that the revised passage immediately follows Luke’s recounting of a prayer of gratitude that Jesus offers to the Father. In this verse, Joseph revises the KJV text just slightly, adding the words italicized below: “In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from them who think they are wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight” (Luke 10:22 JST). This verse clearly indicates that Jesus and the Father are not the selfsame person. So, read in context with verse 21, Widmer’s modalistic interpretation of verse 22 is incoherent. And this modalistic interpretation remains incoherent even when we read verse 22 just by itself. For the language apparently identifying the Son and the Father is preceded by the clause: “All things are delivered to me of my Father.” How can all things be delivered to Jesus of himself? If, as Widmer claims, Joseph were systemati-
cally reshaping the scriptures to fit a modalist theology, he surely would have revised verse 21 to remove its antimodalist import.

The only other support Widmer offers for JST modalism is Joseph's revision of Genesis, most of which we find in the Book of Moses. But as we have already seen, the Book of Moses flatly contradicts Widmer's thesis. Nor does the rest of Joseph's translation of the Bible provide any evidence for his thesis. Despite the isolated texts Widmer refers to, the Bible contains a mass of unquestionably trinitarian language that Joseph never changed—a peculiar move for a man allegedly reworking the Bible to fit his modalistic theology. Joseph does nothing to revise the account of the great intercessory prayer the Savior offered to the Father on behalf of his disciples (John 17) to fit with a modalistic model. He doesn't attempt to change the accounts of the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:16–17), the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–8), or the vision of Stephen (Acts 7:55–56) in order to be more modalistically palatable. One simply cannot stay true to the evidence and propose that Joseph Smith changed the Bible in order to fit his modalistic theology. In fact, the Joseph Smith Translation refutes the very claim for which Widmer uses it as support.

The Book of Mormon

In attempting to document the earliest Mormon understanding of God, Widmer turns initially to the first edition of the Book of Mormon, published in 1830. Unlike ourselves, he believes that this document constitutes the best evidence for the earliest Mormon understanding because it is the earliest Mormon publication and thus "a reflection of Joseph Smith's and therefore the Mormons', earliest theological convictions" (p. 27). We proceed on the assumption that, as Joseph declared, the Book of Mormon is a divinely aided translation of inspired writings by ancient inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere. In our view, then, Joseph was the translator, not the author, of the book's contents. Thus Joseph's thought was shaped by the Book of Mormon, not the other way around.

Widmer claims that the Book of Mormon is "neither consistently tritheistic [trinitarian?] nor modalistic" (p. 30), but he seems to feel
that the work as a whole is modalist. Widmer correctly notes that several Book of Mormon passages are apparently modalistic, but he neglects to analyze other passages from the Book of Mormon. We believe that a thorough study of the Book of Mormon uncovers a very clearly antimodalistic text. Our study reveals that antimodalistic passages outnumber modalist passages by a ratio of at least 20 to 1. Furthermore, we submit that each seemingly modalist passage can easily be explained within a trinitarian model of God but that numerous antimodalist passages cannot be made to fit a modalist model without doing considerable violence to the plain meaning of the texts.

**Antimodalism.** Because of the large number of antimodalist texts in the Book of Mormon, we again place them in six categories. The first category contains references to the risen Lord’s ascending to the Father or sitting on the right hand of the Father. In 3 Nephi VII, p. 485 (15:1), Christ declares, “Behold, ye have heard the things which I have taught before I ascended to my Father.” Also, in 3 Nephi VIII, p. 488 (17:4), “But now I go unto the Father, and also to shew myself unto the lost tribes of Israel: for they are not lost unto the Father, for he knoweth whither he hath taken them.” Mormon writes in Moroni IX, p. 585 (9:26), “And may the grace of God the Father, whose throne is high in the heavens, and our Lord Jesus Christ, who sitteth on the right hand of his power, until all things shall become subject unto him, be, and abide with you forever.” Again, in Moroni VII, p. 579 (7:27), “Hath miracles ceased, because that Christ hath ascended into heaven, and hath set down on the right hand of God, to claim of the Father his rights of mercy which he hath upon the children of men?”¹⁵

Texts that describe the risen Lord as our advocate or intercessor with the Father or as praying to the Father comprise the second category. Abinadi—whose sermons are often used by those who argue that the Book of Mormon is a modalist work—is recorded in Mosiah VIII, p. 186 (15:8), as saying, “And thus God breaketh the bands of

¹⁵. Scriptures similar to these include 3 Nephi VIII, pp. 492–93 (18:27, 35); XII, p. 506 (26:15); XIII, pp. 509–10 (27:28; 28:1, 4).
death; having gained the victory over death; giving the Son power to *make intercession* for the children of men." Alma XVI, p. 317 (33:11), quotes Zenos as he addresses God, saying, "and it is because of thy Son that thou hast been thus merciful unto me . . . for thou hast turned thy judgments away from me, because of thy Son." Third Nephi IX, p. 494 (19:19–20), shows Christ praying to the Father: "And it came to pass that Jesus departed out of the midst of them, and went a little way off from them and bowed himself to the earth, and he saith, Father, I thank thee that thou hast given the Holy Ghost unto these whom I have chosen." Of course, Jesus would not pray to himself, nor does he have multiple personalities.

Passages in the third category describe the Lord's subjecting his own will to the will of the Father. For example, in Mosiah VIII, p. 186 (15:7), Abinadi declares of Jesus Christ, "Yea, even so he shall be led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father." Christ says in 3 Nephi VII, p. 486 (15:14), that he was commanded to do something by the Father: "And not at any time hath the Father given me commandment that I should tell it unto your brethren at Jerusalem." We also read in 3 Nephi VII, p. 488 (16:16), of Christ saying, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Thus hath the Father commanded me, that I should give unto this people this land for their inheritance.”

Moroni records the words of the Lord in Ether I, pp. 546–47 (4:12): “He that will not believe me, will not believe the Father which sent me. For behold, I am the Father, I am the light, and the life, and the truth of the world." The Savior’s statement that “I am the Father” could be used as evidence for modalism; however, if this is accepted,

16. Other such passages include 2 Nephi I, p. 63 (2:3); Jacob III, p. 130 (4:11); Mosiah VIII, p. 186 (14:12); Alma IX, p. 258 (12:33); XIV, p. 291 (24:10); XVI, pp. 317–18 (33:11, 13, 16); 3 Nephi VIII, pp. 489–90, 492 (17:14–17, 21; 18:24); IX, pp. 494–95 (19:21–24, 27–29, 31).

17. Other such passages include 2 Nephi XIII, pp. 118–19 (31:6–7, 10–12); Mosiah VIII, p. 186 (15:7); Alma X, p. 262 (14:5); 3 Nephi VII, pp. 486, 488 (15:14–16, 18–20; 16:3, 16); VIII, pp. 488, 491 (17:2, 18:14); IX, pp. 496, 499 (20:10, 14, 46); XI, p. 505 (26:2); XII, p. 508 (27:13–15).
the rest of the passage creates some exegetical turbulence. How can Christ send himself?

In our fourth category of differentiation are verses describing individuals and multitudes praying unto the Father in Christ’s name. In 3 Nephi VIII, p. 491 (18:19), Christ commands, “Therefore ye must always pray unto the Father in my name.” Further, in 3 Nephi IX, p. 498 (20:31), “And they shall believe in me, that I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and shall pray unto the Father in my name.” These passages are most naturally read as trinitarian passages that separate the metaphysical existences of members of the Godhead.

The fifth category encompasses several verses that describe two or more members of the Godhead manifesting themselves at the same time. In Lehi’s vision of God, as reported in 1 Nephi I, p. 6 (1:8–10), by his son Nephi, three divine persons are referenced: “And being thus overcome with the spirit, [Lehi] was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the Heavens open; and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God. And it came to pass that he saw one descending out of the midst of Heaven, and he beheld that his lustre was above that of the sun at noon-day; and he also saw twelve others following him.” In the larger context of the passage, it appears that the “One” who descended out of heaven is Jesus Christ, the “God sitting upon his throne” is the Father, and “the spirit” is the Holy Ghost. There is nothing in the text or the context to suggest that the terms referenced denote one and the same person.

Also included in this category is one of the most clearly explicit antimoodalistic passages in the Book of Mormon. This is the announcement of Jesus Christ by the Father as Christ descends to the Nephites after his resurrection:

And it came to pass that again they heard the voice . . . and it saith unto them, Behold, my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name, hear ye him.

18. Similar verses are 3 Nephi VIII, pp. 488, 491–92 (17:3, 18:21–23, 30); IX, p. 494 (19:6–8); X, p. 501 (21:27); XII, p. 507 (27:2, 9); XIII, pp. 509, 511–12 (27:28; 28:30); Ether I, p. 547 (4:15); Mormon IV, pp. 535, 537 (9:6, 21, 27); Moroni II, p. 547 (2:2); III, p. 575 (3:2); IV, p. 575 (4:2–3); VII, pp. 578–79 (7:26); VIII, p. 581 (8:3); X, p. 586 (10:4).
And it came to pass as they understood, they cast their eyes up again towards Heaven, and behold, they saw a man descending out of Heaven; and he was clothed in a white robe, and he came down and stood in the midst of them....

And it came to pass that he stretched forth his hand, and spake unto the people, saying: Behold I am Jesus Christ, of which the prophets testified that should come into the world; and behold I am the light and the life of the world, and I have drank [sic] out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things, from the beginning. (3 Nephi V, pp. 476–77 [11:4, 6, 8, 9–11])

The sixth and final category includes passages that otherwise differentiate between two or more members of the Godhead. For example, Christ teaches in 3 Nephi IX, p. 497 (20:26), “The Father having raised me up unto you first, and sent me to bless you.” In 3 Nephi VII, p. 486 (15:24), Christ also tells the Nephites, “Ye are numbered among them which the Father hath given me.” In addition, Christ teaches in 3 Nephi IX, p. 500 (21:9), “For in that day, for my sake shall the Father work a work.” As he baptizes Helam at the waters of Mormon in Mosiah IX, p. 192 (18:13), Alma prays, “May the spirit of the Lord be poured out upon you; and may he grant unto you eternal life, through the redemption of Christ, which he hath prepared from the foundation of the world.” Here, the Lord prepared Christ.

In seeking personal confirmation of his father’s revelations, Nephi was granted a remarkable vision in which he both saw and conversed with the “spirit of the Lord” (or, as the context shows, with the Holy Ghost) who, according to 1 Nephi III, p. 24 (11:11), “was in the form of a man.” The Holy Ghost shouts hosanna to “the most high God” (in context, the Father) and refers separately to “the Son of the Most High God” (in context, Jesus Christ), referencing both in the third person and thus distinguishing himself from both.

And it came to pass after . . . having heard all the words of my Father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision . . . I, Nephi, was desirous also, that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost . . . and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me; wherefore, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the spirit of the Lord. . . . The spirit cried with a loud voice, saying: Hosanna to the Lord, the most high God; for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all; and blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the Most High God. (1 Nephi III, pp. 23–24 [10:17; 11:1, 6])

Here, the Holy Ghost is clearly depicted as a divine person who is separate from both the “most high God” and the “Son of the Most High God.”

As we have seen, antimodalist passages in the Book of Mormon are numerous and explicit. These passages clearly outnum-

ber the modalist passages cited by Widmer and others, yet Widmer offers no explanation for this preponderance of contraindicating evidence. Instead of interpreting the antimodalist data from the Book of Mormon in a modalist framework—a monumental task—we should offer a possible interpretation for the few modalist passages from a trinitarian viewpoint.

Possible Modalisms. Proponents of Book of Mormon modalism, including Widmer, commonly rely on four groups of passages in making a case for their thesis. These are (1) passages which affir-

m that Jesus Christ is God (see pp. 33–34); (2) so-called “unity” pas-


21. See, for example, 2 Nephi XI, p. 107 (26:12); Mosiah VIII, p. 185 (13:28, 34); XI, p. 210 (26:26); 3 Nephi IX, p. 494 (19:18); Mormon I, p. 524 (3:21); Ether I, p. 541 (2:12).
sages which affirm that there is only one God, or that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one or one God (see p. 35);\(^{22}\) (3) passages which refer to Jesus Christ as the Creator, the Father of heaven and earth (see p. 35);\(^{23}\) and (4) passages which unqualifiedly affirm that the Son is the Father or the Father is the Son. In addition, (5) certain editorial revisions that Joseph made to the first edition of the Book of Mormon are used to add circumstantial evidence that Joseph's earliest understanding of God was modalistic. As already noted, the first three of these categories are evidentially neutral.\(^{24}\) We will consider the evidentiary bearing of the final two sets of putative proof texts.

Widmer and those of similar persuasion quote passages unqualifiedly affirming that the Son is the Father and the Father is the Son as "the strongest evidence" for Book of Mormon modalism (pp. 23, 33, 34).\(^{25}\) Indeed, these passages constitute the only credible evidence that can be found for modalism in the Book of Mormon. Of approximately eighteen hundred references to God in the Book of Mormon, only six (and two more that were subsequently changed) are of the kind presently under consideration. Laying aside evidentially neutral references to Deity, the ratio of antimodalist passages to modalist passages in the first edition of the Book of Mormon is at least 20 to 1. Hence, even if the modalist passages could not be successfully accommodated by a trinitarian model, the existence of these six passages would be far less of a difficulty to a trinitarian model than the overwhelming preponderance of antimodalist passages is to a modalist model.

Let us consider three ways of assimilating or otherwise dealing with the apparently recalcitrant data. First, some unqualified references to Christ as Father might merely be abbreviated expressions of

\(^{22}\) For example, 2 Nephi XIV, p. 120 (31:21); Alma VIII, pp. 253–54 (11:28–29, 44); 3 Nephi IV, p. 473 (9:15); V, p. 478 (11:27, 36); IX, p. 498 (20:35); XIII, p. 510 (28:10); Mormon III, p. 531 (7:7).

\(^{23}\) For example, 2 Nephi VI, p. 79 (9:5); XI, p. 104 (25:12); Mosiah I, p. 160 (3:8); II, p. 162 (4:2); V, p. 171 (7:27); Alma VIII, p. 253 (11:39); Helaman V, pp. 446, 451 (14:12, 16:18); Ether I, p. 546 (4:7).

\(^{24}\) See above, pp. 112–13.

\(^{25}\) These passages include 2 Nephi IX, p. 95 (19:6); Mosiah VIII, pp. 186, 189 (15:1–4, 16:15); 3 Nephi I, p. 453 (1:14); Mormon IV, p. 536 (9:12); Ether I, p. 544 (3:14).
his being Father in the sense of being the Father of heaven and earth. As already shown, such references are unproblematic. Second, the Book of Mormon itself teaches us a second sense of “Father” that is also properly applied to Christ: through Christ’s atonement for our sins, he spiritually adopts those who are willing to covenant that they will obey him. Thus, he is their adoptive Father. Third, Christ can be referred to as the Father because his Father gave him of his fulness. Christ himself provides this explanation as to why he also refers to himself as Father. In a revelation given on 6 May 1833, he teaches, “I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one—The Father because he gave me of his fulness, and the Son because I was in the world and made flesh my tabernacle, and dwelt among the sons of men” (D&C 93:3–4). Christ becomes the Father in the sense that he inherits all that his Father has. At the same time, he is the Son because he was incarnate in an earthly body of flesh. “He received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness; And thus he was called the Son of God, because he received not of the fulness at the first” (D&C 93:13–14). Christ was born as the Son, who was required to progress through mortality until he regained the fulness that he had before mortality.

Proponents of Book of Mormon modalism rely on one more class of evidence, albeit circumstantial, in arguing for their thesis: certain editorial changes Joseph made to the language of the first edition of the Book of Mormon in his 1837 revision. Their claim is that Joseph was seeking to remove from the document modalistic ideas which earlier, but no longer, reflected his theological understanding. Widmer, for example, writes, “The new work, in keeping with the recently emerged Mormon concept of the divine, removed the passages that reflected the earlier modalistic position of the church” (p. 32). We find two categories of changes, only one of which actually re-

26. See Mosiah III, p. 166 (5:7), and Ether 1, p. 544 (3:14). Widmer offers the latter passage as evidence for Book of Mormon modalism, but the wording of the passage shows that Christ refers to himself not as his own Father but as the adoptive Father of those who follow him.

27. Note the similar wording in Mosiah VIII, p. 186 (15:1–4).
moved apparently modalistic language from the Book of Mormon (and in only two verses).

The first category is a series of changes in which language is changed from “God” to “Son of God.” This category includes two verses. In the first edition (1830), 1 Nephi III, p. 25, reads, “the virgin which thou seest, is the mother of God, after the manner of the flesh.” Joseph changed it to read, “the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh” (1 Nephi 11:18). Also, 1 Nephi III, p. 26, reads, “[The Lamb of God] was taken by the people; yea, the Everlasting God, was judged of the world.” It was changed to read, “[The Lamb of God] was taken by the people; yea, the Son of the everlasting God was judged of the world” (1 Nephi 11:32). Before the changes were made, these verses were actually evidentially neutral as between trinitarianism and modalism, as previously discussed. The changes that were made thus provide no significant evidence for Widmer’s thesis. Since the Father and the Son are both referred to as “God,” the changes simply make clear which member of the Godhead is being referred to.

The second group of revisions involves changes from Christ’s being referred to as “the Father” to his being referred to as “the Son of the Father.” First Nephi III, p. 26, originally read, “behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father.” It was changed to read, “Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father” (1 Nephi 11:21). Also, 1 Nephi III, p. 32, originally read, “[these records] shall make known to all . . . that the Lamb of God is the Eternal Father and the Saviour of the world.” It was changed to read, “[these records] shall make known to all . . . that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the world” (1 Nephi 13:40). Since both Christ and his Father are referred to as Father, these revisions can also be plausibly understood as attempts to clarify which member of the Godhead is being referenced.

It must also be recognized that Joseph did not alter the majority of the apparently modalistic passages in the Book of Mormon. This fact alone should be enough to cause us to look for other reasons for the changes. If Joseph were really trying to change the doctrines of the Book of Mormon, why did he neglect so many passages? Disambiguation,
as opposed to a sudden radical change in theology, provides the best explanation of these editorial revisions.

The 1832 Account of the First Vision as Evidence for Early Mormon Modalism

Widmer uses Joseph's first published account (1832) of his first vision as further evidence of Joseph's early modalism in that in this version Joseph mentions only one divine personage appearing to him. Widmer writes, "What appears to be a recurring theme throughout the various versions is the interpretation of the original event, in light of the current theology. That is to say, as Joseph's theological interpretations shifted from modalism to cosmic henotheism, the details of the vision expanded in the same direction. In a nutshell, this can be seen as: while Joseph still held to basic modalistic concepts, there appeared only one heavenly visitor" (p. 96). Thus Widmer claims that Joseph's later versions of his vision (1835, 1838 canonized, and subsequent accounts), which depict two personages appearing to Joseph, are reconstructions of his initial experience, pragmatically crafted to fit with his continually changing understanding of God.

The 1832 account, however, does not support the idea that Joseph was a modalist. In this account, the Savior ends his address to Joseph with a reference to his Father: "Behold and lo, I come quickly as it [is] written of me, in the cloud clothed in the glory of my Father." If Christ were referring here to another of his modes of appearance, why does he refer to the Father as my Father? It does not seem plausible within a modalist paradigm that the resurrected Christ, who had already regained the glory he had before his incarnation (see John 17:5, Luke 24:25-26), should refer to being clothed with the glory of his Father at his second coming. Thus, whether the 1832 account explicitly mentions the appearance of the Father is irrelevant; Joseph's recollection of Christ's words indicates that he was not a modalist at the time.

Because the 1832 account was written in his own journal,²⁹ it seems natural that Joseph would record those details that seemed most important to him personally. Widmer assumes that since the Prophet explicitly mentions only Christ’s coming to visit him, it follows that the Father was not also present in that first visit. This is a non sequitur. Joseph never asserts in the 1832 account that only one personage visited him, nor does he claim that the information he includes provides an exhaustive account of his experience. Likely, this account was mostly an attempt to record the spiritual impact that the vision had on him personally.³⁰ Joseph was praying specifically for the forgiveness of his sins and to know which church to join; hence, he recorded the answers to his questions. In the canonized 1838 account, which includes much more detail than does the 1832 account, the Father’s role is limited to introducing his Son, using the words, “This is my beloved Son, Hear Him.”³¹ After the Father’s introduction, the Son proceeds to teach Joseph Smith. Because the Savior was the being who instructed the Prophet, it could very well explain why Joseph explicitly mentions only his appearance.

**Binitarianism (1834–42)**

Widmer asserts that “Mormon theology shifted from a modalistic form of monotheism to binatarianism [sic] within the first three years” (p. 6). According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, binitarianism is “the belief that there are only two Persons in the Godhead instead of the three of the Trinity, thus involving the denial of the deity of the Holy Spirit.”³² Van Hale, Dan Vogel, and Melodie Moench Charles—who, among others, also affirm binitarianism as the second stage in the development of the Mormon understanding of God or at least as the doctrine taught in the *Lectures on

---


Faith—define the term in its usual sense.33 We argue that, so defined, binitarianism has never been the Mormon view of God.

Widmer, however, in describing Mormon binitarianism, gives it a strange definition. He says: “What is meant by binatarianism [sic] in this case is that, while there exist three persons called God, they are no longer defined in terms of their modes of operation. The binatari-
anism [sic] present in Mormonism during the mid-1830s can be de-
scribed in the following way. While Mormonism did not have a clear definition of the nature of God, it did make a distinction between the Father and the Son. The Father and the Son were no longer seen as the same person with different modes of operation and purpose” (p. 59). Widmer provides no further explanation of how he uses the term binitarianism in reference to Latter-day Saint belief in the mid-1830s.

The problem with his statement is that what he describes is not binitarianism. The mere fact, even if it were true, that Latter-day Saints “no longer [saw the Father and the Son] as the same person with different modes of operation and purpose” (p. 59) does not constitute binitarianism. Given only this description, antimodalism is the most that can be inferred from such a development. But Widmer takes his description of the mid-1830s Mormon understanding of God still farther. He asserts that Latter-day Saints believed that “there exist[ed] three persons called God” (p. 59, emphasis added). But this contradicts the very meaning of binitarianism, signifying, rather, a mode of trinitarianism or tritheism. If Widmer’s position (call it what he may) is that the Mormon understanding of God from 1834 to 1842 was some form of trinitarianism or tritheism, then there is little to dispute.

Why, then, have so many writers labeled the Lectures on Faith “binitarian”? Charles defines Mormon binitarianism thus: “The Lectures on Faith’ described two personages in the Godhead with the

Holy Ghost as the shared mind of the two gods.” Indeed, the fifth lecture does contain confusing passages which affirm that there are only two personages in the Godhead and which do describe the Holy Spirit as the “mind” of the Father and the Son—hence Charles’s definition. We should note, however, that the fifth lecture does not teach that the Godhead consists only of two entities, for it explicitly reads, “We shall, in this lecture, speak of the Godhead—we mean the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.... These three are one... these three constitute the great, matchless, governing and supreme, power over all things... and these three constitute the Godhead, and are one.”

While three entities constitute the Godhead, according to the fifth lecture, only the Father and the Son are personages. Charles seems to feel that while the fifth lecture does not deny the separateness of the Holy Ghost, it does indicate that the Holy Ghost is not a deity, but simply the “mind” of the Father and the Son—some kind of metaphysical link between them. This could be construed as binitarianism in two ways: the Holy Ghost is not a person, or the Holy Ghost is not divine. We will show, however, that the fifth lecture rejects neither the Holy Ghost’s divinity nor his personhood.

As evidence for Joseph’s temporary espousal of binitarianism, Widmer and others offer only the Lectures on Faith—in fact, only a few passages from the fifth lecture can be found as evidence. In addition, Joseph continued to allow publication of the lectures in the Doctrine and Covenants long after his supposed conversion to a belief in three (and even more) gods. Since Joseph never explicitly rejected the doctrines taught in the lectures, it seems that he did not feel them to be binitarian works.

As we have already seen in our discussion of modalism, the 1830 Book of Mormon, the Book of Commandments, and the pre-1834

34. Charles, “Book of Mormon Christology,” 103–4. Because Widmer uses the Lectures on Faith as the basis for his second stage in Mormon doctrinal development, Charles’s definition may be close to what Widmer actually wants to argue.

revelations included in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants already
clearly separated the Holy Ghost from the Father and the Son and
portrayed him as a personal being. Particularly explicit passages are
found in 1 Nephi III, pp. 23–24 (10:17; 11:1–11), in which Nephi sees
and converses with the Holy Ghost.36

Doctrine and Covenants XCI:7 (76:85–86), in which those who
inherit the telestial kingdom receive of the presence of the Holy
Ghost but not of the Father and the Son, is also very informative.37
These passages indicate that Joseph had received revelation disclosing
that the Holy Ghost is a person separate from the Father and the Son
several years before the publication of the Lectures on Faith. In addi-
tion, the Holy Ghost is described in revelation received prior to 1834
as someone who knows all things, testifies of the Father and the Son
(Book of Commandments XLIV:16 [D&C 42:17]),38 comforts (Book
of Commandments XXXVIII:1 [D&C 36:2]), and gives gifts (Book of
Commandments XLIX:12 [D&C 46:11]). All these acts are personal
acts of a conscious individual, not the acts of an impersonal meta-
physical entity.

Passages prior to the publication of the lectures that declare the
divinity of the Holy Ghost can also be found. The Holy Ghost is
mentioned numerous times in the same group as the Father and the
Son, all of whom are repeatedly referred to as “God.” For example, in
the Book of Mormon Nephi refers to “the only true doctrine, of the
Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God”
(2 Nephi XIII, p. 120 [31:21]). Amulek refers to the fact that all must
be judged at “the bar of Christ the Son, and God the Father, and the
Holy Spirit, which is one Eternal God” (Alma VIII, p. 254 [11:44]).
Moroni prays that “the Grace of God the Father, and also the Lord
Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost” may be in us (Ether V, p. 566
[12:41]). Thus, the Holy Ghost participates with the Father and the
Son in declaring doctrine, judging humankind, and dispensing grace.
Together with the Father and the Son, the three are one God. Alma

37. Note that this revelation was included with the Lectures on Faith in the 1835
Doctrine and Covenants. See the discussion of these passages above, p. 117.
38. See also 3 Nephi V, p. 478 (11:36).
also teaches that denying the Holy Ghost is an unpardonable sin (see Alma XIX, p. 332 [39:6]). It seems clear that the Book of Mormon teaches the divinity of the Holy Ghost—four years before the Lectures on Faith were ever written.

As we have seen, prior to the Lectures on Faith, Joseph apparently believed both that the Holy Ghost is a personal being and that he is divine. If, indeed, Joseph meant to teach a binitarian conception of the Godhead in the lectures, then doing so was a radical departure from his prior position. A more likely conjecture is that Joseph never changed his position so radically. Outside of these few problematic passages in the Lectures on Faith, there is no evidence that Joseph ever was a binitarian.

Let us examine the troublesome passages from the fifth lecture more closely. These passages can be placed in two general categories: those passages naming only two personages in the Godhead and those passages describing the Holy Spirit as the “mind” of the Father and the Son. Troublesome passages of the first type follow: “There are two personages who constitute the great, matchless, governing and supreme power over all things.” Again, “Q. How many personages are there in the Godhead? A. Two: the Father and the Son.” We must admit that the Holy Spirit is not acknowledged to be a “personage,” but it does not follow from this that the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from the Father and the Son, that he is not divine, or that he is not a person. “Personage” and “person” should not be confused. It is quite likely that at the time of the writing of the lectures, Joseph Smith, while he did understand the Holy Ghost to be a person, did not yet understand that the Holy Ghost was a personage.

The term personage as it is used in the Lectures on Faith seems to refer to a materially embodied person or, sometimes, merely to the body of a person. The second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary indicates how the term personage was used at the time: “The body of a person; chiefly with reference to appearance, stature, etc.; bodily

40. Ibid., 61.
41. Note that in his Nauvoo teachings Joseph consistently refers to the Holy Ghost as a personage. See, for example, D&C 130:22.
frame, figure; personal appearance. . . . 1785. Cowper Let. To Lady Hesketh 20–24 Dec., Half a dozen flannel waistcoats . . . to be worn . . . next to my personage."42 The fifth lecture, besides referring to the Father and the Son as “personages,” also refers to “the personage of the Father.”43 In this use, personage does not refer directly to the Father, but to the body of the Father. The Father is referred to as “a personage of spirit,” but the Son, who is “a personage of tabernacle . . . is also the express image and likeness of the personage of the Father.”44 Although the Holy Ghost is humanlike in form—“a personage of Spirit” (D&C 130:22)—and therefore possesses a material body, it is not clear that the Prophet understood this until the Nauvoo period;45 it is plausible that Joseph believed that the Godhead consisted of three persons, but only two “personages” in the sense of materially embodied persons.

The second category of troublesome passages describes the Holy Spirit as the mind of the other two members of the Godhead: “[The Son] possessing the same mind with the Father, which mind is the Holy Spirit, that bears record of the Father and the Son, and these three are one.”46 Although Widmer assumes that the Holy Ghost in this passage must be the mind of the Father and the Son in some mysterious metaphysical manner, a more likely interpretation, given the external evidence, is that the Holy Ghost simply conveys and executes the mind of the Father and the Son. The Lord revealed through Joseph Smith as early as 1831 that “whatsoever [priesthood holders] shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the...
word of the Lord” (D&C 68:4). The Holy Ghost conveys to mankind the mind of the Lord; hence, the Holy Ghost can coherently be understood as the “mind” of the Father and the Son without this being understood as merely some nonpersonal metaphysical link between the two.

The fifth lecture, in fact, teaches that even the human followers of Christ can possess the “same mind” as the Father and the Son. In this way, they “become one in [Christ], even as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one.”47 In also referring to the Holy Ghost as the “mind” of the Father and the Son, the fifth lecture seems to be emphasizing the unity of the Godhead. The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are perfectly unified in mind and will, just as their followers can be through Christ.

The lectures are certainly ambiguous and incomplete, but they do not represent a move toward binitarianism in the mind of Joseph Smith. If they did, we should find more evidence of binitarian teachings in contemporaneous documents and, subsequently, some kind of repudiation of the lectures. In addition, we should not find so much evidence that Joseph knew and understood the separateness and divinity of the Holy Ghost prior to the publication of the Lectures on Faith. The most logical conclusion is that a binitarian reading of the fifth lecture is not the best reading and that binitarianism was never a stage in Joseph’s developing understanding of the Godhead.

The Adam-God Theory

One of Widmer’s assertions is that the early Utah period of church history was marked by a new and inconsistent development in the Latter-day Saint concept of God. This concept, espoused by Brigham Young, has come to be known as the Adam-God theory. According to Widmer, the theory was an attempt on the part of Brigham Young to correlate some of the doctrines and sermons of Joseph Smith into an understandable theory. Widmer claims that “the Adam-God doctrine appears to have been the dominant Mormon

47. Ibid.
theological position on the godhead during the latter half of the 19th century” (p. 131). The Adam-God theory may have been taught by Brigham Young, but it was never the dominant position of the church.

At least four reasons lead us to believe that the Adam-God theory was not the dominant Mormon position Widmer claimed it to be. First, the theory itself was so little known within the LDS community that for the first half of the twentieth century, many questioned whether Brigham Young had even held the idea himself.48

Second, other than Brigham Young’s discourses; a few sermons by Brigham Young’s close associate and brother-in-law, Heber C. Kimball; and a few items published by Frederick G. Williams in the English Mission, far from the center of the Saints, the church was silent on the subject.49 The prominent exception to this, of course, was Elder Orson Pratt, who was quite vociferous in his opposition to the theory.50 In his polemical and strongly anti-Brigham Young book, The Rocky Mountain Saints, apostate T. B. H. Stenhouse wrote that “The mass of the Mormon people do not believe in the Adam-deity, but of them all, one only, Orson Pratt, has dared to make public protest against that doctrine.”51

Third, even Brigham Young seems to have granted that his theory was not widely accepted and was, at the least, difficult to understand. In President Young’s later comments on his theory, he admitted that the subject should “not concern us at present.”52 Indeed, speaking five years after that statement, President Young admitted that in considering God’s history,

when we arrive at that point, a vail is dropt, and our knowledge is cut off. Were it not so, you could trace back your history to the Father of our spirits in the eternal world. . . .

Whether Adam is the personage that we should consider our

48. See, for example, Joseph Fielding Smith, Doctrines of Salvation, ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:96–96.
50. Widmer admits as much (cf. pp. 133–37).
heavenly Father, or not, is considerable of a mystery to a good many. I do not care for one moment how that is; it is no matter whether we are to consider Him our God, or whether His Father, or His Grandfather.  53

Finally, shortly after Brigham Young’s death the church officially stated in three First Presidency messages that Adam is not to be confused with God the Father or any other member of the Godhead.  54 A private letter coauthored by President Wilford Woodruff—fourth president of the church and a contemporary of Brigham Young—and Apostle Joseph F. Smith makes clear that the Adam-God theory was never widely held nor accepted by the church as an official doctrine:

President Young no doubt expressed his personal opinion or views upon the subject. What he said was not given as revelation or commandment from the Lord. The doctrine was never submitted to the councils of the Priesthood nor to the Church for approval or ratification, and was never formally or otherwise accepted by the Church. It is therefore in no sense binding upon the Church.  55

Widmer’s claim that the Adam-God theory was the accepted LDS doctrine during the latter half of the nineteenth century is without basis. The theory was never official doctrine; neither was it widely accepted by the Saints. It was refuted by the leaders of the church not long after Brigham Young’s death, and it is not accepted today.

53. Journal of Discourses, 4:217. See J. F. Smith, Doctrines of Salvation, 1:100–101, 104–5, in which Joseph Fielding Smith outlines a number of other sermons of Brigham Young’s that indicate an understanding of Adam’s role in more traditional terms. Likewise, John A. Widtsoe’s Evidences and Reconciliations (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 69, points to both the 9 April sermon and other sermons of near date made by President Young which seem to either contradict or temper the strength of the 9 April statement used so frequently by anti-Mormon critics.


55. Wilford Woodruff and Joseph F. Smith, letter to A. Saxey, 7 January 1897, Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
Talmage's Synthesis: Refined Cosmic Henotheism

Widmer's thesis throughout his book is that modern LDS theology is radically different today than it was at the church's founding (see, for example, pp. 156-57). He asserts that the "new Mormon theology" is largely the innovation of three LDS theologians: B. H. Roberts, John A. Widtsoe, and James E. Talmage, who would change the status of "cosmic henotheism" from speculation to doctrine. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church defines henotheism as "a primitive form of faith which, as distinct from monotheism ... recognizes the existence of several gods, but regards one particular god as the deity of the family or tribe; makes him the centre of its worship; and in its relations with him neglects for practical purposes the existence of others." Unfortunately, Widmer fails to explicitly define what he means by cosmic henotheism. The closest he comes to providing such a definition is hidden in a footnote to his introduction. Here he writes,

Mormonism's doctrine of God has been defined as being polytheistic because of the belief in distinct beings called Gods. While this appears to be the sentiment expressed by Joseph Smith in his sermon of April 7, 1844, there have been attempts to show that a unity exists among these beings. Mormonism does not follow Nicene Christological terminology (i.e., using essence and nature to define the unity of the beings). Rather, Mormonism chooses to concentrate on the distinctiveness of persons and unity of purpose among the beings. This concept attained its present status through the work of James E. Talmage. Essentially applying the term polytheism to Mormonism is inaccurate. While Mormons do believe that a plurality of Gods exist they do not worship a plurality of Gods. It is perhaps better to speak of Mormonism then as a henotheistic movement. That is to say, while there exist many Gods, Mormons worship only one God. (p. 163)

Hence, Widmer’s “cosmic henotheism” appears on the surface to be very close to traditional henotheism.

Widmer claims that through the writings of James E. Talmage, the Mormon doctrine of the Godhead became consistent throughout the church. In his view, Talmage had such an effect on Latter-day Saint beliefs that he created a “new Mormonism” through his presentation of the first clear Mormon doctrines (p. 7), which Widmer claims are henotheistic.

This section shows (1) that James E. Talmage did not create a “new Mormonism” and (2) that modern (that is, twentieth-century) LDS belief does not espouse those aspects of theology that Widmer labels as henotheistic; more accurate and descriptive labels can and should be applied to modern (twentieth-century) LDS belief in the Godhead than “henotheism” provides.

Talmage and a “New Mormonism”

Widmer argues that it was “primarily through the work of Apostle James E. Talmage that the past seventy years of doctrinal speculation [were] correlated. . . . Talmage’s correlation . . . resulted in the birth of a new Mormonism” (p. 7). According to Widmer, prior to Talmage, “early 20th-century Mormonism consisted of a series of inharmonious, speculative theories, or theological options, that centered around a henotheistic concept of the divine” (p. 143). While Talmage does not seem to have created a “new Mormonism,” Widmer is correct in claiming that Talmage was extremely influential in providing a clear and authoritative statement of Mormon doctrine. However, Widmer misrepresents Talmage’s teachings. In this section, we examine Widmer’s assertions regarding Talmage’s theology and compare them with Talmage’s actual theology, arguing that he introduced very few new concepts and ignored, rather than reconciled, the speculative doctrines of which Widmer writes.

We focus our analysis here on Talmage’s most systematic doctrinal exposition, The Articles of Faith. Widmer’s description of the book is found in one paragraph. Ignoring the majority of the work, Widmer focuses on the single chapter that deals with the nature of the Godhead. He labels this chapter—and the entire work—“an attempt to
reconcile the Church's early theological position, modalism, with the current plurality of Gods concept" (p. 150). Widmer correctly notes that Talmage rejects the idea that the unity of the Trinity is a unity of substance. But from this, he incorrectly concludes that Mormonism must have officially rejected modalism in favor of henotheism. In rejecting the doctrine of one substance, Talmage does thereby reject both modalism and classical trinitarianism, but it does not follow that he affirms henotheism. Neither is he presenting new doctrine; instead, he is systematically presenting already existent doctrine.57

Talmage is very methodical in his presentation of the Mormon understanding of the Godhead. First, we are presented with the Trinity itself. Talmage makes it clear to the reader that the classical term Trinity is to be equated with the Mormon theological term Godhead.58 Indeed, Talmage dedicates an entire subsection to the discussion of the unity of the Godhead. In this section, he clearly distinguishes between the members of the Godhead as separate beings but also clearly states that "The godhead [trinity] is a type of unity in the attributes, powers, and purposes of its members."59

Talmage next proceeds to outline the LDS position: that we reject both modalism, which declares that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are all different modes or manifestations of the same being, and classical trinitarianism, which declares that the three members of the Trinity are a single substance.60 Each member of the Godhead is a separately identifiable "personal being,"61 all of whom are "physically distinct from each other."62 Likewise, each member of the Trinity is rightly called God.63 And while the unity of the Trinity is not one of substance, it is one of purpose and will:

57. See note 2, above, and accompanying text. In his 16 June 1844 sermon, Joseph Smith explicitly affirms that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost are separate persons who do not constitute one substance but who are nonetheless "agreed as one." Talmage's explanation of the Godhead closely mirrors Joseph's 1844 declaration.
59. Ibid., 36.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid., 37.
62. Ibid., 35.
63. Ibid., 36.
The mind of any one member of the Trinity is the mind of the others; seeing as each of them does with the eye of perfection, they see and understand alike. Under any given conditions each would act in the same way, guided by the same principles of unerring justice and equity. . . . their unity of purpose and operation is such as to make their edicts one, and their will the will of God.

These ideas are not new. As already discussed, the LDS doctrine of the Godhead never was modalistic. And early on, it was clear from scriptural data that each member of the Godhead is a separate person and that the Trinity is one in purpose, attributes, and power, but not in substance. The various speculations that Widmer claims Talmage reconciled did not relate to the unity of the Godhead nor to any doctrine found in The Articles of Faith; they dealt with the origin of God the Father and of mankind. The Articles of Faith does not pretend to answer these questions. Instead, this work emphatically reaffirms the basic doctrines of the church: that the Saints worship the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; that these three are separate personages; and that they are one God, perfectly united in attributes, power, and purpose. Instead of reconciling the speculations of the age, The Articles of Faith leaves these ideas where it found them: as interesting speculations.

One more of Talmage’s works deserves mention. Widmer notes that Talmage authored a 1916 official church statement that was “attempting to reconcile contradictory Book of Mormon passages with

64. Compare the discussion of the statement in the Lectures on Faith that describes the Holy Ghost as “the mind” of the Father and the Son (pp. 138-39, above).
65. Ibid., 37.
66. Widmer asserts that The Articles of Faith “left many questions surrounding the unity of the godhead, the role of Jesus as the Father, and the roles of the Father and the Son in the creation unanswered. Talmage’s second work sought to resolve many of these conflicting statements” (p. 151). The second work referred to is Jesus the Christ. Despite Widmer’s claims, we have already seen that the nature of the unity of the Godhead is very clear in The Articles of Faith. What contribution, then, did Jesus the Christ make? Widmer claims only that Jesus the Christ clarified the use of the names Jehovah and Elohim. This may be true, but such a clarification does not justify the title of a “new Mormonism.” A study of Jesus the Christ reveals that, like The Articles of Faith, the work simply ignores the speculative theology of the later nineteenth century.
the new views on the godhead" (p. 152), thereby claiming that the church, in issuing the statement, was attempting to reconcile its modalistic past with its modern henotheistic position. The statement, entitled “The Father and the Son,” sets forth four ways in which a member of the Godhead can be referred to as “Father”: as our literal father (God the Father), as creator (any member of the Godhead), as father of those who abide in the gospel (Jesus Christ), or as one speaking through divine investiture of authority (the Son or the Holy Ghost). None of these doctrines, excepting perhaps divine investiture of authority, was new at the time. Divine investiture of authority is the process by which the Father allows the Son or the Holy Ghost to speak in his name, as if the Son or the Holy Ghost were the Father. This doctrine provides an interesting explanation through which to understand the apparently modalistic verses in the Book of Mormon, but it certainly is not a necessary explanation; the Book of Mormon itself describes Christ as creator (see Mosiah 3:8) and as father of those who abide in the gospel (see Mosiah 15:10–11). Thus, the principle of divine investiture of authority was a new doctrine, but it was certainly not a doctrine needed to reconcile “contradictory Book of Mormon passages.” Nor did it contribute to a “new Mormonism.”

LDS Henotheism

Widmer’s claim that modern Mormons believe in some form of henotheism may come from one or more of three sources: (1) Some modern Latter-day Saints believe in the existence of gods outside of the Godhead. (2) Latter-day Saints believe that the three members of the Godhead are each individually equally divine and equally God. (3) Mormonism asserts that humans may become gods. We argue that the first belief, while henotheistic, has never been an official doctrine of the church. The second belief is quintessential trinitarianism; the third, the LDS doctrine of deification, is perfectly compatible with trinitarianism.

67. The 1916 statement is found in Messages of the First Presidency. 5:26–34.
While it cannot be denied that some members of the church accept the existence of gods outside of the Godhead, no official doctrine exists concerning this matter, canonized or otherwise. Speculations concerning a plurality of gods usually begin with Joseph Smith’s King Follett Discourse and a couplet by Lorenzo Snow. Joseph Smith and Lorenzo Snow seem to have taught, in essence, that God the Father was once a man and that he progressed to godhood. Nineteenth-century members of the church and even General Authorities, including Lorenzo Snow, may have used the King Follett Discourse in order to speculate about the origins of God, but modern (twentieth-century) LDS teachings about the origin of God or about a plurality of gods are hard to find. While the belief in gods beyond the Godhead does constitute henotheism, that there may or may not be other gods besides the three Gods worshiped by Mormons is a matter of speculation, not of official doctrine. Hence, the label of henotheism should not be applied to official LDS doctrine.

The official, canonical belief of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is authoritatively set forth in the document which has come to be known as the Articles of Faith. The very first article reads, “We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.” There is no equivocation within this article: we believe in one God and in three divine personages.

Widmer and others claim that, other gods aside, Latter-day Saints are henotheists because they believe in three separate personages, each of whom is God and who together do not constitute a single substance. This is certainly an official LDS belief, but it does not constitute henotheism. In henotheism, many gods are recognized but only one is worshiped. This is not the official LDS doctrine. In Mormonism, the Father is recognized as supreme and the font of divinity, but three personages who are God are worshiped. This is not henotheism. Instead, it is either tritheism or social trinitarianism. Because

69. Ibid., 84 n. 9.
of the unity that is emphasized in the Godhead, we argue that LDS belief is most correctly termed social trinitarianism.

Tritheism means "belief in three separate and individual gods."\(^{70}\) This is contrasted with classical trinitarianism, in which "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three Persons in one Godhead. They share the same essence or substance. Yet they are three "persons.""\(^{71}\) The key difference between the two doctrines is found in the unity among the three divine persons. In tritheism, the three Gods are unified only in the sense that they are all divine or all have a similar origin.\(^{72}\) In trinitarianism, on the other hand, the three persons who are God are unified and can collectively be referred to as "God."

Mormonism differs from classical trinitarianism in that it denies that the three persons of the Godhead are a single substance. Instead, they are unified in purpose. Mormonism, however, is not tritheistic because, while recognizing three separate divine persons, it recognizes them as being one God. This doctrine is similar to that of a growing movement in Christian theology called social trinitarianism that is being advanced on several fronts. Cornelius Plantinga, a professor of theology at Calvin College, has explained this view of the Godhead very clearly.\(^{73}\) Social trinitarianism teaches that although the three members of the Trinity are three distinct persons, they are so interrelated in function and purpose that they constitute one Godhead, or governing body. Plantinga writes that the three members of the Godhead are "distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action."\(^{74}\) At the same time, there exists only one God for three reasons. First, there exists only one Father and thus "only one font of divinity." Second, there is one divine essence or Godhood. This could include a list of attributes that apply to anyone called God. Finally, and most important, there is only one Trinity.\(^{75}\) Because Mormonism


\(^{71}\) Ibid., s.v. "Trinity, doctrine of the."

\(^{72}\) Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, s.v. "tritheism."

\(^{73}\) Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," 21–47.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 22.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 31.
believes that there is only one God in all three of these senses, Mor-
mon belief more closely fits the three criteria presented by social trinitarianism than it does the criteria presented by tritheism. In any case, Mormonism is not henotheistic.

The last issue we address here is the idea that Mormons are heno-
theists because they believe that men may progress to become gods—
that is, like God.76 Given this type of doctrine, it is understandable that
an observer could infer some kind of Mormon henotheism. We ar-
gue, however, that the doctrine of theosis does not imply henotheism.

While Mormons may believe in many gods in the form of exalted sons and daughters of our Father in Heaven, we should distinguish this godhood from the supreme Godhood of the Trinity. Humans can progress to an exalted state in which they will acquire many of the attributes of God, but they will never become equal with the Godhead. Doctrine and Covenants 132 teaches the official LDS doctrine of theosis, noting that those who are exalted will be gods (with a lowercase g, v. 20), but nowhere in official doctrinal sources is it taught that humans will ever become equal with the Godhead or become Gods (with an uppercase G) in the same sense in which the Godhead is God. Elder Boyd K. Packer, a current member of the Quorum of the Twelve, confirms this very point:

The Father is the one true God. This thing is certain: no one will ever ascend above Him; no one will ever replace Him. Nor will anything ever change the relationship that we, His literal offspring, have with Him. He is Eloheim, the Father. He is God. Of Him there is only one. We revere our Father and our God; we worship Him.

There is only one Christ, one Redeemer. We accept the divinity of the Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh. We accept the promise that we may become joint heirs with Him.77

76. See, for example, Bruce R. McConkie, “Plurality of Gods,” in Mormon Doctrine, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 577.
Because Latter-day Saints recognize that the Godhead is the only God in the highest sense of the word, Mormonism is not henotheistic.

Although Widmer credits Talmage for reconciling doctrinal confusion in order to create a “new” Mormonism of refined cosmic henotheism, Talmage did nothing of the sort. There was indeed much doctrinal speculation prior to Talmage, some of it henotheistic; but Talmage’s contribution was to reaffirm the basic LDS doctrines of the Trinity, not to reconcile these speculations. What Latter-day Saints, including Talmage, have always taught is very close to social trinitarianism, not to henotheism.

**Other Erroneous or Questionable Historical Claims**

Aside from misdrawing his trajectory of Mormon doctrinal development, Widmer makes several other dubious or questionable historical and theological claims. Although these are not central to our critique, a few of these need to be mentioned and either clarified or refuted.

**The Destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor**

In describing the destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor, Widmer falls into the trap of interpreting an event from 1844 in terms of our modern understanding. Dallin H. Oaks, currently a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and formerly a professor of law at the University of Chicago, has written perhaps the most definitive work on the subject. Today, he points out, any suppression of the press, particularly a suppression that involved destruction of the newspapers and of the printing press involved, would certainly be considered illegal. Elder Oaks, however, argues that because of the provisions of the Nauvoo Charter, the actions of Joseph Smith and the Nauvoo city council in suppressing the publication of the Expositor and in destroying all copies of the newspaper were legal—except

for the destruction of the actual printing press, which was an unwarranted destruction of property.\textsuperscript{79} Joseph, though, was willing to abide by the court’s decision in the matter of the destruction of the press.\textsuperscript{80} The city council’s actions may have been rash and ill-advised, but they were not illegal.

**Joseph Smith’s Martyrdom**

Widmer describes the events leading to Joseph’s death as a “gun battle” (p. 17). This description is inaccurate. While both attackers and defenders had weapons, the situation involved defensive measures taken by a few incarcerated individuals in response to an attack by an armed mob, rather than a gun battle that was equally vicious on both sides. The *History of the Church*, volume 6, which Widmer cites as his source, describes the events in a way that is more congruent with the former interpretation. It is true that Joseph Smith and others took up weapons; as the mob fired at the prisoners, the prisoners grabbed weapons with which to defend themselves. Joseph and Hyrum both fired guns. John Taylor and Willard Richards used canes to try to knock the guns out of the assailants’ hands.\textsuperscript{81}

As previously mentioned, Joseph and his comrades had been arrested with a warrant issued without authority, brought before an anti-Mormon judge, and imprisoned in Carthage Jail without a hearing. The mob came after Joseph Smith and his fellow prisoners after Governor Ford had left Carthage for Nauvoo. Joseph had met with Governor Ford at Carthage Jail on 25 June and had requested to go back to Nauvoo.\textsuperscript{82} He had also informed the governor that he would look to him for protection.\textsuperscript{83} Ford had assured Joseph “that the prisoners were under his protection, . . . again pledging himself that they

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 903.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 891 n. 167.
\textsuperscript{82} George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1907), 536.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 544.
should be protected from violence, . . . telling them that if the troops marched the next morning to Nauvoo, as he then expected, they would probably be taken along in order to ensure their personal safety." Against his word, Governor Ford did not take the prisoners with him to Nauvoo on 27 June 1844. The Prophet and those with him were left to the Carthage Greys, a part of the mob known for their violence and their threats against Joseph and Hyrum Smith. The anti-Mormon Carthage militia was disbanded by Governor Ford, but the men, rather than being ordered to march to their homes, were allowed to stay in Carthage.

Prior to the martyrdom, Joseph Smith was well aware that a group of conspirators had formed in order to murder him and his brother Hyrum, as well as other important men in the church. When Joseph Smith was in jail at Carthage, Thomas C. Sharp, who had organized an anti-Mormon political party in 1841, wrote in the Warsaw Signal: "We have seen and heard enough to convince us that Joe Smith is not safe out of Nauvoo, and we would not be surprised to hear of his death by violent means in a short time. He has deadly enemies. . . . The feeling of this country . . . will break forth in fury upon the slightest provocation." Joseph Smith knew that he would die at Carthage. As he left Nauvoo, he stated, "I am going like a lamb to the slaughter."

The day and evening of the martyrdom (27 June), General Deming, who had command of the Carthage Greys, was to guard the jail, but he left during the day for fear of losing his life. The main group was in the public square, while eight individuals were to guard the prisoners under the command of Sergeant Frank A. Worrell. "The disbanded mob militia had come up to Carthage to the number of

84. Ibid.
85. Ibid., 517.
86. History of the Church, 6:280–81 n.
88. Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 380; see History of the Church, 6:558.
89. Cannon, Life of Joseph Smith, 524.
two hundred, with their faces blackened with powder and mud. . . . it
was then arranged that the guard at the jail should load with blank
cartridges and that the mob should attack the prison and meet with
some show of resistance.”90

Joseph had been given a weapon earlier that day by Cyrus H.
Wheelock, who had come to the jail to get messages to carry back
to Nauvoo. The gun was a small one, known as a “pepper-box” re-
volver.91 According to Truman G. Madsen, a few individuals attempted
to save the Prophet’s life by testifying in his behalf. Stephen Mark-
ham even offered to exchange clothes so that the Prophet could es-
cape in disguise, but Joseph declined.92 “After all these efforts, the only
real thing the Prophet had between him and the final scene was a pis-
tol which Cyrus Wheelock had brought him.”93 The prisoners had only
two pistols and two walking sticks with which to defend themselves.94

Sometime after 5:00 P.M., when the prisoners had been notified
that Stephen Markham had been driven from Carthage by the mob,
“there was a slight rustling at the outer door of the jail, and a cry of
surrender, then a discharge of three or four guns. The plot had been
carried out: two hundred of the mob came rushing into the jail
yard.”95 George Q. Cannon reports that many members of the mob
“rushed up the stairs while others fired through the open windows of
the jail into the room where the brethren were confined. The four
prisoners sprang against the door, but the murderers burst it partly
open and pushed their guns into the room.”96 As John Taylor and
Willard Richards tried to knock the guns from the hands of the mob,
a “shower of bullets came up the stairway and through the door.”97
“Continual discharges of musketry came into the room.”98

90. Ibid.
91. Ibid., 517.
92. Truman G. Madsen, Joseph Smith, the Prophet, 2nd cd. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft,
1989), 121.
93. Ibid., 122.
94. Ibid.
95. Cannon, Life of Joseph Smith, 526.
96. Ibid.
97. Ibid.
98. History of the Church, 6:618.
According to the account in the History of the Church, John Taylor continued to try to ward off the guns of the mobsters until the guns extended approximately half their length into the room. Deciding that it was useless to fight, he tried to jump out of the window, at which point he was shot. Hyrum was also shot. "When Hyrum fell, Joseph exclaimed, 'Oh dear, brother Hyrum!' and opening the door a few inches he discharged his six shooter in the stairway, . . . two or three barrels of which missed fire." Finally, Joseph dropped his pistol and attempted to jump from the window but was shot in the chest and fell out of the window. Madsen reports that thirty-six bullets were fired into the prisoners' room within two minutes. Joseph and Hyrum each received five bullets, and John Taylor was shot four times.

These descriptions of the martyrdom hardly depict a "gun battle." The prisoners were locked inside their room, had no more than two guns, and were trying to defend themselves against an armed mob of at least two hundred men. As Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill write, "The murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith at Carthage, Illinois, was not a spontaneous, impulsive act by a few personal enemies of the Mormon leaders, but a deliberate political assassination, committed or condoned by some of the leading citizens in Hancock County."

Some may ask why Joseph used any weapons if he knew he was to die at Carthage. Apparently, he was more concerned with the well-being of those with whom he was associated than with his own. The Prophet had "promised those brethren in the name of the Lord that he would defend them even if it meant giving up his life." He had given his word to the Saints in 1842 that, "When my enemies take away my rights, I will bear it and keep out of the way; but if they take away your rights, I will fight for you." Joseph clearly did not con-
done the oppression of his people. On 18 June, Joseph had told the Nauvoo Legion, “while I live, I will never tamely submit to the dominion of cursed mobocracy.”

On the issue of using a gun at Carthage, Joseph and Hyrum agreed that they disliked the idea, but Joseph thought it necessary for them to defend themselves.107 Joseph said, “Could my brother Hyrum but be liberated it would not matter so much about me.”

It has been speculated that when Joseph finally tried to escape from the window, he did so in order to save the life of Willard Richards, since it was Joseph the assassins wanted to kill. Joseph was shot from behind two or three times before he fell out of the window.109 Even after the Prophet had fallen from the window, the murderers continued to shoot at his dead body.110

The Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were murdered by a large group of angry mobsters. They did shoot at the mobsters, but only in defense of their lives. To make this gruesome, plotted murder sound as though it were the result of some sort of duel, with each party acting with similar ferocity, is highly inaccurate and insulting.

Widmer’s Questionable Methodological Assumptions

In addition to its historical inaccuracies, *Mormonism and the Nature of God* is a work flawed by faulty methodological and hermeneutical assumptions. In this section, we point out some of the faulty assumptions and trace the incoherencies to which they lead. Many of these assumptions may be due to an incomplete understanding of Mormon doctrine, but we cannot avoid the conclusion that Widmer is doing exactly what he accuses Mormon historians of doing: allowing his “faith commitment”—in this case, to purely secular hypotheses—to overshadow his research and to find expression in a purely “apologetical style of writing” (p. 8).

---

107. Ibid., 608.
In his foreword to the book, Irving Hexham lauds Widmer’s work as “a model of scholarship for religious studies” (p. 2) and sets forth several criteria that he used to make this startling judgment. We examine each of these criteria in terms of both the methodology that Widmer proposes in his introduction and the methodology that he actually follows.

First, Hexham states that

Widmer is not content to understand the history of Mormonism in terms of its later development while ignoring the subtle changes that have occurred in our language that alter perceptions of Mormon texts. Rather, following Von Ranke, he seeks to discover the essence of Mormon history by situating specific events in equally specific historical contexts. Therefore, unlike other writers, he does not assume that the meaning of the texts is self-evident, or that what was true in 1880 was equally true fifty years earlier in 1830. Instead he asks, What did this or that event or statement mean when it first occurred or was uttered? How did Joseph Smith’s contemporaries understand his words and deeds? (pp. 1–2)

We take this to mean that a good historical analysis of Mormonism should not simply examine the historical record in terms of modern Mormon understanding. Texts dating from the 1830s should be examined in light of contemporaneous exterior evidence in order to find their original meaning and significance.

Does Widmer follow this guideline? In his introduction, Widmer claims to supplement secondary works “with primary and archival sources to document any reconstruction of Mormon doctrine” (p. 8). Among these sources, he lists Christian writings of the early and mid-1800s directed against early Mormons and writings by early Mormons other than the Prophet. These writings include apologetical tracts, newspapers, official church histories, and diaries. Using these primary sources, Widmer hopes to draw conclusions concerning Joseph’s theology and properly interpret early Mormon stances on doctrine.
Unfortunately, rather than reading a modern Mormon interpretation into original texts, Widmer imposes his own interpretation. He declares that “all speeches of the Church’s leaders, or ‘General Authorities,’ will be considered as true expressions of Latter-day Saint thought” (p. 10). If Widmer means that every statement made by a General Authority is indicative of general Latter-day Saint understanding, his claim is certainly questionable. In context, however, he seems to be making the even more fantastic claim that every General Authority’s statement should be considered as an authoritative expression of Mormon doctrine. Such an assumption will, of course, lead one to conclude that the church has held myriads of contradictory positions.

For Latter-day Saints, only the president of the church is authorized to receive revelation or to declare doctrine for the church as a whole. Oliver Cowdery, who at the time was second only to Joseph in the church’s leadership, was taught this principle plainly in a revelation received in 1830.

It shall be given unto thee that thou shalt be heard by the church in all things whatsoever thou shalt teach them by the Comforter, concerning the revelations and commandments which I have given. But, behold, verily, verily, I say unto thee, no one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., for he receiveth them even as Moses. . . . And if thou art led at any time by the Comforter to speak or teach, or at all times by the way of commandment unto the church, thou mayest do it. But thou shalt not write by way of commandment, but by wisdom; And thou shalt not command him who is at thy head, and at the head of the church; For I have given him the keys of the mysteries, and the revelations which are sealed, until I shall appoint unto them another in his stead. (D&C 28:1–2, 4–7)

In 1831, when other members were influenced by some who claimed to have received revelation, the Lord reiterated, “There is none other
appointed unto you to receive commandments and revelations until [Joseph Smith] be taken” (D&C 43:3). This principle, that the president is the only person authorized to receive revelation and to declare doctrine for the church, has always been taught and practiced in the church.

In addition, it has also been long recognized that not every statement given by the prophet and president of the church is doctrinally authoritative for the church. This is not new doctrine; it harks back to the earliest days of the church. Joseph Smith once said, “This morning I . . . visited with a brother and sister from Michigan, who thought that ‘a prophet is always a prophet’; but I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such.” Even though a man has been called as a prophet, that person does not gain a mysterious quality of inerrancy; only when the prophet is acting or speaking as a prophet are his words finally authoritative for the church.

And here, too, the Lord has established an important safeguard: the law of common consent. The Lord introduced this law in an 1830 revelation given to Oliver Cowdery: “For all things must be done in order, and by common consent in the church, by the prayer of faith” (D&C 28:13; see also 26:2). Throughout the history of the church, items to be included in the church's canon have been voted on by the members of the church. In addition, several policy changes have been presented to the church body to be voted on (see D&C Official Declarations 1 and 2). Other doctrinal declarations have been made through official church statements from the First Presidency or Quorum of the Twelve, which quorum(s) first voted on the doctrine in question. How, then, do we determine the official position of the church? Anyone wishing to conduct such a study should appeal first to scripture that has been voted on and canonized by the church and second to official statements given by the First Presidency. Any other statements should be judged against these official doctrines.

111. History of the Church, 5:265.
112. This is in harmony with both Book of Mormon and Bible claims. See Alma 40:20 and 1 Corinthians 7:2–3, 6–12. Both Alma and Paul differentiate between their own opinions (which may be in error) and what they speak by way of revelation.
Widmer, however, follows his methodological assumption that all speeches by church leaders are to be considered definitive—only when it suits his purposes. Any speech that can be considered counterevidence for his thesis is simply discounted as a personal conviction of the speaker. For example, Widmer discounts the teachings of the Book of Abraham regarding a plurality of gods because, while the book “may represent Smith's personal theological reflections, it cannot be taken to represent the prevalent Mormon view of God in the early 1840s” (p. 79). Other statements made by Joseph Smith about a plurality of gods prior to the King Follett Discourse are also discounted: “Are the revelations to be considered authoritative expressions of the church’s beliefs, or the personal beliefs of an individual? I would tend to hold to the latter” (p. 86). This is quite a methodological departure from Widmer’s earlier claims, especially in light of the counterevidence that he presents in the very next paragraph: “We have accounts that seem to indicate that individual Mormons in the early 1840s appear to have believed in the plurality of Gods” (p. 86). We must conclude that Widmer is more interested in supporting his own theses than he is in consistently following a proper methodology.

Despite his claims to present contemporaneous documentary evidence in order to support his reconstruction of the development of Mormon doctrine, Widmer offers little evidence outside of the canonized scripture of the church. Instead of presenting the early Saints’ understanding of scripture, Widmer is wont to interpret any isolated passage of scripture as a proof text for his thesis. This is most evident in his treatment of the Book of Mormon, from which he selects isolated proof texts. He also misinterprets the fifth lecture on faith. This leads him to claim that the “official doctrine of the Church” in the 1840s is a binitarian doctrine (p. 69). His only evidence for such a claim is a small section of the fifth lecture on faith. Where is the external evidence that Widmer claims to muster in support of his thesis?

Widmer also misinterprets the Mormon claim that the gospel as it has been revealed through modern prophets is a restoration of the gospel known to ancient prophets. He assumes that the concept of a restoration of doctrine through Joseph Smith means that every dispensation receives the same set of revealed doctrines instantly, as if in
one fell swoop. This leads him to the conclusion that “there can be no variance in teachings between the present belief system and the early belief system... If a variance exists between the earliest Mormon concepts, those restored by Smith, and later concepts, how could Smith claim to have restored primitive Christianity, when these concepts were not present at the foundation of the Mormon Church?” (p. 65).

This is not, however, the Mormon view of the restoration. Rather, each dispensation has not received everything God has to reveal, and certainly not in a systematic form. Each dispensation receives truth “line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little” (2 Nephi 28:30). Although each dispensation receives the “fulness of the Gospel,” this fulness need not contain every truth that God possesses. Instead, the fulness of the gospel “consists in those laws, doctrines, ordinances, powers and authorities needed to enable men to gain the fulness of salvation.”

God gives to each dispensation everything that mankind needs to know in order to receive exaltation, but he does not reveal to every dispensation everything that he knows nor necessarily everything a previous dispensation knew or practiced. Joseph Smith referred to “knowledge... that has not been revealed since the world was until now, which our forefathers have waited with anxious expectation to be revealed in the last times.”

The modern dispensation, or the “dispensation of the fulness of times will bring to light the things that have been revealed in all former dispensations; also other things that have not been before revealed.”

Today’s dispensation has received and will continue to receive more than any other single dispensation received. Hence, Widmer’s conclusion that Mormon dispensationalism precludes any variance or development of doctrine is false.

In addition, a dispensation does not receive everything that it receives at one time. Joseph Smith received a series of visions and revelations throughout his life. He did not learn everything at one

113. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, 333.
115. Ibid., 193.
time. If this had been the case, there would be no need for continued revelation. God reveals more knowledge based on the readiness and willingness of his people to receive it. On one occasion Joseph Smith taught, “God said, ‘Thou shalt not kill’; at another time He said, ‘Thou shalt utterly destroy.’ This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed.” Again, “We are differently situated from any other people that ever existed upon this earth; consequently those former revelations cannot be suited to our conditions; they were given to other people, who were before us.”

Widmer’s assumption that God simultaneously reveals all truth to every dispensation at the beginning of the dispensation leads him to conclude that the church has a need to hide any past revelations that seem to differ from current doctrine. As we can see from the foregoing discussion, current and past revelation can differ without destroying the Mormon claim to restoration or revelation. God can and does reveal new doctrine from time to time, tailored to fit the background and understanding of his people.

This leads us to our next criterion, as presented by Hexham: “This book is a model of scholarship for religious studies that avoids the ever present traps of generalization and interdisciplinary mush” (p. 2). We take the “trap of generalization” to mean that a good historian should not take a few statements or passages to be representative of a time period or text as a whole. In interpreting a text, for example, a good historian should examine all the evidence. If this assumption is correct, then Widmer is more guilty of generalization than of anything else.

Widmer claims that his “concentration on the documents available to the public is related to [his] concern with what the Saints believed and taught at specific times in their history. By doing this it is hoped that a fuller understanding of the development of the Mormon doctrine of God can be attained” (p. 10). In this passage, it

116. Ibid., 256.
117. Ibid., 70.
sounds as if Widmer is concerned with examining all the evidence in order to present a “fuller,” broader understanding of history. Unfortunately, Widmer is not concerned with all the evidence. Rather, he is only concerned with the evidence that supports his thesis.

One of the most striking instances in which Widmer is guilty of generalization is in his analysis of the Book of Mormon. He notes that “No clear or consistent thought exists in the 1830 Book of Mormon” (p. 30). Book of Mormon teachings, he acknowledges, can be placed in three categories: “1) modalistic or Sabellian passages, 2) Patri-passian passages, 3) traditional Christological, Trinitarian or anti-modalistic passages” (p. 32). However, Widmer ignores the third group of passages and contradicts himself by claiming that “early Mormon documents clearly express that it was the modalist interpretation of the divine that had been lost by the Christian Church over the centuries” (p. 53, emphasis added). Again, “Early Mormon thought, as reflected in the Book of Mormon, is strictly monotheistic” (p. 28, emphasis added). This type of generalization is difficult to justify when the Book of Mormon is read as a whole. As we have already discovered, comparatively few Book of Mormon passages seem to teach modalism, while the bulk of its teachings are actually trinitarian.

Another stunning generalization is Widmer’s neglect of the evidence that can be found in the Doctrine and Covenants and its predecessor, the Book of Commandments. It seems obvious that, in attempting an analysis of the early Mormon concept of God, he should examine the early revelations given to Joseph Smith and considered authoritative by the church. Approximately one hundred sections of the Doctrine and Covenants were received before 1834, and yet Widmer considers only two, sections 76 and 88. If he were to ex-

118. Widmer claims that sections 76 and 88, “in their original published formats, . . . omit the passages that support the plurality of Gods concept” (p. 9). We cannot understand how he reaches this conclusion. A study of Woodford’s Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants, 926–72, reveals that the passages in question from section 76 have remained almost completely unchanged since the revelation was originally recorded. Section 88, on the other hand, seems to be a randomly chosen section to examine because its references to a plurality of gods are no stronger than those found throughout the Doctrine and Covenants. Nevertheless, its references remain substantially unchanged.
amine the rest of the revelations, he would find that they clearly do not teach a modalistic concept of God. Yet Widmer concludes from a few passages in the Book of Mormon and from the unfinished, unpublished, nonnormative 1832 account of the first vision that early Mormonism viewed God in a modalist fashion.

Widmer treats the Book of Moses in a similar way. He feels that the Book of Moses "attempts to show that God, the Father, is the sole agent in creation" (p. 45). Here, he almost completely ignores the explicitly antimodalist language in the Book of Moses. In this case, Widmer has absolutely no evidence from which to generalize and is making a completely spurious claim.

It is obvious that Widmer's work does not meet the criteria given by Hexham and that it does not live up to the superlative status of a "model of scholarship for religious studies" (p. 2). Widmer, it seems, is more interested in discrediting Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He claims: "It is not the intention of this work to discredit the Church, or its leaders. It is also not our intent to show that the leaders deliberately deceived the members of the Church. When examining any faith community care must be given in allowing the sources to speak for the faith community. This work is in no way intended to discredit Joseph Smith's claims to having received revelations from God. This claim of Smith lies beyond the scope of objective historical criticism, and can in no way be proved or disproved according to scientific criteria" (p. 10).

However, Widmer repeatedly assumes both that Joseph's claims to revelation were false and that the church conducted a cover-up in order to deceive its members. Consider the following:

No clear or consistent thought exists in the 1830 Book of Mormon. What is apparent is that early Mormons were reacting against a heavily intellectualized and theologized Trinitarian concept of God. (p. 30)

Smith's intention, in revising the Bible, is clear. The Bible contains many ambiguous passages that can be misinterpreted. With his revision, Joseph sought to remove these ambiguous passages and replace them with what he felt the
original authors intended. The intent of the original authors was drawn from the theology of the *Book of Mormon*, its modalistic view of the divine. . . . Smith as translator used common sense to legitimize his reasons for revising the text. (pp. 50–51)

Smith’s concept of the divine is an early 19th-century layman’s interpretation of Trinitarianism. (p. 53).

Many factors came into play, causing this shift from modalism to cosmic henotheism. Joseph’s self-concept as a prophet of God, as well as several external forces, contributed to this shift. (p. 68)

As for Mormonism in the Kirtland period, it can be said that while the shifts in theology may have occurred, doctrinally Mormonism could still be considered a Christian sect. (p. 69)

It appears unlikely that . . . Smith . . . had any clue as to what the papyri actually contained. (p. 72)

The First Vision, itself the result of speculative theology, would give legitimization to the new thought that was emerging in Nauvoo. (p. 95)

The First Vision becomes an attempt to deal with 50 years of doctrinal development, and reinterpret this development as insignificant, or as something that never occurred. (p. 105)

There is no doubt Mormonism has developed, or progressed, from modalism to cosmic henotheism. Yet Mormon leaders continue to maintain that the Church that exists in the late 20th century is exactly the same Church, doctrinally and structurally, as that organized in 1830. . . .

The Church has taken great measures to protect the illusion of doctrinal continuity. (p. 157).

It quickly becomes apparent that Widmer is working from a foundational assumption that Joseph’s claims to a divine origin for his translations are false. Working from this basis, he also goes to great
lengths to demonstrate that the church has attempted to somehow "protect the . . . doctrinal continuity" by reinterpreting its history and covering up past events where necessary. Widmer's work does not present a scholarly history of Mormonism; it presents a biased attack that uses any available evidence while ignoring all counterevidence.

**Internal Inconsistencies**

In his acknowledgments, Widmer credits Renée M. Clark for helping to flesh out the work "to make a consistent and coherent presentation" (p. vi). This claim of coherency is not only unfounded but humorous, given the astonishing number of glaring contradictions throughout the work, some of which have already been shown. Oftentimes, in one paragraph Widmer will make an assertion only to make a contrary claim in the next paragraph. In this section, we present a number of these contradictions, together with some speculation about the reasons for their appearance in the work. The major reason, perhaps, for so many incoherent and contradictory presentations within the work is Widmer's bias. In fact, we hope that this chapter, aside from presenting some humorous passages, will unmask Widmer's goal of discrediting Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Perhaps the most glaring contradiction can be seen in statements asserting that the Book of Mormon is both unique in nineteenth-century America and yet not substantially different from other nineteenth-century American documents. Widmer writes, "Book of Mormon thought, primarily its Christology, is substantially different from other early 19th-century theologies and thought streams. . . . Book of Mormon thought maintains a unique Christological position" (p. 30). Thus far, he seems to be claiming that the Book of Mormon is unique. And yet, contradictory passages can be found: "The Book of Mormon taught nothing substantially different, theologically, than many other groups in early 19th-century Christianity" (p. 38). Again, "The Book of Mormon taught nothing different from what early 19th-century religious seekers would have already been familiar with" (p. 20). Also, "Joseph Smith and his theological convictions were a product of his time" (pp. 19–20). (For Widmer, "the
Book of Mormon is a reflection of Joseph Smith's...earliest theological convictions" [p. 27]. Is Widmer arguing that Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon were products of the nineteenth century that did not differ from their contemporaries or that they were truly unique? Which claim are we to believe or respond to? Widmer offers no explanation for the conflicting claims. We can speculate, however, that he is attempting to discredit Joseph's claims to revelation by arguing that Joseph is a product of his time. At the same time, however, Widmer is forced to acknowledge the uniqueness of the Book of Mormon within its nineteenth-century background.

Further, Widmer seems confused about what he means by modalism. Modalism, which has historically been considered heretical by mainstream Christianity, must be differentiated from classical trinitarianism, the doctrine accepted by mainstream Christianity. If the Book of Mormon taught modalism, then its teachings would have been very different from those of mainstream Christianity. In some places, Widmer seems to recognize the difference between modalism and trinitarianism: "The thought expressed in the Book of Mormon...can be seen as a reaction to Trinitarianism" (p. 30). In other places, however, Widmer seems to confuse the two: "Perhaps the best description of the Book of Mormon thought is that it is a layman's Trinitarianism" (p. 30). Again, "earliest Mormonism," which he claims taught modalism, actually "taught nothing substantially different from the rest of mainstream Christianity" (p. 41).

Widmer is quite adept at ignoring evidence against his position; in some cases, the evidence can be found in quotations and passages within his own work. He argues (without any supporting evidence) that Joseph Smith, in his 1832 account of the first vision, "makes no mention of either member of the godhead appearing to him, only that a personage of light appeared" (p. 101). In fact, Joseph "was not even aware of who exactly had called him. Was it a messenger of God, God himself, or Jesus that had called him to do a major work?" (p. 102). This leads him to the fantastic conclusion that "in 1832 Smith still held to a Judeo-Christian concept that no man has seen God" (pp. 101-2). One need not appeal to external evidence to refute these ridiculous claims; the refutation can be found within Widmer's.
own quotation of the 1832 account of the first vision: “I saw the Lord and he spoke unto me saying Joseph [my son] thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy (way) walk in my statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world . . . behold and lo I come quickly as it [is] written of me in the cloud (clothed) in the glory of my Father” (p. 91, brackets and parentheses in Widmer). Widmer’s bias has somehow allowed him to find some kind of ambiguity in this language, but it seems impossible to claim that anyone other than Jesus Christ is speaking in this passage. If Widmer is attempting to dodge the evidence against his claim, he is foolish to quote such evidence in his own work.

Yet Widmer continues to present counterevidence and then to ignore it. Later in the work, he discounts the Book of Moses, claiming that “its impact on Mormon doctrinal development is minute” (p. 46). On the other hand, “The Joseph Smith Translation, while never published during Smith’s lifetime or made part of the Mormon canon, appears to have made a greater contribution to Mormon doctrinal development” (p. 46). Widmer also discounts the importance of section 76 in favor of the Joseph Smith Translation. How can he make such a claim? How can the Joseph Smith Translation have made such an impact when, as he notes, it was not published until 1866, and then by a different church (see p. 46)? Section 76 and the Book of Moses were both published within the Prophet’s own lifetime.

Widmer also has a hard time clearly articulating the impact of the Lectures on Faith on Mormon doctrinal development. “The accepted doctrine of the 1840s,” he writes, “would have been the concepts taught by a canonized document, the Lectures of [sic] Faith” (p. 76). Later, however, he asserts that “The Lectures . . . had played only a minor role in Mormon doctrinal development” prior to their removal from the canon in 1921 (p. 105). How can this be? Widmer, it seems, wants to accept the lectures as doctrinally binding when it suits his thesis, while denying their importance when he needs to explain their disappearance from the canon.

Widmer claims that “the modern Mormon doctrine of God is really the product of the 20th century with little resemblance to the original position of the Church in the early 19th century” (p. 6). This
new twentieth-century doctrine was so removed from the original doctrine of the church that it "left the 20th-century church unrecognizable from its 19th-century counterpart" (p. 160). Yet this fantastic claim is inconsistent with other passages from Widmer's work: "Most of the major theological shifts occurred within the life of the movement's founder, Joseph Smith" (p. 6). Again, "Since the days of Joseph Smith, the Mormons have changed little in the way of doctrine, officially that is" (p. 21). Finally, "The henotheistic doctrinal position of modern Mormonism is a refinement of concepts first introduced in 1844" (p. 7). Perhaps the reason for such inconsistent statements is Widmer's desire to discredit both Joseph Smith and the modern church. In order to discredit Joseph, Widmer argues that most of the doctrinal changes occurred within his life. In order to discredit the church, he argues that many changes have occurred since the Prophet's death.

Many other inconsistencies can be found within Widmer's work. For example, "The earliest Mormon concept of the restoration was not the concept of the restoration commonly perceived by 20th-century Latter-day Saints; the restoration of new doctrines, and of the New Testament Church structure" (p. 40). Instead, "the initial Mormon concept of 'the restoration' was based on the belief that after 1,800 years God was again speaking to his people" (p. 4). This is meant to contrast with the modern view of the restoration, in which God restored to the earth many "plain and precious parts of the gospel" (1 Nephi 13:34). However, Widmer fails to recognize that the very passage that he quotes from the Book of Mormon originated in 1829 from the very earliest revelations given in the life of Joseph Smith. This leads him into many contradictions; despite his claims that the original restoration was not a restoration of doctrine, Widmer asserts that "Early Mormon documents clearly express that it was a modalist interpretation of the divine that had been lost by the Christian Church over the centuries" (p. 53). "The message found" in the pages of the Book of Mormon "was the message of the restoration of precious truths removed from the world by the establishment" (p. 38). If the earliest Mormon interpretation of the restoration was a restoration only of revelation, it must have predated the
Book of Mormon and other early Mormon documents. In translating the Bible, however, Joseph was fulfilling his “original mandate to restore the teachings of primitive Christianity, the changes were necessary to restore those ‘plain and precious truths’ that had been removed from the biblical text” (p. 48, emphasis added). Apparently, the concept of a restoration of truth was an original concept after all.

One more contradiction deserves mention. When speaking of the King Follett Discourse, Widmer tells us that “On this day Smith made no claim to special revelation in revealing the true nature of God” (p. 121). But as anyone familiar with the discourse can attest, this is not true. Even Widmer himself is forced to recognize this: “As Moses had stood before Israel, Joseph Smith stood before the Saints. Smith claims that the Holy Spirit is speaking through him. It is precisely this claim that Smith uses to legitimate his claim as Prophet of God” (p. 118). Again, when Joseph delivered the sermon of April 7, he claimed to be speaking by the power of God” (p. 19). If Joseph’s claims were true, then he certainly was not simply “vindicating his calling in the eyes of his followers” (p. 117). Instead, he was speaking by way of commandment from God.

We do not make mention of these myriad contradictions simply to ridicule or to embarrass Kurt Widmer. Rather, we hope to point out the result of his faulty methodological assumptions—assumptions that result in contradictions like those mentioned above. Of course, not every prima facie inconsistency is in reality a contradiction, but this section should at least cast some doubt on the conclusions reached by Widmer and show the difficulty of responding to such a piece. It should be clear at least that Mormonism and the Nature of God is not the “model of scholarship for religious studies” that Irving Hexham claims it to be. Nor is it a reliable guide for one seeking to understand the development of Mormon doctrine.