

6. What do Latter-day Saints mean when they say that God was once a man?

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Joseph Smith taught in April 1844:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by His power, was to make himself visible,—I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man. . . .

. . . It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with Him as one man converses with another, and that He was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ Himself did.²³

As we have seen, Lorenzo Snow, fifth president of the LDS Church, summarized this doctrine in a couplet: “As man now is, God once was; As God now is, man may be.”²⁴

In proclaiming this doctrine, neither Joseph Smith nor his successors have in any way sought to limit or degrade the Almighty. In fact, both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants state emphatically that there is no knowledge or power or divine attribute that God does not possess in perfection. “O how great the holiness of our God! For he knoweth all things, and there is not anything save he knows it” (2 Nephi 9:20; see 2 Nephi 2:24; Moroni 7:22). He truly “has all power, all wisdom, and all understanding” (Alma 26:35). He who is “mightier than all the earth” (1 Nephi 4:1) “comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him” (D&C 88:41). Mormons accept the reality that “there is a God in heaven, who is infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting the same unchangeable God, the framer of heaven and earth, and all things which are in them” (D&C 20:17).

Mortality

That God was once a mortal being is in no way inconsistent with the fact that he now has all power and all knowledge and possesses every virtue, grace, and godly attribute. He acquired perfection through long periods of growth, development, and progression, “by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation,” as Joseph Smith explained. “When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave.”²⁵

From Everlasting to Everlasting

How, then, do Latter-day Saints reconcile the scriptural description of God as being “from everlasting to everlasting” with the idea that he has not always been God? For one thing, they believe that biblical passages that speak of God’s eternity and of his being the same yesterday, today, and forever make reference to his divine

attributes—his love, constancy, and willingness to bless his people (see, for example, Psalm 102:27; Hebrews 1:12; 13:8). Such passages are also found in the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants and, again, refer to God’s divine nature (see 1 Nephi 10:18–19; 2 Nephi 27:23; Alma 7:20; Mormon 9:8–11, 19; Moroni 8:18; 10:7; D&C 3:2; 20:12, 17; 35:1).

Not much has been revealed about this concept beyond the fact that God was once a man and that over a long period of time he gained the knowledge, power, and divine attributes necessary to know all things and have all power. Because he has held his exalted status for a longer period than any of us can conceive, he is able to speak in terms of eternity and can state that he is from everlasting to everlasting. President Joseph Fielding Smith explained that “from eternity to eternity means from the spirit existence through the probation which we are in, and then back again to the eternal existence which will follow. Surely this is everlasting, for when we receive the resurrection, we will never die. We all existed in the first eternity. I think I can say of myself and others, we are from eternity; and we will be to eternity everlasting, if we receive the exaltation.”²⁶

Empathy

President Brigham Young taught that our Father in Heaven “has passed the ordeals we are now passing through; he has received an experience, has suffered and enjoyed, and knows all that we know regarding the toils, sufferings, life and death of this mortality, for he has passed through the whole of it, and has received his crown and exaltation.”²⁷ Men and women can thus relate to him as a father and pray to him with the perfect assurance that he understands our struggles. His experience contributes to his empathy as well as to his omniscient and all-loving capacity to judge his children. President Young observed that “it must be that God knows something about temporal things, and has had a body and been on an earth, were it not so He would not know how to judge men righteously, according to the temptations and sin they have had to contend with.”²⁸

For Latter-day Saints, God is far more than the ultimate cosmic force or primal cause; he is a personal being, an exalted Man of Holiness, literally our Father in Heaven (see Moses 6:57). He has a body, parts, and passions. He is approachable, knowable, and, like his Beloved Son, able to be touched with the feeling of our infirmities (see Hebrews 4:15). He has tender regard for his children and desires that we become as he is—not through our personal effort alone, but primarily through the mercy, grace, and transforming and glorifying power that come through the atonement of Jesus Christ.

These doctrines are not clearly stated in the Bible. Mormons believe, however, that this knowledge was once had among the ancients and that it has been restored through modern prophets. To those who sincerely seek an understanding of their true selves and destiny, latter-day prophets have affirmed that through truly coming to know God, men and women may come to understand their own eternal identities and divine possibilities. In the words of Joseph Smith, “If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves.”²⁹

Notes

23. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:305.

24. *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, comp. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 2.

25. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:306–7.

26. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:12; see Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 166.

27. In *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards & Sons, 1851–86), 11:249; see 7:333.

28. In *ibid.*, 4:271; see Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 64.

29. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:303; see Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:312.