

# The Weeping God of Mormonism<sup>1</sup>

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IN THE BOOK OF MOSES, revealed to Joseph Smith in 1830 as part of his revision of the Bible, we learn of a prophet named Enoch, who is called to preach repentance to his people. He succeeds so well they are called "Zion" and are translated into heaven. Then, despite his obviously great knowledge of the Gospel, Enoch has an experience that shocks and amazes him and completely changes his concept of God: He is "lifted up, even in the bosom of the Father" and given a vision of those he had taught who resisted evil and "were caught up by the power of heaven into Zion." Then, "It came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?" (Moses 7:24, 28; my emphasis).

Enoch is able to focus his surprise at God's unexpected emotion into questions which disclose, even after his previous visions and his achievements as a prophet, what is for him an entirely new understanding of the nature of God. The answers to Enoch's questions reveal a concept of God which, I believe, is the essential foundation of all Mormon theology, one that makes our theology radically different from most others. However, it is also a concept which many Mormons, like the younger Enoch, still have not understood or quite accepted. Enoch asks God in amazement, "How it is thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?" (Moses 7:29). In other words, Enoch wonders, how can an absolute and, thus, all-powerful being do such a human thing as weep? Humans weep in response to tragic events they cannot change; God *can* change or prevent them, so why should he weep?

Enoch even sounds a bit put out with God because of this surprising challenge to his traditional understanding as he goes on to remind God at some length of his infinite powers. God patiently responds with an ex-

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1. This essay is previously unpublished.

planation of his own limitations: These people in the vision are “thy brethren” who have “agency” (Moses 7:32). I gave them a commandment “that they should love one another,” but “they are without affection, and they hate their own blood.” As a result “misery shall be their doom; and the whole heavens shall weep over them. . . ; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?” (7:37). In other words, agency is real and cannot be abrogated. God’s power to remove sin and other causes of human suffering is limited. He can send prophets like Enoch to warn and preach repentance, and he can send his son to provide those who accept him with power to repent: “Wherefore, he suffereth for their sins; inasmuch as they will repent in the day that my Chosen shall return to me” (7:39). But he cannot simply change or do away with his creation, so until his children repent, “they shall be in torment. Wherefore for this shall the heavens weep” (7:39-40). Enoch here sees into God’s heart, changes his concept of God, and, very significantly, is moved to new compassion himself: He “wept and stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned: and all eternity shook” (7:41).

We have in this experience of Enoch, of course, a version of the basic theological paradox, “How can God be all-powerful and still allow evil?” Enoch is encountering a completely new theodicy, a “justification” of God or explanation of how he can be considered just. It is a theodicy which, if not unique to Mormonism, makes Mormonism unique among large, growing churches. It is also, I believe, a theodicy which can make a crucial contribution to Mormonism’s emergence as a mature, compassionate world religion, one able to contribute in important ways to God’s efforts to save all his children, not just through conversion but also through sharing our revealed insights into the nature of God by dialogue with others.

Traditional theodicies tend to solve the paradox either by (1) redefining evil as not really evil from God’s infinite perspective, as illusory, or “necessary” to build souls, or as merely the “absence of good,” the holes in God’s swiss-cheese universe, or (2) by equivocating on agency, which is “given” because for some unexplained reason an omnipotent God “has” to give it in order to have beings who “freely” love him. Many Mormon thinkers have used these approaches, but the theodicy revealed to Enoch and foundational to Mormonism’s orthodoxy denies the other pole of the paradox: God’s omnipotence. God allows evil because there is much of it he can’t prevent or do away with. Therefore, like a human, he weeps. Of course, I don’t mean that all evil is beyond God’s literal power to prevent. That would make him impotent indeed. Certainly he can and often does interfere with evil. The weeping God of Mormon finitism whom I am trying to describe creates a world for soul-building, which can only succeed if it includes exposure of our souls to the effects of nat-

ural law, as well as maximum latitude for us to exercise our agency as we learn how the universe works. Evil is a natural condition of such a world, not because God *creates* evil for soul-building, but because evil inevitably results from agency freed to grapple with natural law in this mortal world. You can't have one without the other, not because God says so, but rather because the universe, which was not created *ex nihilo* and, thus, has its own intractable nature, says so. Thus, God is not omnipotent.

In a remarkable personal testimony written to a young man dying of cancer, Reynolds Price explores all the traditional answers to the fundamental question, "If a loving, all-powerful God exists, why does he let a gifted young man be tormented and killed?" Price flirts briefly with the notion that God's nature itself contains the seeds of evil or at least was incapable of preventing it, but he finally offers mainly his own undeniable (for him) experience with a God who has given him moments of calm assurance and an actual vision of Christ—in which he was both forgiven of his sins and healed of his own cancer. Price also provides a more intellectual solace based on his own experience and his reading of the great religious texts, especially Job and the Bhagavad Gita, that "the God who is both our omnipotent Creator and the mute witness of so much agony. . . is what *is* or is *in* all that exists: that he is our only choice,"<sup>2</sup> and that since "God has made us for his glory and that glorification is pleasing to him. . . wouldn't that glory be augmented by a wider spectrum of light and dark in our own dim eyes if we saw and granted and tried to live in the glare of a fuller awareness of his being?"<sup>3</sup>

The articulate and tender testimony of Price is moving and impressive, but it seems to me somewhat short of what may be available through the weeping God of Mormonism. That God, like Job's God and the one in the Gita, suggests we would change our perspective on our individual griefs if we could see the grandeur of God's universe and purposes, if we could have been with God "when I laid the foundation of the earth." But when our weeping God, in what seems a similar imperious gesture, tells us, "In nothing doth man offend God. . . save those who confess not his hand in all things" (D&C 59:21), we are not, like Price, left to struggle to "confess his hand," or express gratitude and acceptance to a God who "is surely the full proprietor or the impassive witness of AIDS and Bosnia, Oklahoma City and Rwanda,"<sup>4</sup> to say nothing of the Holocaust. I believe God means we, like Job, must recognize that the universe itself, not a finite God, is the "proprietor" of those things; we *could*

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2. Reynolds Price, *Letter to a Man in the Fire* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 76.

3. *Ibid.*, 77-78

4. *Ibid.*

not have all the good of it, including the means to grow and know beauty and have joy and become more God-like, without the evil, not because God is that way, but because the universe, which he did not make, is that way. Furthermore, because of Enoch, we especially know, as apparently Price does not, that God is not an "impassive witness" of all this: He weeps.

One of the evidences for me that Joseph Smith was a true prophet, both translating and receiving by direct revelation material from real ancient cultures and their living prophets, is that he produced material he didn't yet understand or agree with. A great example, of course, is the claim in the Book of Mormon that "all are alike unto God," black and white, male and female (2 Nephi 26:33), which probably no one in America believed in 1830, including Joseph Smith, and which many, of course, still don't believe. It's also clear that the Prophet Joseph didn't quite understand the implications of Enoch's experience, which I believe he recorded by direct revelation from God. For some time after that revelation, and despite its implications, Joseph apparently took literally the passages in the Book of Mormon which refer to God as having all knowledge and all power (such as 2 Nephi 9:20 and Alma 26:35). We know this because the earliest Mormon doctrinal exposition, the "Lectures on Faith" (1834-35), uses the traditional Christian categories of omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence in describing God and claims that "without the knowledge of all things God would not be able to save any portion of his creatures."<sup>5</sup>

Joseph Smith's part in authoring the "Lectures on Faith" is still uncertain; they seem mainly the work of Sidney Rigdon, with significant input from Joseph.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, as many readers have suspected, the Lectures reflect a very early stage of Mormon doctrinal expression about God, one still heavily influenced by traditional Christian ideas and categories. For instance, God is described as a personage of Spirit, Christ only as a personage of tabernacle, and the Holy Ghost not as a personage at all but a kind of unifying mind of the father and son. Those who teach from the Lectures on Faith have had to editorialize and add footnotes and explanations, to make it conform to later orthodox Mormon thought, which Joseph Fielding Smith, for example, did at the beginning of his book, *Doctrines of Salvation*. This problem can be seen in the inclination by church authorities to revise the Lectures on Faith in the early 1900s, or

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5. Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985), 4:11.

6. On authorship and decanonization, see Leland H. Gentry, "What of the Lectures on Faith?" *BYU Studies* 19 (Fall 1978): 5-19, and Richard S. Van Wagoner, Steven C. Walker, and Allen D. Roberts, "The 'Lectures on Faith': A Case Study in Decanonization," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 71-77.

at least to add a footnote, and also in their subsequent decision to exclude them from the Doctrine and Covenants in 1921.<sup>7</sup> However, Joseph Smith never repudiated them, and while it is likely that, had they been written later as his understanding developed, he too might have qualified or explained some of the terms used there, I think he eventually saw no inherent contradiction between the Lectures and his later understanding of God as having “all” knowledge and power, sufficient to provide us salvation in our sphere of existence (and thus being “infinite”), but also as one who is still learning and developing in relationship to higher spheres of existence (and thus “finite”). God is thus, as Joseph understood, *redemptively* sovereign, not absolute in every way, but absolutely able to save us.

This complex understanding had been received and amplified over a number of years before it was most clearly, comprehensively, and publicly declared in the famous “King Follett Discourse,” which was given at the April 1844 General Conference a few months before Joseph’s death. The King Follett Discourse itself has somewhat questionable status because it was recorded only in the rather sketchy way possible at that time: in longhand by four scribes whose work was later amalgamated. In the Discourse, Joseph Smith nowhere states definitely that God is “finite” or progressing in knowledge and power, but there and in the Doctrine and Covenants he certainly implies that God is not supreme and does not have all power, by stating that there are Gods above him and by naming specific, substantive things that cannot be done, even by God, such as create out of nothing. It seems to me that Joseph Smith also clearly describes an eternal process of learning and growth by which Godhood is attained, and he at least *implies* that this process *continues* for God:

First God Himself who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a Man like unto one of yourselves—that is the great secret! . . . The first principle of truth and of the Gospel is to know of a certainty that character of God, and that we may converse with Him. . . that He once was a man like one of us. . . . You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods. . . 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. . . from exaltation to exaltation. [Jesus said], “I saw the Father work out His kingdom with fear and trembling and I am doing the same, too. When I get my king-

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7. In editing the *History of the Church*, B. H. Roberts noted that the Lectures on Faith were “not of equal authority in matters of doctrine,” compared with the regular sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, because, when they were originally presented to the church for acceptance they had been separately designated as not inspired revelation, “though judiciously written and profitable for doctrine” (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, ed. B. H. Roberts [Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1912], 2:176).

dom, I will give it to the Father and it will add to and exalt His glory. He will take a higher exaltation and I will take His place and also be exalted, so that He obtains kingdom rolling upon Kingdom. . . ."

All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement and improvement. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. God Himself found Himself in the midst of spirits and glory. Because He was greater, He saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest, who were less in intelligence, could have a privilege to advance like Himself and be exalted with Him, so that they might have one glory upon another in all that knowledge, power, and glory.<sup>8</sup>

Notice the lack of traditional Christian absolutism here. Instead, the emphasis seems to be on God's similarity to humans, on God as the same kind of being we are, one who makes available to us a process of growth he himself has been engaged in and apparently is still engaged in, "whereby the less intelligent. . . could have a privilege to advance like Himself." (The verb structure implies he *still is* advancing.) God is a "greater" intelligence, not absolute intelligence, and he is moving to *higher* and *higher* exaltations, not to some absolute state of the highest possible exaltation; one glory is added to another "in all that knowledge, power, and glory" (my emphases).

The concept of a plurality of Gods had been taught by Joseph Smith since 1835 and was clearly understood by his close associates, such as Hyrum Smith and Brigham Young.<sup>9</sup> Hyrum himself is quoted in George Laub's Journal as teaching, on April 27, 1843, that there is "a whole train and lineage of gods."<sup>10</sup> In fact, in that sermon he offers the basic scriptural text for the shift in perspective which makes it possible to talk about many gods, of ascending spheres of power and intelligence, and then, without contradiction, to turn around and talk of one God, our God, sufficiently "perfect" in intelligence and power and, thus, able to save his children on the earth. Hyrum begins his discussion with a quotation from 1 Corinthians 8:5-6: "There be gods many and lords many. But to us there is but one God the Father." Despite the context of this scripture, which is a discussion by Paul of belief in idols, Brigham Young, B. H. Roberts, Joseph Fielding Smith, and many others have used it as a brief explanation of how it is possible to be both a Christian polytheist (technically a henotheist) and a monotheist. Roberts specifically used it to

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8. Stan Larson, "The King Follet Discourse: A New Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 200, 203, 204.

9. Van Hale, "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 209.

10. Eugene England, ed., "George Laub's Nauvoo Journal," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 176.

justify how we can talk sometimes in an adventuresome mode about multiple orders of godhood in which our God is limited and still progressing, and yet at other times, without contradiction, talk in a worshipful mode about the one God and his perfect knowledge and redemptive power relative to our sphere.

However, despite Roberts's apologetic efforts to demonstrate that his belief in a finite, progressing God was consistent with both the Bible and orthodox Mormon thought, it seems clear that he simply believed and gloried in the doctrine as delightfully true and as the chief legacy of Joseph Smith, whom he called "The Prophet-Teacher." In his book of that name and in his most important theological work, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, he expounds and defends what he calls Joseph's "eternalism," thus, grounding Mormon theology in a philosophical position that is its main strength and for many, such as me, its main attraction. Let me quote from Sterling McMurrin's "Introduction" to the 1967 reprinting of *Joseph Smith the Prophet-Teacher*, both to honor McMurrin, whom we deeply miss, and to express with some authority how important this matter is:

More than any other, Roberts sensed the radical heresy in Mormon theology, its complete departure from the traditional Christian doctrines of God and man, its denial of the divine absoluteness, and its rejection of the negativism of the orthodox dogma of the human predicament. Roberts was not a creator of doctrine, in these matters, but he had a clear vision of what was entailed by the basic ideas already laid down by his predecessors, and he did more than any other person to set forth the full character of the Mormonism that followed inevitably from the ideas of Joseph Smith, from the doctrine, for instance, of the uncreated intelligence or ego and the denial of the orthodox dogma on the creation of the world. Roberts was not repulsed by the unorthodox implications of the finitistic conception of God. He delighted in them, for they made room for a positive doctrine of man. Yet he kept the discussion of the nature of God on a more defensible level than did some who confused the old absolutism with the new doctrine. It was a bold and audacious religion, which combined elements of traditional fundamentalism with the modern liberal doctrine of man and the optimism of the nineteenth century, and it required a bold and rebellious and spacious mind to grasp its full implications.<sup>11</sup>

Despite Roberts's achievement, the "old absolutism" McMurrin refers to has remained alive and well in Mormonism and now seems on

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11. Sterling M. McMurrin, "Notes on a Mormon Philosopher-Historian," introduction to B.H. Roberts, *Joseph Smith the Prophet Teacher* (Princeton, N.J.: The Deseret Club of Princeton University, 1967), xvi.

the ascendant. Joseph Smith seems to have progressed in his understanding, at least to the point where he could see the absolutistic language of scripture as metaphorical or only pertaining to God in a partial description of his perfections relative to us. Brigham Young went even further along that path, as did his namesake Brigham H. Roberts. But in the same General Conference of April 1844, where Joseph gave the "King Follett Discourse," his brother Hyrum Smith expressed a position that has persisted in the church, especially through Hyrum's own family. It is clear from the context that Hyrum's concern was with the Saints' faith in Christ's power to save, which he apparently felt had been undermined by too literal or exclusive a focus on a limited God: "I want to put down all false influence. If I thought I should be saved and any in the congregation be lost, I should not be happy. . . . Our Savior is competent to save all from death and hell. I can prove it out of the revelations. I would not serve a God that had not all wisdom and power."<sup>12</sup> He apparently could not quite see how God could be both redemptively sovereign and finite, although he had himself earlier recorded the key in his reference to the passage in Corinthians about many gods and yet one.<sup>13</sup>

Brigham Young felt that the idea of eternal progression was what he called "the mainspring of all action" and acted strongly to assure that the central concepts he had learned from Joseph concerning progression in both humans and a finite God would be kept alive in the Mormon heritage. He reprinted the "King Follett Discourse" a number of times and engaged in continuing and remarkably public doctrinal disagreements with the apostle Orson Pratt about these matters. Brother Brigham was concerned not only that Elder Pratt was wrong in insisting without qualification on God's absolute perfection and the impossibility of his further progression, but also that such an influential speaker and writer would convince many to follow after him, leaving to posterity the impression that only his view and emphasis were part of Mormon thought. President Young felt it so crucial to keep before the Saints Joseph Smith's emphasis that he pushed Elder Pratt to a public recantation in 1865.<sup>14</sup> Then he published the recantation in the *Deseret News*, along with a denunciation of specific absolutistic doctrines of Elder Pratt, signed by the First Presidency.

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12. Quoted in Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954) 5; from Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:300.

13. See note 5.

14. This experience is thoroughly reviewed in Gary J. Bergera, "The Orson Pratt-Brigham Young Controversies," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 7-49, and in Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 1985) 209-17.



Part of Brigham Young's concern that caused him to publicly deny the truth of Pratt's ideas was the presumption of actually *limiting* God while seeming to describe him as having limitless power and knowledge. It was this concern which motivated a statement of Brigham Young that seems directly to contradict Hyrum Smith:

Some men seem as if they could learn so much and no more. They appear to be bounded in their capacity for acquiring knowledge, as Brother Orson has, in theory, bounded the capacity of God. 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.<sup>15</sup>

I find this admirably relevant to the irony that many absolutistic thinkers, including Mormons, in trying to exalt God by contrasting him to the mere human, instead begin to demean him as impersonal, passionless, even cruel. We tend to forget that all our attempts to understand and describe God are anthropomorphic, originating in our human notions and comparisons, and that using the more abstract, irrational, supposedly *superhuman* images may only make God appear more *inhuman*, in the worst sense.

Brigham Young's concern was also with spiritual psychology, the importance (in motivating mankind toward salvation) of retaining a certain vision: that what was most rewarding in earthly progression would continue forever and would make celestial life, or Godhood, genuinely attractive. Godhood is not a mysterious stasis or a mere endless repetition of the same process of creating spirits and saving them. It is most attractive to us, and the best motivator to moral and religious living, when it attracts us for the same reasons the highest forms of human life attract us: learning, creating, experiencing joy and tragedy, even weeping.

Although Orson Pratt's absolutism about God which harked back to the Lectures on Faith had been rejected by Brigham Young, and the Lectures themselves were demoted in status, President Joseph F. Smith, like his father Hyrum Smith, was concerned that some in the church were inclined to reduce too much the distance between God and man and, thus, to undermine the confidence in God's saving power essential for human salvation.<sup>16</sup> (I remember some Mormons in my youth who were so caught up with the vision of eternal progression that they could hardly wait to die to be like God!)

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15. *Journal of Discourses* 11 (Liverpool, England: B. Young, January 1867), 286.

16. See, for instance, his denunciation of those who were denying miracles and, thus, the perfection of God's power, in *Conference Report, April 1914* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1914) 5.

President Joseph F. Smith's son, Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr., took a similar position. In his influential book, *Doctrines of Salvation*, he quotes the passage from his grandfather Hyrum about not serving a finite God, and also the passages from the Lectures on Faith on the perfections of God. It is clear that his concern, like that of his father and grandfather, is with God's power in relation to humans. Following the quotation from Hyrum, he asks, "Do we believe that God has all wisdom? . . . Does he have all power? If so then there is nothing in which he lacks. If he is lacking in 'wisdom' and in 'power' then he is not supreme and there must be something greater than he is, and this is absurd."<sup>17</sup> We know Joseph Fielding Smith is speaking hyperbolically here, and in the single, mortal sphere mode (the one bounded by the idea that *to us* there is only one God the Father), because he obviously knew that both his grandfather and Joseph Smith taught there is "something greater" than God, that God is in fact (if we speak in terms of the multiple, eternal spheres) *not* supreme, that there are Gods above God, a Father of God, who gave him salvation, and a Father of that god and so on, apparently to infinity. But President Smith also shared, it seems to me, his father's concern about belittling God and also his grandfather's concern about the saints losing faith in God's absolute power to save; he focused his own writing and talking about God in the single sphere mode, and influenced his son-in-law Bruce R. McConkie to do the same: In *Mormon Doctrine* Elder McConkie states unequivocally that God is not progressing in knowledge or power, and references the same passage from President Smith's *Doctrines of Salvation* which I have discussed above.<sup>18</sup> In this spirit, both Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie preferred the Lectures on Faith to the King Follett Discourse. Elder Smith was responsible for the last-minute excision of the Discourse from the first printing of B. H. Roberts's edition of Joseph Smith's *History of the Church* in 1912 (although he included it in his own edition of *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* in 1938), and Elder McConkie wrote of the Lectures: "in them is to be found some of the best lesson material ever presented on the . . . character, perfections, and attributes of God."<sup>19</sup>

The influence of these two highly-respected and prolific Gospel scholars and general authorities—and the more intangible influences of our crisis-ridden and anxiety-producing past century—have encouraged a rather negative, pessimistic neo-orthodoxy in Mormonism generally and especially in the semi-official Mormon theology taught in the LDS Church Education System, particularly in the BYU religion department.

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17. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:5.

18. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 221.

19. *Ibid.*, 439.

O. Kendall White has documented these changes most fully,<sup>20</sup> and Thomas Alexander has given the best historical consideration to what he calls “the reconstruction of Mormon doctrine” away from its original radical adventuresomeness, as part of the twentieth-century accommodation to American culture.<sup>21</sup> Robert L. Millett, who later became the head of BYU’s religion department, sounded in 1989 a note of defiance in the face of the claims of White and Alexander when he wrote, “[The movement they describe] is a movement toward a more thoroughly redemptive base to our theology. . . one that may be long overdue. These recent developments [neo-orthodox emphasis on an absolute God, human depravity, and salvation by grace] may represent more of a retrenchment and a refinement than a reversion [to primitive Mormonism].”<sup>22</sup>

But the chief evidence for the desertion of the “weeping God” of Mormonism by some of the most influential LDS teachers of religion is the publication in 1997 of *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*, by Evangelical theologian Craig L. Blomberg and BYU religion professor Stephen E. Robinson. This book is a model for religious dialogue between Mormons and other faiths, as well as dialogue among Mormons themselves, written by two devoutly believing and thoughtful, gracious men. The bad news is that Robinson ends up, I believe, sounding more Evangelical than Mormon on crucial issues like the inerrancy and sufficiency of the Biblical canon, salvation by grace alone, the “substitutionary” Atonement, and—most importantly—the nature of God. Robinson effectively faults Evangelicals who claim biblical sufficiency yet at the same time base much of their thought and language on post-biblical councils; they are thus “wedded to Greek philosophical categories and assumptions.” However, Robinson seems to accept quite uncritically the unbiblical concept of God which arose in those councils, as “omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent,” an absolute being entirely different in nature from humans. As Robinson puts it (and, thus, directly addresses perhaps our major difference from other Christians): “Many Evangelicals are convinced, wrongly, that Latter-day Saints believe in a finite, limited or changeable god, even though that notion is repugnant to us.”<sup>23</sup>

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20. O. Kendall White, Jr., *Mormon Neo-orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987); “The Transformation of Mormon Theology,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1970): 9-24.

21. Thomas G. Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology,” *Sunstone* 5 (July/August 1980): 24-33.

22. Robert L. Millett, “Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism: Orthodoxy, Neoorthodoxy, Tension, and Tradition,” *BYU Studies* 29, no. 3 (1989): 49-68.

23. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997) 88, 92.

"Repugnant" to Mormons? What about Brigham Young: "The God that I serve is progressing eternally [in knowledge and power], and so are his children"?<sup>24</sup> Or the twentieth century apostle, John A. Widstoe: "If the great law of progression is accepted, God must have been engaged, and must now be engaged, in progressive development"?<sup>25</sup>

Yes, I know these are what Blomberg and even Robinson would call "non-canonical" sources, and *literal* interpretations of certain scriptures do support an all-powerful, absolute and static God. But that shows precisely how dangerous scriptural literalism is. The three "omni's" directly contradict what modern revelation and common sense tell us about God, and we have no need to be bound to literal interpretation of their scriptural use. The scriptures, including the Book of Mormon, say that God is "all-powerful" and "infinite," but they also say "God is love" and God is "a consuming fire." These are all hyperboles or metaphors and not to be taken as literal doctrine.

Let's consider what seems more reasonable and consistent with the scriptures taken as a whole and with what should be our touchstone of interpretation, the fundamental teachings of Christ. The Evangelical understanding seems to be that God is an absolute and infinite being, perfect and self-sufficient in every way, existing "before" and, therefore, unconditioned by time and space and material and law, or by us as agents. "He" decides for some unaccountable reason (he certainly doesn't *need* anything, by definition) to create beings to love him—makes them out of nothing—and thus wholly determines what they will be. Yes, I know the arguments that he then "gives" them agency, but that is certainly one thing that can't, logically or meaningfully, be created out of nothing: To the Evangelical, what God makes of you is all there is, including *whatever* in yourself or your environment goes into your "decisions," and God is, thus, unavoidably responsible for the results of those decisions.

Then, the Evangelical posits, God puts billions of us in a world where the huge majority endure mainly pain and sorrow, comes among us as Christ, and rewards those who believe on him with eternal bliss, punishing those who don't (including the huge majority who have never heard of him!) with eternal torment, all without shedding a tear. No wonder many good and intelligent people in our century have decided that such a God is at best absurd and at worst a cruel monster and have turned in droves from the churches to some form of agnosticism. If he was already perfect, why did he "need" to create this mess at all, and if he's all-powerful, why couldn't he just make an Adam and Eve who would have done things right in the first place, or (since they were made

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24. *Journal of Discourses* 11:286.

25. John A. Widstoe, *A Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1915-1965), 30-31.

out of nothing) destroy them and start over, again and again until he got the world he wanted, or at least just send those sinners who fail his plan back into nothingness rather than to eternal torment (or make Christian teaching available to more than ten percent of his children, or prevent the Holocaust, etc., etc.)?

Would you really prefer that to a concept of God as an exalted *person*, existing in time and space with a real environment of matter and energy and law which can be organized and created within but cannot be called into being or destroyed or absolutely controlled, and which therefore must be wept over? Consider the rational and experiential attractiveness of a Being who exists with other eternal beings whom it is his work and glory to help develop in the ways he himself has developed, so they can enjoy his work and glory, too. This God sacrifices his son in an atonement of infinite love, powerful enough to resurrect us all to immortality and to move those of us who *will* to repent and improve until we become like him, with the same joy and creative and loving powers. This God does not punish with hell nor reward with heaven, but makes his teachings and atoning power available to all his children on equal conditions and unendingly: He loves and helps them throughout a pre-existence, mortality, and post-existence until all have the same opportunity to become more like him and enjoy his creative, progressive eternal life. Even then, rather than punishing those who don't fully measure up, he simply lets those beings experience the results of what they have become or can still become, in infinite variety, rather than consigning them absolutely and irrevocably—and thus unredemptively—to pain.

I know my Evangelical God is somewhat of a caricature, but there is enough truth in it to worry me, especially when it seems that popular Mormon theology may be slipping toward such a concept—and there is sufficient evidence in *How Wide the Divide* to justify such a worry. While reading the book, I found myself, despite the intelligence and graciousness of Blomberg, increasingly depressed by the dreary, even mean-spirited, implications of his theology (“[Although] it is not fair to imagine the. . . Adolf Hitlers of this world experiencing the same punishment as the friendly, hardworking non-Christan homeowner down the street. . . they will spend an unpleasant eternity apart from God and all his people”).<sup>26</sup> And I found myself, despite my personal knowledge that Robinson is an affable, generous Latter-day Saint, offended at his similar acceptance of a scriptural literalism that makes God into an unredemptive punisher: “After the resurrection. . . those who are filthy still. . . are cast eternally into the lake of fire.”<sup>27</sup>

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26. Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide*, 174.

27. *Ibid.*, 151.

Such notions certainly fail the marvelous test Joseph Smith suggested for his revealed claims in the King Follett Discourse about God's finitude and man's potential deification: "This is good doctrine. It tastes good. . . . [W]hen I tell you of these words of eternal life that are given to me by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the revelations of Jesus Christ, you are bound to receive them as sweet. You taste them and I know you believe them."<sup>28</sup> Joseph certainly didn't mean that mere emotional preference is an adequate test for truth. He meant something like a delighted, inspired response of the human spirit to what is simply and obviously good.

However, I have to recognize that, in another way, the attractions of a weeping God may be mostly a matter of basic temperament rather than overwhelming rational evidence or even authority. Some of us in each age seem genuinely attracted to the securities of an absolute, sovereign, justice-oriented God and some to the adventuresomeness of an open, progressive universe and a limited but infinitely loving God working with us eternal mortal agents. I remember how shocked I was when I first read the great Evangelical divine, Jonathan Edwards, tell how he, after previously being "full of objections" to what seemed "a horrible doctrine," became converted to "God's sovereignty, in choosing whom He would to eternal life, and rejecting whom He pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell." From the time of his conversion, his "reason apprehended the justice and reasonableness of it" and "the doctrine has very often appeared exceedingly pleasant, bright, and sweet."<sup>29</sup> I was appalled; such a horrible doctrine did not, and does not, taste sweet to me at all. But I could see, and accept, that a good, intelligent person could feel that way and I might have something to learn from him.

The bad news for me is that those (both Evangelicals and Mormons) with the absolutistic temperament seem so unwilling to tolerate and learn from those with the finitistic, and that partly through that influence, American culture and now our Mormon culture seem to be increasingly intolerant of others, even within our culture, both politically and theologically. There seems to be a tendency for those who believe in an absolute, sovereign, all-determining and punishing God to have absolute assurance that he has given them (perhaps through an "inerrant" Bible) absolute truth, which they are justified in using any means, including the law and even illegal force, to impose on others. A few years ago I confronted some evangelical "Ex-Mormons for Jesus" who, in an effort to

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28. *Journal of Discourses* 6: 7.

29. Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," *Jonathan Edwards: Basic Writings*, Ola Elizabeth Winslow, ed. (New York, Signet New American Library, 1966), 83.

embarrass the church, had dishonestly obtained and then circulated a private letter. They claimed they had a perfect right to do *anything* to destroy Mormonism since their absolute God had told them it was evil. I worry that Evangelical Mormons may incline to the same “end-justifies-means” thinking and that they also seem unwilling to allow both the absolutistic and finitistic strains of Mormonism to continue, as Brigham Young so much desired.

The unspoken premise of *How Wide the Divide* seems to be that we *have* to believe more alike in order to be more tolerant. I’m sorry, but even if Blomberg and Robinson are totally wrong and we really do have very different beliefs, we shouldn’t be treating each other the way we do—as Evangelicals and Mormons, absolutists and finitists, conservatives and liberals. There is a spirit of “no compromise” under Blomberg’s urbane, well-informed politeness. He and other Evangelicals “hope and pray that influential modern LDS authors like Prof. Robinson are indeed shifting the balance back toward grace,”<sup>30</sup> and they are already starting to call such people, in print, “Evangelical Mormons,” apparently the only Mormons thus acceptable as Christians.

Robinson and others may indeed be shifting the balance of popular Mormon theology because many of them are influential Church Education System teachers and popular speakers. This is not necessarily bad news. Perhaps it is just an historical shift in temperament or a response to our terrible, anxiety-producing century or even, as Millett suggests, a useful “correction” to an over-emphasis on salvation by works or God’s finitude. But if, as our experience with Evangelical Christians suggests, “Evangelical Mormons,” rather than following the example of Robinson’s book, are more inclined to be intolerant of those who differ with them—to ostracize or belittle or, especially, to attempt to use their power over the official and semi-official press and their authority as Church Education employees to silence others—that would be very bad news indeed.

Finally, if believing in an absolutistic, punishing God tends to make us more judgmental and punishing, does believing in a weeping, genuinely compassionate God tend to make us more compassionate? Not necessarily, of course, but as Blomberg points out, the Evangelical concept of an absolute, sovereign God is crucial to their concept of a “substitutionary” atonement sufficient to save, and that concept, I believe, has very different effects on believers from the Mormon concept of a weeping God. The Evangelical imagines Christ’s suffering as a necessary and sufficient substitute for our sins, demanded by God’s justice and available to those whom he chooses to save into eternal bliss while the rest

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30. *Ibid.*, 177.

burn in hell, quite independent of our actions and state of soul; the Mormon concept of a “participatory” Atonement imagines that suffering as a necessary and sufficient expression of God’s unconditional love, which “appeases the demands of justice” and provides “means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance” (Alma 34:15). Ironically, while Hyrum Smith and his son Joseph F. Smith were concerned about finitistic concepts undermining faith in the Atonement, these concepts instead provide the strongest possible support for the Atonement as a powerful, mercy-generating, influence in our religious lives.

A related concern is social action. Blomberg and Robinson end their book with a call for greater “cooperation” between Evangelicals and Mormons in social and political action. That seems to me to translate into active social conservatism, which in recent times has meant, in my judgment, mainly negative and divisive activities: pro-family through narrowing our definition of family, anti-pornography through censorship, anti-abortion through restricting choice, anti-gay rights, anti-affirmative action, anti-gun control. It’s certainly fine for Mormons to choose to engage in such activities, but it is a tragedy that, increasingly, those are made to appear as the official and only appropriate forms of political action for Mormons. They seem to me the very forms which tend to reflect the absolutistic temperament, which seems on the ascendant.

David Hare is probably England’s finest contemporary playwright (author of the award-winning *Amy’s View*) and certainly one of the most clear and trenchant critics of English society and culture. He is an agnostic, but in 1996 he was invited by an old school friend who is now an Anglican priest to give the annual memorial lecture at Westminster Abbey in honor of the former Dean of the Abbey. He spoke with great respect of those with a religious calling, especially those he saw working in personal poverty and at great personal risk to improve the lives of the poor and dispossessed and discriminated against. But he pointed out rightly, I think, that even such people have a kind of escape clause because they believe in an absolute, all-powerful God, who will somehow, sometime, make everything right—or worse, they try to tell others that “the suffering we endure here in this world is somehow justified, that it even has meaning because it is part of an absent God’s large plan and purpose.”<sup>31</sup> He believes, after careful observation, that such a belief tends ultimately to limit the quality and persistence of Christian service, that justice on this earth matters less if justice will one day be delivered by another. I don’t know how you could prove this either way, but I have noticed a certain tendency in Mormon absolutists to finally throw up their hands

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31. David Hare, “When Shall We Live,” *Via Dolorosa and When Shall We Live* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 62.



in the face of our huge social problems and leave things to God. It seems to me that those who can believe in the weeping God of Mormonism cannot escape. They must stand with David Hare and with the compassionate, passionate agnostics of the world in making it better, confident that God is doing and will do all he can, but that what we do and don't do has irrevocable, sometimes tragic, consequences. As David Hare asks, quoting Seneca, "When shall we live, if not now?"<sup>32</sup>

These, then, are some reasons the weeping God of Mormonism must survive the assaults of the neo-orthodox, Evangelical Mormonism that is becoming almost official because of the influence of the Church Education System: to keep alive a concept of the Atonement which emphasizes Christ's mercy and our own response to it in becoming new creatures; to keep before us the concept that moved Enoch to compassion "as wide as eternity" and might also move us; and to stem our inclinations to various forms of violence with each other. There currently seems to be no one like Brigham Young at the highest level to ensure that such a God survives. Ironically, although Orson Pratt's absolute, non-progressing, certainly non-weeping God was condemned by Brigham Young and the Quorum as heresy, even in the form of Official Proclamation #3 in 1865, it has won out in BYU's College of Religion and increasingly in popular Mormonism. This seems to me a bad case of loss of nerve, of preferring negative, safe religion to the positive, adventuresome kind. Sterling McMurrin concluded that the ascendancy of neo-orthodoxy in this century was because Mormons had come, like many others, to "prefer the comforts of resignation to the dangers and uncertainties of crusade and adventure." He had earlier pointed out the main problem with a weeping God theology, "It's hard to take your problems to a God who may have problems."<sup>33</sup> He nevertheless remained hopeful that the orthodox Mormonism of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and B. H. Roberts would survive:

Today religious liberalism is largely spent and the facts of life too often fail to support its claims. . . . We prefer the comforts of resignation to the dangers and uncertainties of crusade and adventure. But however sanguine its claims and extravagant its vision, there is something noble and heroic about the authentic Mormon orthodoxy which Roberts and his generation believed and defended, and which is still the religion of the uncorrupted Mormon. For it joins faith in God with faith in man, and unless this can be done effectively not only in theology but as well in the minds and experience of men, religion in any viable and acceptable form may not prevail.<sup>34</sup>

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32. *Ibid.*, 72.

33. Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah press, 1965), 35.

34. McMurrin, *Notes on a Mormon Philosopher-Historian*, xvi-xvii.

My heart says McMurrin is right, but my head recognizes that it is Mormonism in its absolutistic form, and also the absolutistic Evangelical churches, which are growing most rapidly in many places in the world. My belief in a weeping God who can't solve our pain and problems or promise to make everything right in the end, who calls us to live with him in a tragic universe, makes life at times very difficult. Much of both my private reading of the scriptures and my public religious life is filled with stories and testimonies about how God has intervened in people's lives, destroying their enemies, helping them find a coin, protecting them from accidental injury or death, putting a book or person or divine voice in their way that led to their conversion. But while I tend to believe such witnesses because I too have experienced what I believe is such intervention from God in my life, I increasingly experience those stories as tragic. Each one reminds me of the innumerable occasions when my weeping God does not intervene, when a Hitler is not destroyed, a crucial passport is not found, a faithful missionary is killed, a young man pleads with God for a witness of the Book of Mormon and hears silence. At such times God seems too limited, too finite, too powerless in his weeping. It is a tragedy to believe in such a God; it would be a tragedy to lose such an understanding of him.

At the very end of the Bible, John the Revelator is given a vision much like Enoch's; in fact, he sees Enoch's holy city, the New Jerusalem in the latter days "coming down from God out of heaven. . . And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people. . . And God shall wipe away all tears from their eye" (Rev. 21:3-4). This is the great hope and consolation for all believers. For Mormons, it has the added poignance that as he wipes away those tears, God himself will be weeping for the residue of his children who are not there.