

Re-vision-ing the Mormon Concept of Deity

[Blake T. Ostler](#)

I am saving a copy of this article because it does an excellent job of providing the philosophical justification for this paper. I don't know how I first came across this paper, but it was after I began praying for information about the nature of God and came across contradictory statements like:

- "God is eternal, unchanging, and everlasting."
- "As man is, God once was. As God is, man may become."
- "If something has a beginning, it will have an end."
- "I am the Father and the Son."
- "I saw two personages."

How can you reconcile something which is eternal, but had a beginning? Is God one personage, or two, or more? The so-called "explanation" of the Trinity is theological nonsense. So are all the Mormon statements about deity. If you laid them all end to end, you could hie to Kolob and back (whatever that means) and still not know where you have been. People have attacked Joseph Smith for his "changing" definitions of God, while others have praised him for his "evolution" on the changing definitions of God, while most Mormons weren't even paying attention. I was inspired to ask questions and receive answers.

These are the scriptures which I prayed about, which lead to major breakthroughs.

Mosiah 5:8 And under this **head** ye are made free, and there is no other head whereby ye can be made free. There is no other **name** given whereby salvation cometh; therefore, I would that ye should take upon you the **name** of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives. [*Name* means far more than just a given name.]

Gen 1:26 And God said, Let **us** make man in **our** image, after **our** likeness: and let **them** have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. [The Bible tries to hide that there is more than one God.]

Joseph Smith boasted about his knowledge of Hebrew. I don't have my own private Hebrew teacher, but I do know how to look up Biblical words in an online concordance, and I know that "name" in Hebrew refers more to just a given name. It refers to a person's nature, title, mission, office, or calling. I also know that pronouns are important, and that when Genesis says "us" and "our", those plural pronouns are inconsistent with a singular God, and that the word "God" is mistranslated from the plural.

Joseph Smith said "By proving contradictions, truth is made manifest." Similar things have been said by Buddha and L. Ron Hubbard, which only proves that truth is everywhere. Proving these contradictions led me to the conclusion that:

- A. There is a difference between God and the Godhead.
- B. The names of the various members of the Godhead are *names* in the Hebrew sense.
- C. If we are ever to become “gods” or “like god” or “the sons of god”, this has implications for us.

This is the whole basis for this paper and my other paper about the Nature of God, but in my searches, I found this philosophical treatise in the web, lying forgotten in the web archives. In addition to the scriptural justifications which I offer in my other paper, this paper offers excellent philosophical insights. It is a perfect second witness for me. I am adding a link to this paper in my blog. I am also preserving a copy of this paper in my blog to ensure it doesn't get lost, and I am also going to try my best to take the relevant points of this paper and translate them into everyday English so that the average person can understand them.

The thing you must realize about anything you are taught about God is subject to bias: your own and that of the writer or speaker. Even if we receive something directly from God, we must take into account our own culture, understanding, and traditions and seek as much as possible to eliminate those from the pure truth we receive. We must realize also that God can also speak to us in terms of our culture and understanding in order to get a truth across to us. So much of what any church teaches us: traditional Christianity, or restored Mormonism, is based on somebody's interpretation or translation of scripture. Given all of this, we have to be constantly discerning for truth.

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Blake Ostler offers a new way to perceive God and the Godhead, based on scriptural evidence, which I believe is much more truthful than the traditional Christian or Mormon interpretations of God. It resonates with the scriptures, with what Joseph Smith taught, and with my understanding of what the Lord is teaching me. Do not mistake any of what you have previously heard or read or what you will now read for the final word about what God is. Instead, take it as a giant step forward in our understanding of God and our quest to know Him, and thus, obtain Life Eternal. Then, having built on a better foundation, I heartily invite you to continue your search for God and obtain an even greater understanding. But, to know God is more than just to know about God. You actually have to understand the heart and mind of God. I hope this discussion of the mechanics of God helps you somewhat to both know and love God in a better more complete way.

[What happened in and after 1835?](#)

This essay divides Mormon doctrine concerning the nature of God at the year 1835. Why this year?

- Book of Commandments published in 1833
- Church under condemnation – name changed in 1834
- Significant drop off in revelation, beginning in 1835.
- The Lectures on Faith were included as the “doctrine” portion of the Doctrine & Covenants.
- D&C, 1835 edition, was canonized in August of 1835.
- Translation of The Book of Abraham began in 1835 – mentions multiple gods
- “Official” version of First Vision written in 1838 – mentions two beings
- Sermon on Plurality of Gods - 1844

- King Follett sermon – 1844
- Section 130 – items of instruction concerning nature of God - 1843

This is a 17-page essay with 3 pages of footnotes. He numbers his paragraphs for each reference. I am going to reply to the major points in each paragraph.

This article can also be found in the web archive at

https://web.archive.org/web/20190421115511/http://www.smpt.org/docs/ostler_element1-1.html

1. I want to focus on a concept in the Mormon scriptures that is rarely discussed -- the concept of *divinity-as-such*. This concept has been obscured in Mormon thought in part because of the emphasis on the distinctness of the divine persons. **Mormons have focused on the distinct divine persons as separate, corporeal individuals to the almost complete exclusion of any notion that there is also an important sense in which God is one.** The *oneness* of God also has been obscured in part by a tendency to commit the logical fallacy of composition, assuming that the one God must have the same properties as the divine persons considered individually, and thus must be one in the same respects that God is three. The complaint that anyone who claims such a thing simply does not know how to count to three is probably well taken. However, the assumption that there is no way to make sense of God as one *something* and also as three *somethings* is mistaken. While there are severe logical problems with the classical formulations of the Trinity, **I believe that Mormon scriptures provide a coherent and fully scriptural way to view God as three divine persons in one Godhead.**

Mormons have placed so much attention on the individual members of the Godhead, and on their individuality that they have lost sight of the nature and characteristics of the Godhead as a whole.

2. The Mormon scriptures consistently present a view of three persons who are one God in virtue of a unity so profound that they are *one* and *in* each other. **God is the relationship of intimate and inter-penetrating love in this sense.** However, 'God' is ambiguous as to whether it refers to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost as individuals or to them as a collective. To avoid confusion, I will adopt the convention of using the term Godhead to refer to the divine persons collectively. By 'divinity' I mean the fulness of the relationship of indwelling love among the Father, Son and Holy Ghost which gives rise to the emergent divine nature and in virtue of which these three are one God. By 'divine nature' I mean the set of properties essential to be divine. To put it less exactly, *divinity* is what makes a divine person *divine*.

Reading the scriptures and seeing the word "God", it is often difficult to tell whether they are talking about a single individual in the Godhead or the Godhead as a whole. For the purposes of this paper, I define "Godhead" to refer to them collectively; "divinity" as the fulness of the relationship of their indwelling love. Divinity is those properties which make a divine person *divine*.

3. This view of divinity challenges at least two commonly held views regarding God in Mormon scripture. Some have argued that the Mormon scriptures before about 1835 adopt a *modalist* view of God, that is that the Father and the Son are identical but merely referred to by different names. Such a view of God would preclude this notion of divinity because it excludes the possibility of a real relationship between divine persons. The only possible relation

on such a view is merely semantic, as the morning star is related to the evening star, which is to say, no real relation at all.

He is going against prevailing views that Mormon scripture held differing pre-1835 and post-1835 views of God. The pre-1835 view is that God was the same person, going by different names.

4. On the other hand, the argument continues that after about 1835 the Mormon scriptures moved beyond the Sabellian heresy and adopt tri-theism or a plurality of gods. The divine persons are united merely in the sense that they are members of a common class of beings called 'gods' who have a common purpose. If tri-theism is true, then the view of divinity that I propose cannot be based on a relationship of indwelling unity and coinherence because the divine persons are related merely by falling under a common description or belonging to the same class. For example, it is like saying that all mortals are one humanity.

The post-1835 view of God suggests Godhead is three distinct persons, all called 'gods' but with a common purpose. This view loses the indwelling relationship of love between them.

5. I will **challenge the notion that Mormon scriptures are either modalist or tri-theistic**. Along the way, **I will also suggest rejecting the view that God is a being who *became* God**. I will argue that a more adequate and consistent understanding of God in Mormon scriptures is **Social Trinitarianism**. I will begin by pointing out some confusion regarding the word 'God'. I will then sketch briefly what the Mormon scriptures have to say about divinity. Then I will elucidate a theory which I believe best accounts for the scriptural materials. Finally, I will look at some theological implications of such a view.

This paragraph is a key outline of his entire paper. Ostler rejects both these notions as well as the notion the "God is a being who became God". He offers a new way to look at God and the Godhead, compares it to the scriptures, and explores the theological implications of such a view.

6. **I add that I consider the scriptural texts as the ultimate test of adequacy for my views because I believe that theological theories ought to be drawn and elaborated from scriptural texts.** There are a lot of different views about God current among Judeo-Christians in general and Mormons in particular. I believe that when the doctrine of God is divorced from scripture that the doctrine often tends to become idiosyncratic and individualistic in addition to becoming somewhat contrary to the interests of a sound theological basis for saving beliefs. The Mormon community has agreed to be bound only by the scriptures in all that they say, and not to any private interpretation or philosophical systems.

The ultimate test of his views (and mine) are the scriptures. These views must harmonize with the scriptures and the Gospel. (It's hard for me not to add my own thoughts here, but I believe these views will give us new insights while preserving and supporting the Gospel teachings as delivered to us by Christ.)

A. **Two Logical Considerations.**

7. The history of interpretation of doctrine of the Trinity could accurately be described as a vacillation between modalism on the other hand, and tri-theism on the other. I believe that the

classical doctrine of the Trinity does indeed suffer from either incoherence or the heresy of Sabellianism. I call this *the Trinitarian's Dilemma*.

(i) *The Trinitarian's Dilemma*.

8. The classical doctrine of the Trinity has been stated most clearly and authoritatively by Augustine. Of the Trinity, Augustine stated:

There are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and each is God, and at the same time all are one God, and each of them is a full substance, and at the same time all are one substance. The Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit; the Son is neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. But the Father is the Father uniquely, the Son is the Son uniquely, and the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit uniquely. [1](#)

Augustine's claim regarding the relation of the divine persons to the one God entails the following:

- (1) There is exactly one God;
- (2) The Father is God;
- (3) The Son is God;
- (4) The Father is not identical to the Son.

9. From the foregoing premises it is apparent that acceptance of any three of these premises entails denial of the fourth. Premises 1, 2 and 3 entail that the Father and the Son are identical and thus the Sabellian heresy follows. The heresy claimed that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one identical being merely manifested in three different modes (thus also known as modalism). Premises 2, 3 and 4 entail bi-theism. There are two independent and separate persons, both of whom are Gods. Further, premises 1, 2 and 4 entail that the Son is not divine and thus reflect the Arian heresy which held that the Son is not divine in the same sense that the Father is divine. And from premises 1, 3 and 4 it follows that the Son is divine but the Father is not. The Gnostic heresy which rejected the God of the Old Testament but accepted Christ as divine thus follows. This inconsistent tetrad of premises poses a significant problem for classical Christians because each of them is affirmed by the tradition.

I'm not going to get into this philosophical jargon.

10. Nevertheless, each of these claims seems to be essential not only to the classical tradition but to Mormonism as well. **Nothing is clearer in Mormon scripture than the claim that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are (is) one God.** It is a claim that is made constantly and consistently throughout all Mormon scripture. **On the other hand, it is also clear that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are distinct persons in the fullest modern sense of the word person.** Each of them has complete cognitive and conative faculties and is spatio-temporally distinct from the others in virtue of possessing a material form (as opposed to a glorified, resurrected body). **It appears, at least on the face of it, that the Mormon scriptures embody an outright contradiction.**

As I mentioned earlier, Mormon theology as taught and understood still contains contradictions, just as does Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity.

11. The problem lies in the fact that there is no easy way to construe these assertions to avoid the problem. **If 'is' in these propositions is understood as an identity statement then we cannot avoid modalism.** Then we would be saying something logically equivalent to: 'Spencer Kimball is the author of *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, Spencer Kimball is the twelfth President of the Mormon Church, and Spencer Kimball is the Prophet to the Lamanites, but there are not three Spencer Kimballs but only one'. While this way of construing the propositions is clearly coherent, it entails the heresy of modalism. This is the way many claim we should understand references to the divine persons in Mormon scripture before about 1835.

12. On the other hand, **if we construe 'is' as an adjectival predicate for membership in a class then we commit the heresy of tri-theism.** Such an interpretation is like saying that Joe Montana is a San Francisco 49'er, Steve Young is a San Francisco 49'er and Bart Oates is a San Francisco 49'er, but there are not three San Francisco 49'er teams but only one. This way of construing the propositions is clearly coherent. However, it entails that there are three football players and not merely one. Although there is one team, the team is not really anything over and above the members of the team itself. The *team* as such has no reality of its own but only the reality of the team members. Many claim that this is the way that we should understand references to the divine persons in Mormon scripture after 1835.

13. **Thus, Mormon scriptures have been accused of playing on both sides of the road on this issue and falling into heresy on each side.** Classical Christianity claims to adopt the middle of the road view which seems to be incoherent. **Thus, on either side of the spectrum we have coherent views that are heresy and the middle view, trying to have it both ways, is literally unbelievable because it does not make a coherent claim.** Now it is true that many people who take the middle position construe the classical view as holding that each of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are God and yet there are not Gods but one. This view has often been dignified with the terms 'paradox' or 'mystery'. But it appears to me there is nothing really paradoxical or mysterious about this claim that in God there both are and are not three persons. Unless we are willing to give up the most basic law of logic, the law of non-contradiction, then this middle view does not really constitute a claim at all because it simply denies what it also affirms. Thus, the middle view is neither a mystery nor a paradox but a logical mess and ought simply to be rejected.

Bill Clinton was right. It all depends on what your definition of *is* is. It can mean a member of a class: *An elephant is an animal*. Or an identity: *Louie Armstrong is Satchmo Armstrong*. Many simple words have complex meanings and how you interpret that meaning determines how you interpret scripture. For example, John 1:1 is, to me, the most mysterious passage in the Bible. The word *and* has as many as 100 different meanings. Mormon scriptures, not the scriptures themselves, but how they are interpreted does not present a coherent meaning.

(ii) *The Fallacy of Composition.*

14. One point in this discussion is crystal clear: **if God is one in the same sense that God is three, then the doctrine presented in scripture is incoherent. Thus, the only way to avoid the**

Trinitarians Dilemma is to recognize that 'God' is equivocal and means something different when it refers to the three persons as one God than when it refers to the three persons as individuals. However, this move has been resisted because it is feared that if 'God' can mean different things, then it can be argued that it means something different for the Father than for the Son. Thus, when it is asserted that the Father is God, it may be asserted that the Son is not *God* in the same sense. There is, of course, a long history of *subordinationism* based upon numerous scriptural texts which recognize that the Son is subordinate to the Father. Nevertheless, Mormons ought to be skittish about adopting any view that renders the Son as subordinate *in the sense that* the Son is somehow less divine than the Father because, like classical Christians, the Mormon scripture clearly insist that only an *infinite God* will suffice to bring about the atonement. (2 Nephi 9:7; Alma 34:10) The notion that the Son is *fully God* is more central to Mormon scripture than has been generally recognized.

We cannot have one member of the Godhead being subordinate and less divine than another. The Son must be fully God and infinite in order to bring about the atonement.

15. Nevertheless, the fact that the Son is subordinate to the Father *in an appropriate sense* does not necessarily entail that the Son is less divine than the Father. Further, the Mormon scriptures do not claim that the Son is *God* in a different sense than the Father; rather, they claim implicitly that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost as *one God* occupy a different logical space than the divine persons individually considered. **In my review of writings about the Mormon concept of God, it has been uniformly assumed that God in Mormon thought merely is a divine person and there is nothing further to be understood.** For example, Sterling McMurrin understood the divine persons to be nominal particulars and insisted that Mormonism did not recognize universals. Thus, he argued that the Godhead simply is the various divine persons as particulars.² I pick on McMurrin not because he is a bad example but because he is among the most philosophically sophisticated and careful writers to treat the subject.

But the Son is subordinate to the Father in a sense that does not mean He is less divine than the Father. (The way out of this dilemma is to recognize the equality of the members of the Godhead while recognizing that they are bound together by a covenant, and that within that covenant, they play differing roles.)

16. **The failure to recognize this distinction between the properties of the divine persons considered individually and of the Godhead as a collective commits the fallacy of composition. The fallacy of composition is committed whenever one assumes that the whole must have the same properties as each of its parts. Thus, this fallacy is committed when one claims that a large crowd of people must be a crowd of large people.** The same fallacy is committed when one claims that anything consisting of oxygen and hydrogen must be a gas at room temperature. However, one molecule consisting of two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen has very different properties than the constituent parts of the molecule considered separately. The properties of water are emergent from the molecular unity of hydrogen and oxygen. Thus, it is a basic confusion in thinking to assume that the Godhead must be understood to have the same properties as the divine persons considered individually.

The logical fallacy of composition is the failure to recognize that the properties of the whole are not necessarily equal to the properties of the individual parts. Ostler offers the perfect example: “a large crowd of people” does not imply the same thing as a “crowd of large people”.

17. Suppose we try again, but avoid the fallacy of composition. Could saying that *God is three, distinct divine persons each of whom are a God but there is only one God and not three*, be like saying that there are three atoms but only one water molecule? If the entity is one that has emergent properties that arise from the unity of its several parts, then the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. On this view, we could say that the emergent properties of the Godhead as a unity of indwelling divine persons constitute their divinity. It is because the divine persons as one Godhead are more than the mere sum of their parts, to put it crudely, that ‘God’ means something different when referring to the three divine persons individually than when referring to them as one Godhead. When referring to the divine persons individually as ‘God’, it means that each possesses the properties essential to be divine in virtue of their participation in the Godhead. However, when we refer to the collective of divine persons as one God, the word functions differently and refers to divinity-as-such in which these three participate. Thus, there is a sense in which the divine persons are three Gods, and there a sense in which the three persons as a unity are one God, *but in different senses of the word ‘God’*.

This is the key paragraph of this whole essay. Don’t read any farther until you understand the point being made here. Each member of the Godhead is a god, possessing all the divine characteristics necessary to be considered a god. They are bound together by indwelling love for one another and by a common purpose: to bring about the immortality and eternal life of man. And, in bringing about that purpose, each has a different function.

“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.” (Joseph Smith, TPJS, pg. 190)

Let’s illustrate this with some scriptures.

Isa 6:3 And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the **LORD of hosts [Those who are with Him.]**: the whole earth is full of **his glory**.

D&C 20:36 And the Lord God has spoken it; and **honor, power and glory** be rendered to his holy name, **both now and ever**. Amen.

Rev 5:13 And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, **Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power**, be unto **him that sitteth upon the throne (1)**, and unto **the Lamb (2)** for ever and ever.

Furthermore, **because of their union, additional and unique properties emerge**. Among these are **Eternal blessing, honor, power, and glory**. These qualities come about because of the unity of the Godhead, and to seek these qualities for oneself alone would dissolve the covenant, the Godhead could

cease to be the Godhead, and God (each individual god), would cease to be God, in the sense that he is now.

Mos 4:1 And I, the Lord God, spake unto Moses, saying: That Satan, whom thou hast commanded in the name of mine Only Begotten, is the same which was from the beginning, and he came before me, saying--Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; **wherefore give me thine honor.**

Mos 4:2 But, behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me--Father, **thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever.**

Mos 4:3 Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and **also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;**

D&C 29:30 But remember that all my judgments are not given unto men; and as the words have gone forth out of my mouth even so shall they be fulfilled, that the first shall be last, and that the last shall be first **in all things whatsoever I have created by the word of my power, which is the power of my Spirit.**

D&C 29:36 And it came to pass that Adam, being tempted of the devil--for, behold, the devil was before Adam, **for he rebelled against me, saying, Give me thine honor, which is my power;** and also a third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me because of their agency;

Jesus taught the Apostles at the Last Supper (John 17). The Father and the Son are one (unified) because of the glory which they share, and Jesus and the Apostles will also be one (unified) because they share in the same glory. Is it because they share glory that they are one, or is it because they are one that they share glory. Chicken or egg? We can't answer this because God is eternal. (More on this later.) I know this is a very esoteric subject and we are drilling far down into it, but there are important principles to be learned here: What is God? How can you know God? What makes God, God? What makes you God?

B. Scriptural Considerations.

18. The scriptures point to an emergent property which unites the three distinct persons as one God and in virtue of which the divine persons are properly also called God individually. For Mormons, the biblical *locus classicus* for understanding the divine nature that is communicated from one divine person to another is **John 17, the High Priestly prayer, wherein Christ prayed that the disciples "may be one as we are." (John 17:11) Christ pleaded with the Father that the disciples "may be one, as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they may be one in us.... And the glory which Thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and Thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that Thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved me." (John 17:21-23)** The divine glory that is communicated to the disciples, and which makes them one even as the Father and the Son are one, is divinity-as-such. This same glory was possessed by the Son with the Father "before the foundation of the world." (John 17:5, 24) It is the same divine glory which the Son set aside when he left the pre-existence with the Father to become mortal and which he asked the Father to restore to him. (John 17:1-5)

I got ahead of myself in the last paragraph, but I couldn't help it. This is so important and self-evident.

19. There are two primary sources for understanding the doctrine of divinity in Mormon scripture, the Book of Mormon and D&C 93. The Book of Mormon reflects the Johannine emphasis upon indwelling unity in individual distinction. The resurrected Christ in 3 Nephi speaks in the idiom of the gospel of John. This idiom bespeaks an indwelling intimacy of unity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost together with the disciples of Christ. Perhaps the best way to show this relationship is to put "oneness" texts side-by-side with "distinctness" texts from 3 Nephi:

<u>Oneness Texts</u>	<u>Distinctness Texts</u>
The Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one, and I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one. (11:27)	I have drunk of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me and have glorified the Father... in the which I have suffered the will of the Father from the beginning. (11:11)
I bear record of the Father, and the Father beareth record of me, and the Holy Ghost beareth record of the Father and me. (11:32)	This is the doctrine that the Father hath given unto me... (11:32)
Whoso believeth in me believeth in the Father also. (11:35)	I ascended to the Father (15:1)
And thus the Father bear record of me, and the Holy Ghost will bear record unto him of the Father and me; for the Father and I and the Holy Ghost are one. (11:36)	This much did the Father command me...The Father hath commanded me to tell you ... I have received a commandment of the Father... (15:16, 19; 16:16)
The Father and I are one (20:35)	Now I go to my Father ... [Jesus] prayed unto the Father... I must go unto the Father (17:4, 15-18, 35)
And now my Father, I pray unto thee for them, also for all those who shall believe on their words, that they may believe in me, that I may be in them as Thou, Father, art in me, that we may be one. (19:23)	I came into the world to the will of the Father because the Father sent me. (27:13)
[T]hat I may be in them as Thou Father, art in me, that we may be one, that I may be glorified in them. (19:29)	

20. The view that the **Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one** in each other in virtue of mutual witnessing of each other, commissioning to do the will of the Father, and indwelling unity is presented with clarity in 3 Nephi. **However, a distinction of wills and persons is also quite clearly elucidated.** The Son is distinguished from the Father by a functional subordinationism. The Father sends the Son to do the Father's will. Though the Son has a will of his own, he subordinates it to the Father's will who is "greater than" him. (c.f., John 4:34; 14:2, 28; 17:24; 20:26). The words spoken by Jesus are not his words, but the words that the Father gives to him. Because the Son does the will of the Father, and the Holy Ghost does the will of both the Father and the Son, there is only one will expressed in actual function.

The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one, yet they have distinct wills. We each have our own distinct wills, but we do not subordinate our will to God's will, we are not unified the way the Godhead is unified, and we do not love the way the Godhead loves, and these are the reasons why we are separated from the Godhead, and these are the things that God is trying to teach us through the scriptures and his servants. Each member of the Godhead is dedicated to the common purpose of bringing us back into their Presence, and each is focused on His own role in carrying out that task.

21. It seems apparent that both 3 Nephi and the Gospel of John adopt the Hebrew notion of commissioning of an agent to act on behalf of God to reflect the relation between the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. As Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. concluded with respect to the gospel of John:

Yet this very superordination and subordination of wills that distinguish the three persons also unites them. For in fact, only one divine will is expressed that of the Father who sends the Son and who, with the Son, sends the Paraclete [Holy Spirit]. The sending idea itself, given the *sali(a)h* tradition of the Old Testament and rabbinic Judaism, suggest both that the one who sends is greater than the one sent, and also that the one sent is an almost perfect duplicate or representative of the sender.³

It is particularly noteworthy that the Holy Ghost is recognized also as an agent having a distinct will and able to witness of the Father and Son as a distinct person who can satisfy the law of multiple witnesses. In these passages, the Holy Ghost is described as engaging in self-conscious personal acts. He communicates, thinks, acts, knows and is described with the personal pronoun 'he'. If the Holy Ghost were less than personal, or somehow identical with the Father and the Son, he could not fulfill the role as a separate witness competent to testify in a manner that satisfies this law of multiple witnesses. **This recognition is significant because the Saints did not fully grasp the status of the Holy Ghost as a distinct divine *personage* for some time, as evidenced in the 1835 Lectures on Faith which present the Holy Ghost as the shared mind of the Father and the Son. The Holy Ghost was thus viewed as personal, in the sense of having cognitive faculties, but not as a *personage* or a distinct person in the modern sense of the word. However, the properties attributed to the Holy Ghost in 3 Nephi require a fully distinct agent who can testify of the Father and the Son as an independent witness.** Because such functions require distinct consciousness, the Book of Mormon implies that the Holy Ghost is a distinct center of consciousness.⁴

I can address this last point. There is a distinction between the Holy Spirit -- the shared mind of God -- and the Holy Ghost, which is a distinct office in the Godhead, which office can be fulfilled by any number of different people who act in this office. We say the Aaronic Priesthood consists of the offices of Deacon, Teacher, and Priest, but this does not mean there is only one of each. Anyone who acts in the office of Deacon, with the requisite power and authority from God is a Deacon. Anyone who acts in the office of the Holy Ghost, with the requisite power and authority from God is a Holy Ghost.

D&C 121:26 God shall give unto you knowledge by his **Holy Spirit**, yea, by the **unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost**, that has not been revealed since the world was until now;

The Holy Spirit (the shared mind of God) is the gift which is bestowed by somebody acting in the office of the Holy Ghost. All those who are baptized by fire (justified, cleansed from sin) and sanctified (made holy) by the baptism of the Holy Ghost are possessors of the mind of God, and are eligible to become members of the church of the firstborn, bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost, and perform the function of the Holy Ghost -- that of leading persons to Christ, and even of escorting persons to the throne of Christ in the heavens. At a lower level, the Holy Ghost ministers to the inhabitants of the earth through the various offices of the Priesthood and the diverse gifts of the Spirit.

22. In 1832 Joseph Smith received a revelation of a text attributed to John -- either or both the Beloved and/or the Baptist. This revelation is now found in D&C 93. Once again, these scriptures initiate us into the Johannine world of divine intimacy. D&C 93 shows that just as Christ is God in virtue of his indwelling unity with the Father, so the Saints may become one with the Father and the Son through the Spirit *in one* another. It explains three key doctrines: (1) how the Father and the Son are one in the Spirit; (2) how Christ is both God and man; and (3) how humans become one in the Father and the Son and enjoy a fulness of joy.

And that I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one--**The Father because** he gave me of his fulness, and **the Son because** I was in the world and made flesh my tabernacle, and dwelt among the sons of men. I give unto you these sayings that you may understand and know how to worship, and know what you worship, **that you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness.** D&C 93:3-4, 19

We are actually invited to come participate in the indwelling love and unity enjoyed by the Godhead!

23. A second comparison is internal to D&C 93 itself. It explains how the Son becomes divine because the Father communicates to the Son a fulness of power, knowledge and presence. This same fulness of power, knowledge and presence is communicated to the Saints:

<u>The Son of God</u>	<u>The Sons of God</u>
I was in the beginning with the Father. (93:21)	Ye were also in the beginning with the Father. (93:22)
I am the Firstborn. (93:21)	All who are begotten through me ... are the Church of the Firstborn. (93:20)

and he received not of the fulness at first; but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness. (93:13)	If ye keep my commandments you shall receive of his fulness ... Ye shall receive grace for grace. (93:20)
I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one.... (93:3) And the glory of the Father was with him, for he dwelt in him. (93:17)	You shall... be glorified in me as I am in the Father. (93:20)
And he received a fulness of truth, yea, even all truth. (93:26)	He that keepeth the commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things. (93:28)
He received all power both in heaven and on earth. (93:17)	Then shall they be gods because they shall have all power. (132:20)
And thus he was called the Son of God, because he received not of the fulness at first. (93:14)	Wherefore it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God. (76:58)

24. From the gospel of John and the Mormon scriptures, at least the following claims seem to be made:

(1) **Distinct Persons.** The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are **three distinct divine persons who are one Godhead in virtue of oneness of indwelling unity of presence, glory, and oneness of mind purpose, power and intent.** Each of the three divine persons is a distinct person in the fullest modern sense of the word, having distinct cognitive and conative personality. Because each of these capacities requires a distinct consciousness, each divine person is a distinct center of self-consciousness.

(2) **Loving Dependence and Ontological Independence.** The Son and the Holy Ghost are **subordinate to the Father and dependent on their relationship of indwelling unity and love with the Father for their divinity, that is, the Father is the source or fount of divinity of the Son and Holy Ghost. If the oneness of the Son and/or Holy Ghost with the Father should cease, then so would their divinity.** However, the Son and Holy Ghost do not depend upon the Father for their existence as individuals and thus each of the divine person has *de re* ontologically necessary existence. Further, **although the Father does not depend for his divine status on the Son or Holy Ghost, nevertheless it is inconceivable that the Father should be God in isolation from them because God is literally the love of the divine persons for each other.**

(3) **Divinity.** Godhood or the divine nature is the **immutable set of essential properties necessary to be divine. There is only one Godhood or divine essence in this sense.** Each of the distinct divine persons shares this set of great-making properties which are severally necessary and jointly sufficient for their possessor to be divine. Each of the divine persons has this essence though none is simply identical with it.

(4) **Indwelling Unity.** The **unity of the divine persons falls short of identity but is much more intimate than merely belonging to the same class of individuals.** There are distinct divine

persons, but hardly separated or independent divine persons. In the divine life there is no alienation, isolation, insulation, secretiveness or aloneness. **The divine persons exist in a unity that includes loving, inter-penetrating awareness of another who is also in one's self.** The divine persons somehow spiritually extend their personal presence to dwell in each other and thus become "one" "in" each other. Thus, the divine persons *as one Godhead* logically cannot experience the alienation and separation that characterizes human existence.

Godhead is oneness beyond that which mortal humans experience oneness, but Jesus has promised us that we can experience that oneness through the Holy Ghost. It is a sense of oneness which is indescribable. God is not you, but He is one with you. Like Ostler says: "It falls short of identity, but is more intimate" than anything we can normally understand.

(5) **Monothelism.** These scriptures present a form of **monothelism** in the sense that it is appropriate to use the designator 'God' to refer to the **Godhead as one emergent unity on a new level of existence and a different level of logical categories. The unity is so complete that each of the distinct divine persons has the same mind in the sense that what one divine person knows, all know as one; what one divine person wills, all will as one.** The unity is so profound that there is only one power governing the universe instead of three, for what one divine person does, all do as one. There is a single state of affairs brought about by the divine persons acting as one almighty agency. Because the properties of all-encompassing power, knowledge and presence arise from and in dependence on the relationship of divine unity, it logically follows that necessarily the distinct divine persons cannot exercise power in isolation from one another. Therefore, it follows that there is necessarily only one sovereign of the universe.

(6) **Apotheosis.** **Humans may share the same divinity as the divine persons through grace by becoming one with the divine persons in the same sense that they are one with each other.** However, humans are eternally subordinate to and dependent upon their relationship of loving unity with the divine persons for their status as *gods*. By acting as one with the Godhead, deified humans will share fully in the godly attributes of knowledge, power, and glory of God, but they will never be separately worthy of worship nor will they be the source of divinity for others.

Bet you didn't know all this was in Section 93. I have made a lifelong study of the Gospel of John and Section 93. I have tasted of the love, goodness, and unity with the Lord, and I can tell you that it is real and tangible. If you have merely read about the Lord, or merely seen Him in vision, or even stood in His Presence, it can't compare with this experience of oneness. And, you are not only one with God, you are also one with everything that is one with God. This is why and this is how John could cry out:

Rev 5:13 And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, **Blessing**, and **honour**, and **glory**, and **power**, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.

25. Now those who are familiar with recent developments in philosophical theology will recognize that this view of God has a lot in common with **Social Trinitarianism**, or the view that the three divine persons are distinct persons in the fullest modern sense of the word and yet are a single social unity that governs the universe. This view has enjoyed somewhat of a resurgence

in recent philosophical theology.⁵ Those who espouse the notion of Social Trinitarianism claim two overriding virtues for it: it is fully scriptural and it is coherent, whereas the alternative *one-person* or tri-theistic models are not scriptural and the middle way, which the tradition apparently claims to espouse, is incoherent. These are considerable virtues in my book which strongly argue in favor of adopting the Social Trinity. For my purposes, perhaps the term '**Emergent Trinity**' is more descriptive.

As far as I am concerned, the above is philosophical "shop talk".

C. Re-Vision of the Concept of God.

26. This view of the one God as an emergent Social Trinity **requires a radical revision of some common assumptions about the Mormon concept of God**. There will obviously be many implications that I cannot touch upon, but here I will mention only a few of them.

If our assumptions, traditions, and doctrines are false, they need to be revised.

27. *God's Necessary Existence*. This view may seem objectionable because the Godhead has contingent existence, that is, the Godheads existence is dependent upon the love of the divine persons for one another and it is logically possible that they freely choose not to love one another. The tradition rejected any notion of distinct parts or composition in deity for fear that it would then be logically possible for God to fall apart from the inside, to put it crudely. The traditional answer to this concern was the doctrine of simplicity. **The basic notion is that God cannot be de-composed in any sense because he is not composed of parts either materially or conceptually**. Thus, at least since Augustine the classical tradition adopted the doctrine of divine simplicity, which holds roughly that each of Gods properties is identical with every one of his properties and his essence is his nature.⁶ Needless to say, this doctrine is very difficult, if not impossible, to square with the doctrine that the one God is three distinct persons.⁷

The LDS doctrine and belief, and indeed Alma 42:12,22 and 25 postulate that God could cease to be God, as does Mormon 9:12, as does 2 Nephi 2:13.

28. However, **this concern overlooks the fact that both the individual divine persons and the Godhead necessarily exist, but in different senses**. Following Richard Swinburne, we can say that *x* has *ontologically necessary existence* if there is no cause, either active or passive, of *x*'s everlasting existence. Such existence is not contingent or dependent on another. In contrast, we can say that *x* has *metaphysically necessary existence* if *x*'s everlasting existence is inevitably caused (for a beginningless period), actively or passively, directly or indirectly, by an ontologically necessary being.⁸ Given these definitions, **D&C 93 seems to contemplate that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost as individuals each have *de re* ontologically necessary existence, that is, it is their nature to exist and they individually cannot fail to exist**. The Father is the source of light and truth which is communicated to the Son through the Spirit of Truth. (D&C 93:8, 26-27) Gods attribute of intelligence, or "light of truth was not created or made, neither indeed can be." (D&C 93:29) By strict implication it follows that the divine persons must themselves have such ontologically necessary existence.⁹ However, it is also this same everlasting attribute which is shared by the divine persons and in virtue of which they are divine.

Simply put, God exists because it is his nature to exist.

29. The Godhead has metaphysically necessary existence. Because the relationship of love of the divine persons constitutes the divine persons as one Godhead, the everlasting existence of the Godhead must be contingent in some sense. Love is an activity and/or attitude which is freely chosen, and thus it is possible to freely choose not to love. It follows that the divine persons love each other contingently. Nevertheless, we can be certain that there always has been and always will be a Godhead. Because the divine persons are perfectly rational beings, it follows that they will always freely choose to relate to one another and sustain the loving relationship in existence. It would be irrational to reject the greatest good possible which consists in the loving relationship of indwelling intimacy among the divine persons. **Therefore, it is certain that they will freely choose to love one another as one God.** It is logically possible that the Godhead fail to exist if the divine persons freely choose to cease loving one another; but it is not practically possible. The Godhead therefore has metaphysically necessary existence.

The Godhead could choose to cease to exist, but it would never do so.

30. Further, the Godhead and divine persons are immutable in different respects. The Godhead necessarily possesses each of the properties of divinity *de dicto* because these properties cohere in and necessarily arise from the relationship of divine unity. The Godhead could not fail to have the properties of divinity and remain what it is. The Godhead is thus immutable with respect to the divine nature in this sense. On the other hand, the divine persons can fail to have the properties of divinity because the divine nature is contingent on the voluntary love of the divine persons for one another. Thus, while the steadfast character and personal essence or identity is essential to each of the divine persons, the properties of divinity are not. The divine persons could voluntarily *empty* themselves of divinity by freely choosing to leave the unity of indwelling existence which characterizes the divine life. However, no other being or force could somehow require a divine person to sever the unity and therefore destroy God because the three persons as one Godhead have maximal power.¹⁰ It is important to note that, given this understanding of divinity, there cannot be a greater being conceived to be actual than God as the divine persons united as one Godhead. God in this sense is necessarily unsurpassable by any other being. The divine power, knowledge and presence arise in dependence on and from this relationship of complete unity and love. The divine attributes of governing power over and knowledge of all things cannot be possessed outside the complete unity which characterizes the relationship between the community of divine persons.¹¹ Thus, God as one Godhead cannot have any rivals. **There are not many Lords of the universe, even though there are many divine persons. It is the community, collective or divine persons-as-one-God, who necessarily agree as one, that has the ultimate authority and power.**¹²

God could not fail to possess divine properties and remain who he is. The ultimate power of the universe is possessed by a community or a collective of divine persons, which compose one God, and who necessarily agree as one. (But there is no limiting factor on how many beings compose this community at any given time, as long as the community, itself, remains, and as long as the persons within it possess divinity.)

31. **God as a community of divine persons is the greatest conceivable love.** Their united love gives rise to an incommensurable joy. Further, this loving relationship has been extended to mere mortals. Thus, God is omni-benevolent. **This love gives rise to life and glory on a new**

level of supreme existence which proceeds from God's presence to fill the immensity of space like light from the sun fills the solar system. (D&C 88:6-13) This light which proceeds from the one God's presence is the source of all biological life and natural laws which govern all things. (D&C 88:16-36) Thus, there can be no rivals to the one God because in this sense God comprehends all reality within the scope of his governing power, knowledge and love. The divine persons as-one-God enjoy life on a level of existence different from individuals. Though humans also have necessary existence, the level of existence of the Godhead is vastly different. The power, knowledge, and compassion of the one God are supreme. No individual being could consistently know more or have more efficacious power or even approach the type of knowledge, power and omnipresence possessed by the Godhead.

Their love, joy, and glory extends out over the universe to fill the immensity of space, and is the source of law and life to all beings and things. They have no rivals when it comes to power, knowledge, or compassion.

32. The Incarnation or Condescension of God. There is one exception to the notion that the three divine persons will always rationally and freely choose to remain as one God -- and it is a profoundly Christian exception. If there were an overriding reason arising from the very love that united them, one of them could choose to make the ultimate sacrifice to leave the divine unity. The Godhead could unitedly decide that one of the divine persons must become human to provide atonement and salvation for humans. **The only reason for leaving the Godhead is thus an overriding love for mere humans.** This view of God thus entails an implicit kenotic christology. *Kenosis* is a form of the Greek word used in Philippians 2:6-11 which means "to empty." It states that Christ "who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal to God: but made himself of no reputation (the verb here means literally that he emptied himself of his divine glory), and took upon himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men." The notion is that the Son emptied himself of his divine glory to become human. **The divine persons can empty themselves of the divine attributes by leaving the divine unity and becoming separated or alienated individuals.** The gospel of John, Hebrews and Phillipians contemplate that this is exactly what Christ did when he became human. He emptied himself of his preexistent glory, left the intimate and indwelling relation with the Father and Holy Ghost, and became human. **Thus a divine person could choose to become human because the divine persons as one Godhead cannot experience the isolation, alienation and alone-ness that are necessary to experience the essential alienation experienced by all humans. Thus, God must become man to fully understand and experience our pain and, through that understanding, provide at-one-ment to humans.**

This is known in the Book of Mormon as "the condescension of God". In the Mormon temple endowment ceremony, Michael, who helped form the earth, condescends to become Adam, the first man in order to introduce immortal spirits to earthly tabernacles, and to experience their own separation from God (a condescension or descent into matter to develop faith and to determine their willingness to voluntarily submit to the principles of divinity in order to become divine, themselves). Alma 13 also speaks about Holy priests, after the order (or likeness) of the Son of God who have earned their divinity by proving themselves in previous incarnations and who then condescend to return to assist others.

33. Several persons (treating primarily the problem of self-referring indexicals of knowledge) have reached the conclusion that God, as an omniscient being¹³ could not have knowledge of particularity.¹⁴ It follows that to learn obedience from things which he suffered (Heb. 5:8), to be able to succor them that are tempted because He himself was tempted but did not sin, (Heb. 2:18), to be touched by our infirmities and to fully understand our alienation from God (Heb. 4:15), Christ as a divine person necessarily had to leave aside his divine glory, become as humans are in all respects, and cease for a time to be "one" "in" the Father and Holy Ghost as one God. There is a kind of perfection that comes only from immediate and personal experience. Prior to the incarnation, it was impossible for the Godhead to understand the essence of alienated human existence. Thus, Jesus truly had to grow and learn what it was like to be human.¹⁵

The condescension of Christ, by experiencing a separated life, outside the divine community, learned what it means to be human and mortal, in order to better assist us to ascend.

34. *Justification, Sanctification and Apotheosis by Grace.* This doctrine of divinity also entails a particular doctrine of grace. Those who are familiar with the "New Perspective" of Paul's doctrine of grace, first stated by E.P. Sanders and more recently by several others, will notice that this view of divinity entails a notion of *covenantal nomism*.¹⁶ The doctrine of grace in the New Perspective is multi-faceted, but briefly it holds that Paul taught that persons enter into a covenant relationship with God through grace alone, but once in the relationship one must abide the conditions of the covenant to remain *in Christ*. The conditions of the covenant for Paul included the law of love taught by Jesus. Further, in Paul's works grace is not seen as inconsistent with judgment and reward by works.¹⁷

Skipping over the various doctrines attributed to Paul, I invite you to consider the Doctrine of Christ, mentioned in the Bible, and fully explained in the Book of Mormon, in 2 Nephi 31,32, and 3 Nephi 33, as the "fulness of the Gospel".

35. God offers the divine relationship to us as a sheer grace, an unmerited gift which is offered in unconditional love. We need not, indeed cannot, do anything to earn or merit this love. To attempt to earn the divine love is to demonstrate that we misunderstand what is offered and the unconditional nature of God's love. Grace is the way that loving persons relate to one another. However, that God offers us love unconditionally does not mean that there are no conditions to abide in this love. We abide in the divine love by keeping the commandments. (John 15:9-10; 1 John 3:24) The commandments are simply two: to love God with all of our heart, might, mind and strength, and to love one another as we love ourselves. (1 John 3:24; John 15:16) The commandments merely outline the way we must act to avoid injuring the relationship of *covenant love* that God has offered to us. **Thus, the relationship is the primary consideration protected by invoking obedience to commandments.** There is no sense of earning the relationship by keeping the commandments. We keep the commandments to maintain our fidelity with God.

By grace we are saved, after all we can do, and all we *can* do is to lay claim on it by our faith and repentance, after which we are transformed by the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ. We retain the remission of our sins by keeping the commandments of God to us.

36. As I have attempted to show elsewhere, this same view is essentially the view presented throughout Mormon scripture and in the gospel of John.¹⁸ In Mormon scripture, God offers light, or his own presence and glory, without condition as a sheer gift. This light reflects the quality of one's relationship with God, or the degree to which one appropriates God's power and glory as the source of their lives in the here and now. **However, one grows in the light or relationship by keeping the commandments. As D&C 93 states, one grows in the light by keeping the commandments until the perfect day when one is glorified with the divine knowledge, power and presence as "one" "in" the Father and Son, just as they are "one" "in" each other.**

This view is consistently present throughout Mormon scripture, but with a more complete understanding of the nature of God and how to come to Him, we learn how to grow this relationship with God.

37. The key to the doctrine of grace throughout the scriptures is that it consists in the offer of a covenant relationship with the divine persons in unconditional love. Persons are accepted as **justified** when they accept Christ as their Lord and agree to obey the covenant conditions. One is justified when one enters into the relationship, for acceptance into the relationship is justification. One has life *in Christ* as a result of entering the covenant relationship. Through faithfulness to the covenant conditions, one is thereafter **sanctified** in the sense that the Holy Ghost makes the person over in the image of God which was lost through the fall. Through sanctification, a person is made holy as God is holy. **Through grace, persons are made "partakers of the divine" nature by being purified and becoming pure as He is pure. (1 Peter 1:13-22; 2 Peter 1:3-4; 1 John 3:1-2)** Thus, the Mormon doctrine of divinity entails that divinity is humanity fully mature in the grace of Christ.

A scriptural view of Mormon doctrine explains how, through the grace of Christ, divinity is fully within the reach of any mortal who comes to Christ.

38. The culmination of such a view of divine grace granting access to the divine relationship is thus apotheosis or deification of humans. Because humans become divine by entering the divine relationship as a sheer gift, they do not enjoy the same type of Godhood that characterizes the Father, Son and Holy Ghost who have such glory primordially from everlasting to everlasting.

Divinity is within our grasp, but Ostler makes the point that because it is a gift, we cannot fully enjoy the same type of Godhood that characterized the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but I'm not completely on board with this. How other way is there to achieve divinity, except as a gift? And why would this make a relationship any less intimate or valuable?

D. Two Scriptural Objections.

39. It may be objected that although this view of divinity is consistent or required by some scriptures, it is incompatible with others. **In particular, it may be objected that this view is inconsistent with modalism expressed in the earliest Mormon scriptures and also with polytheism expressed in later Mormon scriptures.** Due to time and space constraints, I cannot

provide an exegesis of every Mormon text dealing with the relation of the divine persons to one another, their shared relation to the Godhead, and the relation of divinity to humans. Instead, I will focus on what I consider to be the key scriptures which form the trajectory for the trajectory of revelation about this relationship.

I was already convinced, even before reading this paper, but there are some who would not be convinced, including some critics, so Ostler has to show how his arguments defeat the Modalists – those who say the Father and the Son are two different manifestations of the same being, although on different levels: the Father in Heaven and the Modalists Son on earth. Also, he needs to argue against those who believe later Mormon doctrine embraces polytheism. Then, he has to answer those who claim Joseph Smith switched from modalism to polytheism. Confused? I hope I am able to translate, and I hope my paraphrasing does justice to Ostler's reasoning.

40. *Modalism or Distinction in Unity? Those who adopt a modalist reading of Mormon scripture rely heavily on Mosiah 15 as a proof-text for their view. The focus of this scripture is to explain how Jesus Christ is both God and man.* The primary issue is thus what we would now call *christology*. However, the explanation of Christ's dual humanity/divinity is elucidated in terms of the Son's relation to the Father. There are four key comparisons in Mosiah 15 that elucidate this relationship.

- First, "the flesh" is parallel to the "spirit."
- Second, the Son is identified with the flesh and the Father is identified with spirit; that is, possession of flesh is predicated only of the Son and the Father is identified with the spirit.
- Third, the Son's will is subordinated to, or "swallowed up in," the Father's will as a result of the Son's death of the flesh.
- Finally, the Son *becomes* "the Father and the Son" whereas the Father already is the Father but never the Son.

To proof-text the scriptures is to take one passage out of context and use it to prove an arbitrary point, while ignoring or contradicting other passages. Sometimes we only have one passage to support our point, so we have to be careful with private interpretations. Usually, we can find multiple passages and verify using the law of witnesses.

41. For purposes of exegesis, **I will also introduce the principle of identity of indiscernibles.** The importance of this logical principle is that any expression of the relation between the Father and the Son which can be termed *patripassionism* (i.e., **that the Father suffers in the Son's suffering because the Father is identical to the Son**) or modalism must satisfy this principle.

Roughly this principle asserts that **something is identical to another thing if and only if everything that is true of that something is also true of the other thing.**[19](#)

In layman's terms, "If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a duck". For a more technical explanation, see the footnote.

For purposes of reviewing this scripture, I will present it in *parallelismus membrorum* form:

God himself shall come down
among the children of men,
and shall redeem his people.

And **because** he dwelleth in the flesh,
he shall **be called** the Son of God,
and having subjected to the flesh
to the will of the Father,
being the Father and the Son --

The **Father because** he was conceived by the power of God;
and the **Son because** of the flesh;
thus **becoming** the Father and the Son --
And they are one God,
yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and earth.

And thus the **flesh becoming subject to the Spirit**,
or the Son to the Father,
being one God,
suffereth temptation....

Yea, even so he shall be led,
crucified and slain,
the flesh becoming subject even unto death,
the will of the Son
being swallowed in the will of the Father.

And thus God breaketh the bands of death,
giving the Son power to make intercession
for the children of men. (Mosiah 15:1-8)

If you are into such things, note the **chiastic** structure of these verses. ("The last shall be first and the first shall be last".)

Now let's ask a few questions.

How many wills are there among the divine persons? The answer seems fairly transparent. **There are two.** The Son has a will of his own but he subjects it to the Father's will by undergoing death in furtherance of the Father's will.

How many wills are expressed in the Son's life? **There is only one will** functionally expressed because the Son's will is swallowed up in the Father's will. Because the Father's will is *embodied*, so to speak, in the Son, the Son *becomes* both the Father and the Son.

Will this scripture satisfy the principle of the identity of indiscernibles? Manifestly it will not because **the Son has a number of properties that the Father does not have.**

- The **Son has a distinct will** which is subjected to the Father's will. Thus, the Son has the property of *having a will subjected to the Father's will* and the Father does not.
- The **Father gives power to the Son** to make intercession, the Son thus has the property of *receiving power from the Father to make intercession* and the Father does not.
- The **Son has the property of being made flesh** and is called the Son because he possesses this property which the Father does not.

- The **Son has the property of *being conceived by the power of the Father*** and the Father does not. It follows that the Father and the Son are not identical although they are intimately united by a common will.

42. Thus, there are **two divine persons having distinct wills** in this passage, the Father and the Son. However, **there is only one God**. The Father and the Son in relation to one another "are one God." **It is of utmost importance to note that whenever the Mormon scriptures predicate oneness of God, it is *always, without exception, a relationship of the Father and the Son, or the Father, Son and Holy Ghost to one another, and never a reference to just one of the divine persons***. This usage can be compared to references to "one God" in the Old Testament which refer to a single divine person, Yahweh (Dt. 6:4), or in the New Testament where the Father is sometimes called the one God (1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:6) or "the only true God" (John 17:3)

Two separate wills. Their relationship is described as one God. In Mormon scripture, whenever the "oneness of God" is mentioned, it is always mentioned in the context of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Why, with all the theologians and scribes in the church, over the years, has nobody ever before mentioned this?

43. There is another feature of this passage which is important to note. **The Book of Mormon views possession of a body as a necessary condition for humans to experience suffering.** (2 Nephi 2:15-25) Moreover, God is no exception to this general rule. It is true that the Book of Mormon views the Son as the God of the Old Testament who delivered the Law to the Israelites. (1 Ne. 19:7, 9-10; Alma 7:8-13; 3 Ne. 11:14; 15:5-9) **It is the very God of Israel who is incarnated as the Son of God. However, the Book of Mormon is careful to specify that whenever the God of Israel suffers, he does so only "according to the flesh."** (Alma 7:8-13, "the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh"). There are fifteen references in the Book of Mormon which predicate suffering of God, and all fifteen references are attributed to "the flesh" or to the Son of God as a mortal and *never* to the Father or God *simpliciter*. (1 Ne. 19:9; 2 Ne. 9:5, 21-22; Mosiah 3:7; 17:15, 18; 15:5; Alma 7:13; 33:22; Hel. 13:6; 14:20) **The Son has the property of suffering according to the flesh and the Father does not.**

44. Moreover, the Book of Mormon refers to the Son as "the Father of heaven and earth" five times (Mos. 3:7; Mosiah 15:4; Alma 11:39-40; Ether 3:14-17). **Each time that the Son is called the Father of heaven and earth it is always and only in the context of: (1) the Son becoming mortal and taking upon himself flesh, and (2) the Son as creator.** For example, Mosiah 3:5-8 states that "he shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay [And shall] suffer temptations, pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer ... And he shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things" It seems to me that the best way to understand references to the Son as the "Father of heaven and earth" is that the Father's will has become embodied in the Son because the Son fulfills the Father's will by becoming enfleshed. This is exactly the conclusion of Mosiah 15:3 which states that the Son "becomes the Father and the Son" because he was conceived by the power of the Father and became flesh as the Son. Further, the Son is recognized as the Father's exact duplicate in creation of heaven and earth because he embodies the Father's will in such activities.

The Son, having come to earth and become mortal, embodied the Father's will.

45. There is of course a rival interpretation of this passage which attempts to square it with modalism. If I have properly grasped the view presented by those who argue for a modalist interpretation, they would suggest that in Mosiah 15 the divine person who is the Father is spirit and the same person became flesh as the Son.²⁰ **Thus, this one person is called both the Father and the Son because the Father's spirit has entered flesh and become the Son, thus becoming both Father and Son.** The Father has certain properties as a spirit before becoming mortal and then has other properties subsequently as flesh. For example, as a spirit the divine person who is called the Father cannot experience pain but when this same divine person takes upon himself flesh as the Son, he is capable of experiencing pain. **Thus, it may be argued that the incompatible properties refer to successive states of being of the same divine person.**

46. **However, this interpretation cannot account for all of the aspects of this text.** According to Abinadi, the Son as flesh has a distinct will which is "swallowed up" in the Father's will as spirit. The Father has a will at the same time that the Son has his will. This modalist interpretation leads to the absurdity of saying that "the Father's will was swallowed up in his own will, but as the Son." This interpretation fails to recognize the distinction of wills presented in the text. It also leads to the absurdity of saying that "the Father gave himself power to make intercession." This interpretation fails to recognize the relational giving from Father to Son in the text. It also leads to the absurdity of saying that "the Father conceived himself." The Son has properties as flesh while at the same time, and not in a successive state, the Father has different properties. Thus, this interpretation seems to me to violate the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals and cannot account for the text in its totality.

The Father and the Son could not be successive states of the same person, because the will of the Son was "swallowed" up in the will of the Father, and the Father, who conceived the Son. Could not conceive himself.

47. There is another compelling reason to reject the modalist interpretation of the Book of Mormon. It cannot be squared with other clear statements in the Book of Mormon, primarily in 3 Nephi, to the effect that the Son prayed to the Father, the Father sent the Son, and so forth. The culmination of the revelation of the relation between the Father and the Son is elucidated in 3 Nephi where the Son appears to the Nephites. As is appropriate given the inner logic of the Book of Mormon as a progressive revelation, the expression of oneness/threeness in 3 Nephi is much more clearly stated than in the prophets before Christ's self-revelation. **The Book of Mormon presents the Nephites as not having fully understood the message of the prophets prior to Christ's appearance, and thus Christ undertakes to impart a fuller understanding to the Nephites.** The inner logic of the Book of Mormon would suggest that as Israelites, the Nephites before Christ's coming were concerned to preserve monotheism as understood in the Old Testament.²¹ **Thus, the Nephite prophets prior to Christ's resurrection emphasized the unity of the Father and the Son. After the post-resurrection appearance of the Son, however, the plurality of the divine persons is much more prominent.** Thus, Moroni can speak of praying to the Father in the name of "the Holy Child" (Moroni 8:3) and of the Son ascending to heaven to sit on the right hand of the Father. (Moroni 7:27; 9:26)

Throughout the Book of Mormon, the prophets' successive understanding of the relationship of the Father and Son matures, as shown above.

48. Now even those who claim that the Book of Mormon presents a form of modalism or patripassionism recognize that what Christ reveals in 3 Nephi is not consistent with modalism. For instance, Dan Vogel admits that his interpretation of modalism leads to absurdities in 3 Nephi such as saying that "Jesus as the Father sent himself."²² However, he argues that there are two reasons we can ignore such absurdities when we interpret the Book of Mormon. First, he claims that passages evincing an identity between the Father and the Son are supposedly "more specific" than those in 3 Nephi and we should therefore read them to be consistent with modalism. Vogel gives no evidence to support this assertion. It is an argument consisting of nothing more than assertion. I disagree that such passages are more specific. The assertion that the Book of Mormon asserts an identity of Father and Son in the sense required of modalism is not accurate.

Dan Vogel supports the modalistic view, but admits it has inconsistencies.

49. Second, Vogel claims we can ignore the contrary evidence in 3 Nephi because those who adopted modalism in Christian history were certainly aware of similar passages in the gospel of John which were difficult to account for in their view, but that never stopped them from adopting modalism.²³ That may be true but this argument simply begs the question. One could as easily argue that tri-theists were never convinced by statements of God's oneness, so the Book of Mormon is tri-theistic. **This argument has the same logical structure as saying that we can ignore pictures from NASA taken by orbiting spacecraft as evidence that the earth is a sphere because members of the Flat Earth Society have seen those same pictures and they weren't convinced.** Modalists never cited the Johannine passages to support their modalism. However, the Book of Mormon does express the relation between the Father and the Son in terms similar to the gospel of John which cannot be squared with modalism. The far better view, in my opinion, is a view which accounts for all of the evidence, not just the evidence that supports one's revisionary theory.

Vogel claims we can ignore the contradictory evidence in 3 Nephi because other modalists ignored the passages in John which go against the modalistic view. Ostler points out the flaw in this argument.

50. In summary, the Book of Mormon views each of the three divine persons is individuated in the sense that they are not identical. Each of the divine persons is referred to individually as 'God'. The divine persons have distinct wills which implies that there are distinct centers of consciousness, knowledge, action and intentionality. The divine persons as a relationship of indwelling unity are "one Eternal God." (Alma 11:44) Their oneness consists in the indwelling unity of act, will, mind, mutual testifying, and love.

51. Now I have not demonstrated that all Mormon scriptures before 1835 are incompatible with modalism. That would take a much more extensive and exhaustive exegesis than I can undertake here. However, I do believe that I have shown that a key text cited to support a modalist reading is inconsistent with modalism's essential claims and that Social Trinitarianism is more consistent with this particular passage and the view of the Book of Mormon as a whole.

I hope you are not having trouble following along. This paper is very technical, but well-organized. At this point, we have covered Mormon scriptural teaching about God, prior to 1835. The key to understanding the seemingly contradictory statements about "God" in the scriptures is to understand

that some of them refer to individual members of the Godhead: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, while other statements refer to God as a whole. We have established that the Godhead consists of three separate individuals, bound together by love and purpose, and that although these bonds fall short of identity, they are so close that they share a joint mind, have separate wills, and this mind is so powerful, it reaches out to fill the immensity of space. Furthermore, these three form a society, a community, a fellowship, which we are calling the Godhead, which is greater than the sum of its parts. Furthermore, the purpose of this community of gods is to prepare, enlarge, and invite lesser beings to come and participate in this community. Now, we take up Mormon teachings post-1835.

52. *Polytheism or Unity in Distinction?* It may also be claimed that the view of indwelling divinity that I have adopted is inconsistent both with polytheism in scriptures after 1835 and the notion that the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are **distinct personages**, with the Father and the Son having "tangible bodies" of flesh and bone. (D&C 130:22) Let's deal with the second issue first. **Why would one think that possessing a resurrected or glorified body of flesh and bone is inconsistent with the notion of three distinct persons who are united by their indwelling unity?** Well, perhaps if we assume that there are merely three persons in three bodies and nothing more, then we have an inconsistency. After all, having tangible bodies would seem to entail that each of the divine personages is spatio-temporally distinct. Perhaps this could be taken to entail that they therefore cannot indwell in each other spatially. But I have already shown that the assumption that the Godhead must have the same properties as the divine persons considered individually commits the fallacy of composition. Unless it can be shown that the notion of having a glorified body is somehow inconsistent with the notion of emergent properties, the argument can't even get off the ground. **If a glorified body can consistently be conceived to participate in the spirit of God that pervades in and through all things, and I see no reason why it cannot, then the notion that three tangible bodies may unite to form a greater whole is coherent.**

After 1835 there was an emphasis of the Godhead being three distinct personages, and having tangible bodies. There is no reason to suppose that beings having tangible bodies cannot indwell one another on a spiritual level, especially since they share the same mind (Lecture 5).

53. Of course it may also be argued that Joseph Smith somehow intended to replace the notion of three distinct persons united as one God with the idea that there are simply three Gods. But I see no evidence in the text that something of that nature was intended. Indeed, it seems much more reasonable to me to assume that Joseph Smith intended later revelations to be bound in the same volume with the earlier revelations and thus contemplated that they would be read *in pari materia* or in light of one another. Thus, there was no reason to restate the concept of divine unity that had already been revealed and published in the 1835 Book of Commandments **[This is a mistake. Is he referring to the 1833 Book of Commandments or the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants?]**. What was needed was a clarification that the divine persons are more distinct than the Saints previously understood.

There is no reason to believe that Joseph Smith deliberately intended to change the doctrine of God. After all, the supposedly conflicting revelations would be published in the same volume, and should inform, rather than contradict, each other. Instead, Joseph probably wanted to especially emphasize their distinctness.

54. **It has also been asserted that later Mormon scriptures adopt polytheism straight out. Polytheism is the view that there are a number of deities having distinct spheres of sovereignty. However, such an assertion is not sensitive to the way the word 'God' operates in Mormon scriptures.** There are two senses in which the Mormon scriptures use 'gods' to refer to entities other than the Father, Son and/or Holy Ghost. Mormon scriptures sometimes call humans 'gods'. The Mormon scriptures also use the term 'gods' to refer to members of the divine council who are subordinate to the Eternal God. Neither of these usages is inconsistent with Social Trinitarianism.

There is no indication that Joseph Smith wanted to switch to polytheism outright, as some have alleged. This is borne out by the way Mormons refer to entities other than the Father.

55. **The notion of human *apotheosis* is not late in Mormon scripture, contrary to the claims made by Mormon critics.** For example, the Book of Mormon already embodied the notion that humans could become "like God." For example, reflecting the language of 1 John 3:1-2, Moroni 7:48 states: "pray unto the Father with all the energy of your heart, that ye may be filled with his love ... that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we might have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure." 3 Nephi also consistently adopts Johannine language to teach that humans may be one just as the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one: "your joy shall be full, even as the Father hath given me fulness of joy; and ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father, and the Father and I are one." (3 Nephi 28:10) These scriptures are perfect statements of Social Trinitarianism because they assert that the fulness of the Father is communicated to the Son. The same fulness is communicated to the Saints as one in the Father and the Son.

Some critics argue that the idea of *apotheosis* (man becoming God) was newly introduced by Joseph Smith after 1835. Ostler presents evidence right out of the Bible and similar passages in the Book of Mormon proving that this is not so.

56. An 1832 revelation known as the Vision calls humans 'gods' for the first time in Mormon scripture: "as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God." (D&C 76:58). However, this language merely reflects Psalm 82:6: "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High." This same Psalm was quoted in the gospel of John in response to the charge of blasphemy when Christ claims to be the Son of God who is one with the Father. (John 10:30-38) These scriptures probably assert only that humans are *gods* in the sense that they have been commanded to be holy as God is holy.[24](#)

D&C 76 calls humans 'gods', but Ostler cites Psalm 82, the same as Jesus did, to prove that humans are called "gods" in the Bible. In fact, the word translated "judges" in the Old Testament, appears as *elohim* (gods) in the original Hebrew.

57. **The only other scripture that calls humans 'gods' straight out is D&C 132, which states that: "Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting,** because they continue, then shall they be above all things because all things are subject to them. Then shall they be gods because they have power and the angels are subject unto them." (132:20) This scripture does not entail polytheism because humans are always subordinate to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost and dependent on their relationship with

them for their divinity. They are never pictured as separately worthy of worship. **The Godhead has communicated to them the attributes of divine power, knowledge and presence Humans, as subordinate 'gods' are not independent rivals for worship in the sense required for polytheism.**

Humans are also called 'gods' in D&C 132, but are subordinate to the Godhead and not to be worshipped, as is required in polytheism.

58. Finally, an 1839 revelation to Joseph Smith uses the word 'gods' to refer to heavenly beings who are members of the divine council. Mirroring references in the Old Testament to gods in the heavenly council (Dt. 10:17 and Ps. 136:2), D&C 121:28, 32 states that: "A time [shall] come in the which nothing will be withheld, whether there be one God or many gods, they shall be made manifest ... **according to that which was ordained in the midst of the Council of the Eternal God of all other gods before the world was.**" Similarly, the Book of Abraham refers to God, apparently the Father, in the midst of the pre-earth council taking judgment concerning his plan for creation of this world. (B. of Abr. 3:23) God is also the sovereign Lord who summons emissaries of the divine council and sends them as agents. (B. of Abr. 3:24-27) The gods carry out the plan of creation as emissaries and agents of the Supreme God. (B. of Abr. Ch. 4) This picture reflects the concept of gods in the heavenly council found in the Psalms and Job. As Hans Joachim-Kraus observed:

In the heavenly world Yahweh, enthroned as God and king, is surrounded by powers who honor, praise and serve him. Israel borrowed from the Canaanite-Syrian world the well- attested concept of a pantheon of gods and godlike beings who surround the supreme God, the ruler and monarch. In Psalm 29:1-2 the *bene elohim* ("sons of God") give honor to Yahweh. They are subordinate heavenly beings stripped of their power, who are totally dependent on Yahweh and no longer possess any independent divine nature. In Job and the Psalter, powers of this sort are called *bene elohim*, *elim*, or *qedushim* ("sons of God," "gods," and "holy ones," Job 1:6ff; Ps. 58:1; 8:5; 86:8) But Yahweh alone is the highest God (*Elyon*) and king.... In Psalm 82 we have a clear example of the idea of a council of gods, "God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment." The "highest god" is the judge. The gods (*elohim*) are his attendants. They are witnesses in the forum which Yahweh rules alone, and in which he possesses judicial authority. We might term the *cheduth-el* "Yahweh's heavenly court." All of the gods and powers of the people are in his service.²⁵

If you think God only ever held one council in the "pre-existence", think again. God does all his business in heavenly councils, and this appears throughout all the Old Testament, although obscured by poor translators with an agenda to promote monotheism. You see the council of God translated as "his secrets" or "the sons of God", or many other terms. You see this reflected in the Book of Abraham and in the temple endowment ceremony.

59. It must be emphasized therefore that these gods in Mormon scripture are members of the divine council who are subordinate to the Eternal God and not *gods* in the same sense that the Father, or Eternal God, is *God*. Certainly they are not *gods* in the sense that the one Godhead is *God*. They are not the sovereign of the entire universe. They do not merit worship

individually. They act only as emissaries or agents of the Eternal God. The Book of Abraham draws upon the Hebrew commissioning tradition that viewed the emissary, though acting as agent, as the exact duplicate and representative of the commissioning Most High. Such a view of subordinate heavenly beings who are called 'gods' because they exercise the divine function of judgment in council is not inconsistent with the Social Trinity as I have elucidated it. **Finally, it could be argued that this view is simply inconsistent with Joseph Smith's later view of the Father as a subordinate deity to an eternal plurality of gods. I believe that such a position misunderstands Joseph Smith when his assertions are read in light of the scriptures. Let me explain why.**

These council members are subordinate to God, which is why He is called "The Most High". In the Old Testament, YHVH constantly declared Himself to be above all other gods.

62. **I believe that Mormons commonly believe that God the Father *became* God through a process of moral development and eternal progression to Godhood. The corollary of this view is that there was a time before which God the Father was a god or divine. No Mormon scripture supports this view; rather, it is an inference from non-canonical statements made by Joseph Smith in the King Follett discourse and by President Lorenzo Snow, who coined the couplet: "as man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may become."** When the biblical scriptures say that God is *eternal*, they are usually translating the Hebrew *'olam* or the Greek *aioion*. However, both words are ambiguous. They can mean either an indefinite period of time, much like the English word *aeon*, or a time without beginning or end. These words decidedly do not mean that God is timeless in the sense that there is no temporal succession for God.[26](#)

This is an important point. I believe Joseph's statement has been misinterpreted in light of Brigham Young's doctrine that a man may acquire his own kingdom in the hereafter with power dependent on the number of wives he has and the number of other kingdoms he can subordinate under him, and that Lorenzo Snow was simply echoing that doctrine. Joseph spoke of an endless chain of fathers and sons, but this is a covenant relationship, as I have explained elsewhere and has nothing to do with procreation or dominion. Then, we come to those words *'olam* and *aioion*. They can mean *world, estate, condition of existence*, but are usually translated "eternal". You don't usually see the problem in the King James Bible, but when you read other translations, you see the problem.

62. **However, the problem is not so much the Bible as it is Mormon scripture.** The Mormon scriptures say that "there is a God in heaven who is *infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting the same unchangeable God...*" (D&C 20:17). "The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God, *infinite and eternal, without end*" (D&C 20:28). **When the term *eternal* is conjoined with *infinite* and from *everlasting to everlasting*, it is pretty clear that it means *without beginning or end*. The notion of infinity usually means unlimited, without bounds.**

63. **There are other Mormon scriptures that are even clearer: "Behold I am the Lord God Almighty, and endless is my name; for I am *without beginning of days* or end of years; and is this not endless?" (Moses 1:3) "For I know that God is not a partial God, neither a changeable being; but he is unchangeable from all eternity to all eternity" (Mormon 8:8).** Further, Joseph Smith stated in 1840 that: "I believe that God is eternal. That He had not (sic) beginning and can have no end. *Eternity means that which is without beginning or end.*"[27](#) Given this clarification,

it seems pretty clear to me that these scriptures mean that God has always been God in the same unchanging sense without beginning. Are the King Follett discourse and President Snow's couplet simply inconsistent with scripture? It seems to me that there are several possibilities here.

64. For purposes of clarity in this discussion I will need to make a few distinctions. **The word 'God' is equivocal in Mormon thought, and in Christian thought in general, because it can have many different references.** I suspect that most references in the New Testament to God refer solely to God the Father. However, when I speak of the divine persons individually, I will use the locutions 'the Father', or 'Son', or 'Holy Ghost'. I will use the biblical term 'Godhead' to refer to these three individual divine persons as one God united in indwelling glory, power, dominion and love. I will use the term 'God' as an equivocal reference where it is unclear whether the reference is to one of the individual divine persons or to the Godhead. I will use the term 'god(s)' to refer to humans who become divine through atoning grace. I will use the term members of the heavenly council to refer to the gods who are subordinate emissaries of the divine council. Finally, I will use the non-scriptural term 'divine beings' to refer to the non-scriptural gods who supposedly existed as gods prior to the time the Father became a divine person. Now for my best crack at responding to this difficult question.

Prior to his detailed explanation, he is defining his terms.

- The Father, Son, or Holy Ghost – refer to the divine persons individually
- Godhead – refers to the three divine persons united as one God
- God – an equivocal reference where its meaning is unclear
- God(s) – refers to humans who become divine
- Members of the heavenly council – subordinate gods
- Divine beings – non-scriptural gods who supposedly existed as god prior to Father

65. **The notion that there are divine beings who were gods prior to the time that the Father was God arises in part from a confusion regarding scriptural references to gods who are members of the heavenly council.** These members of the heavenly council have sometimes been understood to be gods prior to the time that the Father was divine and through obedience to which the Father became divine. However, since these members of the divine council were in fact subordinate to the Father as the "Eternal God of all other gods," (D&C 121: 28, 32) such a view is logically precluded by Mormon scripture.

There is a conflation between members of the heavenly council and prior gods

66. **One could understand the scriptural references to an "eternal God" to refer solely to God the Father as an individual divine person. One could take the position that when God says he is eternal and without beginning, he is referring merely to the personal existence of the Father as a beginningless spirit or intelligence and not to his *status* as a divine person.** Thus, the Father has always existed as an individual without beginning, but he has not always been God. There was a time when the Father was not divine in this view. However, it need not imply that there were no divine beings prior to the time the Father became divine because, as I understand the implications drawn by Mormons such as Orson Pratt and B.H. Roberts, there is supposedly an infinite chain of divine beings who existed before the Father.²⁸ It was obedience to these

divine beings and their commandments by which the Father became divine on this view, as I understand it. **The problem with this view is that it seems to contradict the scriptures that say that the Lord God Almighty is without beginning of days. It is also hard to square with the scriptures which assert that God is the same unchanging God from all eternity.** It is inconsistent also with the understanding that the Father is the Eternal God of all other gods. Moreover, this position seems to contradict the view that it is a divine relationship of loving unity *with God the Father* that constitutes the source of divinity of the Son, the Holy Ghost and god(s). I believe that D&C 93 teaches that the Son is divine in virtue of his indwelling unity with the Father and that mortals become god(s) by becoming one just as are the Father and the Son. In this scripture, the Father is the *source or fount of divinity* of all other divine beings. **If the Father is the source of divinity then it certainly seems inconsistent to assert that the Father became divine in dependence on some other divine beings, for then the Father is not the ultimate source of divinity. Thus, the view that the Father became divine in dependence on other divine beings and was not divine from all eternity is not scriptural and it seems to contradict both the uniquely Mormon scriptures and the Bible.**

There is the view that God is infinite and eternal because he has always existed as a spirit (or intelligence), as have we all, even before He became God. Ostler presents evidence against this view. As I have stated, I believe it is a chain of father/son based on covenant relationship.

67. On the other hand, one could understand 'God from all eternity to all eternity' to refer to the Godhead rather than to any of the individual divine persons separately. It is not true that if there has always been a Godhead that all of the divine persons constituting the Godhead have always been divine. Thus, when the scriptures say that "God is from everlasting to everlasting the same unchangeable God," **it means that the Godhead has always manifested all of the essential properties of Godhood (whatever they may be), but the individual divine persons may not have always possessed all of the properties of Godhood considered individually.** In other words, there was a time when the Father took upon himself mortality just as there was time when the Son became mortal, but there was a Godhead before, during and after that time.[29](#)

There is an alternate view that God (referring to the Godhead itself and not to any particular member of the Godhead) is infinite and eternal. This is like saying the Presidency of the United States has existed for over 200 years, but the sitting President only serves in office for a limited time.

68. This latter view seems to be more consistent with the scriptures to me. Moreover, it need not entail that the Father *became* God after an eternity of not having ever been divine, or that there was a time before which the Father was not divine. Rather, when we say that "as man now is, God once was," **it seems more consistent to say that just as the Son was divine before becoming mortal (and was in fact very God of the Old Testament),[30](#) so also the Father was divine from all eternity without beginning before he became mortal.** The scriptures assert that the Godhead is the same unchangeable and everlasting God from all eternity without beginning. **References to "the same unchangeable God" in Mormon scripture often explicitly refer in context to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost as one God.[31](#) As noted, the Godhead has metaphysically necessary existence and is immutable in nature.** The Mormon scriptures also say that although the Son was made flesh, he was an individual divine person prior to mortality

from all eternity. **It is often not certain whether scriptures or sermons refer to God the Father, or the Son as individual divine persons or to the Godhead. However, if the Son only does what he has seen the Father do before him, as Joseph Smith asserted in the King Follett discourse, then the Father was also divine before becoming mortal just as the Son was before being made flesh.**[32](#)

We can understand from the sermons of Joseph Smith (King Follett and the plurality of Gods) that we are eternal beings in the same sense that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are eternal beings. Those three beings have attained a divine state as individuals, and a divine status as a covenant society, and they are extending the invitation to us to join in that fellowship. This fellowship (relationship, society, call it what you will) is the supreme God and has always existed. The sum is greater than its parts. The individuals comprising this fellowship have not necessarily always existed as members of this fellowship, but ascend to be members, and thus add to the glory of God.

This is the view I take, as I understand what has been revealed to me. This is what I have understood, without having any logic or reasoning to support it – just an understanding of the scriptures and asking the Lord to help me understand the seeming inconsistencies and contradictions of the scriptures. The biggest stumbling block I encountered was the false teaching surrounding polygamy and Adam-God doctrine/theory/mystery/heresy necessary to support polygamy. I explore more of this in my other paper, and more of the nature of God as it relates to us, as mortals, trying to ascend the ladder to eternal life. The questions we try to answer are: What does *eternal* really mean? and what kind of *life* will we live?

Another tantalizing unanswered question is this: as eternal beings, what have we been doing all this time? I say “time”, because it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to comprehend eternity – where all time is *now*. Could it be that we were once among the Gods, ourselves, but chose to fall, in order to experience separation and mortality? Could it be that in the grand cycles of creation. (I am not talking about multiple lifetimes, but over aeons of cycles of creation.) Could it be that we have fallen and ascended many times, either by our own choice or through disobedience? Eternal life does mean life from age to age, aeon to aeon, estate to estate, living the kind of life that God (ambiguous reference) leads. I’ll leave this for you to pray and think about. There are many mysteries, but there are two things we do know from our mortal perspective:

- “... all my judgments are not given unto men” (D&C 29:30)
- “Wherefore, no man can behold all my works, except he behold all my glory; and no man can behold all my glory, and afterwards remain in the flesh on the earth.” (Mos 1:5)

69. For those who are offended by Joseph Smith's suggestion that God the Father was once incarnate, it should be noted that God the Son was undoubtedly once a man, and that did not compromise his divinity. Indeed, because it is logically impossible for the divine persons as one Godhead to experience alienation, and because first-hand experience of alienation is essential to fully understand the existential dimension of humanity, the Father also has an overriding reason to experience something like mortality. Thus, the Mormon doctrine of divinity suggests a reason for Joseph Smith's non-scriptural teachings in Nauvoo that the Father, at one time, experienced something like mortality and thereafter regained his divinity in the same way as the Son. **However,**

this belief is a non-scriptural implication of theology that is not binding on Mormons, and thus remains as an option of belief rather than a defining belief of Mormonism.

Joseph Smith's teachings about the nature of God are reasonable, scriptural, and doctrinally consistent. I hope you enjoyed and appreciated this journey and come away with a new appreciation and understanding of the nature of God, and through this knowledge are able to better come to salvation and eternal life, and that you will never think of God and the Godhead the same way again.

Notes

1 *On Christian Doctrine* I, 5, 5. Elsewhere, Augustine stated: "The Father, Son and the Holy Spirit constitute a divine unity of one and the same substance in an indivisible equality. Therefore, there are not three Gods but one God; although the Father has begotten the Son and, therefore, he who is the Father is not the Son; and the Son was begotten by the Father and, therefore, he who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son." *De Trinitate*, I, 7 in N. Stephen McKenna, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 1963).

2 See Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), 17-18; 40-42. However, Orson Pratt attempted to elucidate a universal essence shared by all material beings or atoms of intelligence in virtue of which there was one God. His system reduced to monism. B.H. Roberts also attempted to state a doctrine of divine unity over against the individual divine persons that could be called the one God in the *Third Year of the Seventy's Course on Theology*.

3 See Plantinga, 26.

4 It bears noting that such personal distinctions are not limited to 3 Nephi. For 1 Nephi 12:18 states: "The word of the justice of the Eternal God, and the Messiah who is the Lamb of God, of whom the Holy Ghost beareth record."

5 The foremost supporter of this view is Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "Social Trinitarianism and Tritheism," in Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 21-47; and "The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity," *Calvin Theological Journal* (23:1 (April 1998), 37-53. In addition to Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., the Social Trinity has been defined and defended by Stephen Layham, "Trithesim and Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* 5:3 (July 1988), 291-8; Richard Swinburne, "Could There be More Than One God," *Faith and Philosophy*, 5:3 (July 1988, 225-41); and *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1994), 170-92; David Brown *Trinitarian Personhood* "Individuality in Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement" in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement* 48-78; and *The Divine Trinity* (LaSalle, Ill: Open Court Publishing Co., 1985) C. 7; Jurgan Moltman, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, (trans. M. Kohl London: SCM Press, 1981); Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996) 21-48; Thomas V. Morse, *Our Idea of God*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1991), 1974-84 and Timothy R. Bartell, "The Plight of the Relative Trinitarian," *Religious Studies* 24 (1988) 129-55.

6 The best explanation of this difficult doctrine is Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologicae* I, Q. 6; 28.2, 3; Ia 1 ad 3 et 37 1 ad 34.

7 Several persons have critiqued the attempt to reconcile the doctrine of the Trinity with the doctrine of divine simplicity or the claim that God is not composite in any sense but wholly without parts. See, Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), Thomas V. Morris, "Dependence and Simplicity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 23 (1988), 161-74; G. E. Hughes, "The Doctrine of the Trinity," *Sophia* II (1963), 1-11.

8 Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 146.

9 The existence of an attribute x strictly entails the existence of the bearer of that attribute; therefore, the necessary existence of the attribute of intelligence strictly implies the necessary existence of the bearer of that attribute, God. Gods everlasting existence is also asserted straight out throughout the Bible. "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world; even from everlasting (*olam*) to everlasting (*olam*) you were God." Ps. 90:2. "The everlasting God, Jehovah, (*olam YHWH*) the creator of the ends of the earth. Isaiah 40:28. For unseen things of Him for the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood of the things made, both his eternal (*aiionios*) and Godhead (*theotes*)." Romans 1:20.

10 Because I believe that most traditional formulations of omnipotence are incoherent, I have adopted another term which I believe describes a coherent formulation of power. For purposes of this discussion, we may say that S has maximal power iff S is able at any time t to bring about any logically possible state of affairs consistent with S 's essential properties and also with all states of affairs that have already obtained in the actual world up to t .

11 C. Stephen Layman explains how power, love, and knowledge can be shared attributes of a community of divine persons in "Tritheism and Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* 5:3 (July 1988), 291-8.

12 Richard Swinburne explains how three distinct divine persons can agree among themselves to avoid conflicts in "Could There Be More Than One God?" *Faith and Philosophy* 5:3 (July 1988), 230-1. Joseph Smith's own view was that the three distinct persons of the Godhead entered into a covenant of love and planned the creation in unity. Moreover, these statements were made during his last sermons and demonstrates that he did not abandon the idea of a controlling Godhead in his later thought. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 366-9.

13 God must be understood to be omniscient in the sense that God knows all that it is possible for a being having God's attributes to know, and not in the classical sense that God knows all true propositions..

14 See for example, Gordon Knight, "The necessity of God incarnate," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998), 1-16; Henry Simoni, "Divine Passibility and the Problem of Radical Particularity: Does God Feel Your Pain?," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997), 327-47; and "Omniscience and the problem of radical particularity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 42 (1997), 1-22.

15 I might add here that this view logically implies that the other divine persons, the Father and the Holy Ghost, might also have an overriding reason to become incarnated so that they can have firsthand knowledge of human alienation as a necessary condition to complete unity and love.

16 E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 236 et seq.; D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," *BJRL* 65 (1983), 95-122, and *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 206-141; and *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 334-389; D. B. Garlington, "The Obedience of Faith in the Letter to the Romans Part II: The Obedience of Faith and Judgment by Works," *Westminster Theological Journal* 73 (Spring 1991), 73-91.

17 See J. M. Cambier, "Le judgment de tous les hommes par Dieu seul, selon la verite dans Rom. 2.1-3.20," *Zeitschrift fue die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 66 (1975), 187-213; N. M. Watson, "Justified by Faith, Judged by Works an Antimony?" *New Testament Studies* 29 (1983), 209-21.

18 See my, "The Concept of Grace in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 24:1 (Spring 1991), 57-84.

19 More technically, an object x is identical to an object y if and only if every property and only those properties possessed by x are also possessed by y and vice versa. For an x and a y and any property P, if x is identical to y (x=y), then x has P iff y has P.

20 See Melodie Moench Charles, "The Book of Mormon Christology" in B. L. Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (SLC: Signature Books, 1993), 81-114; Dan Vogel, "The Earliest Mormon Concept of God," in G. J. Bergera, ed., *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 17-33.

21 This seems to be Amulek's concern in responding to Zeezrom's question as to whether there is more than one God in light of the fact that there is both the Father and the Son. (Alma 11:28-35) Amulek's answer is "no," there is not more than one God. Such an answer is completely accurate from the perspective of Social Trinitarianism, but needs further explanation. However, the further explanation is provided in the text itself. In response to the question, "is the Son of God the very Eternal Father?," Amulek answers: "Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth ... and he shall come into the world to the redeem his people...." (Alma 11:38-39) Thus, the Son is not merely identical to the Father; rather, he is the Father in a particular sense of sharing the creative and redemptive power. Amulek further explains that all persons will be judged before the bar "of Christ the Son, and God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, which is one Eternal God." (Alma 11:44) Thus, the oneness is a relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost as one God, and not of the Son *simpliciter*..

22 See Dan Vogel, "The Earliest Mormon Concept of God" in *Line Upon Line*, Gary Bergera ed., (SLC: Signature Books, 1989), 24. Moench Charles also admits that the modalist interpretation of the Book of Mormon is not apt in every instance ... often the evidence is ambiguous as in 3 Nephi, where the resurrected Christ on earth among the Nephites talks as if he is his Fathers subordinate. "Book of Mormon Christology," 100-101.

23 Id. Moench, Charles adopts Vogel's argument. "Book of Mormon Christology," 100.

24 See, Jerome H. Neyrey, "I Said You Are Gods," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108:4 (Winter 1989), 647-63.

25 *Theology of the Psalms* (London: SPCK, 1986), 48.

26 Ernst Jenni, "Das Wort *olam* im Alten Testament," *Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 64 (1952), 197-248; and 65 (1953), 1-35.

27 Lyndon Cook and Andrew Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1984), 33.

28 I have discussed the views of Orson Pratt, B.H. Roberts and others regarding the status of the divine beings in Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Preexistence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 15:1 (Spring 1982), 59-78.

29 It should also be noted that a failure to distinguish between God as the Godhead and God as an individual divine person may also have led to a misunderstanding by evangelicals and others about Mormon claims that God is a glorified man and otherwise anthropomorphic. Mormons do *not* claim that the Godhead is a glorified man. Further, those evangelicals and other Christians who accept a kenotic theory of christology can hardly object to the view that God as a divine person has a glorified or resurrected body. As Ronald J. Feenstra observed: If the exalted Christ is human, then we have good reason to hope that we human beings can also be glorified in an eschatological existence, since it will follow that being human is compatible with being glorified. Both Lutheran and Reformed confessions have held that the ascended Christ retains his body.... If Christ is still embodied, he remains incarnate and therefore truly human. See Feenstra, "Reconsidering Kenotic Christology" in Ronald Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 147.

30 I note that there is no scriptural support for the view that Elohim is the proper name of the Father. Indeed, such use contradicts D&C 109 where Joseph Smith refers to Jehovah and Elohim interchangeably. Such usage could be adopted as a mere policy for purposes of keeping the divine persons distinct, but it also creates confusion regarding the identity of members of the Godhead. It must be recognized that no such usage is consistent in either the Bible or the Mormon scriptures.

31 This is the case in D&C 20:17, 28; Mosiah 15:2-5; Alma 11:44; Ether 12:41.

32 In the King Follett Discourse, Joseph Smith stated: "What did Jesus do, the same thing as I see the Father do..." Joseph Smith was quoting from John 5:19, which states, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son of Man can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these things doeth the Son likewise." Joseph Smith took this scripture literally, so that the Son does exactly what the Father did before him. See *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 345 & n.41.