

Elohim and Jehovah in Mormonism and the Bible

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Currently, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints defines the Godhead as consisting of three separate and distinct personages or Gods: Elohim, or God the Father; Jehovah, or Jesus Christ, the Son of God both in the spirit and in the flesh; and the Holy Ghost. The Father and the Son have physical, resurrected bodies of flesh and bone, but the Holy Ghost is a spirit personage. Jesus' title of Jehovah reflects his pre-existent role as God of the Old Testament. These definitions took official form in "The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve" (1916) as the culmination of five major stages of theological development in Church history (Kirkland 1984):

1. Joseph Smith, Mormonism's founder, originally spoke and wrote about God in terms practically indistinguishable from then-current protestant theology. He used the roles, personalities, and titles of the Father and the Son interchangeably in a manner implying that he believed in only one God who manifested himself as three persons. The Book of Mormon, revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants prior to 1835, and Smith's 1832 account of his First Vision all reflect "trinitarian" perceptions. He did not use the title Elohim at all in this early stage and used Jehovah only rarely as the name of the "one" God.

2. The 1835 Lectures on Faith and Smith's official 1838 account of his First Vision both emphasized the complete separateness of the Father and the Son. The Lectures on Faith did not consider the Holy Ghost to be a personage at all, but rather defined it to be the mind of God: "There are two personages who constitute the great, matchless, governing, and supreme power over all things. . . . the Father and the Son — the Father being a personage of spirit, glory and power, possessing all perfection and fullness, the Son . . . a personage

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of tabernacle . . . 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 . . .” (Lundwall, 48). The names Elohim and Jehovah were both used in association with God the Father, who was also considered to be the God of the Old Testament (Kirkland 1984, 37).

3. Between 1838 and 1844, Joseph Smith introduced the concept of an infinite lineal hierarchy of Gods. The book of Abraham describes the creation as being performed by “the Gods” (4:1), and the King Follett Discourse further describes these Gods as a council presided over by a “head God” clearly a patriarchal superior to God the Father (Larson 1978, 202–03; Hale 1978, 212–18; Kirkland 1984, 38). Elohim was used variously as the name of God the Father, the name of a “Head God” who directed the Father in the creation of the world, and as a plural representing the Council of the Gods. The name Jehovah was also still associated with the Father, not with Jesus. The Holy Ghost was now generally referred to by Joseph Smith as being a personage.

4. In the 1854 general conference of the Church and on many other occasions throughout his life, Brigham Young taught that God the Father was also known as Michael. After creating the earth under the direction of Elohim and Jehovah, his patriarchal superiors in the Council of the Gods, Michael descended from his exalted, immortal status to become Adam, the first man, to provide his spiritual progeny with physical tabernacles. While in this fallen condition, his Father Elohim, the “grandfather” of mankind, presided over the earth in his stead. Following his “death,” Adam returned to his exalted status and presided over Israel using both titles, Elohim and Jehovah. Jesus was begotten by this personage both spiritually and in the flesh (Kirkland 1984, 38–40; Buerger 1982, 14–58).

5. Between Brigham Young’s death and the turn of the century, a mixture of all of the previously discussed theological positions circulated within the Church causing much conflict and confusion. To achieve some semblance of harmony between these widely varying ideas, as well as to quell external attacks from anti-Mormon critics at the “Adam-God” doctrine, Mormon leaders carefully reformulated Mormon theology around the turn of the century and articulated it in 1916 (Kirkland 1984, 39–41). These adjustments remain as the current doctrine of the Church today. As a result, much of the original meaning and context of the various godhead references in earlier Mormon scripture and teachings were lost as they were redefined or discarded during this harmonizing process. The Bible was used only as a secondary “proof-text” source for this reformulation of theology, as Mormon sources (regardless of their own extreme diversities) were considered to be more doctrinally sound and pure.

Just as the Mormon historical record demonstrates that its leaders have varied in their perceptions of God, modern biblical scholarship has shown that the Bible’s own authors had varying perceptions of God (Anderson 2:427–28; 411–14; 654–56 Moule 2:430–36; Terrien 1982, 1150–52; Rankin 1962, 90–99). Prior to the Exodus, a multiplicity of gods were understood to exist, each having his own realm of influence on earthly affairs. Israel’s earliest beliefs were monaltrous, i.e., other gods were acknowledged to exist but they were

all subject to the God of Israel who reigned over them in the divine "council of the gods" (Anderson 1981, 427–28; Rankin 1962, 92–93; Robinson 1944, 151–57). This belief was eventually modified into extreme monotheism, or the belief in only one God. At this stage, the one true God was granted many of the divine appellations associated with the other previously recognized deities, and earlier biblical records were edited to more closely conform with this monotheistic point of view. Monotheism achieved its apex in the writings of Isaiah and is carried on through the end of the Old Testament. The New Testament continues with the monotheistic theme by teaching the supremacy of one true God, now called the Father, but it also introduces two additional subordinate divine personalities: Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Holy Ghost or spirit of God.

Since theological evolution and diversity characterize both biblical and Mormon history, it would be unusual for current Mormon definitions of the divine names Elohim and Jehovah to coincide with the Bible's usage of those names. This essay examines how Elohim and Jehovah are used in the Bible and compares this with the current Mormon definitions and position that the pre-existent Jesus Christ was Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament.

Most Latter-day Saints do not realize how often the names Elohim and Jehovah¹ appear in the Old Testament because they have been translated from Hebrew into English. *Elohim* occurs 2,570 times and is closely related to *El*, which occurs some 238 times. Jehovah is by far the most frequently used Hebrew name for God in the Old Testament, occurring some 6,823 times. King James translators translated Elohim and *El* as "God" and Jehovah as "LORD," (all caps) and used "Lord" for the Hebrew *Adonai*, which Hebrew biblical editors often substituted for Jehovah in the prophetic books out of respect for the divine name (Stone 1944, 10, 18; Anderson 2:409–14, 3:150; Roberts 1976, 256–58; Rankin 1962, 96).

While Elohim and Jehovah appear very frequently in the Old Testament, these divine names do not designate two different gods with a Father-Son relationship as they do in Mormonism. Depending upon the intentions of the author, God may be referred to as Elohim, Jehovah, or Jehovah-Elohim. Elohim has the Hebrew masculine plural ending, *im*, and can designate gods generally, the gods of Israel's neighbors, one of these gods (despite its technical plurality), or Israel's God. Jehovah is the personal name of Israel's God as revealed to Moses (Ex. 6:2–3) and hence is never used in a plural sense or ever designates anyone but Israel's God. Jehovah is used in combination with, parallel to, and as a synonym for *El* or Elohim (Anderson 1981, 409–14;

¹ A more proper expression of the divine name is Yahweh, but I will use Jehovah, the more common term in Mormonism. The origin of "Jehovah" is, according to Rankin: "In the sixteenth century (1520) Christian theologians — not without the protest of certain scholars — combining the vowels of *Adhonai* with the consonants JHVH, produced the form Jehovah, a purely fictitious name which has become hallowed by four centuries of use. But the evidence of the pronunciation of the divine name as *Jahweh* is particularly good, for it is founded on the tradition handed down by Theodoret that the Samaritans pronounced the name as *Iabe* and upon Clement of Alexandria, who wrote "the mystic name of four letters' as *laoue*" (1962, 96).

Rankin 1962, 94–95; Roberts 1976, 257). The author of the second account of creation in Genesis 2 intentionally combined the two names Jehovah-Elohim (LORD God) to “Affirm that Jehovah is Elohim, the God of all times” (Anderson 1981, 414). Reading several passages containing the original Hebrew names instead of the King James translations shows the effort being made by the biblical authors to identify Elohim (or El) and Jehovah as being the same God:

For Jehovah your Elohim is Elohim of Elohim(s), and Adonai of Adonais, the great El, mighty and terrible” (Deut. 10:17).

I am Jehovah, the Elohim of Abraham thy father, and the Elohim of Isaac” (Gen. 28:13).

Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I Am hath sent me unto you . . . Jehovah, the Elohim of your fathers . . . of Abraham . . . of Isaac, and of Jacob, hath sent me unto you” (Ex. 3:14–15).

Jehovah is El of the Gods! Jehovah is El of the Gods! He knows, and let Israel itself know” (Josh. 22:22).

For Jehovah is the Great El, the Great King over all the gods” (Ps. 95:3) (Roberts 1976, 257).

This intermixing of the names for God may be best understood by noting that El, or Elohim, was favored by the northern kingdom of Israel while Judah, or the southern kingdom, preferred Jehovah (Miller and Miller 1973, 154). Thus, biblical scholars have been able to trace two main sources of thought in the Old Testament: the “J” or Jehovistic source, and the “E” or Elohistic source (Anderson 2:409; Fretheim 1976, 260; Brueggemann 1976, 971). According to the J source, Jehovah was known among the patriarchs prior to the time of Moses (Gen. 4:26; 12:8; 26:25); but according to the E source, the patriarchs worshipped El (Gen. 33:20) and the name of Jehovah was not revealed until Moses’ time (Ex. 3:13–16; 6:2–3). The Bible contains two accounts of creation, the first attributed to Elohim, the second to Jehovah; two accounts of the flood story interwoven in Genesis 6–7; and many Psalms which favor one name or the other. For example, Elohim is used four times as often for God as Jehovah in Psalms 42–83 while the rest of the Psalms use Jehovah twenty times as often as Elohim (Miller and Miller 1973, 155).

The Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek approximately 280 B.C. This version, the Septuagint, was the Bible of New Testament Christians. The New Testament was also written in Greek. In Greek, Jehovah and Adonai become *Kyrios*. Elohim becomes *theos* when speaking of gods generally, and *ho theos* when speaking of the one true God (Rankin 1962, 96; Anderson 2:414; Barclay 1980, 21–37, 413; Kittel 3:90, 104–5). The New Testament uses both *ho theos* and *Kyrios* to designate God the Father. Jesus is also called *Kyrios*, is only rarely called *theos*, and only once (during Thomas’ confession in John 20:28) called *ho theos*.² The fact that *ho theos* is used in

² By the second century A.D., Christians like Ignatius unhesitatingly called Jesus God. Some second-century writers, like Justin Martyr, also began describing him as the God of the Old Testament. The New Testament, however, contains very few references to Jesus as God. As Barclay has noted: “On almost every occasion in the New Testament on which Jesus seems to be called God there is a problem either of textual criticism or of translation. In

the New Testament almost exclusively of the Father indicates that the Christians equated the Father (not the Son) with the God of Israel.

Adding further confusion to sorting out the biblical usage of these words, the Hebrew word *adon* also becomes *kyrios* in Greek. *Adon* is used in the Old Testament and *kyrios* is used in the Septuagint and the Greek New Testament to designate men who are in a superior position to others (kings, commanders, slave owners, teachers, etc.); it is also often used as an address of courtesy and respect (Barclay 1980, 409–14; Campbell 1962, 130–31). Thus, when “Lord” appears in English translations, we may not automatically assume connotations of divinity. The context must be considered as well as whether the translated word is *kyrios*, *adon*, Jehovah, or *Adonai*. For example, scholars have noted a difference between the application of Lord to Jesus during mortality and following his resurrection. They generally concur that during his lifetime, *Kyrios* nearly always means “sir” or “master,” while after his resurrection, *Kyrios* becomes a divine appellation, a title of God which he bestows upon Jesus (Barclay 1980, 414–16; Cullman 1963, 180, 203–18).

There is a dramatic contrast between the Old and New Testament concepts of God as Father. God is spoken of as Father in the Old Testament only fifteen times and never in the sense of ancestor or progenitor of mankind, an idea common in Near Eastern myths. God is Father in the sense of creator (Deut. 32:6; Mal. 2:10; Ps. 103:13–22; as Father of Israel (God’s first-born), the nation he adopted out of all peoples (Deut. 14:1–2; Ex. 4:22; Jer. 31:9); and also as having Israel’s kings as adopted sons (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7). There are no examples in the Old Testament of God (whether Elohim or Jehovah) being explicitly invoked in prayer as Father (Jeremias 1979, 23–29). There are likewise no Old Testament references to God as Father of a divine Son through whom he creates and makes contact with the world.

In the New Testament, however, the four Gospels alone quote Jesus calling God Father some 170 times. Jesus also apparently introduced the idea of calling God *Abba* (Mark 14:36), an intimate Aramaic equivalent of “Daddy” or “Dad.” There are no precedents from the entire literature of Jewish prayer prior to the New Testament for God being so addressed, for the Jews would have considered it disrespectful. Thus, Jesus’ use of the term indicates an extremely close relationship with God. Within the first century, *Abba* became the favorite Christian name for God and Paul explains its significance in Galatians 4:4–7 and Romans 8:14–17 (Jeremias 1979, 29–35, 58, 62–63).

Early Christians reserved “Father” for God alone (Matt. 23:9). Jesus bears witness of the name of the Father (John 5:43; 17:6), but he is never called Father himself in the Bible.³ The name of God bestowed upon Jesus

almost every case we have to discuss which of two readings is to be accepted or which of two possible translations is to be accepted” (1980, 21; 1975, 56–57; 1 Cor. 11:3; 15:28; 3:23).

³ The only possible exception might be Isaiah 9:6, in which Isaiah proclaims that “a boy has been born for us, a son given to us . . . and he shall be called in purpose wonderful, in battle God-like, Father for all time, Prince of peace” (New English). However, it is not certain that Isaiah meant Jesus. None of the New Testament authors cite the passage with applica-