

How well does the depiction of God and humanity in Joseph Smith's King Follett Discourse and Lorenzo Snow's famous "couplet" fit with traditional Christian views of Christ and the Atonement—or even with those found in the Book of Mormon? Must Latter-day Saints choose between them?

THEOLOGY AND CHRISTOLOGY THROUGH THE LENS OF A LITTLE COUPLET

By L. Rex Sears

WHEN BYU RELIGION PROFESSOR STEPHEN E. Robinson collaborated with an evangelical Christian to write *How Wide the Divide?*, he devoted his contributions to minimizing Mormon departures from more orthodox forms of Christianity.¹ Judging from Robinson's position and influence, we have come a long way from our nineteenth-century heritage of glorying in alienation from mainstream Christianity. For my part, I suspect that we have never fully appreciated how wide the divide really is—or might be, if we took our founding prophet at his word. If accepted, Joseph Smith's later teachings have implications, unappreciated perhaps by the Prophet himself, which could place us even further from the biblical Christian tradition than the Mormon firebrands of the nineteenth century recognized.

Over the years, observers on both sides of the divide have remarked that the theology Joseph taught in the King Follett Discourse fits poorly, or not at all, with orthodox Christianity's notions of humanity, deity, and their relations one with another. But I think observers on the Mormon side, in particular, have shown little awareness that King Follett teachings may have decisive consequences for the central Christian doctrine of Atonement as well. As I argue here, reasonable elaborations of the discourse's teachings undercut certain lines of Atonement theory and render competing lines superfluous.

Eugene England characterized the perfect and loving, yet limited divinity of the Mormon theology he loved as the "weeping God of Mormonism."² I share England's taste in theology, but unlike him, I am not sure we can keep our weeping God and still maintain our membership in the wider Christian fraternity. And although those in authority may not have consciously acknowledged the tension, I think they may sense it



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and may be responding by moving the Church away from its King Follett heritage.

"THE FIRST PRINCIPLE OF TRUTH AND OF THE GOSPEL"

IN THE KING Follett Discourse he delivered shortly before his death, Joseph Smith taught the Saints, as "the first principle of truth and of the Gospel," that God "once was a man like one of us and that God Himself, the Father of us all, once dwelled on an earth the same as Jesus Christ himself did in the flesh *and like us*."³ "God Himself who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a Man like unto one of yourselves—that is the great secret!"⁴

According to Smith, this "great secret" is the key to understanding "the designs of God for the human race, the relation the human family sustains with God, and why He interferes with the affairs of man."⁵ God is "a man" like us, and our destiny as "joint-heirs with Jesus Christ" is "to inherit *and enjoy* the same glory, powers, and exaltation until you ascend a throne of eternal power *and arrive at the station of a God*, the same as those who have gone before."⁶

You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods in order to save yourselves and be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done—by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection *of the dead*, from exaltation to exaltation—till you are able to sit in everlasting burnings and everlasting power and glory as those who have gone before, sit enthroned.⁷

Thus Joseph Smith explains God's interest in human affairs: God has trodden the same eternal path as we; and just as his forebears have done (and we shall yet do), God desires to raise up yet another generation of gods—just like generation after generation of human beings eagerly bear and rear offspring.

Consider the parental model of divinity set forth in Joseph Smith's discourse and Lorenzo Snow's couplet to be incompatible with guilty monotheistic piety that teaches us to feel hopelessly and inescapably dependent on and indebted to a mercifully condescending creator.

For Joseph Smith, then, the reason for God's participation in human affairs is captured in Lorenzo Snow's couplet: "As man is, God once was. As God is, man may become."

In a newspaper interview a few years ago, President Hinckley publicly dismissed Snow's teaching as "a little couplet," "more of a couplet than anything else," that "gets into some pretty deep theology that we don't know very much about."⁸ Personally, I do not think the theology involved is all that deep—if by deep, we mean obscure or difficult; the doctrine is certainly profound but not deep in that other sense.

In a more recent interview, President Hinckley gave the same treatment to another ideological derelict from our past. He attributed to Brigham Young the statement that "If you went to Heaven and saw God it would be Adam and Eve," and commented, "I don't know what he meant by that."⁹ In both cases, rather than acknowledge that earlier prophets taught what they appeared to teach, President Hinckley concludes that their statements are difficult or obscure and cannot be accepted at face value.¹⁰ I think that the similarity of President Hinckley's treatment of the little couplet and Adam-God bodes ill for the future of the couplet.

President Hinckley followed his remarks about the couplet with a tempered endorsement of the idea that we can become as God is, which suggests that his reservations center primarily on the first teaching of the couplet, that God was once as we are now.¹¹ Several decades earlier, influential Apostle Anthon H. Lund had similarly confided to his journal that he did not "like to think of a time when there was no God."¹² Sterling M. McMurrin suggested one possible explanation for the discomfort evident in Lund's reaction to this teaching when he noted that worshippers want the object of their worship to "have the whole world in his hand," because they "do not propose to take their problems to a God who has problems of his own."¹³ Maybe Lund disliked the notion that God once was not a god because that idea threatened his comforting belief in a god with no limits.

King Follett theology poses another, less obvious but related threat to certain religious sensibilities. Traditional Christian theologies present God's participation in human affairs as the incomprehensible condescension of a being insuperably superior to us. In such theologies, the creation and subsequent Atonement of humanity is solely motivated by the unmerited mercy of the supreme being for lesser creatures who are and must ever remain pitiable by comparison to their

great creator. As the objects of such condescending mercy, we can only assume toward our god a position analogous to supine prostration. King Benjamin espouses something like this in his famous sermon:

And now, in the first place, he hath created you, and granted unto you your lives, for which ye are indebted unto him. And secondly, he doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you; for which if ye do, he doth immediately bless you; and therefore he hath paid you. And ye are still indebted unto him, and are, and will be, forever and ever; therefore, of what have ye to boast? (Mosiah 2:23–25)

I wonder if, at some level, those who are uncomfortable with Joseph Smith's later teachings might regard accepting this sense of worthlessness as a form of payment for the aid of the supreme being McMurrin talks about, the one who holds the whole world in his hands. Based upon my own development, I suspect that some people have an unarticulated fear that this being might abandon them if they do not exhibit and preach such guilty monotheistic piety.

But I do not think this piety fits with the model of divinity espoused by Joseph Smith. If we take the Prophet's model seriously, we must modify or abandon some of our more self-deprecating religious notions.

TO SHARE KNOWLEDGE, POWER, AND GLORY

JOSEPH SMITH TEACHES us to understand our relationship with God through the lens of earthly parenting. Healthy parenting of mortal children is about many noble things, but it is not about mercy or condescension in anything like the sense described above. Like most parents, I have a deep and abiding love for my son that can drive me to make great sacrifices for his sake. But I did not become and I do not remain Christian's father because I feel sorry for him. I am simply thrilled to be a part of his life, to have the opportunity to share in his upbringing, and to help and watch him grow.

Like the heavenly father Joseph Smith describes, I am raising my son to share in whatever "knowledge, power and glory" I have achieved or may achieve. Sadly, this means an important part of what I want for Christian is independence from me. Like any teacher's, my success is measured by the extent to which my child becomes able to meet tasks and challenges without my help. If Christian is not developing the abilities

and confidence to do more and more things on his own, I am failing. I aspire to continue growing throughout my life, which might always keep me one step ahead of my son in at least some respects and might ensure that I always have something to teach him. But a day will come when Christian must stand on his own, when he will surpass *me* in certain respects, and when, in an important sense, he and I must relate as equals.

Since I am raising a future equal, I cannot consider Christian to be forever inferior or indebted to me, nor do I expect or even want him to think of our relationship in those terms. For now, I do require him to accept a certain level of asymmetry in our relationship and thus to treat me with some measure of respect; I am his father first and his buddy second. I do not see how I could be an effective parent, how I could properly discharge the heavy responsibility I share with his mother of guiding and directing his development here on earth, otherwise. But the goals I have for my son likewise require that I afford him a certain measure of respect, and that I cultivate his own respect for himself, both what he already is and what he may become.

I strive to parent so as to facilitate a successful maturity for my son, and I hope and expect that if I do so, Christian will always have a sense of gratitude for my contributions. But the successful maturity I want for my son is inextricably bound up with independence from me—unburdened by any feeling that he owes me something. Thus I consider the parental model of divinity set forth in Joseph Smith's discourse and Lorenzo Snow's couplet to be incompatible with guilty monotheistic piety that teaches us to feel hopelessly and inescapably dependent on and indebted to a mercifully condescending creator.

"WHAT DID JESUS SAY?"

AMONG THE BEST defenses of King Follett theology is B. H. Roberts's *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*. In that work, Roberts characterizes Jesus as "both premise and argument" for the conclusion that God is a man, complete with body, parts, and passions. Oversimplifying, Roberts argues that because Jesus is both man and God, God is a man and men may become gods.¹⁴

Roberts's argument has its roots in the King Follett Discourse. Immediately after announcing as "the first principle of truth and of the Gospel" that God "once was *a man* like one of us and . . . dwelled on an earth the same as Jesus Christ . . . and like us," Joseph Smith set out to "show it from the Bible."¹⁵ The Prophet argued as follows:

What did Jesus say?—As the Father has power in Himself, even so has the Son power *in himself*. To do what? Why, what the Father did. That answer is obvious; *even* in a manner to lay down His body and take it up again. Jesus, what are you going to do? "To lay down my life as my Father laid down His body that I might take it up again." *Do you believe it?* If you don't believe it, you don't believe the Bible. . . .

What did Jesus *Christ* do? "Why I do the *same*

things that I saw my Father do when worlds came rolling into existence." *Saw the Father do what?* "I saw the Father work out His kingdom with fear and trembling and I am doing the same, *too*. . . . So that Jesus treads in His tracks as He had gone before and then inherits what God did before."¹⁶

For Joseph Smith, as for Roberts, Jesus demonstrates not only God's humanity but also humanity's glorious prospects and potential:

How consoling to the mourners . . . to contemplate the saying that [their departed loved ones] will be heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ. What is it? To inherit *and enjoy* the same glory, powers, and exaltation until you ascend a throne of eternal power *and arrive at the station of a God*, the same as those who have gone before. . . .¹⁷

and the same as Jesus.

In familial terms, the Jesus of King Follett is our brother, rather than father or object of our worship. You, me, and Jesus were all among the spirits in whose midst God the Father found himself, when our common father—not Jesus—"took in hand to save the world of spirits."¹⁸ Jesus grew faster than the rest of us, becoming our *elder* brother, showing us the path to our shared destiny. But for Jesus to serve as premise and argument that shows us *we* can become like Father, for Jesus to be our elder brother, he must be like us.

THE ATONING COUPLET

AS EUGENE ENGLAND has observed, "The question 'Why is man's salvation dependent on Christ and the events surrounding his death?' is the most central and the most difficult question in Christian theology."¹⁹ From its inception, Mormonism as taught by its leaders has recited allegiance to the central Christian tenet of the Atonement. But with few exceptions, the body of authoritative Mormon teachings and scripture has offered little by way of Atonement theory. Most notable among those exceptions is the eclectic collection of explanations found in the Book of Mormon, the volume of distinctively Mormon scripture from which King Follett theology is most wholly absent.

I do not find that coincidence fortuitous, for I think the doctrine so plainly taught by Joseph Smith in the King Follett Discourse eliminates the problems that certain theories say the Atonement solves, while creating additional challenges for other Atonement theories. It bears mention here that while Jesus figures prominently in the reasoning of both the King Follett Discourse and the Roberts book that defends it, neither work so much as mentions the Atonement, Gethsemane, Calvary, or the cross. Jesus figures into King Follett theology not as the great sacrifice for sin, but as premise and argument, illustrating the family ties that bind earth to heaven, demonstrating God's humanity and our own nascent divinity.

A sermon delivered by Book of Mormon prophet Amulek provides a helpful foundation for more complete articulation of the tension I perceive:

