

# WAS JOSEPH SMITH A MONARCHOTHEIST? AN ENGAGEMENT WITH BLAKE OSTLER'S THEOLOGICAL POSITION ON THE NATURE OF GOD

Loren Pankratz

Many members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints hold a view of God in which “God became ‘God’ at some first moment through obedience to moral principles that were given by a prior god, the Father’s Father.”<sup>1</sup> This supposition follows the teaching of many erstwhile theologians and authorities of the Church who have understood Joseph Smith to teach that God became God at some moment in the past, having been exalted to his divine stature by another being due to his obedience to eternal laws.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Smith’s teachings on God found in his preaching at the April 7, 1844 general conference, known as the King Follett Sermon, and Smith’s Sermon in the Grove, given at a meeting held just east of the Nauvoo Temple on June 16, 1844, have appeared

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1. Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism and the Love of God* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2006), 91.

2. Terryl Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 63. See also: Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 60; Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology*, 4th ed. (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1877), 37; John Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology: As Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: General Boards of the Mutual Improvement Association, 1932), 175.

to many to give strong support to this view. There, he taught that God was not always God but developed into God over time. Eschewing this traditional notion, Blake Ostler defends a view of God in which the head God (the Monarch) leads all other subordinate gods.<sup>3</sup> He argues that this kingship monotheistic view is the proper interpretation of Joseph Smith's teaching on God. Ostler seeks to harmonize this monarchotheist viewpoint with Smith's teaching both generally and, more specifically, in the King Follett Sermon and his Sermon in the Grove.<sup>4</sup> Ostler is not just making a theological argument but a historical one about what Joseph Smith's own views were. This paper demonstrates that Ostler's monarchotheist construal of Joseph Smith's teaching is not supported by the evidence.<sup>5</sup>

### An 1840 Sermon of Joseph Smith

To be successful, the monarchotheist must reconcile this theological position with the teaching of Joseph Smith's Nauvoo period and the tradition that developed from it. One of the most important issues is reconciling the notion from classical theology that God is eternal and unchanging with Smith's idea that God was not always God. Ostler develops an important solution to this that allows him to hold both that God was always God and that God was at one point a human. He

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3. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 442.

4. Portions of this article draw on research from the author's PhD dissertation. See Loren Pankratz, "Traditional Christian and Mormon Views of God and Their Compatibility with the Moral Theistic Argument: An Exercise in Rami-fied Natural Theology" (PhD diss., South African Theological Seminary, 2020).

5. This paper will use the phrases "traditional view" and "traditional thought" as representing the view expressed in the paper's opening sentence. As Samuel Brown has illustrated, there are a variety of ways Latter-day Saints may conceive of God from within this traditional viewpoint. See Samuel M. Brown, "Mormons Probably Aren't Materialists," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 39–72.

argues that Joseph Smith's teachings support the position that "There was an interval of time from T2 through T3 during which the Father was mortal and not fully divine, but the Father was fully divine eternally prior to T2 and forever after T3."<sup>6</sup> In this argument, T2 and T3 represent time markers in the life of God. His claim is that while God the Father may not have been fully divine in one period of time, namely that period we can symbolize as between T2 and T3, still he was fully divine both prior to T2 and after T3. In the argument, the time between T2 and T3 is to be thought of as a mortal sojourn of some sort. Thus, Ostler's contention is that Smith's teaching is consistent with the view that God the Father was fully divine prior to and following his mortal sojourn. It is Ostler's contention that this view is consistent with Smith's later teaching that God was not always God found in the 1844 King Follett Sermon.

Ostler begins his argument for a rereading of the King Follett Sermon that is consistent with the monarchotheist position by first seeking to add context to this position. He points to a sermon Smith preached on February 5, 1840. In this sermon, Smith was preaching in Washington DC, describing his religious beliefs to outsiders.<sup>7</sup> Here Smith taught, "I believe that God is Eternal. That he had no beginning and can have no End. Eternity means that which is without beginning or End."<sup>8</sup> Ostler admits that this seems to contradict what Smith says in the King Follett Sermon, in which he claims, "for I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and will take away and

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6. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 93.

7. "Discourse, 5 February 1840: Historical introduction," The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-5-february-1840/1#historical-intro>.

8. "Discourse, 5 February 1840." See also, Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 433.

do away the veil, so that you may see.”<sup>9</sup> There appears to be a contradiction between what Smith taught in 1840, in which God is said to be God eternally, and the 1844 teaching, in which the eternal divinity of God seems to be denied. Ostler’s solution to this seeming contradiction is to argue that, in fact, both of these claims are in harmony with the monarchotheist position and that the 1840 sermon helps one interpret what Smith meant in 1844.

I agree that there is not necessarily a contradiction between Smith’s two statements, but on different grounds from Ostler. Rather than supporting the monarchotheist position, the February 5, 1840 sermon appears to confirm the notion that God has not been fully divine from all eternity. In this 1840 discourse, Smith does not merely claim that God is eternal but also that souls in general are eternal and have no beginning. Just after claiming that God is eternal, having no beginning or end, he said, “I believe that the Soul is Eternal. It had no beginning; it can have no End.”<sup>10</sup> Matthew Livingston Davis, the scribe of the February 5 sermon, understood Smith’s point to be that neither God nor the human soul had a beginning, and they will not have an end.<sup>11</sup> Smith does not highlight an attribute of God in distinction to what is common to humanity; rather, he is claiming that the “soul of man” is as eternal as God is.<sup>12</sup> Thus, rather than setting up a seeming contradiction that needs to be resolved, the 1840 sermon supports the interpretation of Smith’s teaching in which God is thought to have eternally existed (as have all souls) but was exalted to divinity at some point in the past. This sermon shows that Smith, in 1840, taught that humans share God’s

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9. “History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844],” 1970, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/327>. See also, Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 433.

10. “Discourse, 5 February 1840.”

11. “Discourse, 5 February 1840.”

12. “Discourse, 5 February 1840.”

same trajectory, at least potentially. Contra Ostler, this sermon does not show that Smith taught that God was divine from all eternity. There appears to be no conflict between Smith's 1840 sermon and his later teaching on God as understood and espoused historically by Church theologians and authorities. Having addressed this preliminary matter, I now turn to Ostler's specific interpretations and revisions of Smith's King Follett Sermon.

### The King Follett Sermon

At the April 1844 general conference, Joseph Smith delivered a funeral oration for a man named King Follet to a crowd of Latter-day Saints estimated to be around twenty thousand in number.<sup>13</sup> This sermon, known as the King Follet Sermon (KFS), has become one of his most important theological discussions. In that sermon, Smith preached,

It is the first principle of the Gospel, to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that he was once a man like us--yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did, and I will show it from the Bible . . . What did Jesus say? (Mark it Elder [Sidney] Rigdon;) the Scriptures inform us that Jesus said, 'as the Father hath power in himself, even so hath the Son power', to do what? Why what the Father did; the answer is obvious, in a manner to lay down his body and take it up again.<sup>14</sup>

It is not part of the historical teaching of the Church that each human was fully divine prior to our mortal life. Thus, when Joseph Smith taught that God was "once a man like us," he seemed to imply that God had not been fully divine prior to his mortal sojourn. Ostler acknowledges that passages from the KFS, like this one, can be interpreted to support the notion that "there was a time T2 at which the Father first became

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13. "History, 1838-1856, volume E-1," 1968.

14. "History, 1838-1856, volume E-1," 1970.

fully divine, but that he was not fully divine prior to T2.”<sup>15</sup> That is, this passage appears to be consistent with the belief that God, like humans generally, was not fully divine from all eternity, and that he was later exalted to his present fully divine stature after being resurrected from the dead. This interpretation is also consistent with the belief taught in 1840, that the Father, like all souls, has always existed without beginning and will always exist without end. However, Ostler moves the discussion of this passage in a different direction. He claims that “it is uniformly taught in Mormon scripture and by Joseph Smith that Christ was a fully divine person prior to mortality.”<sup>16</sup> Ostler reads the KFS to support the view that the Father was fully divine prior to his mortality. He claims that “the Father’s mortal experience was like Christ’s, and thus it is more consistent to interpret Joseph Smith to assert that the Father, like Christ, was divine *before* his mortal sojourn.”<sup>17</sup> Ostler’s contention is that the above passage of the KFS only teaches that there was a time (i.e., during his mortal sojourn) when God was not fully divine, while remaining open to the possibility that God was fully divine prior to that time. He bases this on his understanding of Jesus as being in possession of all the essential properties of divinity prior to his mortal life.

This interpretation seems far from secure. First, Smith is claiming that there is something Jesus has in common with the Father, not something the Father has in common with the Son. He is pointing out specifically that just as the Father had the power to lay down his body and take it up again, so the Son has the power to lay down his body and take it up again. This comparison says nothing of God’s ontological status prior to his mortal life. The KFS is aimed to give comfort to those grieving the loss of a beloved member of the community. This funeral sermon provides hope for those who have not been divine from

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15. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 435.

16. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 438.

17. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 438, emphasis in the original.

all eternity by teaching that they can follow the example set by God and Jesus. Smith claims that both the Father and Jesus laid down their lives and were later exalted, and in this sermon he extends that hope to all humans generally. Ostler takes this quotation from the KFS to mean that if Jesus was divine prior to his mortal life then God was divine prior to his. However, logically speaking, Jesus' claim to follow the Father's example does not necessarily imply that the Father was fully divine before his mortal sojourn, even if Jesus was fully divine before his mortal existence. When predicating some distinctive attribute of person A to person B, one is not thereby committed to predicating some other feature of person B to person A. The passage does not say that what is true of Jesus is also true of the Father. Rather, it only claims that what is true of the Father is true of the Son. Thus, Ostler's contention that this passage implies that the Father was fully divine prior to his mortal life is not substantiated.

Secondly, Ostler's interpretation of this passage from the KFS, if correct, disproves his main point. While it may have been uniformly taught in Mormon scripture and by Joseph Smith that Christ was a fully divine person prior to mortality, it is also taught that there was a time when Jesus was first exalted. That is, Jesus was the firstborn spirit child of God in the premortal existence and progressed to divinity. For example, in the winter of 1834–35, lectures were given in Kirtland, Ohio that served as an early attempt to “formulate a systematic Latter-day Saint theology.”<sup>18</sup> These lectures were published in the Church's newspaper in May of 1835, and “All seven lectures were published together later that year in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, the

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18. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church History Topics, “Lectures on Theology (“Lectures on Faith”), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/lectures-on-faith/>. Robert Millet calls the *Lectures on Faith* a “systematic study of faith.” See, Robert L. Millet, *Precept Upon Precept: Joseph Smith and the Restoration of Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), 217.

lectures constituting the ‘doctrine,’ and Joseph Smith’s revelations, the ‘covenants.’”<sup>19</sup> While it is debated whether or not Joseph Smith personally delivered all of the lectures, the “inclusion of the lectures in the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835 strongly suggests that Joseph Smith approved of the content of the lectures.”<sup>20</sup> These lectures have been said to represent the “breadth and depth of the mind of Joseph Smith.”<sup>21</sup> “Lecture Fifth” of the *Lectures on Faith* teaches that Jesus, having overcome, “received a fullness of the glory of the Father.”<sup>22</sup> Later, in “Lecture Seventh” of the *Lectures on Faith*, it is taught that Jesus Christ is the prototype of a saved and glorified person. He is the example for us to follow, a person who, through faith, “has become perfect enough to lay hold upon eternal life.”<sup>23</sup> This early summary of the theology Joseph Smith developed depicts Jesus advancing from having a non-deified status to being one who takes hold of eternal life, having received a fullness of glory. Thus, even if Christ becomes the archetype of pre- and post-mortal divinity, his trajectory also includes an initial progression to divinity. There was a time, call it time T, when Jesus was not fully divine. Then at T1 he was exalted, then at T2 he was mortal (and not

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19. “Lectures on Theology.”

20. “Lectures on Theology.” See also Charles R. Harrell, *“This Is My Doctrine”: The Development of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 121. Harrell claims that the consensus concerning authorship of the *Lectures on Faith* is that Joseph Smith “ultimately endorsed their contents and sanctioned their publication.” Joseph Fielding Smith reminds the reader that the *Lectures* “were not taken out of the Doctrine and Covenants because they contained false doctrine,” and that “the Prophet himself revised and prepared these Lectures on Faith for publication; and they were studied in the School of the Prophets.” See Joseph Fielding Smith, *Seek Ye Earnestly* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1970), 194.

21. Millet, *Precept Upon Precept*, 236.

22. Joseph Smith Jr., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985), 60.

23. Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, 75.



glorified), and then at T3 he was full of glory once more. Ostler has argued that the KFS passage above is consistent with monarchotheism because Smith claimed that Jesus did only what he had seen the Father do before him, and since we know that Jesus was fully divine prior to his mortal sojourn, then God must have been fully divine prior to his subsequent exaltation as well. However, the trajectory of Jesus represented in the KFS and in the *Lectures of Faith* appears to be one of a being who was exalted at some time after he was born of heavenly parents. If Ostler is correct in his interpretation and Jesus follows the Father's path, then this would imply that God the Father was once a mere organized being who was later exalted, after which he became mortal and then, finally, was glorified again. Thus, if Ostler is correct, God the Father still has not been God from all eternity. Ostler's treatment of the passage from the King Follett Sermon does not work to effectively undermine the understanding of many members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who hold that "God became 'God' at some first moment through obedience to moral principles that were given by a prior god, the Father's Father."<sup>24</sup>

There is a second key passage in the King Follett Sermon that seems to establish the notion of a progression toward deity. Smith preached,

Here, then is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be Kings and Priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.<sup>25</sup>

Ostler concedes that this passage may indicate that persons "learn how to advance to become Gods by becoming a 'god' at some first time T1

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24. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 91.

25. "History, 1838–1856, volume E-1," 1971.

by advancing from one capacity to another until they reach the status of gods.”<sup>26</sup> However, Ostler seeks to reconcile this with his own view of a static and unchanging divine status. He argues that readers should not assume “that those engaged in the process of learning to be gods cannot already be gods.”<sup>27</sup> Ostler claims this passage should be taken to mean only that “God the Father has been in a process of eternal progression from one exaltation to another for all eternity, and humans can commence to progress toward godhood by engaging in the same activity of progression.”<sup>28</sup>

Contrary to Ostler’s interpretation, this passage is aimed at communicating to mortal humans, who have (presumably) never been gods, how they may progress to “be Gods yourselves.” Humans, who at present have never been fully divine, may become so by following the same process “as all the Gods have done before” them. Smith taught humans to take as their model for exaltation other beings who have learned little by little how to progress from a small capacity to a great one. He is not talking about a separate class of eternally divine beings. Even “the only wise and true God,” in Joseph Smith’s theology, does not appear to be exempted from this mimicable process. “All Gods,” Joseph Smith explains, have followed this trajectory. The above passage is all the more remarkable because in the sermon, just prior to the quoted passage, Smith led the congregation to consider what God is like. He petitioned his listeners, “I want to ask this congregation, every man, woman and child, to answer the question in their own heart, what kind of a being God is,”<sup>29</sup> and Smith takes it as his “first object” to “find out the character of the only wise and true God; and what kind of

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26. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 440.

27. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 440.

28. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 440.

29. “History, 1838–1856, volume E-1,” 1969.

being he is.”<sup>30</sup> The portion of the KFS quoted above is Smith’s answer to this question. What sort of being is the only wise and true God? He is a being who has learned to be God, advancing from one capacity to another, as all gods have done. Ostler’s contention does not fully consider the context and aim of the sermon.

There is a third passage in the KFS that Ostler has opened for reinterpretation. In the most well-known version of the King Follett Sermon produced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith states:

It is necessary we should understand the character and being of God and how He came to be so; for I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see.<sup>31</sup>

In this passage, Smith reportedly refutes the idea that God “has always been God or always had divine status.”<sup>32</sup> Here again, he put forward the idea that God “came to be” at a certain point, indicating that divinity occurred at a particular time.

Ostler’s strategy with this passage is to argue for a revision of the text that will allow for a different interpretation. There exists no stenographic record of this sermon. Instead, what we have are a number of individuals’ notes of the sermon. Several of these accounts were scribes from Smith’s presidential office and other authorities of the Church, making this the best recorded of Smith’s discourses.<sup>33</sup> Ostler’s primary

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30. “History, 1838–1856, volume E-1,” 1969.

31. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd rev. ed., edited by B. H. Roberts (Deseret Book: Salt Lake City, 1980), 6:305. See also Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 441.

32. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 441.

33. “Accounts of the ‘King Follett Sermon,’” The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-king-follett-sermon#josephsmithpapers>.

argument maintains that the above statement, while supported by Willard Richards's and Wilford Woodruff's recollection of the sermon, is not in harmony with Thomas Bullock's report of the discourse.<sup>34</sup> Ostler also points out that another observer of the address, William Clayton, omits the statement "about a refutation altogether."

However, one should accept the traditional text as published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for three reasons. First, William Clayton's report does convey that Smith claimed to "tell you how God came to be God."<sup>35</sup> While he does not reproduce the exact phrase as Willard Richards and Wilford Woodruff, he does produce the same teaching. Presumably, for Smith to tell us how "God came to be God," he will have to refute the idea that God has been God for all eternity.

Secondly, there is actually another version of the sermon that reports the same idea. Samuel W. Richards's record is brief but remarkably records Smith's refutation that God has been God from all eternity. It states, "to have eternal life, God: a man like one of us, even like Adam. Not God from all Eternity."<sup>36</sup> Richards's account provides another witness to Smith's refutation of the notion that God has been God from all eternity, making it difficult to maintain, as Ostler does, that Smith did not teach this.

Thirdly, Bullock's account is not out of harmony with Willard Richards's, and Wilford Woodruff's account as Ostler claims. Bullock's report records, "I am going to tell you what sort of a being of God. for

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34. "Accounts of the 'King Follett Sermon.'"

35. "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton," 13, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-william-clayton/3>.

36. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University), 361.

he was God from the begin of all Eternity & if I do not refute it.”<sup>37</sup> Ostler claims that Bullock’s report states that Smith does not intend to refute the idea that God has been God from all eternity. However, Bullock’s report is ambiguous, as he reports Smith to have said only, “if I do not refute it.” He does not say “I do not refute it.” The statement as recorded by Bullock could well be understood as shorthand for something like, “& [see] if I do not refute it.” Supporting this notion, Bullock notes that just after this statement, Smith went on to claim that “God himself the father of us all dwelt on a Earth same as J C himself did.”<sup>38</sup> This seems to refute the idea that God has been God from all eternity. God dwelt on an Earth, and during that time God was not fully divine. Bullock’s notes continue that humans have this capacity to dwell on an Earth and be exalted to divine status as well, claiming “you have got to learn how to be a God yourself & be K[ing] & Priest to God same as all have done by going from a small cap[acit]y to an[othe]r. from grace to grace until the res[urrectio]n. & sit in everlasting power as they who have gone before & God.”<sup>39</sup> The theology Bullock records, that God and all humans share a trajectory of progress, is entirely in line with the one reported by Richards, Woodruff, and Clayton. Ostler’s interpretation of this passage from Bullock’s report would set it against not only the other records of the discourse but against Bullock’s own account.

The idea that there is a disagreement between Bullock and the other witnesses on this point is weak. Bullock himself was responsible for preparing the minutes of the conference based on his and William Clayton’s notes.<sup>40</sup> These minutes were then published in *Times*

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37. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Thomas Bullock,” 16, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/3>.

38. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Thomas Bullock.”

39. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Thomas Bullock.”

40. Kevin L. Barney, “Joseph Smith’s Emendation of Hebrew Genesis 1:1.” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 107.

*and Seasons*. In Bullock's published minutes, Smith claimed, "We have imagined that God was God from all eternity," but that it is necessary to "understand the character and being of God, for I am going to tell you how God came to be God."<sup>41</sup> The preponderance of the reporting seems to point in one direction: namely, the interpretation Ostler seeks to avoid.<sup>42</sup>

As a final consideration regarding the view of God found in the King Follett Sermon, Ostler points to Smith's reconstruction of Genesis 1:1 as proof of his monarchotheistic leanings. Smith claimed that Genesis 1:1 should be read to say, "The head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods."<sup>43</sup> Ostler claims that Smith's revision of Genesis 1:1 "entailed that there is a single God who is the head of all other gods." As has been argued elsewhere, Smith used Hebrew "as he chose, as an artist . . . in accordance with his taste, according to the effect he wanted to produce, as a foundation for the theological innovations."<sup>44</sup> In Kevin Barney's study of Smith's emendation of the Hebrew behind Genesis 1:1, he admits that it is difficult to piece together Smith's exact logic in his reconstruction. Rather than attempting to follow Smith's interpretation of the text of Genesis 1:1, Barney concludes that it seems more fruitful

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41. "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>.

42. Stan Larson's amalgamated text of the King Follett Sermon is in harmony with the traditional published version of the discourse. It reads, "For we have imagined that God was God from the beginning of all eternity. I will refute that idea and take away the veil so you may see." Larson's modern amalgamation preserves Smith refuting the idea that God was God from the beginning. See Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1978): 201. See also B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1903), 227.

43. "History, 1838–1856, volume E-1," 1972.

44. Zucker L. "Joseph Smith as a Student of Hebrew." *Dialogue* 3 (Summer 1968): 53.

to interpret Smith as conjecturing that the original Hebrew of Genesis 1:1 had been altered and that his reading was the original.<sup>45</sup> While it may be difficult to ascertain how Smith arrived at his reconstruction of Genesis 1:1, Barney claims that the basic thrust of Smith's argument is not as uncertain. Joseph Smith appears to make the claim that Genesis 1:1 is describing the council witnessed to in the book of Abraham 3:23, in which God called other gods to council in order to create our world. This certainly does not necessitate God's being fully divine from all eternity, as God could have been fully divine at this point in his existence and could be the head God of this creative event. This is fully consistent with the belief that God was not fully divine from all eternity. Ostler contends that Smith "believed that the text of Genesis 1:1 had been corrupted and that it originally indicated that the head God brought forth the other gods in a council of gods."<sup>46</sup> This claim will be revisited in the next section while reviewing Ostler's claim regarding Smith's use of Genesis 1:1 in the Sermon in the Grove.

### Sermon in the Grove

Joseph preached his final sermon in a grove east of the Nauvoo Temple.<sup>47</sup> He began the sermon by quoting Revelation 1:6, "And hath made us kings and priests unto God and His father."<sup>48</sup> The King James Version of the Bible places "and His father" after "God," which Joseph Smith took to mean that the verse was stating that Jesus makes Christians to be kings and priests under God the Father and God the Father's father. This understanding seems to have been seized upon by Joseph Smith and used as a proof text from which to proclaim that "the Father had a

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45. Barney, "Joseph Smith's Emendation," 128.

46. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, 442.

47. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 378.

48. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 442.

father and that there is another ‘Father above the Father of Christ.’<sup>49</sup> In this view, God the Father of Jesus Christ also has a father.

Ostler believes that the Father of God here refers only to his earthly existence. He explains, “when the Father condescended from a fullness of his divine state to become mortal, he was born into a world and had a father *as a mortal*.”<sup>50</sup> Ostler begins his defense of this interpretation by noting that Smith continues to stress that Jesus does “precisely” what the Father did before him.<sup>51</sup> As we saw above, this strategy fails to suit Ostler’s purposes because, if the analogy holds, it proves too much. If Jesus truly follows the Father’s precise example, then the example is that of a person of divine parentage who became divine, entered into mortality, and exercised power to take his life up again after death. If Jesus’ divine Father was the trailblazer of this precise path, then he too would have both a spiritual and mortal father.

Ostler puts forward other evidence for his reading of this sermon in support of monarchotheism. He points to George Laub’s journal notes from this sermon. Ostler quotes Laub as reporting that “the Holy Ghost is yet a Spiritual body and waiting to take upon himself a body, as the Savior did or as god did.”<sup>52</sup> Ostler concludes from this that “Joseph Smith taught that already divine persons, including the Son and the Holy Ghost, take upon themselves bodies.”<sup>53</sup> The major problem with this use of George Laub’s journal is that Ostler’s quotation of this portion of the journal is incomplete. Laub’s sentence continues on where Ostler provides a period. Laub’s record reads, “But the holy ghost is yet a spiritual Body. and waiting to take to himself a body as the savior did

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49. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 444.

50. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 444, emphasis in the original.

51. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 445.

52. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 445.

53. Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 445.



or as god did or the gods before them took bodies.”<sup>54</sup> This indicates that Smith taught that all gods follow this path, with Jesus, Jesus’ Father, and the Holy Ghost as exemplars of the pattern. Laub’s notes go on to further extend the analogy: “the scripture says those who will obey the commandments Shall be heirs of god and joint heirs with Jesus Christ. we then also took Bodies to lay them down and take them up again.”<sup>55</sup> Laub’s understanding is that we do just what Jesus did, which is just what the Father did before him, and other gods before him. Laub’s journal provides deeper evidence that Smith’s thinking about God is that the Father, the Son, and we humans are but three links in an eternal chain of gods.

William McIntire’s and Thomas Bullock’s record of Smith’s Sermon in the Grove relates that in this sermon Smith returned again to his modification of Genesis 1:1.<sup>56</sup> Ostler contends that Smith’s understanding of Genesis 1:1 is that a monarchotheistic head God presides over a council of gods.<sup>57</sup> However, in Thomas Bullock’s account of this sermon, Smith understands the term “Eloihem” from Genesis 1:1 to be translated “in the plural all the way thro--Gods--the heads of the Gods appointed one God for us.”<sup>58</sup> Rather than there being a head God who organizes a council, there is instead an insistence that in the beginning there were heads of the gods who appointed one God for us. Smith

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54. “Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by George Laub,” 30, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-16-june-1844-a-as-reported-by-george-laub/2>, emphasis added.

55. “Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by George Laub,” 31.

56. “Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by William McIntire,” 21, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-16-june-1844-a-as-reported-by-william-mcintire/1>.

57. Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: Of God and Gods* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008), 20. See also Ostler, *Problems of Theism*, 443.

58. “Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by Thomas Bullock,” 2, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-16-june-1844-a-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/2>.

proclaims, “Intelligences exist one above anotr. that there is no end to it.”<sup>59</sup> That there is “no end to it” suggests that Smith sees no one head God at the end of the line. He states, “in the very beginning there is a plurality of Gods—beyond the power of refutation.”<sup>60</sup> From Thomas Bullock’s record, Smith is clear, there are a plurality of head gods who appointed one God to preside over the earth. Ostler’s contention that Smith taught there to be one head God does not hold up.

William McIntire’s report of the sermon, though brief, shares Bullock’s understanding of Smith’s use of Genesis 1:1 in the Sermon in the Grove. McIntire claims that in this sermon, Smith “proceeded to show the plurality of Gods” with his explanation of the “origanel [*sic*] Hebrew” of Genesis 1:1.<sup>61</sup> McIntire claims that Smith shared with the gathered crowd in the grove that the “Head Gods organized the Earth & the heavens.”<sup>62</sup> McIntire’s witness claims Joseph Smith spoke of the “Head Gods” (plural), rather than a singular “head God,” as Ostler would have it. Thus, the reports of Smith’s teaching in the Sermon in the Grove does not support Ostler’s contention that Smith taught there to be a monarchotheist Head God who presides over a council of gods. Smith teaches a plurality all the way through.

## Conclusion

Ostler’s interpretation of Joseph Smith’s teaching rests on three principal arguments. First, he claims that Smith’s teaching in the KFS implies that the Father was divine prior to becoming mortal just as Jesus was divine prior to mortality. Yet the KFS was shown to be better interpreted as claiming that God was elevated to his status as God at some time in the past. Further, if we press the analogy between the Father

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59. “Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by Thomas Bullock,” 3.

60. “Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by Thomas Bullock,” 3.

61. “Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by William McIntire,” 21.

62. “Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by William McIntire,” 21.

and the Son as Ostler does, the conclusion runs contrary to Ostler's contention and God the Father is still elevated to divinity from some state of non-divinity at some point prior to his mortal life. Second, Ostler claims that Smith's teaching that the Father had a father from Smith's Sermon in the Grove should be interpreted as God the Father's having a father in mortality, and not that there was a God prior to the Father. After reviewing Ostler's arguments, it seems clear that Smith's point in that sermon was indeed to claim that God the Father of Jesus himself had a spiritual progenitor. Third, Ostler argues that Smith's use of Genesis 1:1 shows that Smith believed in a monarch God who rules over a heavenly council of gods. This is a novel thesis, but as a historical argument it does not hold. The great lesson Smith stresses from his emendation of Genesis 1:1 is that there is a plurality of gods at play from the very beginning. The heads of gods appointed the God of this world to his station. This is a process Smith appears to envision having no end.

Ostler's contention that the best interpretation of Joseph Smith's teachings about God is to suppose God to be the head God (the Monarch) who leads all other subordinate gods has not been persuasive. Ostler's kingship monotheism does not appear to be represented in the two key discourses of Joseph Smith that have been examined in this paper. Instead, the best interpretation of Smith's teaching on God in those discourses is that God the Father himself had a premortal father and came to be exalted to divinity at some first moment, that Jesus followed God the Father's example, and that humans may follow Jesus' example in turn.

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LOREN PANKRATZ {Loren@thebridgeutah.org} holds a MDiv from Princeton Theological Seminary, a DMin from Talbot School of Theology, and a PhD in theology from the South African Theological Seminary. His academic work has focused primarily on philosophical and theological matters pertaining to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Loren and his family live along the Wasatch Front in Utah, where Loren leads The Bridge Community, a non-denominational Christian church.