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# Is God Subject to or the Creator of Eternal Law?

*James McLachlan*

Whether God is subject to law or whether God created all law is a question long debated in priesthood quorums, Relief Society meetings, Gospel Doctrine classes, and around Latter-day Saint dinner tables. Both sides claim the scriptures and the Prophet Joseph Smith. The divide usually lines up with, on one side, Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce McConkie teaching of God's power over all things and, on the other, B. H. Roberts, John Widtsoe, and James Talmage seeing God as the revealer of laws that even God must follow. Not only is the question open and unsettled as a matter of doctrine, but whether these brethren line up so neatly on either side is itself a question.

## **An Ancient Question**

Whether God is subject to eternal laws or is their creator who is free to change them is a very old question. In one of Plato's early dialogues, his hero Socrates asks Euthyphro, an Athenian prophet who has come to the courts to charge his own father with murder, a question about the nature of piety: "Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?" (10a).<sup>1</sup> To frame this question in Christian terms, Socrates's question asks whether something is good because it has been decreed so by God, being subject

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1. Plato, *Plato: Five Dialogues; Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2002), 11.

to God's will, or whether God decrees it because it is good in itself.<sup>2</sup> The question has been considered, avoided, and sometimes even answered in various ways in the history of Christianity. It relates both to ethics and the problem of evil and suffering, as well as to natural laws and logical rules. If one is a follower of "divine command theory" in ethics, then whatever God decrees is good because God decides what is good. For example, if one accepts that the good depends on the will of God, it makes some sense that God could command Moses and the Israelites to wipe out the Midianites, including their children, and keep the virgins as their slaves (Num. 31). God loves Israel and hates the Midianites. This is good because God has decreed it so. If one tries to explain why God would order such things—for example, the Midianites had certain diseases or were irredeemably evil; in other words, that God had reasons for destroying the Midianites—one is already sliding toward the idea that God must follow certain laws.

Disturbing stories in scripture—God hardening Pharaoh's heart, the massacres associated with the entry into Canaan, Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter, the wager between God and Satan over Job, and some of the descriptions of the coming apocalyptic conflicts—create conflicts in the minds of even the most committed believers. The destruction of the Midianites led an uneasy nonbeliever, Mark Twain, to ask in his *Letters from the Earth*, What kind of "Father" would decree such a thing?<sup>3</sup> In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov asks what idea of morality we have other than the human one, which says such actions as described in scripture are beyond justification.<sup>4</sup> To answer objections like Ivan's, some will cite Isaiah 55:9, that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts as the heavens are higher than the earth. But this only raises the question, Are there any things we

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2. Plato seems to be on the side that claims God(s) are subject to the good. Plato's God is a demiurge, a workman, who does the best he can with the materials he has; he creates order from chaos, but he does not create the original materials from nothing. (An already long tradition in Greek philosophy held that creation from nothing was an incoherent idea.) As a result, Plato does not face the "problem of evil" troubling the Judeo-Christian tradition; if God creates the world from nothing, then why does he create evil as part of it? Plato's God is a creator in the way a craftsman is; he makes the product, which is an excellent one, but he is not responsible for the effects of "Necessity," the unavoidable defects of the materials.

3. Mark Twain, *Letters from the Earth*, ed. Bernard DeVoto (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 75–79.

4. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1990), 245–46.

could begin to understand about God if all the moral and physical rules by which we understand are subject to God's will? Certainly, the idea that God sanctions massacres of children is dangerous. The massacre and enslavement of the Midianites, and the other slaughters that accompanied the Israelite entry into Canaan, have been used to justify genocides or the enslavement of masses of God's children.

But the question about law goes beyond ethics. Is God, in his omnipotence, subject to the rules of logic? Could God create square circles, make mountain ranges with no valleys, or microwave a burrito so hot God couldn't eat it and then eat it? Thinkers with very strong notions of omnipotence, like William of Ockham, John Calvin, and Al-Ghazali, will say yes, but how this is so is beyond human understanding.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas gets around the question by saying that the rules of logic are "in Gods nature" so God doesn't do irrational things.<sup>6</sup> God cannot violate the principle of noncontradiction. Omnipotence is not irrationality. But what about natural laws and human freedom? Process theologians, on the other hand, claim that besides the principle of noncontradiction, God is also limited by the freedom of others and the brute continual persistence of nature.<sup>7</sup>

### Latter-day Saints, God, and Eternal Laws

Where do Latter-day Saints fall in the debate?<sup>8</sup> Latter-day Saint scripture shows that law itself is extremely important for Latter-day Saints. In the

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5. For William of Ockham, see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 274–76. For Al-Ghazali, see Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 106–11; Daniel A. Dombrowski, *A History of the Concept of God: A Process Approach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 35–38. For John Calvin, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 3, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 14.15, 23.1; Anna Case-Winters, *God's Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 39–96.

6. Hartshorne and Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God*, 119–33; Dombrowski, *History of the Concept of God*, 43–60.

7. David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 275–311.

8. It is interesting that many contemporary scholars think the answer is clear. Latter-day Saints follow Plato: God is a craftsman who knows the laws. The laws are eternal, and God is subject to them. See, for example, Francis Beckwith, "Moral Law, the Mormon Universe, and the Nature of the Right We Ought to Choose," and Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, "Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the Mormon

Book of Mormon, the prophet Lehi says without law there could be no God, no humanity, no creation.

And if ye shall say there is no law, ye shall also say there is no sin. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness. And if there be no righteousness nor happiness there be no punishment nor misery. And if these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon; wherefore, all things must have vanished away. (2 Ne. 2:13)

According to Lehi, law must exist for there to be anything beyond the sheer chaos of nothing or no-thing. All things would vanish away. Without order, all is chaos. But are these laws eternal themselves, or are they dependent on the will of God? Latter-day Saints have approached this question in a variety of ways. Consider the following scripture, which emphasizes the importance of law in relation to blessings, progress, and perfection: “Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come. There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:18–21).

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Doctrine and a Defense of *Creation ex Nihilo*,” in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002).

The irony here is some critics accuse the Latter-day Saints of following the Greeks and not the Bible. This is a charge that Latter-day Saints, at least since Talmage and Roberts, have argued is a source of the apostasy in early Christianity. It was part of the reason that a restoration was necessary. Greek philosophy, with its static ideal of perfection, demanded a God without body, parts, or passions, and this is one source of the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* which appears to be nonbiblical. Ex nihilo creation, that God created the universe from nothing, protects the absolute omnipotence of God but is also a source of the problem of evil. If God is good, why couldn't God have made a better world? It also creates problems about how one might think of freedom. Notice this is also the philosophical source and justification of the idea that God creates all the laws since God created everything ex nihilo. Gerhard May, *Creation Ex Nihilo* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); James McLachlan, “The Problem of Evil in Mormon Thought,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Philip Barlow and Terryl Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 276–92.

The question we need to consider here is, “What does it mean to say the law was decreed?” If we examine the verses, they are open to at least three possible readings.<sup>9</sup> Each reading has a complementary question as to whether the laws are one decreed or many.<sup>10</sup>

1. God decreed the law or laws that would govern the world before the creation of the world.
2. The law or laws are eternal since they are before the foundation of the world. God decreed the law or laws because they are eternal truth.
3. Laws emerge with the world and are at its foundation. In this sense, as the world emerges from the chaos of disorganized matter, laws are the descriptions of the order and limitations imposed because of the emergence of plural beings. God finds himself in the midst of other persons.

In brief, were the laws decreed by God, were they made clear by God, or did they emerge with the relation between God, other spirits, and the world? Consider the following passage drawn from three different accounts of the King Follett Discourse. I think all three interpretations are still possible here.

God himself— find[ing] himself in the midst of spirits and glory— because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.<sup>11</sup> The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. God has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences that they may be exalted with himself.<sup>12</sup> God . . . saw proper to institute laws for those who were in less intelligence that they mi[gh]t have one glory upon another in all that knowledge power & glory & so took in hand to save [them in] the world of Sp[irits].<sup>13</sup>

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9. In this essay, I indicate three possible readings of this text. But these are only three possible readings; there may be more.

10. Do the blessings depend on an infinite or finite number of separate laws, or do all these laws depend on obedience to one basic law, love of God and neighbor?

11. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton [28],” 16–17 [28–29], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-william-clayton/6>.

12. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff,” [137], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/5>.

13. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Thomas Bullock,” 19, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/6>.

B. H. Roberts is usually associated with position 2, that God is subject to the eternal law or laws decreed before the foundation of the world. He argued that omnipotence must be thought of as somewhat limited. In the quote below, Roberts, as others have done, limits God's omnipotence in relation to logical necessities without which we cannot understand our world. But notice God is also placed within space and time (duration). God neither creates space nor annihilates matter. For Roberts, this would seem to place God under explanation 2 of the law(s). The laws are eternal and God is God because God embodies them perfectly.

The attribute "Omnipotence" must needs be thought upon also as somewhat limited. Even God, notwithstanding the ascription to him of all-powerfulness in such scripture phrases as "With God all things are possible," "Nothing shall be impossible with God"—notwithstanding all this, I say, not even God may have two mountain ranges without a valley between. Not even God may place himself beyond the boundary of space: nor on the outside of duration. Nor is it conceivable to human thought that he can create space, or annihilate matter. These are things that limit even God's Omnipotence. What then, is meant by the ascription of the attribute Omnipotence to God? Simply that all that may or can be done by power conditioned by other eternal existences—duration, space, matter, truth, justice—God can do. But even he may not act out of harmony with the other eternal existences which condition or limit even him.<sup>14</sup>

The statement that God's power is limited by other eternal existences including truth and justice would seem to bring this part of Roberts's stance closer to position 3. In order for the universe that includes persons to emerge, each person has a kind of eternal power that limits the other persons, powers, and laws. These eternal existences include duration, space, and matter but also truth and justice. Other eternal existences, including other eternal intelligences, limit God's power. Latter-day Saints occasionally sing a hymn that reflects this position: "Know This, That Every Soul Is Free," which includes the line "God will force no man to heav'n."<sup>15</sup> This relates to Alma 42:13 in the Book of Mormon where Alma declares that should God's mercy rob justice, "God

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14. B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology: Years One–Five* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2015), locations 14122–14129, Kindle.

15. "Know This, That Every Soul Is Free," *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 240.

would cease to be God.” This is how Brigham Young understood the passage. God seems subject to some eternal principles, whether laws or tenets arising from his relation to other persons. He explains this in a discourse from 1866.

The volition of the creature is free; this is a law of their existence and the Lord cannot violate his own law; were he to do that, he would cease to be God. He has placed life and death before his children, and it is for them to choose. If they choose life, they receive the blessing of life; if they choose death, they must abide the penalty. This is a law which has always existed from all eternity, and will continue to exist throughout all the eternities to come.<sup>16</sup>

In 1853 Young outlined what he believed were two eternal principles: increase and destruction. These were eternal.

The Lord Jesus Christ works upon a plan of eternal increase, of wisdom, intelligence, honor, excellence, power, glory, might, and dominion, and the attributes that fill eternity. What principle does the devil work upon? It is to destroy, dissolve, decompose, and tear in pieces. The principle of separation, or disorganization, is as much an eternal principle, as much a truth, as that of organization. Both always did and will exist. Can I point out to you the difference in these principles, and show clearly and satisfactorily the benefit, the propriety, and the necessity of acting upon one, any more than the other?<sup>17</sup>

These two eternal principles echo Lehi’s discussion of order and dissolution of order in 2 Nephi 2:11 and in 2:27 of choosing between liberty and eternal life or captivity and death, increase or dissolution: “Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself” (2 Ne. 2:27).

### **Omnipotence, Chaos, and Creation Ex Nihilo**

One way to protect God’s absolute power is to claim that he created all things ex nihilo. There is thus nothing that limits the power of God. For Augustine and most of the Christian tradition, the world exists in space

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16. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 11:272 (August 19, 1866).

17. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:116 (February 27, 1853).

and time, but God exists in eternity—not as everlasting time but as something more like an eternal now.<sup>18</sup> God created all matter, time, and space from nothing. Thus, God created the laws by which the world is governed. This may or may not include the laws of logic. Ex nihilo creation thus defends the idea that God is not subject at least to some laws, because God, in his eternity, transcends the realm of space and time and natural law. The question for most theists is, then, Is God subject to the rules of logic, or are these created when God created the world ex nihilo? The question can also be extended to moral laws and to freedom. Does God have a duty to respect the freedom of human persons if God created them and moral laws ex nihilo? The Calvinist God is the epitome of the all-powerful ex-nihilo artist of the universe. Even more powerfully than Augustine, Calvin argued that humanity was under the predestinating power of God.<sup>19</sup> Augustine had written, “If it were not good that evil things exist, they would certainly not be allowed to exist by the omnipotent God.”<sup>20</sup> Calvin goes further clarifying the position. “Those whom God passes over, he condemns; and this he does for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them for the inheritance which he predestines for his own children.”<sup>21</sup> God literally decreed all events to take place. God “foresees future events only by reason of the fact that he decreed they take place.”<sup>22</sup> “Whence does it happen that Adam’s fall irremediably involved so many peoples, together with their infant offspring in eternal death because it so pleased God?” Calvin replied, “The decree is dreadful indeed, I confess.”<sup>23</sup> But he concludes that “God’s will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous.”<sup>24</sup> This rejection of human independence in relation to God could be at the heart of Joseph Smith’s famous alterations to the text of the Exodus passages

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18. See Augustine’s famous analysis of time in book 11 of Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

19. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 46–48.

20. Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dodds (New York: Modern Library, 1993) bk. 11, ch. 18.

21. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 3, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), xxiii–xiv.15.

22. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:xxiii–xiv.15.

23. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:xxiii, 6.

24. Calvin, *Institutes*, 20:xxiii 7; xxiii, 2. See James McLachlan, “Mark Twain and the Problem of Evil,” in *The Philosophy of Mark Twain*, ed. Alan Goldman and Jacob Held (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

where God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (for example, Ex. 9:12; 10:20). In Smith’s version, Pharaoh hardens his own heart (see, for example, JST Ex. 9:12; 10:20). In this case, God could either be subject to ethical principles or permit the freedom of Pharaoh as a separate person.

Joseph Smith rejected creation ex nihilo explicitly in the King Follett Discourse, where he stated that there is something uncreated about the spirit of man. “God never did have power to create the spirit of man at all. He could not create himself— Intelligence exists upon a self-existent principle— [it] is a spirit from age to age & [there is] no creation about it.”<sup>25</sup> Even before Joseph Smith unveiled his Nauvoo theology, Parley Pratt thought that, since Joseph Smith had denied the idea of creation ex nihilo, it followed that God was subject to certain laws. It is impossible, he wrote in an 1838 essay, “for God to bring forth matter from nonentity, or to originate element from nothing,” because “these are principles of eternal truth, they are laws which cannot be broken, . . . whether the reckoning be calculated by the Almighty, or by man.”<sup>26</sup> In *Key to the Science of Theology*, he declared that even the Father and Son, as part of an eternal and physical universe, are “subject to the laws that govern, of necessity, even the most refined order of physical existence,” because “all physical element, however embodied, quickened, or refined, is subject to the general laws necessary to all existence.”<sup>27</sup> John A. Widtsoe agreed; God was “part of the universe”; his “conquest over the universe” was a function of his “recognition of universal laws” and “the forces lying about him.”<sup>28</sup>

### The Discussion Goes On

The tradition that God is subject to eternal laws that either exist eternally or that emerge in Creation in relation to other eternal existences external to God is long and often defended in Latter-day Saint thought,

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25. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton [28],” 16 [28]. Joseph Smith started teaching this doctrine as early as August 1839. He then repeated it in (at least) February 1840, January 1841, March 1841, April 1842, and, of course, April 1844. This is one of the best-documented teachings of Joseph Smith. Charles Harrell quotes each of these instances in “The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844,” *BYU Studies* 28, no. 2 (1988): 75–96.

26. Parley P. Pratt, *The Millennium and Other Poems: To Which Is Annexed a Treatise on the Regeneration and Eternal Duration of Matter* (New York: W. Molineux, 1840), 110.

27. Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855), 37.

28. John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology: As Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: General Boards of the Mutual Improvement Association, 1932), 24–25.

but the idea that God decreed the laws from eternity is also present. In its 1929 response to B. H. Roberts's book *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, which, as we have seen, held positions like 2 or 3, the apostolic committee reviewing the book for publication objected that God "is the author of law" and cited D&C 88:42: "And again, verily I say unto you, he hath given a law unto all things, by which they move in their times and their seasons." The committee's main objection was that Elder Roberts claimed in relation to his position that God is subject to law; if so, then it was the case that God, like human beings, progressed in knowledge, learning all laws. The committee argued that this could not be the case since God was the author of all law.<sup>29</sup>

Although less clear on this point of whether God is subject to eternal laws, Elder Bruce R. McConkie thoroughly rejected the idea that God could be progressing in knowledge and seemed to hold that all laws were ordained by God. In his highly influential *Mormon Doctrine*, Elder McConkie wrote that all progress relates to obedience to divine laws that were ordained by God so that we might become like him. But Elder McConkie did not make clear exactly what "ordained" means in this context. Were the laws created or approved?

Obedience is the first law of heaven, the cornerstone upon which all righteousness and progression rest. It consists in compliance with divine law, in conformity to the mind and will of Deity, in complete subjection to God and his commands. To obey gospel law is to yield obedience to the Lord, to execute the commands of and be ruled by him whose we are. Obedience is possible because of two things: 1. Laws were ordained by Deity so that his spirit children by conformity to them might progress and become like him; and 2. The children of God were endowed with agency, the power and ability to either obey or disobey the divine will.<sup>30</sup>

It seems to me that we can read Elder McConkie's statement about law in all three of the possible readings I mentioned above, but 1 and 3 seem the most likely. God can be seen as omnipotent in a very strong sense, and in this case the law is created by God, which would mean that McConkie espouses the first position. And yet Elder McConkie also writes that God ordained the laws that his spirit children might become like him through obedience. This sounds more like position 3, where

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29. B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed. (Provo: BYU Studies, 1994), 418 n.

30. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 539.

God exists in relation with other beings, his children and other Gods. This is in line with Joseph Smith's description of God and the spirits of glory in the King Follett Discourse: "God himself— find himself in the midst of spirit and glory— because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself."<sup>31</sup>

Latter-day Saint writers like O. Kendall White in his *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* have claimed that positions like Elder McConkie's reflect a retreat from traditional Mormon theology toward a type of Protestant crisis theology.<sup>32</sup> This might also, perhaps unfairly, be said of the work of Robert Millet, Stephen Robinson, and others who have sought a kind of rapprochement with evangelical Christians. But as Eugene England, not a champion of anything like a Latter-day Saint crisis theology, pointed out, one could trace this more traditionally theistic view from Elder McConkie, Joseph Fielding Smith, J. Reuben Clark, and Joseph F. Smith to Hyrum Smith's early objections to his brother Joseph's Nauvoo theology.<sup>33</sup> In any case, Latter-day Saint attitudes, at least historically, toward the question of the eternity or creation of eternal law are diverse and not always clear.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell seemed to say that God transcends space and time. "The past, present, and future are before God simultaneously. . . . Therefore God's omniscience is not solely a function of prolonged and discerning familiarity with us—but of the stunning reality that the past, present, and future are part of an 'eternal now' with God."<sup>34</sup> The scriptural reference related to this is, "The angels do not reside on a planet like this earth; but they reside in the presence of God, on a globe like a sea of glass and fire, where all things for their glory are manifest, past, present, and future, and are continually before the Lord" (D&C 130:6–7). One could read Elder Maxwell's statement in an Augustinian fashion, which would make it easier to argue the case that God created space and time and all the laws. But what complicates this reading, as Blake Ostler points out, is that it is difficult to read this passage to say God is beyond time since verses 4–5 say God exists in time but God's time is different

31. "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton [28]," 16 [28]–17 [29].

32. O. Kendall White Jr., *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1987).

33. Eugene England, "The Weeping God of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 70.

34. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 95–96.

from earthly time. “In answer to the question—Is not the reckoning of God’s time, angel’s time, prophet’s time, and man’s time, according to the planet on which they reside? I answer, Yes. But there are no angels who minister to this earth but those who do belong or have belonged to it” (D&C 130:4–5).<sup>35</sup>

Beyond statements of the General Authorities, the discussion about issues surrounding the idea of God being the author or the creator of laws has been common among Latter-day Saint thinkers. The Latter-day Saint philosopher Sterling McMurrin claimed that Latter-day Saint theology was essentially “non-absolutistic.”<sup>36</sup> This did not mean that in their everyday discourse Latter-day Saints didn’t talk about God using the same absolutist terms as other Christians, only that their idea of God would not let them do so consistently. McMurrin thought that an embodied God who had advanced in knowledge and understanding had to be still advancing in knowledge and power. This was what McMurrin thought was the Latter-day Saint response to the problem of evil.<sup>37</sup>

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35. For a discussion of time and divine knowledge, see Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), 148–56. Earlier in an article in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Ostler elaborated on Elder Maxwell’s statement and alluded to personal correspondence with Elder Maxwell: “The idea of God’s eternity here appears to consist not in the Hebrew notion of God’s eternal duration *in time* without beginning or end; but of transcendence of temporal succession. In fairness to Elder Maxwell, we must recognize that his observations are meant as rhetorical expressions to inspire worship rather than as an exacting philosophical analysis of the idea of timelessness. Furthermore, in a private conversation in January 1984, Elder Maxwell told me that he is unfamiliar with the classical idea of timelessness and the problems it entails. His intent was not to convey the idea that God transcends temporal succession, but ‘to help us trust in God’s perspectives, and not to be too constrained by our own provincial perceptions while we are in this mortal cocoon.’” Blake T. Ostler, “The Mormon Concept of God,” *Dialogue* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 75, emphasis in original.

In a footnote, Ostler reproduces some more of his personal correspondence with Maxwell: “I refer to this private conversation and to excerpts from Elder Maxwell’s letter with his permission. He writes, ‘I would never desire to do, say, or write anything which would cause others unnecessary problems. . . . I would not have understood certain philosophical implications arising (for some) because I quoted from Purtil who, in turn, quoted from Boethius. Nor would I presume to know of God’s past, including His former relationship to time and space.’ Elder Neal A. Maxwell to Blake T. Ostler, January 24, 1984. My thanks to Elder Maxwell for his helpful and generous comments on this and numerous other subjects.” Ostler, “Mormon Concept of God,” 76 n. 30.

36. Sterling M. McMurrin, *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 27–29.

37. McMurrin, *Theological Foundations*, 96–109.

Douglas Davies, a non-LDS scholar who studied the Latter-day Saints, claims, “It is this presence that poses Mormonism’s strategic yet apologetic dilemma of ‘otherness,’ of wanting to be accepted as Christian by the wider Christian world while not accepting that world’s definition of Christianity; issues of heavenly and earthly apostasy, transcended by Restoration and prophecy, make this so.”<sup>38</sup> For Davies and McMurrin, Latter-day Saints might use terms like unchanging, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and so forth, but it is hard to see, without radical redefinition of all these terms, often used to describe the transcendent deity of theism, how the Latter-day Saint God would fit any of them. Latter-day Saint theologies, even in their most conservative versions, do not see God as completely ontologically distinct from human beings. In Joseph Smith’s First Vision, God appears as an embodied human being. This is important to note at the beginning because the traditional problem of evil does not arise for Latter-day Saints in the same way it arises for other theists. Or, to be more precise, it arises only to be dismissed once Latter-day Saints pass from the language they share about God with other Christians—which Latter-day Saints (and one might argue the entire Judeo-Christian scriptural tradition) use hyperbolically as a language of praise—to discussion of the problem in philosophical terms.

Authoritative pronouncements from Latter-day Saint scriptural traditions and founding authorities use terms like omnipotence but define it in ways quite different from most of the main credal theistic traditions. Omnipotence, for example, has been used in Latter-day Saint writings to mean almighty, or all the power that a being can possess given they exist alongside other self-existing free beings that logically limit omnipotence. The late LDS philosopher David Paulsen has explained omnipotence in this way.<sup>39</sup> Like process theologians, Latter-day Saints can claim that most credal Christians and traditional theists place limits on omnipotence when they define it as God only being able to do what is “logically possible.”<sup>40</sup> If God is limited by what is logically possible, that would include being limited by the activity of other free beings. The thought seems to be if omnipotence is limited by logic by traditional theists, why not also claim that it is

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38. Douglas J. Davies, *Joseph Smith, Jesus, and Satanic Opposition: Atonement, Evil and the Mormon Vision* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 228.

39. David L. Paulsen, “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil,” *BYU Studies* 39, no. 1 (2000): 53–65; David Paulsen, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and (William) James,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (1999): 114–46.

40. John Cobb Jr. and Truman G. Madsen, “Theodicy,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1473.

just as inconsistent to say that God could force beings to act against their freedom as to say that God could create a square circle. The first statement is to misunderstand freedom, just as the second is to misunderstand geometry. Thus, God is understood as having all the power any being could have and is thus in religious terms “Almighty.”<sup>41</sup>

Theologians and philosophers like Blake Ostler and Terryl Givens have taken positions close to Roberts or the Pratts.<sup>42</sup> Ostler has staked out a position close to Open Theism but denies creation ex nihilo and in this respect approaches Process Theology.<sup>43</sup> Others, like Robert Millet and Stephen Robinson, in dialogue with evangelical theologians like Richard J. Mouw and Craig Blomberg, emphasize the grace in Latter-day Saint teaching in a way that affirms the power and majesty of God in ways more compatible with traditional theism.<sup>44</sup> James Faulconer and Adam Miller take a more postmodern approach to the question. Faulconer forsakes theology altogether, referring to the restored gospel’s “atheological” character, “without an official or even semi-official philosophy that explains and gives rational support to [its] beliefs and teachings.”<sup>45</sup> For Faulconer, Latter-day Saint thought, like Judaism, is an orthopraxis rather than an orthodoxy. In other words, it emphasizes practice above theology. Miller does not eschew theology but follows the

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41. David Paulsen uses this strategy in his well-known article on Joseph Smith and the problem of evil and again with Blake Ostler in the most complete treatment of the problem from a Latter-day Saint point of view. Paulsen, “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil,” 53–65; David L. Paulsen and Blake T. Ostler, “Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making: Joseph Smith on the Problem of Evil,” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2014), 237–84.

42. See Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 84–88.

43. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God*, 122–29. See also John Cobb and Clark Pinnock, eds., *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000); David Ray Griffin and James McLachlan, “A Dialogue on Process Theology,” in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, ed. Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2007), 161–210.

44. Robert L. Millet, *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints*, foreword and afterword by Richard J. Mouw (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005); Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1997).

45. James E. Faulconer, “Why a Mormon Won’t Drink Coffee but Might Have a Coke: The Atheological Character of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Element* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 21.

French thinker Bruno Latour, arguing against Givens that laws are not ideal and eternal but are material in the sense that they are embodied in creation.<sup>46</sup> The question is still an open one, and this is probably a good thing. Lively debate about the meaning of the gospel can be a form of worship.

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46. Adam Miller, *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 62–64.