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What Is the Nature of God's Progress?

Matthew Bowman

In the theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the question of whether or not God progresses can be separated into two more precise questions, each of which has been the topic of strenuous debate. The first has to do with whether God has always been divine or achieved that state through eons of progression, passing through a humanity much like ours along the way. The second is whether God continues to progress—and crucially, whether that progression is qualitative or simply quantitative: whether God's progress means that God learns new things and gains new powers or whether his glory already achieved simply expands as his creation expands. Naturally, the two questions are somewhat interrelated.

Both have their roots in the rather ambiguous theology of the relationship between humanity and deity that Joseph Smith taught. Early on in the life of the Church he founded, Smith endorsed a somewhat conventionally Christian vision of deity: an eternal, unchanging spirit manifest in the world through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The 1834 Lectures on Faith, for instance, which Joseph Smith approved and supervised though did not write himself, declared that “the Godhead” consisted of the Father, “a personage of spirit,” and the Son, “a personage of tabernacle.” These two, said the Lectures, “possess the same mind,” which was “the Holy Spirit.” The Lectures also taught that God “changes not, neither is there variable-ness with him; but that he is the same from everlasting to everlasting.”¹

1. “Doctrine and Covenants, 1835,” 38, 52–53, 57, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/60>; see, for

The Lectures, though, also contained more expansive ideas. For instance, they drew on the language of Paul's Epistle to the Romans and the Gospel of John, promising that faithful Latter-day Saints would become "joint heirs with Jesus Christ; possessing the same mind"; they would be "filled with the fulness of his glory, and become one in him, even as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one."² This implication of human divinization reflected a principle taught in a February 1832 vision that Joseph Smith and his associate Sidney Rigdon received. Faithful human beings, the revelation declared, would become "priests and kings, who have received of his [God's] fulness, and of his glory . . . : wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God."³

This promise marked the growing clarity about the relationship between humanity and divinity that characterized the last fifteen years of Joseph Smith's life. In April 1843, he declared that God the Father possessed "a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's."⁴ In two sermons the next year, he offered the most radical statements about the nature of God he had to date. In a funeral sermon popularly known as the "King Follett Discourse," Smith offered a series of statements that seemed to indicate that God had once been a man like human men and had progressed to achieve Godhood and that this was to be also the fate of his listeners.⁵ As Wilford Woodruff recorded the discourse, Smith declared that God "once was a man like us, and the Father was once on an earth like us." And finally, Smith told his audience, "you have got to learn how to make yourselves God, king, priest, by going from a small capacity to a great capacity . . . be an heir of God & joint heir of Jesus Christ enjoying the same rise exaltation & glory untill you arive at the station of a God." After all, Smith asked, "What did Jesus Christ do the same thing as I se the Father do."⁶ In both this sermon and the so-called "Sermon

instance, Noel B. Reynolds, "The Case of Sidney Rigdon as Author of the 'Lectures on Faith,'" *Journal of Mormon History* 31, no. 2 (2005): 1–41.

2. "Doctrine and Covenants, 1835," 54.

3. "Doctrine and Covenants, 1835," 228.

4. Joseph Smith's Diary, April 2, 1843, in *The Words of Joseph Smith*, comp. and ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 173; see also "History, 1838–1856, Volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843]," 1511, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/154>.

5. See James E. Faulconer with Susannah Morrison, "The King Follett Discourse: Pinnacle or Peripheral?" in this publication, pp. 85–104.

6. "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff," [135], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/>

in the Grove,” preached two months later, Smith extended these ideas, teaching that there were generations of gods extending backward into eternity. “If Jesus Christ was the Son of God & John discovered that God the Father of Jesus Christ had a father you may suppose that he had a Father also,” Smith said, according to the scribe Thomas Bullock.⁷

In the decades following the sermon, Smith’s ideas often seemed enigmatic to many of those who followed him, and the precise extent of his meaning sparked an ongoing debate among leaders and intellectuals of the Church. The question of God’s past progress has seemed less controversial, though members of the Church have interpreted what Smith said in varying ways.

Throughout the nineteenth century, many Church leaders embraced the notion that God had achieved godhood through a process of maturation, learning, and growth. For some, like Brigham Young, who succeeded Joseph Smith as President of the Church, this process was most comprehensible in terms of family and lineage. Young took Smith’s meaning at its most frank, imagining a long chain of divine parents. He said of God the Father, “He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, both body and spirit; and he is the Father of our spirits, and the Father of our flesh in the beginning. . . . Do you wish me to simplify it? Could you have a father without having a grandfather; or a grandfather without having a great grandfather?”⁸ As the Apostle Orson Hyde, a contemporary of Young and Smith, put it, “God, our heavenly Father, was perhaps once a child, and mortal like we ourselves, and rose step by step in the scale of progress, in the school of advancement.”⁹ Both Young and Hyde imagined God, scion of another God on another world, traveling the long road from childhood through an earthly life toward his inheritance of divinity and presidency over our world. For Young and Hyde, then, divinity was something gained through experience, knowledge, and patrimony.

discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/3, all misspellings in original; see also Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 344–45.

7. “Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by Thomas Bullock,” [3], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-16-june-1844-a-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/3>, abbreviations expanded; see also Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 380.

8. Brigham Young, sermon, October 8, 1854, MS D1234, Addresses, 1854, July–October, Brigham Young Papers, Church History Library and Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

9. Orson Hyde, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 1:123 (October 1853).

Other nineteenth-century leaders adopted a somewhat different approach. Orson Pratt took the notion that God was not always God seriously, but he offered a more abstract version of divine progress than the lineal parentage statements of Young or Hyde, instead teaching that in some way God's divinity is eternal and self-existent. From the King Follett Discourse, Pratt posited that "the primary powers of all material substance must be intelligent" and that therefore the totality of that intelligence, which was interconnected, self-existent, and eternal, was in fact what Pratt called the "Great God."¹⁰ The being humans called "God," then, partook of the eternal divine attributes that the "Great God" had always possessed as a singular manifestation of the eternal principles of divinity. Pratt thus insisted that "God" in the form of the "Great God" had indeed always existed and always possessed all the attributes of divinity, but that any particular "God" who entered into communion with the "Great God" might indeed have had a history of growth and change. He thus saw both eternity and progress in Smith's ideas.

Pratt's theories persisted in some way for many members of the Church; the early-twentieth-century Apostle Anthon Lund, for instance, evinced sympathy for Pratt's attempt to retain traditional Christian notions of God's eternity in his famous observation, "I do not like to think of a time when there was no God."¹¹ As time went on, however, some form of Young's ideas seemed more tempting to many Latter-day Saints than Pratt's abstractions. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the progressive-era philosophy of thinkers like Herbert Spencer had gained much influence with thinkers in the Church. Spencer modified Darwinian ideas to emphasize that progress was achieved through refinement and struggle and that the natural tendency of humanity and the universe was toward increasing complexity and accomplishment. For the Apostles James E. Talmage and John A. Widtsoe and the Seventy B. H. Roberts, then, it made much sense that God became God the same way that species evolved, through effort and education, and for thinkers influenced by Spencerian-modified Darwinism, Young's emphasis on inheritance and lineage seemed appropriate.

10. Orson Pratt, "Great First Cause, or the Self-Moving Forces of the Universe," in *The Essential Orson Pratt*, ed. David J. Whittaker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 189.

11. Anthon H. Lund, journal, August 25, 1911, cited in Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-existence in Mormon Thought," in *Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 143.

Thus, Talmage argued that God the Father “once passed through experience analogous to those which His Son, the Lord Jesus, afterward passed through,” maintaining that the trials and sacrifice of Jesus contributed to his capacity for working the divine Atonement.¹² Both Roberts and Widtsoe conceived of divinity as the achievement of sufficient education to master the workings of the universe; as Roberts put it, “The Gods had attained unto that excellence of oneness that Jesus prayed his disciples might possess, and . . . the Gods have attained unto it, and all govern their worlds and systems of worlds by the same spirit and upon the same principles.”¹³ Widtsoe, the most scientifically minded of them all, explicitly connected God’s achievement of divinity with his development, writing, “If the law of progression be accepted, God must have been engaged from the beginning, and must now be engaged in progressive development, and infinite as God is, he must have been less powerful in the past than he is today.” Widtsoe credited this development to God’s “will,” knowledge of “universal laws,” and “self-effort.”¹⁴

While these ideas have not been fundamentally repudiated in the twentieth century, the subject of God’s origins has certainly been the subject of less speculation. Neither the Apostle Bruce R. McConkie nor his father-in-law, President of the Church Joseph Fielding Smith, two of the most prolific and powerful theological minds of the twentieth-century Church, dealt at great length with the issue. Indeed, Fielding Smith wrote, puzzled, if “God is infinite and eternal, . . . how does this conform to the Prophet’s teaching” that God was once a man? “This is one of the mysteries,” he concluded. “There are many things that we will not comprehend while in this mortal life.”¹⁵ Rather, both Fielding Smith and McConkie routinely used absolute language to describe God.

For instance, in his encyclopedic *Mormon Doctrine*, McConkie quoted the Lectures on Faith to describe God as “the one supreme and absolute being; the ultimate source of the universe.” He insisted further that God “is not a progressive being in the sense that liberal religionists

12. James E. Talmage, “The Son of Man,” in *The Essential James E. Talmage*, ed. James P. Harris (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 137.

13. B. H. Roberts, *A New Witness for God* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1895), 474.

14. John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: General Priesthood Committee, 1915), 23–24.

15. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:8.

profess,” instead paraphrasing scripture: God is “the same yesterday, today, and forever.”¹⁶ When a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle* asked Church President Gordon B. Hinckley in 1997 if he believed “that God was once a man,” Hinckley said, “That gets into some pretty deep theology that we don’t know much about.”¹⁷

Far more controversial than the debate over God’s origins has been the notion only hinted at in Smith’s discourses: that God continues to progress. Woodruff recorded Joseph Smith describing Jesus’s intentions in the King Follett Discourse: “I will give to the father which will add to his glory, He will take a Higher exaltation & I will take his place and am also exalted.”¹⁸ This implied, at least, that God the Father’s divinity continues in some way to expand. For some, the idea was self-evident, and those who were most vocal in insisting that God did progress also tended to argue that God’s progress was qualitative: that God is increasing in knowledge and power, changing and developing even as human beings do the same. Brigham Young and John Widtsoe were the two most vocal, and though they expressed their sentiments somewhat differently, at the heart of both men’s ideas was the notion that progress was part and parcel of divinity itself. Young sought to refute Orson Pratt’s theory of the “Great God,” saying, “According to his theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power; but the God that I serve is progressing eternally, and so are his children: they will increase to all eternity, if they are faithful.”¹⁹ For Young, change was inevitable: “All organized existence is in progress either to an endless advancement in eternal perfections, or back to dissolution.”²⁰ Wilford Woodruff specified in particular that God “is increasing and progressing in knowledge, power, and dominion, and will do so, worlds without end.”²¹

Widtsoe felt as Young did, but he and other Latter-day Saint progressive-era theologians drew on Herbert Spencer’s theories that stasis was destructive and change was progressive to make their case. As

16. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 1st ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 291–92.

17. Don Lattin, “Musings of the Main Mormon,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 13, 1997, <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/SUNDAY-INTERVIEW-Musings-of-the-Main-Mormon-2846138.php>.

18. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff,” [135], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/3>; see also Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 345.

19. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:286–87 (January 1857).

20. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:349 (July 1853).

21. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:120 (December 1857).

B. H. Roberts put it, "God's immutability should not be so understood as to exclude the idea of advancement or progress of God. . . . An absolute immutability would require eternal immobility—which would reduce God to a condition eternally static."²² Thus it seemed inconceivable to Widtsoe that God was not progressing. God "must now be engaged in progressive development, and, infinite as God is, he must have been less powerful in the past than he is today. Nothing in the universe is static or quiescent."²³

As the twentieth century went on, however, Widtsoe's and Young's ideas were increasingly marginalized. Rather, many Church leaders came to conclude that in referring to "higher exaltation," Joseph Smith meant that God's glory increased as Jesus worked out his mission and human beings progressed. They found the notion that God continues to gain knowledge and power incompatible with scriptural declarations that God possesses all power and wisdom. Elder Neal A. Maxwell worried that "some have wrongly assumed God's progress is related to His acquisition of additional knowledge. . . . Mortals should not aspire to teach God that He is not omniscient by adding qualifiers that He has never used in the scriptures. Job rightly asked, 'Shall any teach God knowledge?'"²⁴ McConkie said, "God is not progressing in knowledge, truth, virtue, wisdom, or any of the attributes of godliness. . . . He is progressing in the sense that his creations increase, his dominions expand, his spirit offspring multiply, and more kingdoms are added to his domains."²⁵ Indeed, McConkie, whose mind worked in definitives, denounced as one of his "Seven Deadly Heresies" the idea that "God is progressing in knowledge and is learning new truths. This is false—utterly, totally, and completely. There is not one sliver of truth in it."²⁶

Other Church members were more equivocal than the lawyerly McConkie. Brigham Young University English professor and theologian Eugene England sought in 1980 to reconcile the positions of leaders like Young and Widtsoe with those of leaders like McConkie and Fielding Smith. While McConkie was influenced by his legal training, England's

22. B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, vol. 4, *The Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1911), 69.

23. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 24.

24. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 6, 14.

25. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 1st ed., 221; see also Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 239.

26. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies," in *1980 Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), 75.

literary interest in paradox led him to attempt to find a way in which both sides might be true. He suggested that “perfection in one sphere is possible, but then so is progress in a higher sphere or realm.”²⁷ He thus concluded that it was possible to speak of God as both perfect and progressing, both expanding in knowledge and power and possessed of maximal authority.

But after forwarding the essay to McConkie, England received a stern reply which indicated that McConkie perceived England’s position as dangerous. McConkie freely acknowledged there was a debate, noting that Brigham Young had taught at times that God was perfect and at times that God was progressing. However, the Apostle was also certain humanity must “choose between the divergent teachings of the same man and come up with those that accord with what God has set forth in his eternal plan of salvation.”²⁸ This was essential because McConkie held that “if we believe false doctrine, we will be condemned. . . . Wise people anchor their doctrine on the Standard Works.”²⁹ Just as Widtsoe and Roberts drew upon progressive-era philosophy to frame their beliefs about divine progress, so was McConkie influenced by a twentieth-century movement that emphasized scriptural literalism and divine authority, popular among conservative Christians of many denominations.

By the late twentieth century, many members of the Church seemed comfortable with indeterminacy of the sort President Hinckley had embraced in his response to the *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter, rather than insisting that one position or another must be taken. Indeed, some, like the Brigham Young University theologian and professor of philosophy David Paulsen, were taking the discussion of God’s nature in different directions entirely. They were inspired by new schools in Protestant Christian theology, the related notions of “open theology” and “process theology,” both of which emphasized God’s mutability and insisted that his divinity drew not from his abstract, static perfection but from his interaction with other beings. For Paulsen, God’s perfection emerged from being “lovingly interrelated as to constitute one perfectly united community” with the Son and the Holy Spirit; as God fostered such relationships with others of God’s children, God’s glory expanded through

27. Eugene England, “Perfection and Progression: Two Complimentary Ways to Talk about God,” *BYU Studies* 29, no. 3 (1989): 45.

28. Bruce R. McConkie to Eugene England, February 19, 1981, 6–7, <http://www.eugeneengland.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/BRM-to-EE-Feb-80-Combined.pdf>.

29. McConkie to England, 7.

those relationships.³⁰ Paulsen sought to set aside the old debates and instead develop a new way of thinking about God's progress that might help resolve them.

The increased comfort with ambiguity about the precise nature of God's progress led to renewed emphasis on a practical relationship with God, and both found increased expression in the Church at the turn of the millennium. The prominent Brigham Young University professor of ancient scripture Stephen Robinson wrote in the 1992 *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, a semiofficial work, that while it was clear that "Gods and humans are the same species of being, but at different stages of development," and "there has been speculation among some Latter-day Saints on the implications of this doctrine," it was also clear that "nothing has been revealed to the Church about conditions before the 'beginning' as mortals know it."³¹ Similarly, elsewhere in the *Encyclopedia*, author and attorney Lisa Ramsey Adams stated bluntly that while "ideas have been advanced to explain how God might progress in knowledge and still be perfect and know all things," at the same time, "no official Church teaching attempts to specify all the ways in which God progresses in his exalted spheres."³² Thus, the *Encyclopedia* fostered rather than foreclosed debate. It acknowledged that each competing idea had within it some characteristic rooted deep within the theology of the Church. For some—like John A. Widtsoe, B. H. Roberts, and Brigham Young—naturalism and optimism about human potential led them to believe in God's progression and humanity; for others, like Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie, faith in scripture and prophetic authority lent weight to more traditional notions about God. The argument, then, contains within it much that makes the Church itself distinctive.

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30. David L. Paulsen and Matthew G. Fisher, "A New Evangelical Vision of God: Openness and Mormon Thought," *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003): 423.

31. Stephen E. Robinson, "God the Father: Overview," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:549.

32. Lisa Ramsey Adams, "Eternal Progression," in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:466.