

THE SOURCE OF GOD'S AUTHORITY: ONE ARGUMENT FOR AN UNAMBIGUOUS DOCTRINE OF PREEXISTENCE

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The famous couplet coined by Lorenzo Snow in 1840, “As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be,”¹ rears its head every now and then, inspiring both awe and some confusion among rank-and-file Latter-day Saints while causing at least a degree of discomfort for Church leaders and spokespeople who are trying to make Mormonism more palatable for our mainstream Christian friends and critics. Some observers have even suggested that the Church is intentionally downplaying this doctrine.² Nevertheless, the couplet found its way into the 2013 Melchizedek Priesthood/Relief Society manual *Teaching of Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow*, and this distinctive doctrine also appeared prominently in previous manuals containing the teachings of Brigham Young and Joseph Smith.³

1. In Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1884), 46; see also “The Grand Destiny of Man,” *Deseret Evening News*, Jul. 20, 1901, 22.

2. See, for instance, Armand Mauss, “Rethinking Retrenchment: Course Corrections in the Ongoing Campaign for Respectability,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 4 (2011): 6–7.

3. See *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012), 83; *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 30; *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 40.

So, what are we to make of this theological nugget, this idea that God was once a mortal man going through similar experiences to ours, who overcame through faith and obedience and, presumably, the assistance of his own deified Father? Should we assume, as President Gordon B. Hinckley was reported to have said, that Lorenzo Snow's couplet "gets into some pretty deep theology that we don't know very much about"?⁴

I would suggest that although our understanding of the particulars of the premortal existence is certainly meager, this radical doctrine is not something we should downplay.⁵ In fact, I would argue that without this doctrine, the boundary between Mormonism and mainstream Christianity blurs in certain ways, because it has inescapable ramifications not only for how we understand our own eternal nature and potential, but also how we view our relationship with God, including the question of why and how he is able to exercise authority over us. In short, this doctrine is perhaps the most distinctively "Mormon" of all our doctrines and is something we should neither gloss over nor disavow in any way. This tenet is not just an afterthought to Joseph Smith's other teachings; it is, in a fundamental way, the culmination of what he was trying to teach the Saints in Nauvoo, and if we were to fully embrace this doctrine, it might, among other things, revolutionize the way we understand and exercise authority in the Church. Before we can do this, however, we need to clear up some theological loose ends. So let me set the table with some necessary doctrinal history.

A Selective History of the Doctrine of Preexistence

In a 2013 *BYU Studies Quarterly* article, Samuel Brown argued that adoption is a theology that, among other things, differs from the doctrine of spirit birth that has prevailed in the Church since shortly *after* the death

4. Don Lattin, "Sunday Interview—Musings of the Main Mormon," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Apr. 13, 1997, <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/SUNDAY-INTERVIEW-Musings-of-the-Main-Mormon-2846138.php>.

5. See Gordon B. Hinckley, quoted in Van Biema, "Kingdom Come," *Time*, Aug. 4, 1997, 56.

of Joseph Smith.⁶ Before I began editing Brown's essay, I spent some time reacquainting myself with the history of this doctrine. What I learned reinforced for me just how crucial our view of the premortal experience is and how important it is to examine the ramifications of certain beliefs, some of which remain very much unsettled.

The doctrine of spirit birth plays an integral role in the development of the more encompassing doctrine of preexistence. Blake Ostler recounts a portion of this doctrinal history in a 1982 *Dialogue* article,⁷ as does Charles Harrell in a 1988 *BYU Studies* article⁸ and in his more recent "*This Is My Doctrine*": *The Development of Mormon Theology*.⁹ Ostler and Harrell begin with early Mormonism (roughly 1830–1835) when Latter-day Saints accepted the Catholic/Protestant idea of an infinite and absolute God and perhaps had no well-developed concept yet of an actual premortal existence of humanity. It has been argued that the spiritual creation mentioned in what is now the Book of Moses¹⁰ was understood by early Mormons to involve a strictly conceptual creation rather than an actual creation of all things, including men and women, in spirit form. Ostler presents this argument,¹¹ for instance, but Harrell contends that "no record from the early era of the Church offers any evidence that this spiritual creation was ever viewed in any way other than as a spirit

6. Samuel M. Brown, "Believing Adoption," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2013): 45–65.

7. Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 (1982): 59–78. Thomas G. Alexander also offers this argument in "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine from Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone* 5 (Jul.–Aug. 1980): 33, n. 23.

8. Charles Harrell, "The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844," *BYU Studies* 28, no. 2 (1988): 75–96.

9. See Charles R. Harrell, "*This Is My Doctrine*": *The Development of Mormon Theology* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), chapter 11.

10. See Moses 3:1–7; 5:24; 6:36, 51, 59, 63.

11. Ostler, "Idea of Pre-Existence," 61.

creation.”¹² Although we may not be able to discern exactly how early Latter-day Saints understood the concept of “spiritual creation,” we do know that Joseph Smith introduced the idea of uncreated intelligence in 1833 with the revelation that is now Doctrine and Covenants 93,¹³ but at that time the word *intelligence* was understood differently than Mormons today interpret the scriptural text. The notion of uncreated intelligence was understood to mean a general knowledge or awareness and not a personal preexistent spirit or unembodied but self-aware entity.¹⁴ Contemporary Latter-day Saints have been guilty of superimposing their current definition of terms on earlier statements, which creates problems in understanding what those early Latter-day Saints actually believed.

In 1839, Joseph Smith publicly rejected the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* and introduced the idea that each individual’s spirit was not created and has always existed.¹⁵ This teaching appears on several different

12. Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 80.

13. D&C 93:24 states, “Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.”

14. Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 82–83. Harrell quotes Parley P. Pratt and Thomas Ward to support the notion that the early Saints did not understand *intelligence* to mean a “personal preexistent spirit.”

15. Ostler, “Idea of Pre-Existence,” 61. See also Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 85. It should be noted that Joseph Smith’s understanding of the premortal existence of the human race and related concepts evolved and expanded over time. To try to harmonize all of his statements and even his revelations on the subject is probably impossible. Consequently, his later statements deserve more attention than his earlier statements. For example, Moses 6:36, revealed in June 1830, speaks of “spirits that God had created.” Likewise, Moses 3:5 refers to “the children of men” and that “in heaven I created them.” But in 1839, Joseph began teaching the doctrine of uncreated spirits: “The Spirit of Man is not a created being; it existed from Eternity & will exist to eternity. Anything created cannot be Eternal” (Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* [Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991], 9, quoting the Aug. 8, 1839, entry in Willard Richards Pocket Companion). In February 1840, he taught, “I believe that the *soul* is eternal; and had no beginning” (Ehat

occasions,¹⁶ and again what Joseph meant exactly with the term *spirit* is subject to debate, but he did use the term *soul* twice in describing the eternal existence of human beings, suggesting something more than a form of nonsentient intelligence. B. H. Roberts, for instance, insisted that Joseph was referring only to the mind or intelligence of man, not to the spirit body,¹⁷ but Joseph could very well have been referring to the spirit as an embodied form.

In 1842, Joseph began teaching that spirit is matter.¹⁸ He expanded the idea of uncreated, eternal spirits and their relationship to God until his death in 1844. In the so-called King Follett discourse, for example, Joseph taught that God found “himself in the midst of spirit and glory [and] because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the

and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 33, quoting Matthew Livingston Davis, a journalist who reported a speech Joseph gave on Feb. 5, 1840). It is difficult to reconcile these statements.

16. Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 85, gives quotations from Joseph Smith in Aug. 1839, Feb. 1840, Jan. 1841, Mar. 1841, Apr. 1842, and Apr. 1844 to support this doctrinal innovation.

17. See Roberts’s footnote to his amalgamated version of Joseph’s King Follett discourse, recorded in Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 6:311 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

18. “In tracing the thing to the foundation, and looking at it philosophically we shall find a very material difference between the body and the spirit:—the body is supposed to be organized matter, and the spirit by many is thought to be immaterial, without substance. With this latter statement we should beg leave to differ—and state that spirit is a substance; that it is material, but that it is more pure, elastic, and refined matter than the body;—that it existed before the body, can exist in the body, and will exist separate from the body, when the body will be mouldering in the dust; and will in the resurrection be again united with it” (Joseph Smith Jr., “Try the Spirits,” *Times and Seasons* 3 [Apr. 1, 1842]: 745). See also Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 84. On May 17, 1843, Joseph taught this doctrine at Ramus, Illinois; his words as recorded by William Clayton were later canonized as D&C 131:7.

rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.”¹⁹ If the record is an accurate reflection of what Joseph taught,²⁰ it appears he understood that God did not “create” his spirit children, but *found* them and entered into a covenant relationship with them. This is consistent with the Book of Abraham, which explains that God “came down in the beginning in the midst of all the intelligences” that Abraham was shown (Abraham 3:21). Two comments on this statement: First, if neither God nor the human race has a beginning, what is this beginning Abraham talks about, which is also mentioned in D&C 93:29 (“Man was also in the beginning with God”)? It must be the beginning of our association with our Father. If we accept the notion that God was once as we are, we also must accept the idea that he was not always God and that he was therefore not always our Father, which means our relationship with him had to have a beginning. Second, Joseph seemed to use the terms *intelligence*, *spirit*, and *soul* interchangeably at times. Two verses later in Abraham’s record, referring to the “intelligences” mentioned in verse 21, the account states that “God saw these *souls*²¹ that they were good” (emphasis mine), so he likely wasn’t seeing what modern-day Mormons would consider “intelligences,” namely, some sort of self-aware prespirit entities, because this concept, as I discuss below, did not develop until many years after Joseph’s death.

In all of Joseph’s teachings about the eternal nature of God and his children, there is no mention of exactly how they are related. Harrell and

19. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 360, quoting William Clayton’s transcript.

20. The King Follett discourse is generally quoted from one of two amalgamated texts, one produced by B. H. Roberts for *History of the Church*, and a more recent amalgamation by Stan Larson, published in *BYU Studies* in vol. 18, no. 2 (1978). These amalgamations are attempts to weave a coherent thread of oratory from four different sets of notes, all taken in longhand. The quotation here is taken from William Clayton’s account, not from an amalgamated text, but since it is a longhand transcript, it may not represent exactly what Joseph said.

21. Obviously, Joseph didn’t mean by “souls” our current understanding, which is body and spirit welded together (see D&C 88:15).

Ostler agree that there is no record of Joseph introducing the idea of a literal spirit birth, although Harrell argues that “Joseph Smith must be credited with having provided the impetus that led to an awareness of spirit birth.”²² Terryl Givens goes a step further, suggesting that Joseph must have given his close associates reason to believe not only that spirits are eternal but also that something such as spirit birth occurs. For instance, “William Clayton . . . recorded Smith as teaching that marriages which persist in the eternities will include the power to ‘have children in the celestial glory,’ implying that we may have been created by a comparable process. . . . Other evidence, however, suggests that Smith considered spirit and intelligence to be synonymous concepts, referring to an eternally existent entity.”²³ If he had lived a year or two longer, he may have resolved this uncertainty, but we have no way of knowing which path Joseph’s thought may have taken. After his demise, though, his followers began openly developing the doctrine of spirit birth. According to Brown,

By 1845, several Church leaders were arguing publicly that Joseph Smith’s divine anthropology required a birth from prespirit into spirit, a transition graphically patterned on the process of gestation and parturition familiar from human biology. There is a relentless, albeit asymmetrical, logic in this attempt to describe the internal workings of the system Joseph Smith had revealed only in broad contours. . . . They could as easily have chosen the spiritual rebirth of conversion and baptism, or the covenantal fatherhood proclaimed by King Benjamin, or the rebirth of resurrection as the exemplar for the process of premortal birth, but they chose mortal parenthood as their reference point.²⁴

22. Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 91.

23. Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 156.

24. Brown, “Believing Adoption,” 49.

Givens traces the first printed mention of a Heavenly Mother to an 1844 letter of W. W. Phelps to William Smith.²⁵ “He followed that exposition several months later with a hymn sung at the December 1844 dedication of the Nauvoo Seventies Hall, which announced ‘Here’s our Father in heaven, and Mother, the Queen.’”²⁶ Later that year Eliza R. Snow, one of Joseph’s plural wives, published her poem that is now the popular hymn “O My Father.”²⁷ But the existence of a Heavenly Mother requires spirit birth no more than the existence of a Heavenly Father does. References to a metaphorical parenthood and birth abound in scripture.²⁸ Still, from the Pratt brothers, George Q. Cannon, Erastus Snow, and others, the doctrine of spirit birth began to seep into public discourse.²⁹

25. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 108–9, quoting W. W. Phelps, “The Answer,” [to William Smith], *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 24 (Jan. 1, 1844): 758.

26. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 109, quoting a report in *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 2 (Feb. 1, 1845): 794.

27. First published in *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 17 (Nov. 15, 1845): 1039.

28. In scripture, as elsewhere, *birth* is often used in a metaphorical and not a literal sense. Being “born of the Spirit” (Mosiah 27:24) or “born of God” (Mosiah 27:25) or “spiritually begotten” (Mosiah 5:7) or “born again” (John 3:3) or “born of water and of the Spirit” (John 3:5) are all metaphorical terms. We “become [Christ’s] sons and . . . daughters” not through any sort of physical birth process but by covenant and adoption. Is it possible that our premortal relationship with God was similar to this? I would not be offended if this were the case. Some would argue that the phrase “bear the souls of men” (D&C 132:63) in the context of plural marriage refers to women bearing spirit children in the celestial kingdom. It has also been used as evidence for the existence of a Heavenly Mother. But as Givens explains, the interpretation of this verse is far from settled: “The syntax of the sentence makes the meaning a little ambiguous. . . . Whether the bearing refers to replenishing *this earth*, or an activity ‘*in the eternal worlds*’ is unclear” (Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 108). Likewise, a phrase in an earlier verse, “continuation of the seeds forever and ever” (D&C 132:19), has been understood by some as proof of spirit birth. But *seed* is already a metaphor when used regarding human conception. Why could it not be metaphorical in a spiritual context also?

29. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 110.

Ostler indicates that after Joseph's death Brigham Young and Orson Pratt, who disagreed on the basic nature of God and humans, both nevertheless adopted the idea of a literal spirit birth.³⁰ Although others promoted the idea of spirit birth,³¹ Young and Pratt were its two most influential early proponents. Young preferred the idea that personal identity was created at the organization of the spirit body and that intelligence was a raw material of sorts, without self-awareness or agency or accountability.³² Pratt's theory, by contrast, involved "particles" that were eternal, self-aware, and capable of being governed by laws. They were organized at spirit birth into a new configuration that required them to act, feel, and think in union (as a spirit body).³³ Both Young and Pratt agreed, however, that neither God

30. See Ostler, "Idea of Pre-Existence," 64–65.

31. For example, Lorenzo Snow had speculated on the doctrine as early as 1842. Lorenzo Snow to Elder Walker, Feb. 14, 1842, Lorenzo Snow Notebook 1841–1842, MS 2737, pp. 75–77, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. William W. Phelps had also written the notion into a hymn published several months after Joseph Smith's death. William W. Phelps, "Come to Me," *Times and Seasons* 6 (Jan. 15, 1845): 783.

32. See discussion in Ostler, "Idea of Pre-Existence," 66. For examples of Brigham Young's teachings, see *Journal of Discourses*, 2:135 ("The origin of thought was planted in our organization at the beginning of our being"); 6:31 ("What is the mind? It is that character that was made and fashioned after the image of God before these bodies were made"); 7:285 ("The life that is within us is a part of an eternity of life and is organized spirit, which is clothed upon by tabernacles"); 8:205 ("God is the source of all intelligence, no matter who possesses it, whether man upon the earth, the spirits in the spirit-world, the angels that dwell in the eternities of the Gods, or the most inferior intelligence among the devils in hell").

33. See discussion in Ostler, "Idea of Pre-Existence," 64–65. Pratt taught that "each particle eternally existed prior to its organization; each was enabled to perceive its own existence; each had the power of self-motion" (Orson Pratt, *The Seer* [Washington, D.C., 1853], 102). These particle entities would be "organized in the womb of the celestial female" and become thereby individual spirit bodies. "The particles that enter into the organization of the infant spirit are placed in a new sphere of action . . . [and] can no longer act, or feel, or think

nor his children existed as autonomous, self-aware individuals until after they had been organized through the process of spirit birth.

In 1884, after the deaths of Young and Pratt, Charles Penrose promoted a theory somewhat similar to Orson Pratt's, endorsing again the idea that only "in the elementary particles of His organism" did God have no beginning and that "there must have been a time when [God] was organized."³⁴ In 1907, B. H. Roberts published the idea that before spirit birth we existed as individualized "intelligences" that were then given spirit bodies through a process similar to mortal conception, gestation, and birth.³⁵ Whether this idea is original to Roberts is uncertain, perhaps even doubtful. As Jim Faulconer has pointed out,³⁶ in 1895, Brigham Young Academy instructor Nels L. Nelson published an article in *The Contributor* in which he proposed three components in man: the ego, the spirit body, and the physical body. Defining the first component, Nelson wrote: "The ego [is] that in us which enables us to say: 'This is I, and this is the universe.' This principle is co-eternal with God. It never had a beginning nor can it ever have an end. It might appropriately be called the mind of the spirit."³⁷ This notion of an uncreated ego, he claimed, was the only way he could see to harmonize Joseph Smith's teachings that the spirit is uncreated and yet is born of Heavenly Parents. Roberts had certainly read Nelson's article, for he mentioned both "Prof. Nelson" and the "ego" in

as independent individuals, but the law to control them in their new sphere requires them to act, and feel, and think in union" (Pratt, *The Seer*, 103).

34. Charles Penrose, Nov. 16, 1884, *Journal of Discourses*, 26:23.

35. B. H. Roberts, "Immortality of Man," *Improvement Era* 10, no. 6 (Apr. 1907): 406–7, <https://archive.org/stream/improvementera106unse#page/408/mode/2up>.

36. James Faulconer, "The Mormon Understanding of Persons . . . and God," *Speaking Silence* (blog), Aug. 17, 2011, <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Mormon-Understanding-of-Persons-and-God-James-Faulconer-08-18-2011?offset=1&max=1>.

37. Nels L. Nelson, "Theosophy and Mormonism," *The Contributor* 16, no. 12 (1895): 736.

his own 1907 article,³⁸ but he expanded upon this reasoning and perhaps adopted the terminology of Smith's King Follett discourse, renaming this uncreated component the "intelligence," a self-aware prespirit entity. Roberts was not alone in promoting this theory. In the draft of his 1914 *Rational Theology* that was submitted for approval to the First Presidency, John A. Widtsoe promoted ideas similar to Roberts's.³⁹

Significantly, Roberts's explanation of premortality was rejected by the First Presidency, as was Widtsoe's, and the relevant text was deleted from *Rational Theology* before it was published. Roberts's magnum opus, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, in which he outlined his view of a two-tiered premortality, was not published until sixty-one years after his death (jointly by BYU Studies and Deseret Book, followed the next year by a Signature Books edition). But because of the inherent appeal of the idea of sentient prespirit intelligences, over time it gained ascendancy and is now probably the most common understanding of the premortal existence held among Latter-day Saints.⁴⁰

Bruce R. McConkie and others, however, promoted a neoorthodox view more similar to Brigham Young's, insisting that men and women

38. Roberts, "Immortality of Man," 407, 408.

39. See discussion in Alexander, "Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 30–31. See also John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology as Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: General Priesthood Committee, 1915), 26–27, 64–66, 146, for the published version of Widtsoe's ideas.

40. "In spite of such cautionary statements [as made by Joseph Fielding Smith], numerous Mormon writers have assumed personal eternalism to be Mormonism's official doctrine at least since 1940" (Ostler, "Idea of Pre-Existence," 72). In the April general conference of 2015, Elder D. Todd Christofferson gave this doctrine a semi-official stamp of approval by presenting it as if it were a settled matter: "Prophets have revealed that we first existed as intelligences and that we were given form, or spirit bodies, by God, thus becoming His spirit children" (D. Todd Christofferson, "Why Marriage, Why Family," *Ensign*, May 2015, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/04/why-marriage-why-family?lang=eng&r=1>).

did not exist as conscious entities before spirit birth.⁴¹ The Church has never weighed in with an official stance on this disagreement over our prespirit status, and so a degree of ambiguity reigns at this fundamental level of LDS theology. The one constant, however, from 1845 to the present—appearing in the theories of Pratt, Young, Penrose, Nelson, Roberts, McConkie, and many others—is the idea that we are begotten by our Heavenly Father and given birth by a Heavenly Mother in a process similar to human conception, gestation, and parturition.

Ironically, it may have been Charles Darwin who indirectly cemented spirit birth's place in the Mormon doctrine of premortality.⁴² Five years after Young's death, Orson Whitney argued against Darwin's theory of evolution, which presented challenges to Christian theology in general, by employing the notion of spirit birth in his defense of the biblical account of earth's (and man's) creation: "Man is the direct offspring of Deity, of a being who is the Begetter of his spirit in the eternal worlds, and the Architect of his mortal tabernacle in this. . . . For man is the child of God, fashioned in His image and endowed with His attributes, and even as the infant son of an earthly father is capable in due time of becoming a man, so the undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage is capable in due time of becoming a God."⁴³

Twenty-seven years later, in November 1909, in the wake of a Brigham Young University centennial celebration of the birth of Charles Darwin and troubling statements in support of Darwin by faculty member Ralph

41. Ostler, "Idea of Pre-Existence," 72. See, for instance, Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 387 ("The intelligence or spirit element became intelligences after the spirits were born as individual entities"). See also Alexander, "Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 32.

42. Credit for this insight goes to a blogger using the pseudonym "aquinas," who wishes to remain anonymous and has since removed all of the relevant posts from the internet.

43. Orson F. Whitney, "Man's Origin and Destiny," *Contributor* 3, no. 9 (Jun. 1882), 269–70.

Chamberlin and others, the First Presidency issued a document (“The Origin of Man”) drafted by Orson Whitney and based largely on his 1882 article. This document included the following:

The Father of Jesus is our Father also. . . . Jesus, however, is the firstborn among all the sons of God—the first begotten in the spirit, and the only begotten in the flesh. He is our elder brother, and we, like Him, are in the image of God. All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity. . . . The doctrine of the pre-existence . . . shows that man, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal body to undergo an experience in mortality.⁴⁴

This doctrinal exposition effectively established spirit birth as the official doctrine of the Church regarding our premortal relationship with our Father in Heaven. As evidence of how influential this exposition still is, over a hundred years after its publication, “The Origin of Man” has been quoted in two official Church manuals in recent years (one manual actually quoting from the other).⁴⁵

The doctrine of spirit birth gained traction only after Joseph Smith’s death; nevertheless, it seems to be the only official teaching of the Church today, although the wording current Church leaders use is often more cautious and measured than in earlier days, likely because of the adverse reaction this doctrine elicits from mainstream Christians.⁴⁶

44. Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, Anthon H. Lund, “The Origin of Man,” *Improvement Era* 13, no. 1 (Nov. 1909): 75–81; also reprinted as “Gospel Classics: The Origin of Man,” *Ensign* 32, no. 2 (Feb. 2002): 26–30.

45. *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.), 9, https://www.lds.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/language-materials/06195_eng.pdf?lang=eng, quoting *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 335.

46. Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, for instance, made this statement in 2012: “Members of the Church understand that God

It may be that the doctrine of literal spirit birth emerged as an attempt to bridge the conceptual gap between Joseph's early revelations (especially Moses 3) about a spiritual creation of everything, including humankind, preceding physical creation and his later teachings about uncreated and eternal spirits. This new doctrine, however, gave birth to another conundrum: how to account for evil and accountability in the world if, as Brigham Young taught, God created the spirits of men and women from impersonal eternal material called "intelligence."⁴⁷ This conundrum is identical to the dilemma created by the Christian doctrine *creatio ex nihilo*, merely moving it back one link in the chain of existence. B. H. Roberts (perhaps following the lead of Nels Nelson) solved this problem by introducing the idea of prespirit beings called "intelligences," thus allowing for eternal inequality and accountability, but this idea introduced other philosophical difficulties, which Blake Ostler briefly outlines: "The doctrine of personal eternalism raises problems for

the Father is the Supreme Governor of the universe, the Power that gave us spiritual being, and the Author of the plan that gives us hope and potential. He is our Heavenly Father, and we lived in His presence as part of His family in the premortal life. . . . Our Heavenly Father has chosen not to reveal many details of our premortal life with Him. . . . Every human being is a begotten spirit son or daughter of our Heavenly Father. *Begotten* is an adjectival form of the verb *beget* and means 'brought into being.' *Beget* is the expression used in the scriptures to describe the process of giving life" (Quentin L. Cook, "The Doctrine of the Father," *Ensign*, Feb. 2012, 33–34). In admitting that God has revealed very little about our premortal existence, Elder Cook employs, interestingly, a carefully worded and rather broad (if not figurative) definition of the term *beget*.

47. The problem of trying to reconcile God's goodness with the presence of evil in the world, often referred to as *theodicy*, is closely intertwined with the ideas presented in this essay. For a thorough discussion of this problem, see David L. Paulsen and Blake Thomas Ostler, "Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making: Joseph Smith on the Problem of Evil," in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, edited by Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 237–84.

Mormon thought. If the number of intelligences is infinite, then an infinite number of intelligences will remain without the chance to progress by further organization. If, on the other hand, the number of intelligences is finite, the eternal progression of gods resulting from begetting spirits must one day cease. Either way, the dilemma remains.⁴⁸ What we are left with today are certain unsettled points of doctrine.

Doctrinal Possibilities

These doctrines are unsettled primarily because Joseph Smith died before he made clear exactly what he understood regarding our premortal state, and apparently none of his successors have felt comfortable filling in all the gaps (or perhaps they have disagreed on the details). It is also possible that Joseph himself was uncertain regarding some of the particulars and that God, for some reason, was reluctant to reveal too many specifics about the nature of premortality. The revelations are intriguing but unclear on some points. According to Doctrine and Covenants 93:29, for instance, “intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.” But does this refer to some sort of unembodied yet individualized prespirit entity or a rudimentary, impersonal spiritual element? Whatever it means, the context suggests something more than the general conceptual notion of knowledge or understanding held by the earliest Mormons.⁴⁹ The idea that intelligence cannot be created suggests it is a self-existent capacity or entity. Along these same lines, in the King Follett discourse, given just weeks before the Prophet’s murder and captured in longhand imperfectly by four scribes, Joseph taught, “The mind of man—the intelligent part is coequal with, God himself. . . . Is it

48. Ostler, “Idea of Pre-Existence,” 74.

49. “All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence” (D&C 93:30). Here, intelligence appears to have the ability to act independently, and so does truth, which raises questions about what truth actually is. Of course, this may merely be another example of Joseph using words imprecisely.

logic to say that a spirit is immortal and yet have a beginning[?] because if a spirit have a beginning it will have an end. . . . Intelligence exists upon a self-existent principle—is a spirit from age to age & no creation about it.”⁵⁰ Although Joseph seemed to use the terms *mind*, *intelligence*, and *spirit* interchangeably, he was very clear that the “mind of man,” the intelligent part that gives us agency, identity, and being, had no beginning. Whether that intelligent mind was already packaged in a spirit body is uncertain. Joseph left both doors open on that question.

Because of the imprecision of Joseph’s statements and the equally imprecise records that preserved these statements, we are left with two initial possibilities: (1) our spirits always existed in an embodied form, or (2) our spirits were organized by Deity through either a process analogous to mortal birth or some other creative endeavor. The second option leads to two further possibilities: (1) prior to the creation of our spirits, we were already self-aware, individual, intelligent entities with agency and accountability; or (2) our spirits were organized from an impersonal spirit substance called intelligence, at which point we became sentient, accountable individuals. Dividing these possibilities along different lines, there are two ultimate alternatives: (1) at some point, we became individual, accountable entities; or (2) we have always existed as self-aware, individual beings, either as uncreated spirits or as intelligences who later acquired spirit bodies. During my investigation of our premortal past (and perhaps heavily influenced by Brown’s essay), the more I learned about the idea of spirit birth and its theological history, the less persuasive I found it. But that is not the most important question anyway. Whether my spirit always existed, whether I am a literal child of Heavenly Parents through

50. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 359, William Clayton account. I would argue with Joseph’s logic here. Simple mathematics demonstrates that something can have a beginning but no end. A straight line that begins at point A but goes on forever in a certain direction is an example. Another is a series of whole numbers, beginning at 3 and increasing by 3 forever—3, 6, 9, 12 . . . and so on to infinity. So logic does not insist that because we have no end we also have no beginning.

a process of spirit birth, or whether my spirit body was organized using some other mechanism and was then adopted into the heavenly family does not really matter to me. Adoption is a perfectly viable method of joining a family, either in mortality or in a prior life.⁵¹ The more important question—indeed, the *most* important question, regarding our premortal existence—is whether, on the one hand, I was always “me,” an individual with a unique personality, strengths and weaknesses, and the inviolable right to choose my path, or, on the other hand, at some point in the past I was conjured into existence out of impersonal elements and given free

51. See note 28 above. Regardless of the theological arguments for or against spirit birth, however, there are serious logistical problems with the notion that we all became children of Heavenly Parents through some sort of process similar to mortal conception, gestation, and parturition. Consider, for example, that before the end of the Millennium there will have been at least 317 billion of Father's “children” sent to this earth (through either mortal birth or being cast down with Satan). How I derived this admittedly *conservative* estimate is detailed in appendixes A and B at the end of this article. And this world is but one of “innumerable” worlds God tells us he has created (see Moses 1:35). The staggering number of children our Heavenly Father would have had to sire ought to make us rethink our belief that we were born to heavenly parents through some process similar to human conception and birth. Even polygamy on a galactic scale could not produce such a massive “family.” These mind-boggling numbers alone strongly support the notion of eternally existing spirits that become God's children through covenant and adoption rather than birth. These numbers also reveal how naïve we are in assuming that we lived “with” Heavenly Father in the premortal existence, a truism usually spoken glibly, as if it were perfectly rational that we ran around the heavenly mansion with our siblings and sat down to dinner with him every evening, just as we do with our mortal parents.

There are, of course, other ways around the sticky issue of astronomical numbers. One is the possibility of multidimensional time, which I have explored elsewhere and which would allow, hypothetically, for billions of births at once. See Roger Terry, *“Away with Stereotyped Mormons!”: Thoughts on Individuality, Perfection, and the Broad Expanse of Eternity* (Orem, Utah: Rendsburg Publishing, 1996), 27–40. But this possibility has even less basis in scripture than the notion of spirit adoption.

will at that point, with its accompanying accountability. This is a crucial question for several reasons, and I believe the evidence overwhelmingly favors the idea that we have always existed as accountable beings with free will. Let me give only two of several possible arguments supporting this assertion.

Agency and Accountability

If we assume that God organized our spirits from some kind of impersonal spiritual element called intelligence, and that before this creative act those spirits did not exist as conscious, individual beings, then God did in fact create something—a conscious, self-aware, independent, accountable personality—where before there was nothing. And if this is the case, the creation of the spirit signifies the inception of agency, if this is even possible.

We know that spirits had agency in the premortal existence. But if God created a conscious entity from unconscious elements, knowing perfectly at the outset that this particular new being possessed substantial flaws and weaknesses and had no chance whatever (in God’s mind, at least, since he sees the end from the beginning)⁵² to gain exaltation, then God would be, in a very real sense, at least partially accountable for that being’s damnation. Why? Because he created that spirit child with insurmountable weaknesses, which he or she had no choice in acquiring. In essence, if God, using impersonal “intelligence” as his potter’s clay, chooses for some reason to make one spirit vessel adequately strong and another hopelessly flawed, then the ultimate exaltation or damnation of the individual is largely his doing.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell used this same argument to combat the notion that God created all things out of nothing:

Latter-day Saints also know that God did not create man *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. The concept of an “out of nothing” creation confronts its adherents with a severe dilemma. One commentator wrote of human

52. See, for instance, Abraham 2:8 and D&C 38:2. See also note 56 below.

suffering and an “out of nothing” creation: “We cannot say that [God] would like to help but cannot: God is omnipotent. We cannot say that he would help if he only knew: God is omniscient. We cannot say that he is not responsible for the wickedness of others: God creates those others. Indeed an omnipotent, omniscient God [who creates all things absolutely—i.e., out of nothing] must be an accessory before (and during) the fact to every human misdeed; as well as being responsible for every non-moral defect in the universe.”⁵³

Antony Flew, the atheist philosopher quoted by Elder Maxwell (and who late in life became a deist),⁵⁴ is pointing out the inescapable flaw in the notion of *ex nihilo* creation, but the same illogic applies to the idea that God created conscious and imperfect but accountable beings out of impersonal, unaccountable raw materials. On a significant level, this idea is precisely analogous to *creatio ex nihilo* and leads to the inescapable conclusion that God is at least partially (perhaps primarily) accountable for the evil in the world. Indeed, some of his children have an astonishing capacity and proclivity for evil. Given the choice, why would God create such beings?

Blake Ostler similarly argues that a fundamental incompatibility exists between free will and the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*:

If the causes of our acts originate from causes outside of our control, then we are not free and cannot be praised or blamed for what we do resulting from those causes. . . . Thus, a person must be an ultimate source of her acts to be free. . . . The source of the action is the agent's own will that is not caused by events or acts outside of the agent but from the agent's own

53. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Richness of the Restoration,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1998, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1998/03/the-richness-of-the-restoration?lang=eng>, quoting Antony Flew, “Theology and Falsification,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by Antony Flew and Alasdair Macintyre (1955; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1973), 107.

54. William Grimes, “Antony Flew, Philosopher and Ex-Atheist, Dies at 87,” *New York Times*, Apr. 16, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/17/arts/17flew.html? r=0>.

acts of will. . . . If the libertarian demand that we must be the ultimate source of our choices to be morally responsible for them is sound, then God cannot create morally responsible persons *ex nihilo*.⁵⁵

Ostler's argument is valid whether we are talking about the Christian notion of God creating the physical world and mortal souls out of nothing or the LDS view that God created (organized) all things spiritually before they were created physically. Free will, or agency, can only truly exist for God's children if they are what theologians call "first causes," uncreated individuals.

Mormons do not believe in a deterministic God. We believe in a God who has perfect foreknowledge.⁵⁶ But since the God described by those who favor the "impersonal intelligence" theory does indeed play a deterministic

55. Blake T. Ostler, *The Problems of Theism and the Love of God*, vol. 2 of *Exploring Mormon Thought* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2006), 410–11.

56. There is some debate among LDS philosophers and theologians about God's omniscience, what the term means, and whether it includes a perfect foreknowledge of events. Terryl Givens, for instance, refers to the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, which "states that 'Latter-day Saints differ among themselves in their understanding of the nature of God's knowledge. Some have thought that God increases endlessly in knowledge as well as in glory and dominion. Others hold to the more traditional view that God's knowledge, including the foreknowledge of future free contingencies, is complete.' But it is hard to find in Mormon writings either any apostolic pronouncement that limits God's knowledge of the future or the opinion that divine omniscience would be an impediment to free will. [Joseph] Smith denied the assumption that God's omniscience must condition at least a limited predestination. He asserted simply, 'I believe that God foreknew everything, but did not foreordain everything; I deny that foreordain and foreknow is the same thing'" (Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 100, quoting David L. Paulsen, "Omnipotence of God; Omnipresence of God; Omniscience of God," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. [New York: Macmillan, 1992], 3:1030, and a report in a letter [now lost] by Mathew L. Davis, written to his wife, Feb. 6, 1840, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 33). In LDS scripture, we also have the Lord describing himself as "the same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes" (D&C 38:2), and "I know the end from the beginning" (Abraham 2:8).

role in the lives of his children—by the choice of elements he employs in their creation—he is, therefore, ultimately accountable for their failures.

We may argue that no weakness is insurmountable, that we can choose to accept God's grace and overcome our weaknesses, so that "weak things become strong" unto us (Ether 12:27). Our ultimate destiny is then a product of our choices, regardless of any disadvantage we may have been given at the outset. But if we were burdened before we were ever capable of choice with fundamental weaknesses—perhaps even a basic incapacity to plant the seed of faith—how can we be accountable for not having sufficient faith to accept God's grace and overcome that weakness? It is an eternal catch—22. Our strengths and weaknesses always influence our choices. Sometimes we are simply too weak to choose correctly. Sometimes we are too weak to even ask for strength. If God created us as sentient beings from nonsentient material, knowing from the outset that we would not choose to become as he is—and this is a very real scenario for the majority of his children who live to the age of accountability—we might very well ask why he would create us that way. For his entertainment? Because he needs other beings to worship him? Or perhaps so that he would be needed by us? But we do not believe in a sadistic or narcissistic or insecure God. So why wouldn't he create us differently, make us more like his flawless Firstborn? Precisely because he did *not* create us from impersonal raw materials.

Sin, Satan, and Punishment

The notion of sin also argues against the theory that our spirits were formed out of impersonal raw material. Sin is more than simple bad behavior (doing things we know we should not do). The question that is rarely asked, or answered, is what causes us to do things we know we shouldn't do? Temptation? No, temptation does not *cause* sin. The root cause of sin is our inability or unwillingness to resist temptation. In other words, sin results from weakness. If we had no weakness, we likely would

not sin. Christ was sinless because he was not weak. He was tempted in all points, undoubtedly more severely than any of God's other children, yet he never succumbed (see Hebrews 4:15). Someone once said: "Sin is not ignorance; it is insanity."⁵⁷ This is a perceptive distinction. When we have no knowledge of appropriate behaviors and attitudes, we are not accountable. Sin occurs when we know the law but act against our own better judgment. Sometimes we act against better judgment out of rebellion (although it can be argued that rebelliousness is simply a particular manifestation of weakness), but usually our sins do not come from rebellion. Most often we are simply too weak to withstand temptation, too weak to break out of dysfunctional behavioral patterns, too weak to invoke God's saving grace. So, if our weaknesses are God's doing because he used an inferior quality or selection of "intelligence" when he formed our spirits, then we cannot be accountable for our failure to measure up. "It's not my fault," any of us could argue, "that God didn't use top-quality intelligence when he organized my spirit. It's not my fault that he didn't make me more like Jesus." Indeed, in such a universe, dear Brutus, the fault is *not* in ourselves, but in our stars.⁵⁸

The very existence of Satan creates difficulties for the intelligence-as-impersonal-raw-material argument. God sees the end from the beginning. He knew, when he organized the spirit son named Lucifer, that he was creating a vessel doomed to suffer the horrible torments of eternal hell. Would a compassionate God create from oblivion a conscious being, a son he would love, if he knew with a perfect foreknowledge that this son would spend eternity in hellish agony? Not if intelligence were merely a mass of raw, impersonal material to be used as God saw fit. Such an act would be nothing less than sadism. The same, of course, holds true for

57. My sister, who worked in the late 1970s in the BYU Graduate School office, attributed this statement to the dean of the Graduate School, Chauncey Riddle, who was also a professor of philosophy.

58. My apologies to William Shakespeare; see *Julius Caesar*, I.ii.140–41.

his other children, many of whom, he knew at the outset, would suffer varying degrees of eternal damnation.

The only logical explanation for the fact that we are completely accountable for our decisions and must suffer the consequences of those choices is that we have always existed, that our weaknesses and strengths are an intrinsic part of us, and that we have always been accountable for them. This makes perfect sense. If I am either an eternally existing spirit or recipient of a spirit body and have the opportunity to both expand my innate strengths and overcome my inherent weaknesses—through my own efforts and through the saving grace of Christ—it is I who am wholly accountable for my success or failure, and my free will is totally unimpaired. In this theory, instead of God being a preferential determiner of destinies, an omnipotent playwright who dreams up an infinitely varied cast to perform his bizarre eternal tragicomedy, he becomes a compassionate volunteer, aiding in our eternal progress, but never infringing on our eternal agency to become whatever we choose. The only logical explanation for our unfettered free will, our complete accountability, and a just God's willingness to punish us for disobedience is the *eternal* existence of identity. And this, I believe, is what Joseph Smith was trying to teach. Eternal sentient existence redefines our relationship with God. If we were just impersonal intelligence before God "created" our spirit bodies, then his relationship to us is far different than if we existed forever as self-aware beings with agency and inherent strengths and weaknesses.

It has taken many paragraphs and a good deal of doctrinal history and theological reasoning to reach the main point I am trying to make in this essay, but let us be clear about one thing: the notion that our basic personal essence and individuality have always existed is not just fodder for fascinating gospel speculation. It has some significant ramifications. At a fundamental level, it defines our relationship with Deity, our relationship with each other, and the source and nature of God's authority over us. By logical extension, it should also influence how we view our own authority and the way we exercise it.

Joseph Smith's "Heresy": The Source of God's Authority

As a church, we claim to have been organized by men who had first received authority from divinely commissioned messengers. The Savior himself always grounded his own authority in the claim that he was sent by his Father and always executed the Father's will (see 3 Nephi 27:13; John 7:28–29; 8:28–29, 42; 12:49). Regarding the gospel and the Restoration, everything is thus dependent on correct authority that can be traced back to God. But this leads to an even more fundamental question: What is the source of God's authority? Although on the surface this query may appear either obvious or blasphemous, if we are to achieve a correct gospel perspective on authority and on the nature of our relationship with Deity, this is a question we must address, for its answer reveals the foundational pattern upon which all authority in the Church, and even the Savior's own authority, must rest. Let me clarify here that when I talk about God's authority I am not referring to his power over the physical universe. That is unquestionably a consequence of his perfection and intelligence. I am instead referring specifically to his authority *over us*. Why and how does he have authority over us?

I am no expert in the beliefs of other religious traditions, but I assume the customary Christian answer to this question would be that since God is omnipotent and omniscient and since he created all things, including us, either *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) or *ex deo* (out of himself), then we are no different from any of his other creations and he can do whatever he pleases with us. His authority needs no source, because he *is* the source—of everything. Interestingly, if we as Latter-day Saints accept the theory proposed first by Brigham Young, that we did not exist as self-aware individual entities before our spirit birth, then our answer to the question regarding God's authority would be quite similar to the traditional Christian answer, and because of nebulous doctrine here, authority figures sometimes do make statements that lean toward this

view of our relationship with Diety.⁵⁹ But I believe Joseph Smith suggested a radically different response to this question, a response most Christians would consider heresy. Indeed, Joseph completely redefined not only the nature of humankind but also the nature of God and of our relationship to him, which in turn circumscribe our ability to exercise authority in his name. In William Clayton's notes of the King Follett discourse, we find the following, some of which has already been quoted above:

Another subject—the soul—the mind of man—they say God created it in the beginning. The idea lessens man in my estimation. [I] don't believe the doctrine—[I] know better—God told me so. . . . We say that God was self-existent who told you so? It's correct enough but how did it get

59. For instance, we quite often hear God referred to as “the Governor of the universe” or “the great God of the universe” (LDS Bible Dictionary, 681; Gordon B. Hinckley, “We Bear Witness of Him,” *Ensign*, May 1990, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1998/04/we-bear-witness-of-him?lang=eng>). But if we believe statements from earlier prophets—“As man now is, God once was”; “he has passed the ordeals we are now passing through”; “God Himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!” (see references in footnote 3)—then God is not the Governor of the universe. How could he be the great God of this universe if he was once a mortal inhabitant of a world in this universe? The only possibility is if we accept the multiverse theory, but no prophet has ever gone on record with such a claim. If we reject the multiverse theory and accept doctrine taught by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and Lorenzo Snow, we must admit that our Father is the Governor of a part of this universe. Does this diminish him? No more than Joseph's assertion that he was once as we are now. Certainly, being the great God of even one galaxy such as ours is consistent with his own statements about himself. “My works are without end. . . . And worlds without number have I created. . . . [A]nd innumerable are they unto man; but all things are numbered unto me, for they are mine and I know them” (Moses 1:4, 32, 35). Here God is obviously claiming that his worlds are without number *to us*. They are too many *for us* to count. And that statement is certainly true of the Milky Way galaxy. We have only vague estimates of the number of stars in our galaxy and even more uncertain estimates of the number of planets, and no mortal could live long enough to count them, even if we were able to see them all.

into your heads—who told you that man did not exist upon the same principle. . . . The mind of man—the intelligent part is coequal with, God himself. . . . Is it logic to say that a spirit is immortal and yet have a beginning because if a spirit have a beginning it will have an end—good logic—illustrated by his ring. All the fools and learned & wise men that comes and tells that man has a beginning proves that he must have an end and if that doctrine is true then the doctrine of annihilation is true. But if I am right then I might be bold to say that God never did have power to create the spirit of man at all. He could not create himself—Intelligence exists upon a self-existent principle—is a spirit from age to age & no creation about it. . . . That God himself—find himself in the midst of spirit and glory because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.⁶⁰

If Clayton's notes from this sermon are accurate, it seems quite clear that Joseph believed God did not create the essence of humans—our spirit or intelligence, our mind. Our spirits, writes Abraham, “have no beginning” (Abraham 3:18). God came down among “the intelligences,” he told Abraham, and made some of these “spirits” his rulers (Abraham 3:21–23).⁶¹ This does not mean, however, that God came down among the weaker intelligences and forced them to accept his plan and his laws. Such a notion runs counter to everything we know about our Father in Heaven. It also runs counter to every notion we possess of behavior that is moral

60. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 359–60, William Clayton Report.

61. Abraham records that the Lord showed him “the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones” (Abraham 3:22). Some have interpreted “organized” here to mean that God organized the intelligences into spirits, but a more plain reading is that God came down among intelligences or spirits who were then (or perhaps already) organized socially. Indeed, this is the way the Prophet Joseph repeatedly interpreted this statement. Charles Harrell gives five different examples of this interpretation between 1839 and 1843, then concludes, “The only organization of intelligences envisioned by the Prophet in these statements is a social organization and not an organization of intelligence into intelligences. Joseph taught that spirits, like God, are self-existent” (Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 86).

and appropriate in exercising authority righteously. If, as Joseph boldly declared, we are eternal beings whose minds or intelligence could not be created, and if, as the account of Abraham suggests, God came down in the beginning among a group of already existing beings, then we were, in a very real sense, self-existent and independent, and God, no matter how much more intelligent or perfect he was, would have had no right to dictate to us how we were to exist. To put it in modern terms, he did not conduct a hostile takeover of our eternal spirits or intelligences. No, this is not how God would behave. More consistent with the pattern he has established in all his dealings with us, he likely entered into a covenant relationship with his future children. Seeing his glory and intelligence when he “came down,” we naturally desired to become like him, so we accepted his offer to become our Father, and he promised to place us in a “sphere,” or repeated spheres (see D&C 93:30), where we could progress, where he would institute laws that would enable us to advance. We were not forced into the premortal “sphere,” where we were his spirit children, but accepted it freely as the price we had to pay to progress. And in both the premortal sphere, where we purportedly lived with and learned from him, and in this mortal sphere, where we are tried and tested away from his presence, we have always been free to obey or disobey his commandments and to accept the consequences of either choice. Because God did not create us *ex nihilo* or *ex deo* at either our mortal birth or our “spirit birth,” our relationship to him is not that of puppet to puppeteer. Nor do we exist merely at his whim and pleasure. Ours is a relationship founded on the principles of free choice, covenant, and accountability.

Significantly, this redefined relationship of humanity to Deity also redefines the source of God's authority over us. If I am correctly assessing what Joseph was trying to teach toward the end of his life, then God's authority does not come from the mere fact that he is perfect, omniscient, and omnipotent or from the mistaken idea that we were created at his caprice for his own purposes. Rather, his authority must be a consensual matter. He has authority over us *only because we granted it to him*. Truman

Madsen suggested as much: “In all-important ways even He, the greatest of all, can only do with us what we will permit Him to do.”⁶² I am not suggesting that we can escape God’s authority simply by declaring we are no longer answerable to him, nor am I implying that our relationship with him is in any way democratic, even though he has built this feature to a certain degree into his Church, at least on a theoretical level (see D&C 20:65; 26:2). Of course God has great authority over us. That issue was settled long ago—in the “beginning,” I assume. If he wishes to, he can punish us or even end our earthly sojourn. All I am concerned about here is the *source* of this authority. Where did it come from? Must it not exist because we elected at some point to grant him this authority, trusting him to use it perfectly in helping us attain our full potential? If so, this explains why he is so careful about our free will, why Jesus insisted that authority among his disciples was to be exercised differently than the authority wielded by unbelievers (see Matthew 20:26–28), why Joseph Smith outlined strict parameters within which priesthood authority is valid (see D&C 121:34–42), and why the human race is so compelled to seek freedom and so abhors oppression. Thus, the source of God’s authority is not power or force or position. He is neither tyrant nor dictator. He is the ultimate Leader because we chose to *follow* him. And apparently, this pattern is the one we should emulate, not the opposite pattern, the one so common in the world, a pattern of usurping power and exercising it unilaterally. Those who chose to not follow God—Lucifer and his followers—were, in essence, renegeing on their part of the covenant they had made that granted God authority over them. Consequently, they were cast out of heaven and will eventually be consigned to a place where they can no longer progress, because they chose to reject the course that would have led them onward and upward to eternal glory and perfection.

62. Truman Madsen, *Four Essays on Love* (Provo: Communications Workshop, 1971), 57.

Concluding Thoughts

The picture of God I have painted above presents, I believe, a sound argument regarding our premortal existence. If God did indeed, at some point, create us as sentient, individual personalities from some sort of impersonal spirit element, then in a very real sense we are his creations—his property, as it were—and he does not need our consent to do with us as he pleases. He can place us in the most awful circumstances and refuse to help us or even give us any understanding of why we are going through disease, disaster, and destitution. In such a universe, God is indeed the source of all intelligent beings and of all authority, as well as the source of all weakness and suffering. But according to this theory, since he created us so imperfectly, with inherent flaws, how can we possibly trust him to perform his works of salvation perfectly? Something in this view of eternity, to put it in Joseph's terms, tastes bad.⁶³

What I have attempted to establish here is the idea that we have always been sentient, individual beings, which leads inexorably to the conclusion that God's authority over us and his relationship to us is far different than if we assume he created our individual personalities, or minds, out of raw material (or out of nothing). In other words, I am arguing that *he* is not the source of his authority over us—we are. I have also attempted to demonstrate that this idea is central, even essential, to Mormonism's unique message, because without it, our relationship with God is not fundamentally different than that imagined by traditional Christianity, our belief in premortality and in an embodied God notwithstanding. This unique Mormon understanding of our eternal nature implies that as individuals we have certain eternal, unalienable rights, and it is apparent from God's dealings with us that he strictly honors these rights, two of

63. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 346, quoting Wilford Woodruff's journal: "this is good doctrine, it tastes good, I can taste the principles of eternal life, so can you."

which are the freedom to choose and the accountability for our choices (see 2 Nephi 2:26–27; D&C 101:78; Galatians 6:7).

Elsewhere I have discussed two basic types of authority—personal and institutional.⁶⁴ God’s authority over us is certainly personal, unless he is merely an officer in some larger, eternal organization. In that case, we should not be worshipping our Father but some other superior God who gave him authority over us. We would have a hard time supporting this notion. But personal authority is an influence over others that comes either through consent or force. If what I have suggested above is true, then God’s authority comes from the fact that we consented to it. If we toss this idea aside, the only alternative we are left with is that he usurped authority over us by force—unless we accept the idea that God created us, or our consciousness, out of either nothing or out of himself. In either case, we run into the inevitable conclusion that it is God, not we, who is responsible for our sins.

I see no other reasonable alternative: God’s authority, and the authority he granted Joseph Smith through divine messengers, actually originated with us. In other words, the authority he gives us comes from us in the first place.⁶⁵ If this seems like circular thinking, look at it through an analogy: The president of the United States has authority, and that authority comes from the citizens of the country. He can use that authority to appoint individuals to perform certain functions that are legally binding upon all citizens, whether they agree with the actions and decisions of those appointees or not. It is similar with God. We granted him authority over us. He is therefore free, limited only by his perfect grasp of moral

64. See “Authority (Part 2: What Is It?)” *mormonomics & mormonethics* (blog), <http://mormonomics.blogspot.com/2015/09/authority-part-2-what-is-it.html>.

65. One inevitable question arising from the conclusion I have reached here is relevant to the current discussion in the Church about women and priesthood ordination: If 100 percent of us consented to give our Father authority over us, why should we think it is somehow appropriate that he then share that authority again with only half of us? Somehow the circle here seems incomplete.

parameters, to use that authority to appoint servants to carry out his purpose, which is to save our souls, and sometimes we may not like the way that authority is exercised. In the case of the US president, we can get rid of him after four years if we do not like how he and his appointees exercise the authority we granted him. In the case of God, there is no such termination clause. But we knew that when we signed on as his children.

If, however, my interpretation of our relationship with God is inaccurate, then we must toss out the King Follett discourse, other statements by Joseph about the eternal nature of spirits, and the assumption that we have always been sentient, self-aware beings. In that case, we would be just what mainstream Christians claim we are—creations of a God who can exercise arbitrary authority over us because he created our consciousness. Thus, the ramifications of our view of premortality are enormous. In other words, this is a question we really need to settle.

Appendix A

How Many of God's Children Will Be Born on Earth?

Population Estimate Based on Mormon Assumptions (and Population Reference Bureau estimates and Pew Research projections)

YEAR	POPULATION	BIRTHS PER 1000	BIRTHS BETWEEN BENCHMARKS
4000 BC	2	80	—
AD 1	300,000,000 ¹	80	40,000,000,000 ²
1200	450,000,000	60	26,591,343,000
1650	500,000,000	60	12,782,002,453
1750	795,000,000	50	3,171,931,513
1850	1,265,000,000	40	4,046,240,009

YEAR	POPULATION	BIRTHS PER 1000	BIRTHS BETWEEN BENCHMARKS
1900	1,656,000,000	40	2,900,237,856
1950	2,516,000,000	31–38	3,390,198,215
1995	5,760,000,000	31	5,427,305,000
2011	6,987,000,000	23	2,130,327,622
2050 ³	9,600,000,000 ⁴	20	7,054,020,000 ⁵
2051	2,500,000,000 ⁶	24.5 ⁷	36,000,000
2088 ⁸	10,000,000,000	24.5–37.7	7,875,603,400
3050	10,000,000,000 ⁹	10	96,200,000,000
Total			211,605,209,068 ¹⁰

Notes

1. According to the Population Research Bureau, this period is very difficult to model, and some estimates are higher. See “How Many People Have Ever Lived on Earth?” <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2002/HowManyPeople-HaveEverLivedonEarth.aspx>.

2. This is my adjustment of the 46 billion estimated by the PRB. Their estimate assumes 5 million people on earth in 8000 BC. The PRB also assumes 1.138 billion births between 50,000 BC and 8000 BC. The high birthrate in these early years is necessary to maintain any sort of population growth. The number here assumes a mortality rate of 75 per 1000, which leaves a net population growth rate of just .5 percent per year.

3. Just taking a shot in the dark here, I am assuming the Second Coming will be in 2050, which is as good a guess as anyone else’s. Delaying it or moving it up a few years has very minimal effect on the final tally.

4. Pew Research Center estimate. See Rakesh Kochhar, “10 Projections for the Global Population in 2050,” Feb. 3, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/02/03/10-projections-for-the-global-population-in-2050/>.

5. I am assuming linear population growth and linear birthrate decline. This yields an average of 176,350,500 births per year during this period.

6. I am assuming only 2.5 billion will survive the great bonfire at the Second Coming. This includes all 1 billion who will be younger than 8 years old, half of the billion who will be between 8 and 14, and 1 billion from the 7.6 billion who will be 15 or older. PRC projection.

7. Doubtless, the birthrate will have to increase substantially after the Second Coming to repopulate the planet (and provide bodies for all those righteous spirits waiting to come to earth during the Millennium). Current US fertility rate for women between ages 15 and 44 is 63 per 1000. See "Fertility and Birth Trends," Child Trends Data Bank, <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=fertility-and-birth-rates>. If we assume 200 per 1000 for the presumably fecund and terrestrialized survivors in the child-bearing demographic, there would be roughly 61 million births per year at the beginning of the Millennium. This converts into 24.5 births per 1000 total population. The number is relatively low because I am assuming that more than half the population is younger than childbearing age at this point, as opposed to Pew Research's estimate for 2050 of only 15 percent.

8. See Appendix B.

9. I am assuming that when population reaches 10 billion, it levels off (birth and death rates are equal). Because no one dies until age 100, if the birthrate remained even at 20 per 1000, population would grow exponentially (at 1 percent growth per year), and by the end of the Millennium it would reach somewhere in the neighborhood of 138 trillion. A birthrate of 25 per 1000 would yield a population of over 15 quadrillion. A birthrate of 10 per 1000 maintains steady population in a society where everyone dies at age 100.

10. This total is actually conservative in several ways. Different assumptions could raise the figure substantially. First, the 300-million estimate for AD 1 may be low. Second, if the Second Coming occurs much later than 2050, total births would be higher. Third, I assumed that population levels off at 10 billion during the Millennium. It should be obvious that a terrestrialized Earth that reverts to its Edenic state could easily support double that number of inhabitants. If so, total births would be much higher. On the other hand, it could be argued that either more people survive the burning at the Second Coming (say, 50 percent as opposed to my assumption of 25 percent) or that my estimate of 200 births per 1000 women between 15 and 44 years of age during the early years of the Millennium is far too high. Changing either of these figures might adjust the total birth figure downward, but not by a significant amount. We are still looking at a number somewhere in the neighborhood of 200 billion.

This figure, of course, includes only those of God's children who came to earth and obtained a body. Mormon theology assumes that one-third of Heavenly Father's children rebelled in the premortal existence and followed Satan. If we take the one-third figure literally, that number would be 105,802,604,534. Add this to the number born on earth, and God's family in the premortal world would have been 317,407,813,602. What this suggests is that, in spite of our

folksy Mormon belief that we “lived with Heavenly Father” and knew him like we know our earthly fathers, we likely had little or no individual, face-to-face contact with him.

The best estimate I can make is that historically about 37 percent of all humans born on this Earth died before the age of 8. Until the twentieth century, life expectancy was stuck between 20 and 30 years, and was perhaps as low as 10 years in the early centuries. If we combine those who died before age 8 with all those who accept the gospel either on earth or in the spirit world and add to it perhaps half of the 103 billion people who will be born during the Millennium, then Mormon doctrine suggests that the celestial kingdom will easily be the most populous of the three degrees of glory. Can you imagine this earth, in its celestialized state, housing 100 billion inhabitants? Sounds a bit crowded. Soylent Green, anyone? Of course, in popular Mormon thought, the celestial kingdom is just a temporary way station. We’ll all be off rather soon creating and populating our own worlds. If this is true, even an infinite universe might get a bit crowded with every inhabited world producing, say, 40 billion new gods. Is there really “no end to space,” not to mention matter? And what about those who are relegated to being ministering angels, or whatever we wish to call those who are not married and must remain in the lower two levels of the celestial kingdom forever? What will they do? And how does their fate differ from those in the terrestrial kingdom? All that is obvious is that we know virtually nothing about the hereafter.

Appendix B

Population Estimate during Millennium to Reach 10 Billion

YEAR	POPULATION	FEMALES 15–44	BIRTH RATE 15–44	BIRTHS	DEATHS
2051	2,500,000,000 ¹	307,000,000 ²	200 ³	61,400,000	110,000 ⁴
2052	2,561,290,000 ⁵	333,814,000 ⁶	200	66,762,800	110,000
2053	2,627,942,800	360,628,000	200	72,125,600	110,000
2054	2,699,958,400	387,442,000	200	77,488,400	110,000
2055	2,777,336,800	414,256,000	200	82,851,200	110,000
2056	2,860,078,000	441,070,000	200	88,214,000	480,000
2057	2,947,812,000	467,584,000	200	93,516,800	480,000

YEAR	POPULATION	FEMALES 15-44	BIRTH RATE 15-44	BIRTHS	DEATHS
2058	3,041,328,800	494,098,000	200	98,819,600	480,000
2059	3,139,668,400	556,327,000	200	111,265,400	480,000
2060	3,250,453,800	618,556,000	200	123,711,200	480,000
2061	3,373,685,000	680,785,000	200	136,157,000	1,360,000
2062	3,508,482,000	742,114,000	200	148,422,800	1,360,000
2063	3,655,544,800	803,443,000	200	160,688,600	1,360,000
2064	3,814,873,400	864,772,000	200	172,954,400	1,360,000
2065	3,986,467,800	926,101,000	200	185,220,200	1,360,000
2066	4,170,328,000	946,701,000	200	189,340,200	2,600,000
2067	4,357,068,200	968,882,400	200	193,776,500	2,600,000
2068	4,548,244,700	993,745,200	200	198,749,000	2,600,000
2069	4,744,393,700	1,021,289,400	200	204,257,900	2,600,000
2070	4,946,051,600	1,051,515,000	200	210,303,000	2,600,000
2071	5,153,754,600	1,084,422,000	200	216,884,400	4,200,000
2072	5,366,439,000	1,120,080,400	200	224,060,100	4,200,000
2073	5,586,255,100	1,158,390,200	200	231,678,000	4,200,000
2074	5,813,733,100	1,202,922,900	200	240,584,600	4,200,000
2075	6,050,117,700	1,253,678,500	200	250,735,700	4,200,000
2076	6,296,653,400	1,317,557,000	200	263,511,400	5,600,000
2077	6,554,564,800	1,380,868,400	200	276,173,700	5,600,000
2078	6,825,138,500	1,450,312,700	200	290,062,500	5,600,000
2079	7,109,601,000	1,525,889,900	200	305,178,000	5,600,000
2080	7,409,179,000	1,607,600,000	200	321,520,000	5,600,000
2081	7,725,099,000	1,691,370,100	200	338,274,000	8,000,000
2082	8,055,373,000	1,752,544,100 ⁷	200	350,508,800	8,000,000
2083	8,397,881,800	1,816,204,300	200	363,240,900	8,000,000
2084	8,753,122,700	1,882,619,000	200	376,523,800	8,000,000
2085	9,121,646,500	1,952,056,200	200	390,411,200	8,000,000
2086	9,504,057,700	2,024,784,100	200	404,956,800	10,800,000
2087	9,898,214,500	2,101,099,900	200	420,220,000	10,800,000

YEAR	POPULATION	FEMALES 15–44	BIRTH RATE 15–44	BIRTHS	DEATHS
2088	10,307,634,500				
Total	2051–2087			7,875,603,400	

Notes

1. I assume 2.5 billion survivors of the Great Bonfire at the Second Coming. All 1 billion under age 8 survive. Half of the billion ages 8–15 survive. Only 1 billion of those over age 15 survive.

2. Based on 2015 world population 15–44 (3,338 million) divided by total population 15–99 (5,434 million). This percentage (61.4%) is then multiplied by the estimated 1 billion survivors of the Great Bonfire ages 15–99 (614,000,000). Female portion is assumed to be one half of this total. Statistics for 2015 population distribution from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>. Download Excel chart “Population by Age Groups—Both Sexes.”

3. Birthrate estimated at 200 per 1,000 female population ages 15–44, three times the current fertility rate of 63 per 1,000.

4. Deaths based on 2015 world population 95–99 (3 million) divided by total population 15–99 (5,434 million). This percentage (.055%) is then multiplied by the estimated 1 billion survivors of the Great Bonfire ages 15–99 (550,000). Each year represents 1/5 of this total. The next age bracket (90–94) represents .24% of total population 15–99, and so on. This is based on the LDS understanding that people in the Millennium die when they reach age 100.

5. Total population = previous year’s total + births – deaths.

6. Increase in females 15–44 calculated by estimating the number of women who turn 45 (8,900,000) and the number of girls who turn 15 (35,714,000) and add the difference to 307,000,000. The difference holds for five years, then shifts slightly. Two years later, the difference increases substantially because the billion age 1–7 begin turning 15.

7. In this year, the women turning 45 were 14 at the beginning of the Millennium and therefore were part of the 8–14 age group, of whom I estimated that 500 million survived. Their number, then, would be $500,000,000 \div 7 \div 2 = 35,714,285$, which I round to the nearest hundred. This number is subtracted from the number of girls turning 15 and is added to the previous total female population to arrive at the sum listed.