MORMONS PROBABLY AREN'T MATERIALISTS[1]

Samuel M. Brown

My mission was a complicated time for me. I was a Harvard undergraduate, newly theist but uncertainly Mormon, and I was living in southern Louisiana. I'd been a strident atheist for years before a conversion at age eighteen, and I'd managed to keep myself separated from much of folk Mormon belief, even as my family and I had been supported by wonderful Mormon folk in 1980s Davis County, Utah. I was finding my way to faith in the miserable, wet poverty of southern Louisiana, but it was a faith inflected by my lifelong skepticism and general readerliness.

I was working to understand the people whose lives I was sharing, both as a budding student of culture and as a novice theist hoping to love strangers. After a year, I felt that I'd come to understand how Louisiana Protestants saw the world (the Cajun Catholics rarely had anything to do with us). Understanding the worldview of those Christians caused me to worry when a new missionary arrived, anticipating the culture shock that both the green elder and the locals would experience.

I'm guessing it was November because the typical hot wetness is missing from this memory, which otherwise involves Louisiana's rural

1. I presented early iterations of some of these ideas to audiences at conferences of The Interpreter, Mormon Scholars in the Humanities, and the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology in 2016. I'm grateful for such vessels for ritualized wondering and for the bright, good people who animate them. I also thank Eric Eliason, Clark Goble, Rachael Givens Johnson, Jason Kerr, Adam Miller, Boyd Petersen, Jana Riess, and Walker Wright for attempting to steer me to greater clarity of thought and exposition in this overall project, even as several of them disagree with me.

green tangles and a long walk on a road last graveled before I was born. I was on "splits" with an erstwhile athlete and current entrepreneur nearing the second half of middle age. We had a discussion scheduled with a new investigator. After an unremarkable recital of the missionary lesson (scripted then, in easy-to-digest paragraphs with associated pastel photos on a flipchart), I asked my Mormon companion, whom we will call Brother Jones, to bear a word of testimony. While two decades have blurred the specific language he used, my embarrassed befuddlement remains. After some good-natured verbal rumblings reminiscent of an old diesel engine turning over, Brother Jones gushed, "My favorite part is how we'll be gods ourselves with our own planets after the resurrection. At first that blew my mind, but then I saw that it's totally true, and it's the best part of the gospel."

We weren't invited back.

Occasional similar episodes in the wards and branches of my mission made me wary about bringing fresh investigators to church on fast Sundays, when such mysteries could flow from the pulpit like lava, scalding any neophytes in their path. However much I, as a proselytizing missionary, wished that particular mystery would remain sealed in its volcano, I did sympathize with Brother Jones's enthusiasm. Even if I wasn't quite sure that I myself had a "testimony" of that explosive doctrine, the mere possibility of creating worlds thrilled me. Heady stuff, this afterlife vision of human gods.

This deification is perhaps only the most familiar and scandalous aspect of what is often understood to be a peculiar Mormon monism. Just as there is no ontological difference between gods and humans, we learn, there is no ontological difference between the spiritual and the physical. The entire universe is made of one thing; existence is unitary. It is, in the theological jargon, monist. The spiritual is the temporal and vice versa. Often this monism is described as materialism, the philosophical notion that there's only one kind of substance in the universe, and it's called matter. Many see us as anti-Platonists, passionately rejecting the

contrast of the God of immaterial order and the created world. Even what others call spiritual is in fact, in our hands, merely a "finer" type of matter.[2] Our monism (all existence is the same substance) in some quarters is as secure as our materialism (that substance is physical).

We Mormons aren't the only ones in the modern world to preach human deification and ontological materialism. But our bedfellows in this dramatic vision of human potential and the world in which it occurs aren't the people we'd expect. Humans as gods in a wholly material world is the core message of secular humanism.

Both Mormons and secular humanists would be surprised, I think, to hear how much they have in common theologically. I certainly was when I first realized how indebted both appeared to be to key recent assumptions about the nature of humans and the world. This odd juxtaposition pushed me into revisiting the documentary record and conceptual infrastructure of early Mormonism. I got curious about the question of whether the Latter-day Saints really are materialists.

Our specific way of thinking about the unity of existence is probably the central heresy that separates us from our Christian cousins (in honesty, it separates us from all three Abrahamic monotheisms). Our strain of monism appears to reject the God of classical theism. Where other Christians worship a God wholly beyond physical existence, we'll have none of it. We've even been known to brag about our refusal to worship such a God. This posture in deep antagonism to this God of the philosophers has become a historical and theological trope. Learned people know that Mormons don't believe in God the way other people do. We are a religion that, at least superficially, subverts the ancient order

2. Smith's famous pronouncement that "all spirit is matter" just of a "more fine or pure" type is included in a canonized handful of aphorisms uttered in Ramus, Illinois in 1843 (D&C 131). The "Try the Spirits" editorial, which Smith likely oversaw, makes a similar argument the year before. The two texts appear to be part of the same basic impulse.

of gods and humans. We have no place, or at least so the story goes, for the God of traditional Christianity.

It's little wonder that Brother Jones scared our lapsed Baptist contact away from further encounters with LDS doctrine. Thing is, I'm not so sure that this familiar story about Mormon theology is actually true.

Traditional Mormon Materialism

The traditional story is well-known but worth repeating, if only in brief. Joseph Smith taught two crucial doctrines that most of us Mormons see as gems of the Restoration and outsiders see as bizarre, even pagan, heresies: (1) God and humans are of the same species, and (2) spirit and body are the same substance.

I've called the first theological stance the divine anthropology. It began ambiguously but grew into reasonable clarity.

In the Book of Mormon, we meet a God who, on first reading, isn't obviously different from the Trinitarian God of traditional Christianity.[3] But the Book of Mormon only begins the story of God in Mormonism. Within months after the Book of Mormon was published, Smith's visions of ancient Hebrew history pushed toward a more distinctive theology. In his 1830 Prophecy of Enoch and Visions of Moses (later canonized together as the Book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price), Smith began to articulate more clearly a God who was as embedded in history and relationships as we humans are; famously, he is a God who wept beside the seer Enoch.[4] Whether Smith was just becoming bolder about announcing his heresies or his views were shifting over time isn't easy to determine, but within a couple years, the lineaments of Smith's divine anthropology were easily discerned in his 1835 Doctrine and

3. See Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone* 10, no. 5 (May 1985): 8–18.

4. Terryl and Fiona Givens follow that interpretive line in *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012).

Covenants and 1835–1842 Book of Abraham.[5] This God was of the same species as humans. God wasn't just anthropomorphic, he was a divine human.

The ancient Hebrews saw God as able to manifest himself to humans as the angel of the Lord's presence.[6] Increasingly when Smith spoke of God, he spoke as if the angel of the Lord's presence was the Lord himself. Smith described this God explicitly in two public addresses in the last months of his life: the King Follett Sermon and the Sermon in the Grove. In the King Follett Sermon, Smith characterized "the great Elohim who sits enthroned in yonder heavens" as fully conspecific (i.e., of the same species) with humanity.[7] Rather than a God beyond physicality, the Ground of the Great Chain of Being, Smith's Elohim was the founding parent of a genealogical Chain of Belonging.[8]

The Mormon God found himself within a creation that either antedated him or at least (and this is the crucial theological point) existed independent of him. In Smith's most notorious exegetical act (placed within the King Follett Sermon), he argued that the first words of the Hebrew Bible (*Bereshit bara Elohim*) referred to God(s) whose act of creation was one of organizing preexisting material into the world we

5. Samuel Morris Brown, "The Olive Leaf and the Family of Heaven," in *You Shall Have My Word: Exploring the Text of the Doctrine and Covenants,* edited by Scott C. Esplin, Richard O. Cowan, and Rachel Cope (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2012), 182–91.

6. James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

7. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 229.

8. I discuss this in "The Early Mormon Chain of Belonging," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 1–52. The currently most reliable transcript of the King Follett Sermon is probably still the Thomas Bullock transcription, published in "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 15, Aug. 15, 1844, 614–15.

inhabit.[9] If Smith had been a learned Platonist or intentional student of Gnosticism, he might have preached that the demiurge (a supernatural being in Platonic and Gnostic thought that mediated between God and the material world and bore responsibility for terrestrial creation) was a false memory of his Elohim of the Hebrew Bible.[10]

In the subsequent Sermon in the Grove, Smith pushed the exegesis further, relying in part on the fact that *Elohim* is plural. He argued there that the Godhead required a plurality of gods, that God the Father had a Father (after all, Jesus obviously did, and he modeled his life perfectly on his Father's life), and, in the face of that plurality, the God we worshipped was the "one God pertaining to us."[11] Both God and Jesus were conspecific with humans; Jesus' life mirrored God's separate life. The Trinity—certainly in its Platonic sense—was wholly abandoned. Smith thus hovered between two heretical poles—the God of the Old Testament was either the one God in a lineage most closely tied to us or, contrarily, the word "God" referred to the entire lineage of divine beings. A divine metonymy permeates this divine anthropology and complicates attempts to summarize it.

---

9. By most current scholarly readings, that initial phrase means something like "When Deity began creating." Essentially no scholars would endorse Smith's seeing a reference to a "head god" in the phrase, but the sense of a creation *in medias res* rather than *ex nihilo* does comport with many modern readings of the admittedly somewhat cryptic phrase. On the broader question of what Smith was doing in Genesis 1:1, see Kevin L. Barney, "Joseph Smith's Emendation of Hebrew Genesis 1:1," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 103–35.

10. Hereafter, I will italicize *Elohim* when the Hebrew word or the sense of divine plural is intended but leave it in roman when it's the proper name of the God of the Old Testament.

11. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith,* 378–84. Although the fit is imperfect, in this respect Smith's theology may thus overlap some with what Brian Davies calls theistic personalism in his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9–15. I thank Walker Wright for drawing my attention to this theological tradition.

A vigilante mob lynched Smith about a month after the Sermon in the Grove, stilling his personal voice and forcing his followers into bereaved crisis. Smith's disciples soon experimented with these late doctrines. William Phelps wrote a short story about "paracletes," his word for the divine-human species, detailing a web of such paracletes inhabiting and organizing the universe.[12] Brigham Young extended that notion into his subsequently anathematized Adam-God theology, in which the relevant God within the plural *Elohim* was in fact Adam. Eliza Snow (Smith Young) emphasized especially the proximate divinity of our heavenly parents, including the divine mother (emphasizing a dual *Elohim* that rested between the usual singular and plural). Orson Pratt and others pursued a panentheism that merged the plural *Elohim* with the entire universe.

Whichever interpretive line they followed, Mormons remained heretics. Smith often defamed (usually in caricature) the Calvinist God, arguing that a God who did not exist alongside us humans didn't exist at all. Some early Mormons argued in arch idiosyncrasy that mainstream Protestants were atheists because they believed in the traditional God, who, in the phrase of the Anglican Articles of Religion, had no "body, parts, or passions."[13] Along those lines, Mormons rewrote a popular hymn to announce that "the God that others worship is not the God for me."[14]

---

12. Samuel Brown, "William Phelps's 'Paracletes': An Early Witness to Joseph Smith's Divine Anthropology," *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 62–82.

13. [Unknown, perhaps John Taylor or William Phelps], "The Living God," *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 3, Feb. 15, 1845, 808–09. On similar arguments by Orson Pratt, see Craig James Hazen, *The Village Enlightenment in America: Popular Religion and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 40–41.

14. "Poetry," *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 2, Feb. 1, 1845, 799, with simultaneous publication in the *Nauvoo Neighbor.* The author of the parody remains unknown (Michael Hicks, "Poetic Borrowing in Early Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 1 [Spring 1985]: 136–37).

This formulation has stuck. We are, to use the familiar terms, gods in embryo, while God is a mighty oak grown from a human acorn. I suspect that many Latter-day Saints have believed precisely that formulation, even if recently some have been more reluctant to endorse a full-fledged divine anthropology.[15]

While this tradition is reasonably well established, Mormons have always known that times change—the generativeness of their model of the world might even embrace change. Each generation has something that feels new to say about the world. The same is true of Mormon monism.

Current Views of Mormon Materialism

The last fifty years have witnessed an epochal intensification of cultural changes that have affected how we in the West—religious and nonreligious thinkers alike—imagine the world.[16] In light of these changes, renewed or even novel triangulations have seemed necessary.

The literary critic and Mormon theologian Terryl Givens has argued recently for the priority of monistic materialism in the LDS tradition. He sees it as a major theological contribution, rejecting the West's reigning dualism. Givens sees this monism as nothing to be ashamed of and even theologically productive.[17] In this respect he extends and makes more literary the writings of the Mormon attorney-theologian

15. The paradigmatic deflection from the full extent of Mormon divine anthropology came in Gordon B. Hinckley's 1996 interview on *60 Minutes* (DVD available at LDS Church History Library, item 2359001). The Gospel Topics essay "Becoming Like God" (February 2014, https://www.lds.org/topics/becoming-like-god) describes "a cartoonish image of people receiving their own planets."

16. Charles Taylor has told this story most perceptively over a string of books most conveniently summarized in the early and late chapters of his *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

17. Givens makes his arguments in *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 57–65.

Blake Ostler,[18] himself indebted to the Mormon philosopher-theologian David Paulsen.[19]

Mormon theologian and continental philosopher Adam Miller has responded that Givens smuggles in idealism and thus has not taken Mormonism's materialism seriously.[20] Miller suggests that allowing Mormon materialism to be radical requires the abandonment of any external force, essence, or order. He argues that Mormon materialism must be assiduously anti-Platonic, scrupulously avoiding the God of classical theism. To this end he argues that Mormonism could be comfortably placed in a tradition espoused by the French postmodern philosopher Bruno Latour.

Over several books and essays, Miller outlines a proposal to adapt a variant of Latour's version of what many term object-oriented ontology.[21] The crux of these proposals is that what we see as meaning and order in fact derive from objects. The cosmos is nothing but objects, and meaning exists *after* rather than *before* those objects. According to Latour's model, these objects can give or withhold themselves in relationship; the objects and their interconnections constitute networks embedded within

18. Ostler's arguments are made in "The Mormon Concept of God," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 65–93 and his three-volume systematic theology, *Exploring Mormon Thought* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001, 2006, 2008), especially the third volume, *Of God and Gods.* Ostler advocates a "kingship monotheism" in which God the Father is the head of all gods. Ostler rejects both infinite regress and the God of classical theism. Ostler thus advocates only one of the three senses of *Elohim* that I see in early Mormon theology.

19. David Lamont Paulsen, "Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1975).

20. Adam S. Miller, "A Radical Mormon Materialism: Reading *Wrestling the Angel,*" in *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 57–64.

21. Adam S. Miller, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) and Miller, *Future Mormon.*

networks embedded within networks. These proposals thus fit within a "network theology." This network-based approach, heavily indebted in my view to twentieth-century existentialism, resists hierarchy and master narratives as an ethical stance.

Endorsing the mutual constitution of networks through a giving that he characterizes as secular "grace," Miller argues that God himself participates as an object among objects. From these networks arise phenomena of considerable complexity, according to Miller, presumably including the meaning toward which the networks at least transiently aspire.[22]

These flat networks propose to ground their constitutive objects *and* to bear the weight of their own grounding, reporting that they depend on no logic or order anterior to the objects of which they are comprised (or the larger networks in which a given, smaller network is embedded). Such objects and networks regress infinitely; it is "turtles all the way down" in the famous formulation of infinite regress.[23] Visibly and rightly enamored of God and grace, Miller proposes a radical Mormon materialism that appears to be at home with the fundamentals of Mormon deification and ontological monism.[24] The resonances with core Mormon theology should be immediately apparent: the shared ontology of gods and humans, our ineluctable relatedness, our affection for human agency.

I confess here that, despite my admiration and affection for Miller, I'm entirely unmoved by Latour. Because I think it's better to do so,

22. Note that the anti-hierarchical conception underlying the flat networks is wishful thinking. Because emergence is precisely hierarchy; that's just what it is—a higher order supervening on a lower order. Even if one starts with an entirely flat network, if the network does anything at all, it introduces hierarchy.

23. The reference to turtles is part of a standard argument that self-grounding can be the only grounding, that there is nothing like God that serves as the basis for existence. This is often termed "infinite regress."

24. This appears to me to be the primary argument of his *Speculative Grace,* amplified some in chapters 5, 6, 9, and 11 of his *Future Mormon*.

I want to emphasize first our areas of agreement. Miller's proposal strongly emphasizes our interdependency and the primacy of relation. I agree wholeheartedly with that focus, in many respects a postmodern rebaptism of Mormonism's adoption theology. I like Miller's emphasis on the possibility that the universe itself may take an unexpected turn (even if I'm not willing to embrace the Epicurean notion that the cosmic "swerves" cannot be intentional). I love also Miller's notion that grace is fundamental. On a great deal, we agree.

But on some core issues, we disagree. The more I consider the central assumptions of network theology, the flimsier they appear.

The basic notion of network theology borrows heavily from a para-scientific fascination among some philosophers with network effects observed in computer science and information technology, where complex, emergent phenomena are common. This "emergentism" is the notion that certain states or phenomena can supervene on constituents that are not reductively predictable on the basis of the attributes of those constituents. In more colloquial terms, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The intricate structure of a snowflake supervenes on collisions among dust, water vapor, and wind. The double helix as the blueprint of life supervenes on the structure of the individual nucleic acids. The swarming of schools of fish supervenes on the brains of all the distinct fish.

The emergence of mind on brain is the classic formulation of emergentism. Nothing important about consciousness itself can be predicted directly from a tangle of electrically charged cells sheathed in fat, bathed in blood, and stored in a skull. One can't summarize the attributes of neurons or even networks of neurons and thereby anticipate Wagner writing *Tannhäuser* or Bach his cello suites or any of us wondering what it means to love and sing and die. Because consciousness isn't predictable or explicable on the basis of the constituents of the brain; either mind emerges on brain (the standard physicalist account) or mind represents

something else/more than brain (a dualist account) or, as I suspect is more likely, a lot of both.

I'm sympathetic to emergentism. I even sort of like it. At the least, emergentism represents a way for scientists to grapple explicitly with the failings of reductionism to explain rich phenomena in their actual complexity.

Unfortunately, emergentism per se is miserably and notoriously circular.[25] *Why does this inexplicable thing happen? Emergence. Why did it emerge? Because it's emergent.* We have a promissory note but no actual explanation here. Some critics see emergentism as an obfuscating wave of a magic wand. And not without reason.

Many questions remain unanswerable, other than trivially, under an emergentist view of meaning. Take the basic point of emergence as an example. What does it mean when a whole appears to be greater than the sum of its parts? Appears to whom and under what circumstances? What does it mean to be greater? What defines the nature of the interconnections that bind the parts to make the whole?

Is emergentism just a sleight of hand to get materialism, including the network theologies, to work? Or is it a set of empirical observations about circumstances that defy reductionist accounts of mechanism? Could emergentism be better recast as influential absence or constraint, as in Terrence Deacon's impressive (if not entirely satisfactory) treatment of consciousness?[26] None of these answers is clearly spelled out in the

25. Philip Clayton and Paul Davies, eds., *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

26. Terrence W. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (New York: Norton, 2012) is hard to summarize straightforwardly, but, working mostly within information theory, he explores the mechanisms by which constraint (a not-entirely-physical state of limitation) could direct the evolutionary course of physical matter and, crucially, could achieve iteratively more complex types of constraint. Deacon provides the most rigorous emergentist account to date of the rise of human consciousness. Whether he

network theology proposals, but these implications are the stuff out of which this theology must be built if it is to be meaningful.

One suspects that these accounts see the God of classical theism as an attempt to describe phenomena that emerge within flat networks. They bear substantial affinity with what some call teleotheism (a God who *comes into being* as we humans band together in love).[27] I'm sympathetic to that impulse, even as I find it incomplete as both metaphor and reality. Something does happen when we gather together in deep mutual regard, something that is constituted by our committed connection, and the network theology accounts appropriately draw attention to that fact. Whether what emerges from our shared love has no antecedent or gathers no power from outside itself or the shape of its potentiality is the much harder question that network theology only begs.[28]

On the harder question, the network theology proposals fall flat. Networks are units of complexity and adaptation; they aren't metrics of meaning. Networks can grow war or create peace. They can transform through love *or* hate. On the mundane level, witness the mysterious stops and starts of rush-hour traffic or the difficulty in getting an underpowered hotel wireless network to stream a favorite movie on Netflix as two ubiquitous examples of emergent network effects.[29] Emergent

---

was successful is not clear to me and will likely take some decades to have a better sense for the persuasiveness of his schematic account of the possible evolution of consciousness.

27. The term was popularized by the economist and Unitarian-Universalist lay minister Miles Kimball, in a sermon in 2008 (https://blog.supplysideliberal.com/post/27997728961/teleotheism-and-the-purpose-of-life).

28. I'm fascinated by Eric Eliason's suggestion that the God of teleotheism might exist in a state of quantum uncertainty, rather like Schrödinger's cat, deified (Eric Eliason, correspondence with author, August 2016).

29. As is often the case (in my admittedly biased experience), the scientific phenomena occasionally favored by the philosophers for authoritative metaphors tend toward banality in their day jobs as scientific observations or fields of inquiry.

network effects are empirical observations about the behavior of systems, not a metric for knowing whether the system is healthy or ill, a beautiful child or a cancerous tumor.

Emergence doesn't obviously solve any of the residual problems of the infinite regress. Nor is there a sense in which the problem of self-grounding meaning is solved by emergentism. When it comes to questions of meaning, emergentism is primarily a hope for a *deus ex machina* that is all *machina* and no *deus.*

I agree with Miller that many traditional ways of talking about Mormon theology don't look monist or materialist, whatever its exponents say. I disagree that we ought to take the misapprehensions at face value by baptizing Mormonism in the waters of postmodernism. In fact, I think there's decent evidence, both textual and conceptual, that Mormonism isn't actually materialist.

Mormonism's God as Ground: The True Light of *Agape*

Purely materialist accounts struggle to make sense of several hard, basic questions. What causes us? What grounds us? What makes us stand out from other bundles of energy and failures of entropy? What is the source of whatever meaning we may lay claim to? Does our meaning derive from the fact that we connect to other similarly constrained bundles of energy? If so, *what is the nature of those connections?* If we choose the language of emergence, how does that which emerges come to emerge, and how do we know whether what has emerged is the moral equivalent of a mind or a thirty-car pileup? While Mormons don't have as detailed an account of the God who grounds us as traditional Christians do, I believe we have a kernel that we oughtn't abandon. That very kernel may be crucial to navigating a changing social and cultural climate while staying true to our roots.

Joseph Smith offered several admittedly brief sketches of a power beyond God, an essence that could ground Elohim and the rest of us.

A sermon on atonement in Alma 42 argues that God must meet the demands of justice or "cease to be God" (verses 13, 22, and 25). Here justice appears to be able to constrain God the Father.[30] In his last year of life, Smith borrowed the imagery of the ladder to heaven from Jacob's vision to describe a graded ascent to godhood. The surviving transcripts of this sermon aren't entirely clear, but they suggest an infrastructure or scale along which gods and humans progress and/or differentiate.[31] If Elohim ascended that ladder to achieve godhood, then the ladder represents an order beyond him.

Beyond these spare gestures toward an order beyond God, Smith preached a consistent, albeit morphologically dynamic, essence beyond Elohim, an essence that represents the source of extra-divine meaning.[32] That metaphysical essence is made flesh in the bond between a parent and a child, a connection that Smith identified, at different times, with "priesthood," "the light of Christ," and the "true light." The concept first appears in images of light.

As I read Smith's written theology, the "true light" is that which is greater than we all, that which provides the structure for our Chain of Belonging.[33] Christ is the purest and most accessible vessel for it. The

30. Admittedly this could also be a reference to logical coherence: if God is perfect, he can't be internally inconsistent. This scriptural verse is as useful a place as any to indicate that Smith didn't endorse what some have called the "divine command theory," by which morality is defined by God's will, regardless of whether it accords with some greater law.

31. "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 15, Aug. 15, 1844, 614–15. Smith might also have been appropriating Jacob's vision for his quest for humans to climb the expanse separating them from God.

32. Without trying to make too strong a claim for similarity and with no claim for historical dependence, an analogy exists between the Kabbalists' *Ein Sof* and Joseph Smith's True Light. I thank Clark Goble for drawing this parallel to my attention.

33. I believe now that I was mistaken (through indifference, then, to this theological puzzle) in my book *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the*

Book of Mormon introduced the concept as the "light of Christ" in 1829 (Moroni 7:18–19). This essence was, crucially, the metric by which good could be distinguished from bad; it was the "light by which ye may judge." In this early instance, one could be forgiven for not knowing whether this light of Christ referred to an individual's conscience, the moral law beyond humans, something specific to Jesus or, more likely, all three at once. This concept of truth and light took greater shape over the next three years in Smith's revelations.

Smith made his commitment to this essence beyond Elohim clear in his Olive Leaf revelation during the winter of 1832–33 (D&C 88). Smith began the Olive Leaf with a promise of guaranteed salvation, mediated by Jesus Christ, who is "the light of truth." He then described this "light of Christ" as being "in the sun, and the light of the sun, and the power thereof by which it was made." He moved through the litany of celestial bodies that had constituted the backbone of The Vision, his revelation of the graduated heaven from February 1832 (D&C 76), and clarified that this "light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space" and, crucially, it is "the light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things." Smith moved quickly and at times seemed to be invoking the divine emanations of esoteric theology,[34] but he was also working through cosmic structure and the ground of meaning, not just a mystical power existing within the world. Note that in the Olive Leaf, this was the power of God who

Early Mormon Conquest of Death (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 62, when I claimed that the "true light" was material.

34. On the emanations, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 106 and Catherine L. Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), 51, 178, 347, 260, 464.

resides in the bosom of eternity rather than God himself being that eternity. In an exegesis of the prologue of John within the Olive Leaf, Smith clarified that the world didn't comprehend God, but once they were quickened by him and in him they would be able to comprehend God. Specifically, "then shall ye know that ye have seen me, that I am, and that I am the true light that is in you. . . . Otherwise ye could not abound" (vv. 49–50).

Smith made a similar argument in a revelation of September 1832, equating truth, light, and the spirit of Christ (D&C 84:45–46). There again he sounded both somewhat esoteric and assiduously Christian. "Whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ." That "spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world."

Smith returned to the True Light in 1833, this time grappling directly with the New Testament. In Doctrine and Covenants 93, a modern revelatory encounter with the Gospel of John long in need of a non-numeric title, Smith quibbled with prior Christologies.[35] Where John depicts Christ as the eternal *logos* and light by which God brings life and truth to humanity, Smith propounded a view of Christ as the best and purest vessel for that light beyond us all. Smith thereby suggested that John had committed a metonymic error: the ancient apostle had unwittingly merged the light and its purest vessel, Christ, not realizing that they were in fact distinct.[36]

35. Nicholas Frederick is correct that Doctrine and Covenants 93 departs from established Johannine theology, although I believe that he has misunderstood the nature of the departure. See his *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* (Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), chapter 4. In terms of the missing title, I respectfully submit that Doctrine and Covenants 93 should be called "The True Light."

36. Frederick is correct that Smith elaborates a "lower" Christology than John. In his treatment of the phrase "grace for grace," Frederick doesn't acknowledge that Smith used those odd terms in radically different ways.

Smith, though, separated the True Light into Christ and a power beyond Christ. This disambiguation, correcting John's mistaken metonymy, is central to the rewriting of John's Gospel that occurs in Doctrine and Covenants 93. The "true light" (v. 2) exemplifies the *agape* that unites individuals (vv. 3–4). All power arises as God and Christ dwell in each other (v. 17), a mutuality made possible by the true light, which appears to have an existence beyond God and Christ. In this text, Smith makes clear that humans grow toward divinity as they participate in a Christly relationship of mutuality guided by that light (vv. 20–22). He gestures to the concept as the "spirit of truth" (vv. 23–24), arguing that light and truth belong together (vv. 29–30, 36) and are uncreated. He then argues strongly that this light is anterior (logically and chronologically) to human meaning: "here is the agency of man . . . because that which was from the beginning [the true light] is plainly manifest unto them" (v. 31). Throughout this revelatory exegesis, Smith describes this True Light in terms other Christians use to describe the God of classical theism. This True Light is both source and metric of goodness, truth, and morality. It appears, to my eye, to exist beyond time and beyond any specific incarnation, of which there are many.

The notion of a true light beyond the God Elohim stayed with Joseph Smith throughout his life, often moving in and out of the related topics of priesthood, discernment, and the premortal experience (when the True Light apparently first touched us humans). When, in 1842, he revealed more about the Mormon theogony (birth of the gods) in his Book of Abraham, he subtly invoked the True Light as the mechanism by which *Elohim* (here explicitly plural, especially in the revised creation accounts of Abraham 4–5) "organized" the human intelligences into their next phase or "estate" of eternal life. The light of celestial bodies both settled them into a priesthood-like hierarchy and expressed their dominance over other, lesser lights (Abraham 3:4–10, 16–18).

Smith also expanded this theme in "Try the Spirits," an 1842 anti-schismatic editorial on spiritual discernment that he likely supervised.[37] This editorial echoes the concept of the true light of Christ as a power, often called priesthood, that organizes spirits into communities. Invoking the Abraham theology, Smith argues that human "spirits are governed by the same priesthood that Abraham, Melchizedec [sic], and the apostles were" and that "they are organized according to that priesthood which is everlasting." Tying, as the Book of Abraham does consistently, human genealogies to cosmic hierarchy, the editorial indicates that these human spirits "all move in their respective spheres, and are governed by the law of God."[38] In this phrase Smith suggests that this True Light of *agape* contains "the law of God," imposing an order on humanity (and perhaps on God himself, if "of" means "constraining") that is crucial to our communal growth over the course of eternity. Parley Pratt, writing in 1838, made similar arguments in a somewhat more systematic way.[39]

I freely confess that later Mormon thought on this topic has been far from clear, and Smith himself often spoke impressionistically rather than systematically. God, Christ, and the True Light intermingle conceptually in his teachings. Later Mormons settled, more or less, on a wan flicker of the true light as the "light of Christ," which they understood as the inborn human conscience.[40] This theological transition ultimately served

37. Almost all of Smith's published writing was coauthored or ghostwritten at this point, but one hears his voice reasonably clearly in many sections of the editorial, even as he likely relied on John Taylor and/or William Phelps for other sections and revisions.

38. Joseph Smith, et al., "Try the Spirits," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 11, Apr. 1, 1842, 745.

39. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel,* 64.

40. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel,* 127–29 briefly reviews the development of this idea. The first instance of this reasoning I have found is 26 August 1838; see Lyndon W. Cook and Milton V. Backman Jr., eds., *Kirtland Elders' Quorum Record, 1836–1841* (Provo: Grandin Book Company, 1985), 49.

to differentiate the confirmation ritual bestowing the gift of the Holy Ghost from the general sense that God can guide all people, including non-Mormons. (Latter-day Saints may have gained thereby a way to mediate exclusivism and universalism.)

I'm not suggesting either that God is unavailable to non-Mormons or that the LDS ritual of confirmation doesn't matter. I'm aware that some Latter-day Saints love to think of a natural transition from that light of Christ to the gift of the Holy Ghost in their own conversions. I don't disagree with conceiving the light of Christ as the gift of human conscience; I just wouldn't leave it at that.[41]

This True Light of *agape* in Smith's revelations represents, in my view, a reasonable approximation to the God of classical theism, often distinct from Elohim, the Heavenly Father.[42] One could see this True Light as a distinctive updating of ancient Greek forms that accords with what the British philosopher Roger Scruton has called the "soul of the world"[43] or even the essential, divine force supporting human reason in Descartes's philosophy.[44] More to the question of Mormon materialism, this true light is not wrapped into Smith's later meditations on the materiality of spirit. This crucial point—that the light isn't material and both exceeds the God Elohim and works through him—has been missed

41. Incidentally, this rhetorical move brought Mormons into better conformity with the assumptions about the human moral sense within Scottish Common Sense Realism.

42. The true light would thus approximate the abstract plural use of *Elohim* proposed in Joel S. Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 7–24. I thank Walker Wright for bringing this philological argument to my attention.

43. Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

44. Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 68.

in prior discussions of the relationship between Mormon divinity and the God of classical theism.[45]

In later teachings, aspects of this True Light as an active force came to be identified with priesthood. While Jonathan Stapley has elaborated useful gradations among early Mormon priesthoods of cosmology, ecclesiology, and charismatic healing, this sense of priesthood as the true light beyond all humans and gods—most closely tied to a cosmological priesthood—is somewhat external to Stapley's taxonomy.[46] This *agape* as priesthood represents the rules by which cosmological interconnection can operate. This priesthood was the power by which God created and animated the world. It was the force by which God could declare that his "work" and his "glory" was not, as the traditional Christian theologians would have it, the expression of his own unsurpassable majesty. Instead, it was "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life" of humans (Moses 1:39). Here is the kenosis—self-emptying—of parenthood writ large: Elohim follows the dictates of *agape,* just as Christ did.

This is the priesthood that the Pratt brothers, especially Orson, shaped into a Neoplatonic panentheism that strayed some from Smith's initial revelations.[47] This sense of cosmic priesthood is not so different conceptually from the aesthetic essence of the Romantics, as we see in William Wordsworth's 1798 "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey." Reflecting on the contrast between rural idylls and urban alienation, Wordsworth describes his entry into a mode of being in "harmony" and "joy," by which "we see into the life of things." He perceives there "a

45. Thus, for example, Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 15–16.

46. Jonathan Stapley, "Women and Mormon Authority," in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,* edited by Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 101–20.

47. On Pratt, see Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit,* 178 and McMurrin, *Theological Foundations,* 15–16. See also Hazen, *Village Enlightenment* and Givens, *Wrestling the Angel.*

sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused" in nature and human consciousness, "A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things."[48]

Many Christian theologians have tended to think of this same phenomenon as God or, perhaps, *agape* (a kind of supererogatory love that overflows narrowness while creating a universal particularity).[49] Julian of Norwich seems to have seen something like this as the mark of Christ's motherhood of all believers.[50] This *agape* is parental in its mechanics and its experience. Parents feel visceral identity with the child and can empty themselves out for the good of the child—the emptying out that the New Testament refers to as *kenosis,* especially with regard to Christ and what the Book of Mormon calls his "condescension." Few people love anyone as much as they love their children.

The True Light is a template for, or perhaps the essence of, the parent-like act of belonging. Within Mormonism, it is the infrastructure for our communal salvation. This true light is the *what,* the *why,* and the *how* of the meaningful connections that network theology must rely upon. Whether the True Light can function as the ultimate grounding of the world of objects may require additional clarification in a brief philosophical tangent. I believe it can.

In personal communication with me, Adam Miller objects to the notion of a kenotic *agape* as the ground for the world of objects because kenosis presupposes the existence of objects (or, at a minimum, the

48. William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798," in *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* (London: J. & A. Arch, 1798), 201–10.

49. In Blake Ostler's fairly Trinitarian phrase, as he was thinking through the nature of the Mormon Godhead, it is "intimate and inter-penetrating love" ("Re-visioning the Mormon Concept of Deity," *Element* 1, no. 1 [Spring 2005]: 31). I'm aware of the risk of cliché in this formulation (love as the meaning of life has surely been the subject of many millions of awful poems and songs) but suspect that this is a case where cliché is truer to reality than ironic distance.

50. Christ's maternity is an important theme of her *Revelations of Divine Love.*

possibility of plurality). In other words, love and relation require the existence of objects, so they can't be metaphysically prior to those objects. I'm glad for Miller's attention to a paradox all of us must grapple with, even as I think his objection is unpersuasive because it confuses an essence with its incarnation. One could easily imagine, for example, that metaphysical wholeness—dependent on no multiplicity of objects in its very nature—appears in the world of objects as a kenotic *agape.* When we speak of *agape* as kenosis, we are thus describing the most familiar of the incarnations of this essence beyond Elohim, not requiring that the essence itself be dependent upon object.

I understand Miller to be arguing that meaning must ground itself by emerging in a network. I believe that meaning can't bear that burden on its own. In fact, the network theology smuggles in a grounding (via unjustified assumptions about the nature of relation) while simultaneously refusing to allow such grounding to occur. The True Light, in my view, meets the needs for grounding that network theology cannot.

Joseph Smith used other language to describe the incarnations of this True Light in the material world. While priesthood means many things (including most controversially in recent decades which individuals should manage Church organizational structures), I see in Smithian Mormonism strong reason to understand priesthood as centrally a way to talk about the power inhering in the parent-child bond, the true light of *agape.* In other words, priesthood is the awesome, parent-like power from (and through) Elohim to bring together human beings into something greater than themselves, durably. Priesthood (as an expression of the metaphysical power of the love of a parent for a child) is the cement of the cosmos, a universal connector for conscious beings. I believe this was the sense intended when Smith told the Nauvoo Relief Society that "without the female all things cannot be restor'd to the earth[;] it takes all to restore the Priesthood."[51] This priesthood that the male and

51. Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, May 27, 1842, in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History,* edited by

female quorums together constituted was the promise of *agape* made real in the material world.

Acknowledging the power of this True Light of *agape* makes explicit what is centrally ignored in the network theologies, the smuggling of meaning into the unremarked essence of the connections by which emergent meaning is to be generated. Without some metric or order or power, we can only report the behavior of such networks; we cannot fully describe them or know whether they are good or bad or both. Networks could as easily be traffic jams or forest fires as human societies. Networks could as easily end in post-apocalyptic cannibalism as in millennial peace. What matters is not that nodes in a network are connected to each other but what it means to be connected and what the networks become. These central questions remain largely if not wholly unanswered in network theology.

I note here again that this True Light was not included in Smith's materialism of spirit made from "fine matter," nor was the True Light demoted in the claims of the divine anthropology, which brought God and humans together into a single species. As best I can tell, Joseph Smith was disambiguating the God who grounds meaning from the Elohim who was the divine parent of ancient Israel and the supernatural entity to which Christ directed his exemplary prayers of "Abba, Father."

What could we as Latter-day Saints gain from such a disambiguation between the divine force or essence that grounds meaning and the heavenly parents? This contrast seems to meet the logical need for grounding while allowing the generativity of human deification.

To translate this specific position into more familiar Christian terms, Joseph Smith proposed an expanded understanding of Incarnation. The True Light is incarnate in Elohim, Christ, and all of us, to a greater or lesser degree. Elohim is not, per se, incarnate in Christ. He is Christ's Father. The True Light is incarnate in both Elohim and Christ, and they

---

Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2016), 75–76.

call us to a similar incarnation of the true light of *agape.* In Smith's revelations, the miracle of Incarnation moves from the Son to the Father. Elohim, too, incarnates an essence beyond himself. He is a father (and his wife a mother, Smith's characteristically concrete updating of Julian of Norwich's teaching of the divine mother within the Trinity), and we are all called to be parents in one sense or another, whatever the specific details of our mortal family structures.[52]

Even with this background, the word *Elohim* contains ambiguities because it can be seen as both a proper name and a divine plural. Elohim can refer to our remote divine ancestor, both the male and female ancestor together, and all of us divinized humans, taken together (think here of Paul's body of Christ as a ready metaphor). The incorporation of both divine mother and divine father in the dual *Elohim* is hinted at in Genesis 1:26–27, in which a plural deity proposes creating male and female humans "in our image."[53]

We could easily imagine the centrality of kenotic devotion in Mormonism as a lived exegesis of Philippians 2.[54] There Paul hopes that the Saints at Philippi will reject the spirit of narcissism and instead live together in love. Paul holds out the Incarnation of Christ—"let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus"—as an example of kenotic *agape.* Christ emptied out even his divinity in being born human in the interest of an ontological humility that would allow him to become the infrastructure of our salvation. This is, after all, the central miracle of the New Testament (and the Book of Mormon): a god became flesh to be miserably below his inferiors, in order that they might all be united in

52. I thank Phil Barlow for helping me see Moses 1:39 in a new light. Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* contain her meditations on the divine feminine.

53. This use of Elohim as a divine dual could be useful in discussions about the documentary record concerning our heavenly parents in scripture.

54. I thank Jason Kerr for making me engage this scripture.

him and the light that shines through him.[55] In Mormon terms, Christ made it possible for us to fully join the family of heaven. The power by which he did so is the True Light, that order and meaning beyond humanity, of which Christ is the perfect vessel.

God the Father/Mother (the divine dual) and all of us, the children of the Father, Mother, and the Son, are also vessels of that same *agape,* similarly enfleshed with them in the distinctive celebrations of Mormon theology. In Christianity, the God of cosmic order is enfleshed in the Incarnate Christ. In Mormonism, we human beings participate not just in Christ's Atonement but in his very Incarnation. For Christianity, God's parenthood (of Christ) is the mechanism by which God fully exists, and for Mormons that miracle of Incarnation propagates through our parenthood (recalling that parenthood, crucially, is not restricted to its biological forms), the core expression of *agape* that brings us from being into meaning. To say it again, *the love of (and as) a divine parent draws us into fullness.* We exist as potentiality that cannot be realized on its own, until *Elohim* (the divine couple) brings the organizing force of *agape* to us in the premortal realm. This is a process of mutual constitution, a multilateral Incarnation that may be unique to Mormonism.[56]

According to Smith, there is no obvious cause of our being kernels of potentiality. These potentialities have always existed alongside God.

---

55. Nephi describes the Incarnation as the "condescension of God" in 1 Nephi 11. I wonder whether the uses of condescension in, e.g., 2 Nephi 4, 2 Nephi 9, and Jacob 4 might also have reference to a peculiarly Mormon view of Incarnation.

56. Other traditions also embrace variations on pan-human unity. They have not tended to use the language of Incarnation to describe humans as much as Christ, certainly not in their official theology. Stephen Webb correctly identifies the distinctiveness of Mormon Christology on this point in his *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

These kernels are self-existent but eternally potential, and eternal potentiality is ultimately meaningless. The cause of our coming into Being, the actualization of potential, is the true light of *agape* as wielded by *Elohim* and Christ.

In this particularly Mormon construal of Incarnation, we place at the very center of attention the ineluctable embeddedness in the nature of things. Everything that matters most about us, everything that spans for us the mundane and the heavenly, is in relation. We are nothing without relation. This is, I believe, the truth that network theologians are attempting to account for.

While the Mormon solution solves some tensions, it leaves others unresolved. The most straightforward approach to grounding Being has historically been the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo,* that all physical existence derives from God. God in this sense is the answer to the question, *Why is there something rather than nothing?* Smith's True Light straightforwardly grounds Meaning. That is its primary theological function. But Smith's True Light doesn't obviously ground Being. The question is: how could the True Light ground Being if physical existence is coeval with that True Light? Is it that the True Light is metaphysically distinct and thus can bear an ontological rather than chronological priority? Or could an atemporality be at play here? In other words, does this True Light exist outside time, and if so could it cause Being as such within time (where the sense in which we as physical beings are eternal is that we exist from negative to positive infinity on a temporal axis rather than being atemporal)? I suspect that something like this is true.

If it's true that even in our eternity the True Light grounds our being, then what does it mean for Elohim to have drawn us into communion in the premortal realm? I think that Elohim changed us from a materiality of potentiality to actuality, from atomic into molecular beings. Just as, on a much more limited scale of transformation, an infant just banished from the womb grows into a human being only through the constant, attentive love of other humans, so do we grow from potential

to actual in the constant, attentive love of God.[57] That is the miracle of Incarnation writ across the entire human family.

My interpretation of the True Light dovetails with Mormonism's adoption theology, in which we human beings are secondary saviors ourselves, the "saviors on Mount Zion" cryptically prophesied in Obadiah.[58] In his amplification of that old scripture, Joseph Smith made clear that we, as secondary saviors, would bring those we had saved with us to the grand millennial feast on Mount Zion after Christ returns. In this theology of secondary salvation, we not only are adopted, but we in turn adopt, serving as vessels for the propagation of this parent-like priesthood power of the true light of *agape.* We all, through our acts of loving as intensely as parents, become gods because the pure participation in *agape* is the definition of godhood. And as such gods we spread some small portion of the divine True Light that exists beyond us all. The storied infinite regress of gods familiar to Mormon theologians is, thus, the incarnation of the True Light, not the groundless infinite regress of the postmodern theologies.

And here we are again at deification—humans as gods, God as human. (Note here, as everywhere, the ways that this *agape* enwraps and elevates men and women equally in the conspecificity of gods and humans. Such is a straightforward if ambitious interpretation of Joseph Smith's preaching to the Nauvoo Relief Society in 1842: "Said Jesus ye

57. I'm aware of bad parents, orphanages, and the tragedy of abandonment as well as the risk of circular logic here, but my point nevertheless seems secure. Without any human aid, an infant will die within a few days. The few children who have received only the barest nutrition and hydration survive biologically but in a state of psychological disarray that clearly represents a profound failure to actualize their basic potential as human beings.

58. On Smith's appropriation of Obadiah, see Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth,* 219–20.

shall do the work which ye see me do. These are the grand key words for the Society to act upon."[59])

I need to reflect on biology for a moment because I see this theology as salve rather than toxin. Not every biological parent is worthy of the title. My own father failed these duties, through a combination of mental illness and bad choices. I suspect that my own biological children will have cause to criticize my parenting at many points during their mortal course. And many non-biological parents deserve the title of mother or father.[60] While this following claim will be controversial (because it represents an aspiration rather than current reality and because many have experienced our rituals as exclusion), temple parenthood—having one's children born under the covenant or adopted into it—is the template for adoption beyond biology. Although some observers characterize temple family as exclusive rather than inclusive, we Mormons have a profoundly universalistic streak made manifest in our vicarious ordinances, these Latter-day rituals of adoption. Perhaps, therefore, we can say that all who have loved truly will have their love sealed by temple rites in the present world's last days. This adoption is not metaphor; it is ritual and power. It is, in the word favored by Joseph Smith, priesthood. It is the power we make manifest in the world as saviors on Mount Zion.

Humans are not the True Light; neither is Elohim. They are embedded within the world to which it gives order. And, as humans learn to love, they may serve as vessels of that light. The True Light animates humans, grounds them, and directs their aspirations. Through that parent-like connection of *agape,* they are children to God(s).

---

59. Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, May 26, 1842, in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society.*

60. Consider, for example, Ardeth Kapp's response to infertility in Jennifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook, eds., *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women* (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2017), 191.

However the questions of *agape*'s relationship to natural law and the dichotomy of coarse and fine matter are settled (or, as is more likely, remain productively unsettled), adoption appears to be the vehicle by which *agape* is actualized. Adoption is calling human beings into eternal communion.

What, then, did *Elohim* do when they adopted us, as recounted in the theogony and anthropogony of Genesis 1–3, which Smith serially reinterpreted (especially in Abraham 3–5) throughout his prophetic career? My best guess is that Smith was trying to say that *Elohim* (the divine dual) is a vessel for an *agape* that grows ceaselessly in the creation of new bonds of love. And that adoption is the ritual (an action, brimming with the power of correspondence, that spans physics and metaphysics) that enfleshes *agape.*

We may ultimately need to decide whether adoption represents a metaphysical third (i.e., the universe is comprised of coarse matter, fine matter, and the True Light made manifest in adoption). Or, alternatively, metaphysics is really only concerned with the True Light as it is expressed in matter. Whether that matter is monistic (all matter is fundamentally the same) or dualistic (there are two types of matter, one spiritual and one physical, or one fine and one coarse) doesn't matter so much: the rest is physics.

On the precise question of materialist monism, Smith's dualism of fine and coarse matter would satisfy almost no materialists. It sounds more like Ptolemy's gradations of matter into spirit along a scale of coarseness than any sort of actual philosophical materialism.[61] With rare exceptions, materialists are not interested in positing another species of otherwise-unknown matter for what has historically been called spirit. That's just dualism wearing dark glasses, a wig, and a beard. One need

61. On the Ptolemaic gradations, see Seigel, *Idea of the Self,* 52.

only glance at Mormon discussions about "having a body" as the core mission of mortality to see through the disguise.[62]

The Australian philosopher David Chalmers famously proposed that consciousness isn't really an emergence on other forms of matter but its own kind of matter.[63] I'm not sure that Chalmers realized how much like Joseph Smith and his fine matter he sounded, but most physicalist philosophers of consciousness have preferred to leave consciousness unsolved rather than allow Chalmers's or an equivalent updated dualism.

For Smith the big question is the nature of God and the integrity of existence. He seems to hedge his bets some about the formal philosophical problems. When he says that the spiritual and temporal are the same, he's talking about harmony and interdependence. He does not appear to me to be claiming strict physical materialism; his fine matter isn't really the same thing as his coarse matter. Independent of his apparent dualism, the True Light appears to be something else again.

Assuming the True Light is a metaphysical third, what are the mechanisms by which adoption occurs? Are these mechanisms primarily physical or metaphysical? Or is the pursuit of such material mechanisms a category error? Perhaps adoption doesn't require a material mechanism (e.g., the fertilization of an ovum by a sperm or the meiosis of chromosomal material within an individual cell) because adoption is structural/conceptual rather than itself material. Adoption could in part be a pattern, a constraint, a way that matter is organized.

We Latter-day Saints are still heretics and always will be. Our God of the Old Testament is as embedded as we are. In separating a deeper God from its incarnation in *Elohim,* Smith implicitly accuses Christians of a

62. On the notion of "having a body," see Stephen Taysom, "'Satan Mourns Naked Upon the Earth': Locating Mormon Possession and Exorcism Rituals in the American Religious Landscape, 1830–1977," *Religion and American Culture* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 60–61.

63. David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

mistaken metonymy. They have called God what is incarnated in *Elohim.* In pointing out this distinction, Smith draws central attention to our embeddedness. (On this embeddedness Miller and I agree wholeheartedly.)

We Mormons acknowledge our interdependence, even embrace it. While individuals exist for Mormons, they do so in a web of interconnection. We no longer endorse the Chain of Being, that scientific and ontological foundation of almost three millennia of Western thought, but we have inherited its reformulation at the hands of Joseph Smith as the Chain of Belonging. This genealogical replacement for the ontological scale of hierarchy is a way to retain what is best (deep, personal situatedness) while jettisoning what is not (the ontological hierarchy of the Chain of Being, ramifying in our divisions into aristocrats and serfs, slave-owners and chattel slaves). In the case of the Chain of Belonging, what replaces hierarchy depends upon the bestowal of human love. As we learn to love the way God loves Christ and Christ loves us, we extend the scope of our kindred. There is no ontological caste system, only a history of expanding love. Each of us is both child and parent. God embodies (and embeds) that divine order of True Light/*agape,* based on the love of parent for child. This *agape* is the backbone of the universe, the founding principle of existence. It is the Grand Unified Theory for metaphysics.

This true light of *agape* and its emergent Chain of Belonging represent a direct rejection of modern narcissism. We matter not for our defiant solipsism, but for our love. The love that empties us into each other, the love that looks beyond itself. We love and are loved, and that is what we mean. The structure of our cosmic meaning is *agape* as expressed in sacred interconnection.

I suspect that when all is said and done, Mormonism will pose a conundrum for traditional accounts of secularity, with their Weberian emphasis on disenchantment and the removal of the transcendent.[64]

64. I'm puzzling through these problems in my work-in-progress, *The Metaphysics of Translation in Early Mormonism.*

I can't always tell whether Mormon theology is blissfully or willfully unaware of the theological problems of its relation to the immanent/transcendent divide. Lately, I suspect the latter. Do we immanentize the transcendent or transcendentalize the immanent? Or, instead, did Joseph Smith say that the question of immanent vs. transcendent is the wrong question to ask, a misprision as deep as secularity? If we were to stick with this binary opposition of immanent vs. transcendent, we would be forced to say that Smith immanentized the transcendent *without exhausting* transcendence (which exists both as the grounding True Light of *agape* and as the emergent Chain of Belonging).

We are embedded in a fabric of mutuality. And so, apparently, is Elohim. I'm aware of the pastoral implications, ably explored by the Givenses, of a fully embedded God.[65] For many, the God of classical theism is too diffuse, too impersonal, too separated from our plight. Many sufferers would prefer to be succored by someone close to them in experience and vulnerability. Joseph Smith's Elohim, "the God who weeps," seems more accessible to believers than the God of classical theism. But this God who weeps, interpreted materialistically, creates for us a vulnerability in meaning, a potential groundlessness. The network theology seems to embrace groundlessness as if God were a beat poet, cigarette ash falling like existentialist dandruff onto his black turtleneck. Traditional Mormons anxiously sidestep the problem, unwilling to follow Miller into radical materialism, but not sure what to do about God as Ground. The True Light allows our ultimate grounding while expanding the miracle of Incarnation, making Mormonism a productive heresy.

Conclusion

I've loved Mormonism for two and a half decades and wondered about it my whole conscious life. I'm glad that we are heretics, and even as I welcome connections to other believers and unbelievers I'm in no hurry

65. Givens and Givens, *The God Who Weeps.*

to homogenize our odd theology. Still, as I think about our materialism, especially as my wise friend Adam Miller proposes a radical variant as a possible Mormon theology, I find myself unconvinced. The process of digesting this fibrous theology has allowed me to understand ways that Mormon theology has been historically misread.

To recap, Mormonism looks neither monist (except in a trivial sense) nor materialist (except as poetry), even as it draws from a kind of unifying interest in embodiment many of the favorable features of materialism. I think network theologies are centrally wrong, even as I love their reminder that we are always in relation. And I think that Joseph Smith really did believe in something like the God of classical theism even as he emphasized a broader Incarnation that separated the Gods we know from the infrastructure of our being and meaning.

Mormonism is, I believe, able to solve the blind ends of the purely material network theology. The modes and mechanisms and meanings of relations are hidden in the assertions of network theology, but they are revealed and grounded in Mormonism. Secularity's exclusive humanism calls for inherent human dignity without any grounding. Network theology makes roughly the same argument, albeit with more sympathy for fullness and embeddedness. (In Charles Taylor's terms, network theology may be closer to "open frame" as opposed to "closed frame" immanentism, depending on how emergent meaning is treated.[66]) Network theology sneaks in the most important thing (specifically, non-arbitrary meaning) but, in the process, abandons that very thing. Mormonism does not.

66. "Closed frame" immanentism essentially says that there can be nothing beyond the immanent frame, and any such aspirations are absurd; "open frame" immanentism is more open to the quest for fullness while still rejecting the traditional account of transcendence. See Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 550–51.