

PRAISE TO THE MAN: THE DEVELOPMENT OF JOSEPH SMITH DEIFICATION IN WOOLLEYITE MORMONISM, 1929–1977

Cristina Rosetti

“My testimony is that Joseph Smith is at the head of this dispensation; he is a member of the Godhead and he is the One Mighty and Strong. And it is his work to set the house of God in order.”

—Saint Joseph W. Musser, June 25, 1944

The Lorin C. Woolley Statement

On September 22, 1929, Lorin C. Woolley stood before a group of Mormon men and read a statement on the continuation of plural marriage. His statement began with an overview of June 1886, when leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints gathered to raise their concerns about the government confiscating Church property over the issue of polygamy.¹ According to Woolley’s account, many of the men were in support of appeasing the government to preserve Church assets. Leading the charge of this position was George Q. Cannon who, along with Hiram B. Clawson, Franklin S. Richards, John T. Caine, and James Black, met with President John Taylor for his consideration. On

1. The Edmunds–Tucker Act was passed by the Senate in January 1886. The Act disincorporated the Church, dissolved the corporation, and allowed for the federal government to confiscate Church property valued at more than \$50,000. This monetary value put temples, the center of family formation and polygamous marriages, in jeopardy of confiscation.

September 26, 1886, unable to come to a consensus among the men, Cannon suggested that President Taylor take the matter to God.²

In Woolley's recollection of the evening, he sat in his room and began reading the Doctrine and Covenants, a compilation of LDS Church presidents' revelations, when, "I was suddenly attracted to a light appearing under the door leading to President Taylor's room, and was at once startled to hear the voices of men talking there. There were three distinct voices."³ Concerned for Taylor's well-being, who was in hiding for his own participation in plural marriage, Woolley ran to the door and found it bolted. Perplexed, he stood by the door until morning, when Taylor emerged from the room with a "brightness of his personage."⁴ Looking to Woolley, and the other men now gathered at the door, Taylor explained, "Brethren, I have had a very pleasant conversation all night with Brother Joseph [Smith]."⁵ Even more perplexed, Woolley questioned the voices, only to learn that the third voice was Jesus Christ. With little additional explanation, Woolley recalled Taylor placing "each person under covenant that he or she would defend the principle of Celestial or Plural Marriage, and that they would consecrate their lives, liberty and property to this end, and that they personally would sustain and uphold the principle."⁶ Following the alleged ordination, Taylor penned the revelation, popularly referred to as the 1886 Revelation, that affirmed the continued practice of polygamy and its place as an irrevocable doctrine for Latter-day Saints.

2. "Statements of Lorin C. Woolley and Daniel R. Bateman," in *Priesthood Items, 2nd edition*, by J. W. Musser and J. L. Broadbent (n.p., 1933), 56.

3. "Statements of Lorin C. Woolley and Daniel R. Bateman," 56.

4. "Statements of Lorin C. Woolley and Daniel R. Bateman," 57.

5. "Statements of Lorin C. Woolley and Daniel R. Bateman," 57.

6. "Statements of Lorin C. Woolley and Daniel R. Bateman," 58.

The 1886 Revelation was a watershed moment for the development of Mormon fundamentalism. In light of government prosecution and internal persecution of polygamists within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the revelation became a touchstone that affirmed the fundamentalist position on plural marriage. At the same time, the revelation became a marker of an alternate priesthood lineage outside of the LDS Church. Rather than follow the leadership of Wilford Woodruff and the subsequent end of polygamy, a priesthood led by John W. Woolley was initiated to preserve the practice. However, the 1886 Revelation and subsequent statement also raised their own doctrinal questions that were continually developed through the lineage that became Woolleyite Mormonism. Namely, why was the resurrected Joseph Smith present alongside Jesus Christ at the meeting with John Taylor?

Since Smith's death in 1844, Mormonism struggled to place the martyr within their cosmology. In life, Smith's role as the prophet of the last dispensation went largely uncontested among his followers. While this remains the case, his position in death is much more complex. In Christopher J. Blythe's work on the apotheosis of Joseph Smith and the struggle to make sense of the late prophet's identity after death, he describes how early Latter-day Saints conceptualized their late leader, including the use of past sermons that alluded to Smith's identity as "veiled in mystery."⁷ The most notable and often cited of these mysterious remarks stated, "Would to God, brethren, I could tell you who I am! Would to God I could tell you what I know! But you would call it blasphemy and want to take my life."⁸ Smith's vague statement on

7. Christopher James Blythe, "Would to God Brethren, I Could Tell You Who I Am!": Nineteenth-Century Mormonisms and the Apotheosis of Joseph Smith," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 18, no. 2 (2014): 16.

8. Orson F. Whitney, *The Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: The Kimball Family, 1888), 333.

his identity shortly before his death left a knowledge void among his believers that allowed for diverse doctrinal speculation. Summarizing the various responses to Smith's death, Blythe shows a range of positions, from beliefs that Smith belonged within the angelic hierarchy to assertions that his place was among the gods from assertions that Smith belonged within the angelic hierarchy to his place among the gods.

Through doctrinal routinization, LDS leaders sought to distance themselves from the latter position and clarify Smith's place within Mormon cosmology. Within the LDS Church, Smith was doctrinally concretized as a mortal prophet who spoke with God, but was not God. However, as the LDS Church increasingly moved away from deification, with the eventual concretization of Smith's place as the prophet of God, but not God, Mormon fundamentalists developed a doctrine of deity that named Smith as the third member of the Godhead. Most notably, Lorin C. Woolley and the men who descend from his priesthood lineage constructed a discourse on the nature of God that placed Smith back within Woolley's own speculative framework on exaltation.

This article analyzes deification as a discursive practice that, together with Mormon theology of embodiment, exalted Smith to deity. Within many of the largest Mormon fundamentalist groups, Smith's position as a member of the Godhead fills the void of Smith's claim and answers for his continued presence in the lives of the Saints. For many Mormons gathering outside of the institutional LDS Church, Smith remains present in the lives of believers and continues to serve as a source of authority for minority Mormon groups because he became one of the gods.

Mingling with Gods

Following the death of Joseph Smith, a poem turned hymn appeared in the August 1844 issue of *Times and Seasons*, an LDS newspaper that circulated in Nauvoo, Illinois. William W. Phelps wrote "Praise to the Man" to celebrate the life and legacy of the late prophet. While the

hymn underwent its own controversy and revision in the twentieth century, the chorus remained an iconic segment of the commemorative poem:

Hail to the Prophet, ascended to heaven!
Traitors and tyrants now fight him in vain.
Mingling with Gods, he can plan for his brethren;
Death cannot conquer the hero again.

The writings of Phelps, and other early leaders within the Church after Smith's martyrdom, constructed and concretized norms surrounding both faith and the language that serves as its foundation. Through writing, sermonizing, and doctrinal speculation, they created doctrines that became lived realities that governed the lives of the Saints. As authors recalled and theorized Smith's existence, Smith's existence came to life. In ensuing decades, Smith became an authoritative figure who governed those who believed themselves the heirs of the faith he founded.

When Lorin C. Woolley first speculated on the nature of Joseph Smith in 1932, he began with the language of Phelps's hymn to articulate Smith's central role in both the Church and the eschaton. The first recorded reference to Joseph Smith by Woolley occurred during a meeting of his School of the Prophets on March 6, 1932. Because Woolley did not keep a diary or a record of his revelations and doctrinal developments, early Woolleyite Mormonism is best known through the writings of the men in his Priesthood Council, the group of men ordained by Woolley to maintain the principles of Mormonism outside the bounds of the institutional Church.⁹ Woolleyite doctrine recorded

9. In their later writings, the men of the Priesthood Council articulated a theology of priesthood that placed their ordinations above the LDS Church. Holding higher priesthood enabled these men to participate in rituals and practices no longer taught within the institution. Central to their mission was the preservation of polygamy. See Craig L. Foster and Marianne T. Watson, *American Polygamy: A History of Fundamentalist Mormon Faith* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2019).

in Joseph W. Musser's *Book of Remembrances* and the meeting minutes for the School of the Prophets give the most comprehensive overview of Woolley's teachings.¹⁰

In his first lecture pertaining to Smith, Woolley expounded on Smith's infamous "Would to God" statement. He explained:

J.S. repeated the statement—"Would to God I could tell you who I am.' The saints are not yet prepared to know their Prophet leader." Joseph S. is probably a literal descendent of Jesus Christ of Jewish and Ephraim lineage, the blood of Judah probably predominating—the ruling power. . . . Adam at head of Adamic dispensation; Christ at head of dispensation of the Meridian of Times and Joseph at the head of the last dispensation. "Would to God I could tell you who I am!" Being a God, he is mingling with Gods and planning for his brethren.¹¹

In the last year of his life, Smith welcomed his followers to consider their eternity and the transformative aspects of death. In the often-cited King Follet Sermon, delivered by Smith in 1844, Smith remarked, "You have got to learn how to be a god yourself in order to save yourself."¹² By articulating Smith as "mingling with gods," Woolley postulated of an already exalted Smith, placing Smith within his own theological development and asserting that through his own mortal probation Smith was exalted into the realm of the gods.

Woolley maintained Smith's unquestionable role as the prophet who restored the Church and revived the priesthood, or power of God,

10. Woolley School of the Prophets Meeting Minutes, transcribed and edited by Bryan Buchanan, 7, photocopies in author's possession. The Woolley School of the Prophets began meeting on September 1, 1932 in the homes and offices of its members in Salt Lake City. During the meeting, the men received the sacrament using bread and wine, participated in foot washing, and expounded on doctrine.

11. "Praise to the Man," *Hymns*, no. 27.

12. "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton," 11, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-william-clayton/1>.

to earth. Having accomplished this mortal work, Mormons place Smith as the head of the final dispensation, or period of divine time in which an authorized leader holds the priesthood and ministers on behalf of God. As Woolley looked back on the leaders of various dispensations, he accounted for their potential exaltation, especially when viewed through the theological teachings of Brigham Young and the Adam-God doctrine.¹³ The three dispensation periods most spoken about by Woolley were the Adamic dispensation that began humanity, the dispensation at the meridian of time led by Jesus, and the dispensation of the fullness of time led by Joseph Smith.¹⁴ Placing these three individuals together, along with Smith's own comments about his identity, afforded Woolley a starting point for positioning Smith not only within the realm of deity but within the Godhead of Mormon cosmology.

In the last years of his life, Smith offered several comments that alluded to his significance beyond an earthly leader of a temporal Church. The famous "Would to God" statement, paraphrased by Woolley, not only raised the question of Smith's identity, but offered perceived sacrilege as the reason for not divulging, "But you would call it blasphemy and want to take my life."¹⁵ Smith's vague comments were not a deterrent to Woolley. Rather, they were rich with meaning but in need of order and understanding. Central to the early fundamentalist worldview was the belief that doctrines are not available to all people. The assumption being that Smith could not reveal his identity to the members of the Church, but he potentially revealed it to the members

13. Brigham Young, Apr. 9, 1852, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:46. Beginning in 1852, Brigham Young taught that Michael descended to earth and became a mortal, Adam. In mortality, Adam served his God faithfully and attained exaltation at the end of his life. In his exalted status, Adam is the God of this world. Young's discourse on the nature of God outlined the nature of God and offered the Saints and tangible example of Smith's exaltation doctrine.

14. Doctrine and Covenants 128:20.

15. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 333.

of the priesthood.¹⁶ In recollections of his time with Smith, Brigham Young, Smith's successor as president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, noted that revelations are reserved for a certain time and often only to those prepared for them.¹⁷ For Musser and other members of Mormon fundamentalist movements, the people best prepared for the weightier doctrines were the members of the priesthood. Whereas the Church tends toward introductory doctrine and casting aside of the more challenging principles, the priesthood is reserved to maintain the entirety of the faith, including the nature of God. Similar to Brigham Young's comment, Woolley claimed that John Taylor, the third president of the LDS Church and the one claimed to have received the 1886 Revelation and ordained the earliest members of the Priesthood Council apart from the Church, eventually came to a knowledge of Smith as a god.

One of the great challenges to historians of Woolleyite Mormonism are his unsourced statements, such as Taylor's realization of Smith as deity. Because Woolley did not make use of primary sources, Woolley's own revelations became the primary source material for doctrinal formation. As a prophet, Woolley took disparate histories and statements and transformed them into concrete reality. His power as a leader was his ability to sermonize discourse into doctrine, transforming

16. Many Mormon fundamentalists teach that God gives "further light and knowledge" to people as they are prepared to receive it. Gary Barnes, an independent fundamentalist, wrote extensively on this in his pamphlet, *Further Light Further Light and Knowledge: Understanding the Mysteries of the Kingdom*. The pamphlet outlines the journey of Adam and Eve toward God and the necessity of receiving further light and knowledge through the acquisition of priesthood keys. He argues that all human beings must follow the same journey as Adam and Eve, receiving further light and knowledge, in order to return to God. See also Janet Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime: Media, Gender, and Politics in Mormon Fundamentalism* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2011).

17. Brigham Young, Aug. 1831, *Journal of Discourses*, 3:333.

theological ideas into tenets of the faith. One of the greatest examples of this was Woolley's brief accounts of the moments leading up to Smith's martyrdom and the implication that Smith was aware of his divine status prior to death. At a May 5, 1932 meeting of the School of the Prophets, Woolley spoke on Smith's preaching prior to his death, "Shortly before being murdered, Joseph Smith said: 'I am going to take my place in the heavens,' until which time John Taylor did not have a clear understanding of who J. S. was—one of the Gods."¹⁸ The understanding that Smith continued working on the other side of the veil was not a controversial idea in early Mormonism. In his public sermons, Brigham Young commented on Smith's role in the afterlife and place in the final judgement, "Joseph Smith holds the keys of this last dispensation, and is now engaged behind the veil in the great work of the last days."¹⁹

Because of Smith's role as the head of this dispensation and subsequent martyrdom, Woolley's sermons and doctrinal developments assumed his exaltation alongside the great patriarchs of the Old Testament, who were themselves believed to be heads of their respective dispensations. As these developments formed, Woolley's sermons spoke Smith's deification into existence. Drawing on Smith's own theology of embodiment, Woolley preached about Smith as intermingling between the temporal and spiritual. However, it was not until the writings of Joseph W. Musser that Smith became identified with a particular deity of this world who consciously accepted a body. It was also under Musser that the doctrine was further concretized, to the detriment of all other speculative possibilities. Whereas Woolley made Smith a god in embryo, Musser transformed Smith into a god embodied.

18. Musser, *Book of Remembrances*, 11.

19. Brigham Young, Oct. 9, 1859, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:289.

The Office of the Holy Ghost

In 1934, Woolley passed away, leaving Joseph W. Musser one step closer to his future role as president of the Priesthood Council. Already before Woolley's death, Musser's authorship of multiple doctrinal pamphlets and editorial work for the monthly *Truth* magazine made him the primary conduit of Woolleyite doctrine.²⁰ In his leadership role, Musser inherited a religious community marked by both outside prosecution and internal persecution. Having been excommunicated from the LDS Church, Musser joined the Woolley Priesthood Council, an organization that he conceptualized as the highest Joseph W. Musser expression of Mormon priesthood and the avenue for preserving Joseph Smith's most sacred doctrines.

While most of Musser's theology focused on the centrality of the priesthood and the continuation of plural marriage, Musser also penned the first full-length fundamentalist pamphlet on the nature of God. *Michael, Our Father and Our God: The Mormon Conception of Deity as Taught by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor and their Associates in the Priesthood* first appeared in volume 3 of *Truth* magazine and was later reprinted in four editions as a stand-alone pamphlet. The pamphlet sold for 25 cents and purportedly circulated among LDS elders quorums and Sunday Schools throughout the intermountain West.²¹ In this work, Musser articulated the necessity of embodiment for exaltation and acted as an ordering agent who clarified doctrine of God in a way that solidified its place in fundamentalist theology. Through his speculative discourses, Woolley brought doctrine to life. Through his

20. *Truth* was a fundamentalist periodical that ran from 1935 until 1956. Each issue contained excerpts from former Church leaders, community updates (including commentary on government raids), and a monthly editorial by Musser on contemporary topics. From its inception, Musser proclaimed the magazine as centrally concerned with "the fundamentals governing man's existence." *Truth* 1, no. 1 (1935): 1.

21. *Truth* 3, no. 10 (Mar. 1938): 173.

widely circulated writing, Musser solidified Woolley's speculations as truth.

During the April 7, 1844 conference of the Church, Joseph Smith stood before his congregation and emphatically stated, "We have imagined that God was God from all eternity. These are incomprehensible ideas to some, but they are the simple and first principles of the gospel, to know for a certainty the character of God."²² In line with Smith's statement on the first principle, Musser's pamphlet was an attempt at Mormon theology that both defended Young's theory of divine embodiment and accounted for human exaltation. For Musser, the goal of the pamphlet was "acquainting the Saints with the true God of Israel, His genesis, His character and attributes."²³ *Michael, Our Father and Our God*, in all of its editions, fulfilled Smith's 1844 call for the Saints to know for certain the nature of God, a not-too-distant and embodied being that was both familiar and humanity's goal.

Whereas Woolley made claims regarding the deification of Smith, and the other members of the Godhead, Musser sought to answer the mechanics of the claims. *Michael, Our Father and Our God* was foremost a critique of contemporary LDS leadership that disregarded Brigham Young's teaching of the Adam-God doctrine. This doctrine had been central to early Utah Mormonism. On April 9, 1852, Brigham Young delivered an address in the tabernacle for the semiannual general conference on the nature of God. During his sermon, Young asserted that Michael entered an earthly body in Eden and became Adam, "the first

22. "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by *Times and Seasons*," 614, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-times-and-seasons/3>.

23. Joseph White Musser, "Preface to the 3rd Edition," *Michael, Our Father and Our God: The Mormon Conception of Deity as Taught by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor and their Associates in the Priesthood*, 4th ed. (Salt Lake City: Truth Publishing Co.).

of the human family.”²⁴ At the end of his life, having served his God faithfully, Adam was translated back into his celestial body and attained exaltation.²⁵ “As a man who was exalted and became God, Adam affords spiritual beings the opportunity to follow his mortal existence and seek embodiment for the purpose of becoming gods.

To make sense of Brigham Young’s doctrine, Musser introduced his reader to “offices” and “titles” of deities. Whereas the majority of Christianity refers to the divine person as “God,” Musser sought to identify the being and the title as distinct. He explained, “The key to understanding is the difference between the individual and the office held by the individual. ‘God’ is a title or office—a principle; and yet the being who occupies this office of God is an exalted man. The office of ‘God’ has always existed and always will exist. It, the office, is without ‘beginning of days or end of years.’”²⁶ Within this framework, Michael currently holds the office of “God.”²⁷ In a similar way, furthering the doctrine from the teaching of Brigham Young, Musser posited “Jehovah” as a

24. Brigham Young, Apr. 9, 1852, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:46. Musser argues that upon eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam’s body filled with blood and became mortal. This reflects the work of Benjamin E. Park, who wrote about Joseph Smith’s early conception of blood as the “‘corrupting’ factor associated with an earthly body.” Benjamin E. Park, “Salvation through a Tabernacle: Joseph Smith, Parley P. Pratt, and Early Mormon Theologies of Embodiment,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 1–44.

25. Musser, *Michael, Our Father and Our God*, 109.

26. Musser, *Michael, Our Father and Our God*, 85.

27. Musser argued that Elohim is the name given to Adam’s God. Within this narrative, Adam and Eve were created on another earth governed by Elohim. In general, Musser referred to the Adam and Eve account as a “stork story” (*Michael, Our Father and Our God*, 100). Like parents teaching their children about storks delivering babies, Musser argues that Moses was inspired to write the account of Adam formed out of dust and Eve from Adam’s rib as a way of explaining the origins of humanity in a way that met “the mental capacities of his day” (*Michael, Our Father and Our God*, 100).

salvific office that works alongside God by entering a temporal body in this world to redeem humanity. By completing his divinely appointed mission on earth, Jesus attained exaltation following his tenure as the savior of this world.²⁸ In looking at these two beings together, Musser recognized a similarity between the Father and Son. Both experienced mortality. With this in mind, Musser sought to make sense of embodiment as it relates to the third member of the Godhead, the Holy Ghost.

Young's doctrine faced vast criticism in the twentieth century. Musser's LDS contemporaries quickly denounced the teaching as unfounded or noted the possibility of a misquote or misunderstanding. In response, Musser was firm in his conviction that Young's doctrine of God was vital to human exaltation because it offered human beings a clear path forward and example of their future godliness. However, in speaking on the third member of the Godhead, Musser's early work is not as exact or clear. If exaltation makes use of materiality as the vehicle for godliness, the implication is that gods require bodies. Early Mormon teachings on the Holy Ghost aligned with their Protestant counterparts; even Brigham Young noted that the Holy Ghost is not "a person of tabernacle as we are."²⁹ For a faith that placed embodiment as a precursor to godliness, the Holy Ghost's lack of materiality created potential problems for the Mormon conception of God.

Rather than settle on the Holy Ghost existing as a personage without embodiment, Musser used his theory of divine offices to answer for

28. Despite his early comments equating Jesus with Jehovah, similar to the teachings of the LDS Church, Musser's later sermons and writings reflect a shift toward more traditional fundamentalist teachings. In a sermon given on July 23, 1941 in the home of Charles F. Zitting, Musser stated, "Our Brother, Jesus Christ, loves us and He is the Lord of this earth at the present time; He is not the Jehovah at the present time. He is the one who will be the Jehovah when the earth is sanctified." *The Sermons of Joseph W. Musser, 1940–1945*, edited by Nathan and Bonnie Taylor, vols. 1–2, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Messenger Publications, 2008), 61.

29. Brigham Young, Apr. 9, 1852, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:50.

the Holy Ghost. Early in his writing, Musser referred to the Holy Ghost as “God’s witness to mankind,” the divine presence that makes God known to humanity.³⁰ In *A Compendium of the Doctrines of the Gospel*, Elder Franklin D. Richards and amateur historian James A. Little expound on this idea: “Everlasting covenant was made between three personages before the organization of this earth, and relates to their dispensation of things to men on the earth: these personages, according to Abraham’s record, are called God the first, the Creator; God the second, the Redeemer; and God the third, the Witness or Testator.”³¹ As someone well-acquainted with early Mormon writings, Musser was familiar with the phrase “witness and testator.” However, unlike his LDS counterparts, the phrase was familiar because of its use in reference to Joseph Smith.

Like those before him, Musser believed that Smith served greater than anyone because he both witnessed God in vision and testified of him in this dispensation through the Book of Mormon and establishment of the Church despite opposition. For this reason, Musser devoted each December issue of his magazine, *Truth*, to the commemoration of Smith’s birth and earthly mission. Like most fundamentalist work, the magazine was largely a collection of quotes and passages from previous leaders. In addition, Musser offered commentary on the happenings in the LDS Church, community updates, most of which dealt with excommunications of fundamentalists in southern Utah, and a widely read editorial section, written by Musser, that expounded on historical issues and doctrine.

In the 1937 issue of *Truth*, which Musser used to commemorate the birth of Joseph Smith, an entire section of the magazine was devoted to Smith as the witness and testator. He wrote, “Joseph Smith’s mission

30. Musser, *Michael, Our Father and Our God*, 4.

31. *A Compendium of the Doctrines of the Gospel, second edition*, compiled by Franklin D. Richards and Elder James A. Little (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Co., 1884), 1108.

was that of a WITNESS, a TESTATOR. He came in the ‘fulness of times,’ to re-establish God’s laws in the earth. Joseph’s dispensation is the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times, when all things are to be gathered as one, never again to be taken from the earth.”³² While Musser acknowledged Smith’s role as both witness and testator, the first public connection between Smith’s honorific title testator and attribution to godliness was not until the distribution of *Michael, Our Father and Our God*. Drawing the connection between Smith’s earthly role and the designation given the Holy Ghost, Musser offered his first public questioning of Smith’s role outside of temporality: “and why not Joseph Smith, who was the ‘Witness or Testator,’ ‘God the third?’”³³ This public question, the first time having appeared in a widely distributed publication, opened the theological possibility of Smith as the Holy Ghost for the entire fundamentalist movement. While he was not yet acting as the leader of the movement, Musser’s writings quickly became the voice of the growing community and carried an authoritative weight that was not found elsewhere in fundamentalism. With this public question, the doctrinal deification of Joseph Smith took shape.

Drawing on both the work of Richards and Little, as well as his own theological questioning in his pamphlets, Musser’s December 1940 issue of *Truth* marked a shift in the telling of Smith’s story. Whereas previous accounts recalled the First Vision, importance of priesthood restoration, and events leading up to the martyrdom, this issue responded to Smith’s curious comment, “Would to God, brethren, I would tell you who I am.” Again, drawing on Brigham Young’s sentiment that not all truths were revealed to all people, the magazine questions the great truth that Smith concealed from his Church. Responding to Richards and Little’s description of the Godhead, Musser wrote, “Who is this ‘Witness and Testator?’ None other than Joseph Smith. He alone occupies that sacred

32. “JOSEPH SMITH, The Witness and Testator,” *Truth* 3, no. 7 (Dec. 1940): 106.

33. “JOSEPH SMITH, The Witness and Testator,” 112.

office. Even now—ninety-six years since his martyrdom—the Saints as a body are unable to comprehend the great truth; and movements are afloat to nullify some of the doctrines he established, and for which he died!”³⁴ While references in Woolley’s *School of the Prophets* abound, this moment marked the first widely circulated reference to Smith as the Holy Ghost in the fundamentalist movement. As an authoritative voice and the primary circulator of fundamentalist doctrine, Musser established Smith’s position as one of the gods as not a simple matter of speculation, but a central tenet of his faith.

While Musser’s public commentary on the Godhead evolved over time, most of his comments on the subject appeared in sermons given during meetings with members of the fundamentalist movement. During these meetings, members traveled across the state to hear from their leaders, first in homes and then in the shared Priesthood House, dedicated on August 9, 1942. This space, and the community it held, was significant for Musser, who argued that the institutional Church was not prepared for some doctrines. Rather, members of the Priesthood Council were the ones responsible for the maintenance and promulgation of higher laws, such as plural marriage and the lived practice of consecration. Musser referenced this idea in his work on Adam–God stating, “The doctrine, while sound, was too strong for mass reception. And so, with facts pertaining to creation.”³⁵ Rather than preached over the pulpit in LDS meetinghouses, which Musser argued would lead to the group being “hissed out” of the Tabernacle, Musser believed that the Priesthood Council was responsible for teaching the true nature of God.³⁶

Musser’s articulation of potential LDS reaction to the doctrine not only positioned the Salt Lake Church as lacking in divine knowledge,

34. *Truth* 6, no. 7 (Dec. 1940): 157.

35. Musser, *Michael, Our Father and Our God*, 79.

36. “December 24, 1944,” in *Sermons of Joseph W. Musser*, 251.

it simultaneously positioned the Priesthood Council as holding special access to God. The distinction between the Church and the priesthood, with the priesthood functioning as the higher organizational structure, was an overarching theme of Musser's writing.³⁷ Much like his writing on the preservation of plural marriage as a function of the priesthood, the theological development of Smith as the Holy Ghost linked the priesthood to both God and the earliest moments of the Church's organization. For the minority Mormon movement seeking legitimization in a time of religious upheaval, the exaltation of Smith transformed the founder of the faith into a knowable deity who oversaw the truest expression of the faith.

It was during priesthood meetings that Musser made frequent reference to Smith as "the God of this dispensation," referencing Smith's role as the one who re-established God's authority on the earth.³⁸ His first reference on February 23, 1941 argued against placing Smith in a more subordinate position than warranted, something Musser grew increasingly concerned about during his tenure in the Priesthood Council. Musser stated: "I want to protest with all the zeal and power that I have and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, against subordinating Joseph Smith, that great and glorious prophet. Joseph is a God, one of the trinity of this planet. Don't you understand? His own people didn't know that, for they would not have killed him had they known. He is a God in the trinity of this earth. He is going to wind up all things and will take his place with Adam our God."³⁹ Unlike traditional theologies that afford God one instance of incarnation, through Jesus Christ, Musser created a worldview where godly embodiment was the rule that punctuated human existence. Rather than simply focus on a linear trajectory between mortality and godliness, Musser presented an

37. See Joseph W. Musser, *A Priesthood Issue* (1948).

38. "June 28, 1942," in *Sermons of Joseph W. Musser*, 109.

39. "February 23, 1941," in *Sermons of Joseph W. Musser*, 40.

intricate divine relationship where the gods participate in embodiment throughout the course of history.

In order to understand Smith's role, Musser continued to draw from Richards and Little's interpretation of the Godhead, specifically the idea that the members of the Godhead entered into a covenant prior to mortality with the understanding that they would become the gods of this world: "Joseph Smith was one of the three Gods that were appointed to come here on earth and to people this earth and to redeem it—God, the Father, the creator; God the Mediator, the Savior, the Redeemer; and God the Witness and the Testator. Before they came here upon earth, and in the presence of the great Elohim of this earth's galaxy, they entered into a covenant which established them as the Gods, or the Trinity of this earth."⁴⁰

On that same year, on December 26, 1943, Musser further articulated the meeting between the Godhead to prepare for their mortal probations: "We know Joseph Smith as one member in the Godhead. He with His Father and elder brother, Jesus Christ, met before he came here in the mortal state, and met concerning their covenants with each other before they ever came here and were in their positions they assumed before ever they came here."⁴¹ Musser's articulation of Smith's prior knowledge of his divinity and future exaltation flipped the logics of apotheosis. Within Musser's framework, Smith was not only a god in embryo, but a god embodied.

Early members of the Church speculated on the role of Smith after death, some attributing him a place in the final judgement. Most notably, Brigham Young taught that, as the head of this dispensation, Smith's presence was essential for salvation: "no man or woman in this dispensation will ever enter into the celestial kingdom of God without the consent of Joseph Smith. From the day that the Priesthood was taken

40. March 28, 1943, in *Sermons of Joseph W. Musser*, 157.

41. *Sermons of Joseph W. Musser*, 212.

from the earth to the winding-up scene of all things, every man and woman must have the certificate of Joseph Smith, junior, as a passport to their entrance into the mansion where God and Christ are.”⁴² Years later, Musser would articulate the same sentiment, arguing that Smith held an essential place in the salvation of human beings as a member of the Godhead. At a Priesthood Council meeting on December 26, 1943, Musser stated, “To me, Joseph Smith is my leader and God; he is not Adam, Michael; nor Jesus Christ; but I do not expect to pass into the presence of Jesus Christ, or my Father Adam, Michel, except when I am passed upon by Joseph Smith.”⁴³

While not shared by the Church down the street from the Council’s Priesthood House, members of the Council appeared to readily accept the doctrine, recording it in their journals alongside other meeting notes. After one of Musser’s first sermons on the topic, Joseph Lyman Jessop recorded his notes from the Sunday School meeting: “Many notable things were said. Pres. Musser said ‘Joseph Smith is the third member of the Godhead of this earth.’ He held up the book of Doctrine and Covenants and said in substance, ‘Here are the revelations of the Lord to this dispensation. Anyone claiming leadership must be in accord with these revelations or he cannot be of God.’”⁴⁴ Whereas Woolley spoke of Smith as deity, Musser’s writings and sermons created tangible doctrines that solidified the nature of God for members of the fundamentalist movement. Taken together, Musser ended speculation and alternative possibilities for Smith’s posthumous existence. Much like early leaders within the LDS Church, Musser and his priesthood group routinized Smith into godliness.

42. Brigham Young, Oct. 9, 1859, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:289.

43. “December 26, 1943,” in *Sermons of Joseph W. Musser*, 213.

44. December 20, 1936, in *Diary of Joseph Lyman Jessop, Volume 2 (1934–1945)*, 108.

Gods Above Gods Infinitely

In 1944, Musser ordained Rulon C. Allred as “Second Elder,” the title given to the man who would take his place in the priesthood succession after his passing. This ordination was not without controversy, as many of the Council did not agree with the ordination.⁴⁵ However, despite protest, Allred succeeded Musser and eventually became the president of the Priesthood Council. In this role, Allred oversaw the growth and expansion of the movement, as well as the building of a temple and the implementation of ordinances outside of the LDS Church. In addition, Allred incorporated the community into a church, acknowledging that the LDS Church no longer held authority following the lifting the priesthood restriction.⁴⁶ The church he incorporated, the Apostolic United Brethren, remains one of the largest Mormon fundamentalist churches in the nation. As the new leader of the contested fundamentalist

45. In his recollections of the events, Joseph Lyman Jessop, a member of the fundamentalist movement under Musser, recalled “At this service Bro. Jos. W Musser spoke and told the people of a revelation calling Bro. Rulon C. Allred to the Council of Priesthood. They (the Council) would not accept this and would not sustain him not help him lay hands and set Rulon apart to that office.” (May 6, 1951, in *Diary of Joseph Lyman Jessop, Volume 3 [1945–1954]*, 140.) The following year, Lyman recalled Musser instructing the Saints that they were no longer required to attend meetings with the men who did not sustain Allred. This division constituted the largest split in the fundamentalist movement and the eventual formations of the largest fundamentalist groups in the United States.

46. Allred, like many fundamentalists, argued that the government was primarily behind the lifting of the priesthood and temple ban. In addition to government pressure, Allred argued that the devil was also responsible for the pressure on the Church to “give up every principle as a Christian faith that would brand them as the Church of God.” For Allred, this included the priesthood and temple ban. “The Position of the Church Concerning Celestial Marriage and the Negro Holding the Priesthood,” in *Selected Discourses and Excerpts from Talks by Rulon C. Allred*, vol. 1, 1st ed. (Hamilton, Mont.: Bitterroot Publishing Company, 1981), 3.

movement, Allred remained committed to teaching and expanding on the doctrinal development of Woolleyite Mormonism. This included concretizing Smith's place as the Holy Ghost within the fundamentalist movement turned church.

As leader, Allred encouraged his Mormon fundamentalists to retain the principles of the gospel and live lives worthy to return to God and attain their own exaltation. Like his predecessors, Allred advocated for sermons without notes and frequently served as the final speaker at church meetings. One such meeting occurred on October 6, 1974 and was devoted to the Holy Ghost. In his address, Allred sought to expand on Doctrine and Covenants 93, a subject that was discussed earlier in the Sunday School meeting. What made Allred's doctrinal exposition particularly interesting is the way he both elaborated on the work of Musser and veered in new directions, arguing for a representational embodiment and not an embodied deity limited to one probationary period. Allred asserted the abundance that exists pertaining to the spirit of God and argued for a limitless nature of deity. He explained, "But it is so limitless that even the Gods in their various positions are eternally reaching out to its laws and its ordinances and its principles its powers, its dominions and is exaltations. Therefore, there are Gods above Gods infinity."⁴⁷ One such deity, the Holy Ghost, was viewed as so infinite in power that Allred argued no person could fully comprehend the power in mortality.

Allred's clarification conceptualized embodiment as a reason why the Holy Ghost does not remain a constant part of the believer's life, "But the Holy Ghost as an individual, does not abide in us. It is the Spirit which emanates from the Father and the Son which abides in us."⁴⁸ However, at the same time, Allred began developing a theology in which the offices of the Godhead are rotating and serve as representations of godliness in

47. "6 October 1974. Place unknown. THE HOLY GHOST," in *Selected Discourses and Excerpts from Talks by Rulon C. Allred*, 314.

48. "6 October 1974," 314.

various dispensations: “Jehovah, in His supreme power, having passed through these things more than Michael, therefor directed Michael. Michael was the agent through which both Elohim and Jehovah acted. He fulfilled the office of the Holy Ghost, representing the Father and the Son to all of the things under His direction and His creation and organization. This being so, here you have an individual representing the power of the Holy Ghost in creation.”⁴⁹ Allred conceptualized his theology as the Holy Ghost “bearing of the responsibility of exaltation” within the world they presided.⁵⁰ The Holy Ghost is a messenger in a specific time and for a specific people. Within this framework, Joseph Smith acted as the Holy Ghost and served in this office, but did not necessarily retain that position as an eternal and static state. Whereas Musser conceived of Smith as embodied deity, Allred argued for Smith as an embodied representation of deity.

While the spirit of God is welcomed into the life of the believer through the confirmation ordinance, the office of the Holy Ghost remains a personage in Allred’s theology. At the same time, Allred complicates the matter through his theology of infinite gods above gods. To make sense of Smith’s place within the exalted sphere, Allred argued for multiple gods, some of which preside in eternity and some in temporality:

Joseph Smith in speaking of this said there were three Gods pertaining to the spiritual world, and there are three Gods pertaining to the temporal world. These three Gods were god the Father, and He is defined as Adam; God the Son, and He is defined as the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God; and God the Holy Ghost, who held the keys of the dispensation of the fulness of times. The Prophet Joseph Smith perfectly fit this office of the Holy Ghost in this *mortal world*, in that we are told repeatedly in ancient and modern scripture that there would be one

49. “6 October 1974,” 314.

50. “6 October 1974,” 314.

servant of God who would be raised up who would reveal all things in the dispensation in the fulness of times.⁵¹

Allred's theology pointed to the office of the Holy Ghost as the being by which all people in this mortal dispensation participated in godliness. For Allred, Smith was not the vehicle of exaltation itself, but that which represented it. Human beings are able to come in contact with godliness through the work of Joseph Smith, the witness and testator.

On January 13, 1977, Allred offered another talk devoted to the Holy Ghost. This time, the meeting was a fireside and Allred accepted questions and responded based on his knowledge of the subject, claiming much of his information from Joseph Smith and Orson Pratt.⁵² During this meeting, Allred continued his theological development of multiple trinitarian Godheads, arguing, "I cannot conclude anything else but that in the spiritual creation there were the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—Elohim, Jehovah, and Michael. In the temporal creation there is the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost represented by the three distinct Beings, Adam, the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and the Redeemer, and Joseph the Prophet, the witness and testator who restored all things."⁵³ Whereas Musser alluded to a spiritual trinity outside of temporality, Allred concretized the idea and developed it into a complex theology of multiple gods in both temporality and eternity with Smith as the final member of the temporal Godhead.

In the same sermon, Allred addressed the LDS Church and stated that, while acknowledging the Holy Ghost as a personage of spirit, he could not commit to name the personage. Allred continued, "I cannot construe it in any other light, that as far as the temporal creation of the

51. "6 October 1974," 314, emphasis added.

52. "13 January 1977. Fireside. Salt Lake City, Utah. THE HOLY GHOST," in *Selected Discourses and Excerpts from Talks by Rulon C. Allred*, vol. 2, 1st ed. (Hamilton, Mont.: The Bitterroot Publishing Company, 1981), 317.

53. "13 January 1977," 318.

world is concerned, we have the perfect representation of the Father, Adam, Jehovah, God among men, the Son, the Redeemer, and Joseph Smith the Prophet, the witness and testator of both the Father and the Son, who restored all things.”⁵⁴ In response to why Allred believed the way he did, he quoted Smith, saying, “They dare not take the assumption of the Prophet Joseph Smith, who said, ‘If I were to tell you who I am, there are those upon this stand who would seek to take my life. And there is no blasphemy that can be compared with it.’”⁵⁵ Decades after Woolley first sought to fill the void left by Smith through the theological development of embodied deity, Allred affirmed that Smith’s words gave his followers a clue to the divine quest for exaltation by placing himself squarely within the doctrine.

Conclusion

Early in its founding, Mormonism radically redefined the nature of deity by centering materiality and embodiment. Through his lectures on exaltation, Smith spoke to the Saints and affirmed that God had a mortal existence much like themselves. In turn, the Saints held within them the beginnings of godliness and through mortality positioned to become gods. For Smith, mortality was not only the mediator between the temporal and spiritual, but also the vehicle back to God. At the same time, Smith began articulating his own role in Mormon cosmology with statements that were left open to interpretation and allowed for wide speculation. Though Smith’s spirit was routinized shortly after his death and concretized by the LDS Church, the theology Smith developed and his own statements on embodiment allowed for a minority of Saints to conceptualize Smith as more than a prophet.

Through the sermons and writings of Woolleyite Mormonism, the late prophet was placed within his own theological developments.

54. “13 January 1977,” 318.

55. “13 January 1977,” 318.

As this happened, the practices of writing and sermonizing brought forth a theological reality that remains uncontested for many Mormons who follow Woolley's priesthood lineage. Through Woolley's sermons, Smith attained exaltation and became one of the many gods that surround Mormon cosmology and a deity known by the inheritors of the faith. In a time of upheaval for polygamous Mormons, the writings and sermons of Joseph W. Musser transformed Smith into the embodied Holy Ghost who continues to work on behalf of a persecuted religious community. Through Rulon C. Allred, Smith became a representation of an unending universe of deities, which continues as a foundational tenet of Mormon fundamentalism. Woolleyite Mormonism offers an alternate interpretation of the late martyr that takes Smith's own statements on his divine mission, radical doctrine of embodied deity, and eternal perspective of exaltation to theologically innovative conclusions. Through the work of fundamentalist leaders who spoke Smith's exaltation into reality, Smith fulfilled this mission and became a god.

CRISTINA ROSETTI {cristina.rosetti@ucr.edu} holds a PhD in religious studies from the University of California, Riverside. Her research explores the history and lived experience of Mormon fundamentalists in the intermountain West.