

MORMON THEISM, THE TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF GOD, AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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One of the charges leveled against traditional Christian theology is that its concept of God, otherwise known as the classical Christian concept of God, is the result of Greek philosophical thought significantly shaping, indeed corrupting, the way in which church Fathers, councils, theologians, and philosophers have interpreted the phenomenon of God found in Scripture.

A number of scholars in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), popularly known as the Mormon church,¹ believe that the truth of this charge helps ground their unique theology.² For the necessity of the founding of the LDS church is contingent upon the truth of the belief that pristine Christianity vanished from the earth. According to LDS theology, the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805–1844) served as God's instrument to restore the lost Gospel.³ So, any evidence of corruption makes the Mormon case more plausible, though such evidence would certainly be far from decisive, since the disappearance of true Christian theology is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition for the truth of the LDS claims.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a philosophical reply to the Mormon claim that the classical concept of God is a corruption of the true Christian concept of God. In order to accomplish this, we will cover the following: (1) the Mormon concept of God; (2) the classical Christian concept of God; and (3) the LDS charge and its problems. My intention is not to give a biblical case for traditional Christian theism. Rather, my intention is to show

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¹ Within recent years the LDS leadership has increasingly employed the name "Church of Jesus Christ" rather than "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" or "Mormon church." However, because the latter two are more well known in the wider culture, I will use them interchangeably throughout the paper.

² For example, LDS scholar Stephen Robinson writes: "... Mormons start with the assumption that some of [the gospel] was lost in the Hellenization of Christianity and the corruptions of the great church and must now be restored in the latter days" (Stephen E. Robinson in *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and An Evangelical in Conversation* by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997] 60).

³ See "Joseph Smith, 2" in *Pearl of Great Price* (PGP). PGP is a collection of five books, one of which is "Joseph Smith, 2." Robinson writes: "We believe that the Lord in preparation for his imminent second coming has 'restored' New Testament Christianity in the latter days through the prophet Joseph Smith" (*How Wide the Divide?* 17).

that the LDS charge is philosophically problematic and rests on five mistakes. The issue of whether and to what degree Christian theology has been influenced by Greek philosophy is historically important and worth assessing, but it is outside the scope of this paper. Although I will touch on historical sources, my main purpose is philosophical and not historical.

Because of the unjust persecution some Mormons have received at the hands of some self-professing Christians, I am sensitive to the fact that this paper may be interpreted to be within that unfortunate tradition. That would, however, be an inaccurate interpretation. For I am a Christian philosopher who is concerned with both the acquisition of truth as well as sharing the power of Christ's love. Some of what goes by the name of anti-Mormon literature, though containing some accurate information, may, because of its tone and spirit, fuel intolerance, bigotry, and prejudice.⁴ This, of course, does not mean that criticizing another's religion is in principle wrong. As Eleanor Stump and Norman Kretzmann have pointed out, the postmodernist's absolute prohibition of such activity, though politically correct and theologically fashionable, is self-referentially incoherent.⁵ Because I am sensitive to complaints by Mormons that their views are misunderstood by traditional Christians, especially Evangelicals,⁶ I have attempted in this essay to understand and critique the Mormon view fairly and honestly.

I. THE MORMON CONCEPT OF GOD

1. *Sources of doctrine.* The Mormon doctrine of God is derived primarily from three groups of sources.⁷ And it is because of these sources that it departs radically from creedal Christianity.

(a) The first group of sources consists of works regarded by the Mormon church as inspired Scripture: *The Book of Mormon* (BM), the *Doctrine and Covenants* (DC), and the *Pearl of Great Price* (PGP).

(b) The Mormon concept of God is also derived from Joseph Smith, Jr.'s other statements and doctrinal commentaries, such as the seven-volume *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (HC), which was compiled and extensively edited by B. H. Roberts (1857–1933). Although not regarded by the LDS church as Scripture *per se*, Smith's extracanonical pronouncements on doctrine are accepted by the Mormon laity and leadership as authoritative for Mormon theology.

⁴ The book by Edward J. Decker and David Hunt, *The God Makers* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1984), is an example of this sort of anti-Mormon propaganda. Although not everything in the book is inaccurate, much of its presentation is offensive and some of its reasoning is seriously flawed.

⁵ See Eleanor Stump and Norman Kretzman, "Theologically Unfashionable Philosophy," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (July 1990) 329–39; and Francis J. Beckwith, "The Epistemology of Political Correctness," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 8/4 (October 1994) 331–40.

⁶ See Robinson's introductory comments to *How Wide the Divide?* 9–21.

⁷ This list of sources of Mormon theology is nearly identical to the one presented by Mormon philosopher David Lamont Paulsen in his doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan, *The Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1975) 66.

(c) Authoritative presentations of the Mormon doctrine of God can also be found in the statements and writings of the church's ecclesiastical leaders, especially its presidents, who are considered divinely inspired prophets. Concerning this group of sources, Bruce McConkie writes, "When the living oracles speak in the name of the Lord or as moved upon by the Holy Spirit, however, their utterances are then binding upon all who hear, and whatever is said will without any exception be found to be in harmony with the standard works."⁸ Henry D. Taylor, in the Mormon publication *The Ensign Magazine*, writes, "As Latter-day Saints we accept the following scriptures as the standard works of the Church: the Bible (consisting of the Old Testament and the New Testament), the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and official statements made by our leaders."⁹ The book *Gospel Principles*, an official publication of the LDS church, states: "In addition to these four books of scripture, the inspired words of our living prophets become scripture to us. Their words come to us through conferences, Church publications, and instructions to local priesthood leaders."¹⁰ Mormon scholar Stephen Robinson seems to be saying that these extra-canonical pronouncements are *more important* than Scripture: the LDS

church's guarantee of doctrinal correctness lies primarily in the living prophet, and only secondarily in the preservation of the written text. . . . Just as the apostle or prophet is necessary to receive what becomes the written word of God in the first place, he is necessary to authoritatively interpret it in the second. . . . As long as "holy men of God" (apostles and prophets) remain in the church to interpret and apply the written revelations that they and their predecessors have received to changing times and new cultures, there is a presumption of doctrinal continuity and correctness.¹¹

As with any religious tradition, it is also important to consult and consider the writings of believing scholars within the tradition and how they have interpreted and defended the teachings found in their sources of doctrine.¹² I will refer to these writings when appropriate, even though they technically fall outside the three groups of authoritative sources.

⁸ Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (2d ed.; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966) 765.

⁹ *The Ensign Magazine* (November 1976) 63.

¹⁰ *Gospel Principles* (rev. ed.; Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995) 55.

¹¹ Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?* 57–58. Yet Robinson writes elsewhere in his book, "[T]he parameters of LDS doctrine are clear—Scripture is normative; sermons are not. Almost anything outside the [LDS] Standard Works is also outside those parameters" (73–74). Contrast this with the words of Mormon apostle and prophet Brigham Young: "I never yet preached a sermon and sent it out to the children of men, that they may not call Scripture. Let me have the privilege of correcting a sermon, and it is as good Scripture as they deserve" (*Journal of Discourses, by Brigham Young, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, His Two Counselors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others*, 26 volumes, reported by G. D. Watt [Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1854–1886] 13:95 [hereafter JD]). This leads to the query: If a Mormon prophet or apostle tells you in a sermon to think of his sermons as authoritative, do you believe him?

¹² See, for example, Gary James Bergera, ed., *Line Upon Line: Essays in Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989); Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1959); Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965); Blake Ostler, "The Mormon Concept of God," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17

Because there are so many doctrinal sources, it may appear (with some justification) that it is difficult to determine precisely what is the LDS concept of God. For example, the *Book of Mormon* (first published in 1830) seems to teach a strongly Judaic monotheism with modalistic overtones (see Alma 11:26–31, 38; Moroni 8:18; Mosiah 3:5–8; 7:27; 15:1–5), while the equally authoritative *Pearl of Great Price* (first published in 1851) clearly teaches that more than one God exists (see Abraham 4–5) and that these gods are finite. This finite view of God culminated in the theology of Joseph Smith's successor, Brigham Young (1801–1877), in sermons that were considered authoritative at the time¹³ but are now disputed by Mormon authorities.¹⁴ Young taught the doctrine that Adam, the first man, is the God of this world:

Now, hear it, O inhabitants of the earth, Jew and Gentile, Saint and sinner! When our father Adam came into the garden of Eden, he came into it with a *celestial body*, and brought Eve, *one of his wives*, with him. He helped to make and organize this world. He is MICHAEL, *the Archangel*, the ANCIENT OF DAYS! about whom holy men have written and spoken—HE is our FATHER and our GOD and the only God with whom WE have to do. Every man upon the earth, professing Christians or non-professing, must hear it, and *will know it sooner or later*.¹⁵

Even though the Adam-God doctrine is rejected by Mormon authorities today, it is clear that the Mormon doctrine of God, as a number of Mormon scholars have argued, evolved from a traditional monotheism to a uniquely American polytheism.¹⁶ This is why LDS scholar Boyd Kirkland writes that “Mormons who are aware of the various teachings of the LDS scriptures and prophets over the years are faced with a number of doctrinal possibilities.” For example, “they can choose to accept Book of Mormon theology, but this varies from biblical theology as well as from Joseph Smith’s later plurality-of-gods theology. . . . While most Mormons are unaware of the diversity that abounds in the history of Mormon doctrine, many Latter-day Saints . . .

(Summer 1984) 65–93; David L. Paulsen, “Foreword,” in *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Van Der Donckt Discussion* by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998; reprint of 1903 edition); Paulsen, *Comparative Coherency*; Kent Robson, “Omnis on the Horizon,” *Sunstone* 8 (July–August 1983) 21–23; Kent Robson, “Time and Omniscience in Mormon Theology,” *Sunstone* 5 (May–June 1980) 17–23; and White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy* 57–67.

¹³ Brigham Young’s statements on the Adam-God doctrine come primarily from the *Journal of Discourses*, about which the publisher said in the preface to volume 3, “The ‘Journal of Discourses’ is a vehicle of doctrine, counsel, and instruction to all people, but especially to the saints” (JD, 3:iii). Brigham Young himself said that he had “never yet preached a sermon and sent it out to the children of men, that they may not call Scripture” (JD, 13:95).

¹⁴ See McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* 18–19; and Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (comp. Bruce McConkie; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955) 1.91, 96.

¹⁵ JD 1:50.

¹⁶ See James B. Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought,” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980) 43–61; Thomas G. Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progression Theology,” *Sunstone* 5 (July/August 1980) 32–39; Boyd Kirkland, “The Development of the Mormon Doctrine of God,” in Bergera, *Line Upon Line* 35–52; Kurt Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theological Evolution, 1830–1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2000).

have, despite the risk of heresy, continued to believe or promote publicly many of the alternative Godhead theologies from Mormonism's past."¹⁷

2. *The Mormon doctrine of God.* Although the historical development of Mormon theism is a fascinating subject, I will focus on what appears to be the dominant concept of God currently held by the LDS church. Although there is certainly disagreement among Mormon scholars concerning some precise points of doctrine,¹⁸ I believe it is safe to say, based on documents the church presently considers authoritative, that current LDS doctrine teaches that God is, in effect,¹⁹ (1) a contingent being, who was at one time not God; (2) finite in knowledge (not truly omniscient), power (not omnipotent), and being (not omnipresent or immutable); (3) one of many gods;

¹⁷ Kirkland, "Development" 48.

¹⁸ Stephen E. Parrish points out (in *See the Gods Fall: Four Rivals to Christianity*, Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish [Joplin, MO: College Press, 1997] ch. 3; and idem, "A Tale of Two Theisms: The Philosophical Usefulness of the Classical Christian and Mormon Concepts of God," in *The New Mormon Challenge* [ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen; New York: HarperCollins/Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming]) that one can find in contemporary Mormonism two identifiable views of deity: (1) plurality of finite gods theology; and (2) monarchotheism, a view that holds that there is one eternally existing though corporeal (perhaps finite) God who is above all the other gods. Although the latter view is gaining ground among some Mormon intellectuals, the plurality of gods tradition seems to be the most dominant. For this reason, my focus in this paper will be on the former. Among those who seem to be drifting away from LDS finitism is Robinson. For he writes in *How Wide the Divide?*, "Evangelicals often accuse Latter-day Saints of believing in a limited, finite, changeable god, but there is absolutely nothing in LDS Scriptures or beliefs to justify such a charge" (p. 92). In addition, he seems to claim that humans may become "gods," but not in the sense of being truly independent, a status reserved exclusively to God (p. 86). Yet, in other places Robinson affirms doctrines that are inconsistent with this notion (e.g. God is corporeal and may have once been finite, pp. 85–93). I leave it to Robinson to work out the philosophical coherency of maintaining these apparently inconsistent concepts.

Another LDS scholar who insists on using the language of traditional theism to describe the Mormon God is Robert Millet (see his *The Mormon Faith: A New Look at Christianity* [Salt Lake City: Mountain/Deseret, 1998]). For a helpful historical overview of the movement in Mormon intellectual circles of incorporating into LDS thought the vocabulary of traditional Christian theology, see O. Kendall White, Jr., *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1987).

¹⁹ It should be noted that a similar presentation of the Mormon concept (Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish, *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis* [Studies in American Religion 55; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991]) has been accepted as largely accurate by Mormon philosopher Blake Ostler (review of *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis* by Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish, *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 [1996] 91–146), though he maintains that the book's accompanying critique is seriously flawed. He writes that the arguments of Beckwith and Parrish "are not based upon mere caricatures of Mormonism as is so common in anti-Mormon literature" and that the authors had "attempted to fairly assess Mormon views" (p. 146). This is significant, since Ostler writes elsewhere that "although Mormonism lacks a systematic theology, it affirms at least a few remarkably coherent propositions about the nature of God, mortals, and the universe" (Ostler, "The Mormon Concept of God" 66). For two other reviews that give different assessments, see James E. Faulconer, *BYU Studies* (Fall 1992) and Blake T. Ostler and David Paulsen, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 35 (1994) 118–20. In this latter review, Ostler (with Paulsen) writes that "while Mormons do share many doctrinal beliefs . . . , they have nothing like clear consensus, let alone an official Church position, on most of the views attributed to them by [Beckwith and Parrish]" (p. 118). It seems that Ostler held one view in 1984 ("The Mormon Concept of God"), changed it in 1994 (*IJPR*), and returned to his 1984 view in 1996 (*FARMS Review*).

(4) a corporeal (bodily) being, who physically dwells at a particular spatio-temporal location and is therefore not omnipresent like the classical God; (5) a being who is subject to the laws and principles of a beginningless universe with an infinite number of entities in it; and (6) not a Trinity, but rather, there exist three separate Gods who are one in purpose but not being.²⁰

The contemporary Mormon concept of God can best be grasped by understanding the overall Mormon world view and how the deity fits into it. Mormonism teaches that God the Father is a resurrected, "exalted" human being named Elohim who was at one time not God.²¹ He was once a mortal man on another planet who, through obedience to the precepts of his God, eventually attained exaltation, or godhood, himself through "eternal progression." The Mormon God, located in time and space, has a body of flesh and bone and thus is neither spirit nor omnipresent as understood in their traditional meanings. Joseph Smith, Jr. asserts:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! . . . I am going to tell you how God came to be God. *We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute this idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see. . . .* It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that He was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did; and I will show it from the Bible. . . .

Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves, and be kings and priests to God, *the same as all gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power. . . .*²²

The Father has a body of flesh and bone as tangible as man's. . . .²³

The late Mormon president Lorenzo Snow explains: "As man is, God once was; as God now is, man may become."²⁴ Joseph Fielding Smith writes,

Some people are troubled over the statements of the prophet Joseph Smith. . . . The matter that seems such a mystery is the statement that *our Father in*

²⁰ When I use the phrase "the Mormon God," I am referring exclusively to Elohim or God the Father. I am not referring to Jehovah (the pre-incarnate Jesus) or the Holy Spirit. When LDS writers refer to "God," they are almost always referring to God the Father.

²¹ McConkie writes: "*Elohim*, plural word though it is, is used as the exalted name-title of God the Eternal Father. . . ." (*Mormon Doctrine* 224).

²² Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (2d rev. ed.; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978) 6.305–6 (emphasis added; hereafter HC).

²³ DC 130:22.

²⁴ Quoted by B. H. Roberts in Joseph Smith, *The King Follet Discourse: The Being and Kind of Being God Is; the Immortality of the Intelligence of Man*, with notes and references by the late Elder B.H. Roberts of the First Council of Seventy (Salt Lake City: Magazine Printing, 1963) 9.

heaven at one time passed through a life and death and is an exalted man. This is one of the mysteries. . . . The Prophet taught that *our Father had a Father and so on*. Is not this a reasonable thought, especially when we remember that the promises are made to us that we may become like him?²⁵

A member of the LDS First Council of the Seventy, Milton R. Hunter, writes:

Mormon prophets have continuously taught the sublime truth that *God the Eternal Father was once a mortal man* who passed through a school of earth life similar to that through which we are now passing. *He became God*—an exalted being—through obedience to the same eternal Gospel principles that we are given opportunity to obey today.²⁶

Omniscience, according to Mormon theology, is one of the attributes one attains when reaching godhood. Mormons appear to be divided, however, on the meaning of omniscience. It seems that some Mormons believe omniscience to mean that God knows all true propositions about the past, present, and future. This view is consistent with the classical Christian view: God is all-knowing, and his all-knowing encompasses the past, present, and future.²⁷

On the other hand, the dominant Mormon tradition teaches that God does not know the future. This tradition affirms that only the present and the past can be known by God, since the former is occurring and the latter has already occurred. Consequently, since the future is not yet a “thing” and has not become actual (and hence cannot possibly be known), God cannot know the future. Therefore, the Mormon God is omniscient in the sense that he knows everything that can possibly be known, but he nevertheless increases in knowledge as the future unfolds and becomes the present.²⁸ As the late Mormon president and prophet Wilford Woodruff once said: “God himself is increasing in knowledge, power, and dominion, and will do so worlds without end.”²⁹ This is why Brigham Young and his counselors (both in 1860 and 1865) condemned as false doctrine Orson Pratt’s claim that “God cannot know new truths.”³⁰

Once Elohim attained godhood he then created this present world by “organizing” both eternally preexistent, inorganic matter and the preexistent primal intelligences from which human spirits are made (PGP, Abraham 3:22). Mormon writer Hyrum L. Andrus explains:

²⁵ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 1.10, 12.

²⁶ Milton R. Hunter, *The Gospel Through the Ages* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1958) 104.

²⁷ See Neal A. Maxwell, “A More Determined Discipleship,” *The Ensign Magazine* (February 1979) 69–73; and Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1979).

²⁸ Ostler cites four Mormon leaders who have held views consistent with this view of omniscience: presidents Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow as well as member of the Council of Seventy, B. H. Roberts. See Ostler, “The Mormon Concept of God” 76–78.

²⁹ Wilford Woodruff in JD 6:120.

³⁰ According to Ostler (“The Mormon Concept of God” 76), these official pronouncements are recorded in James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency* (Salt Lake City: Book Craft) 2.214–23; and *Millennial Star* 26 (21 Oct. 1865) 658–60.

Though man's spirit is organized from a pure and fine substance which possesses certain properties of life, Joseph Smith seems to have taught that within each individual spirit there is a central primal intelligence (a central directing principle of life), and that man's central primal intelligence is a personal entity possessing some degree of life and certain rudimentary cognitive powers before the time the human spirit was organized.³¹

For this reason, Joseph Smith wrote that "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be."³² In other words, man's basic essence or primal intelligence is as eternal as God's.

The Mormon God, by organizing this world out of preexistent matter, has granted these organized spirits the opportunity to receive physical bodies, pass through mortality, and eventually progress to godhood—just as this opportunity was given him by his Father God. Consequently, if human persons on earth faithfully obey the precepts of Mormonism they, too, can attain godhood like Elohim before them. And the purpose of attaining godhood is so that "we would become heavenly parents and have spirit children just as [Elohim] does."³³ Mormon philosopher David Paulsen writes, "He [the Mormon God] is perfectly just, loving, kind, compassionate, veracious, no respecter of persons, etc. But his perfections are not eternal, but were acquired by means of developmental process."³⁴

Based on the statements of Mormon authorities, some LDS scholars contend that a premortal spirit is "organized" by God the Father through "spirit birth." In this process, human spirits are somehow organized through literal sexual relations between Elohim and his wife (or Mother-God), whereby they are conceived and born as spirit children *prior* to entering the mortal realm (although all human persons prior to spirit birth existed as intelligences in some primal state of cognitive personal existence).³⁵ Since God the Father of Mormonism was himself organized (or spirit-birthed) by his God, who himself is a "creation" of yet another God, and so on *ad infinitum*, Mormonism therefore teaches that the God over this world is a contingent being in an infinite lineage of gods.³⁶ Thus, Mormonism is a polytheistic religion. This is why Joseph Smith asserts that he will "preach the plurality of Gods. . . . I wish to declare I have always and in all congregations when I have preached on the subject of the Deity, it has been the plurality of Gods."³⁷

Comparing the Mormon concept with the classical Christian concept of God, Mormon philosopher Blake Ostler writes that in contrast to the self-sufficient God who creates the universe

³¹ Hyrum L. Andrus, *God, Man and the Universe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968) 175.

³² DC 93:29.

³³ *Gospel Principles* 14.

³⁴ Paulsen, *Comparative Coherency* 79.

³⁵ McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* 386–87, 516–17, 750–51.

³⁶ HC 6:305–12.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 6:474.

ex nihilo (out of nothing), the Mormon God did not bring into being the ultimate constituents of the cosmos—neither its fundamental matter nor the space/time matrix which defines it. Hence, unlike the Necessary Being of classical theology who alone could not *not* exist and on which all else is contingent for existence, the personal God of Mormonism confronts uncreated realities which exist of metaphysical necessity. Such realities include inherently self-directing selves (intelligences), primordial elements (mass/energy), the natural laws which structure reality, and moral principles grounded in the intrinsic value of selves and the requirements for growth and happiness.”³⁸

Concurring, Mormon elder B. H. Roberts, a member of the First Council of Seventy, writes,

[N]ot even God may place himself beyond the boundary of space: nor on the outside of duration. Nor is it conceivable to human thought he can create space, or annihilate matter. These are things that limit even God’s omnipotence. What then, is meant by the ascription of the attribute of Omnipotence to God? Simply that all that may or can be done by power conditioned by other eternal existences—duration, space, matter, truth, justice—God can do. But even he may not act out of harmony with the other eternal existences which condition or limit him.³⁹

Mormonism therefore teaches that certain basic realities have always existed and are indestructible even by God. For Mormonism, God, like each human being, is merely another creature in the universe. In the Mormon universe, God is not responsible for creating or sustaining matter, energy, natural laws, personhood, moral principles, the process of salvation (or exaltation), or much of anything. Instead of the universe being subject to him (as in the classical view), the Mormon God is subject to the universe. In the words of the late Mormon philosopher Sterling McMurrin, “God is not the totality of original being and he is not the ultimate source or the creator of all being. This is a radical departure from the position of tradition theism, whether Christian, Jewish, or Islamic, and the failure to recognize the far-reaching implications of this idea is a failure to come to grips with the somewhat distinctive quality of Mormon theology, its essentially non-absolutistic character.”⁴⁰ Some thinkers, including LDS scholars, have noticed strong conceptual similarities between Mormon theism and other finite theisms and philosophical positions, such as nominalism, classical materialism, and process philosophy.⁴¹

Unlike the God of Christian theism who is omnipresent in being, the God of Mormonism is only omnipresent insofar as he is aware of everything in

³⁸ Ostler, “The Mormon Concept of God” 67.

³⁹ B. H. Roberts, *Seventy’s Course in Theology: Third Year and Fourth Year* (Salt Lake City: Caxton Press, 1910) 4.70.

⁴⁰ McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* 2.

⁴¹ See, for example, McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology*; McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*; Paulsen, *Comparative Coherency*; Ross, “Process Philosophy and Mormon Thought”; and Garland E. Tickemeyer, “Joseph Smith and Process Theology,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Autumn 1984) 75–85.

the universe. Since the Mormon God has a physical body, and hence is limited by time and space, his being cannot be present everywhere. As Roberts has pointed out, when a Mormon says that God is omnipresent, he is asserting that although God's influence, power, and knowledge are all-pervasive, the focal point of God's being (his body) exists at a particular place in time and space.⁴² Because Mormon theology does not teach that the universe is contingent upon God to either bring it into being or to sustain its existence, there is no need for Mormon theology to hold to the classical Christian view of omnipresence.

Given Mormon metaphysics and its concept of God, it is no surprise that the LDS church denies the doctrine of the Trinity as found in the catholic creeds. Joseph Smith, Jr. asserts: "Many men say there is one God; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are only one God! I say that is a strange God anyhow—three in one, and one in three! . . . He would be a wonderfully big God—he would be a giant or a monster."⁴³ McMurrin writes:

The nominalistic and particularistic tendency of Mormon thought, which so commonly insists that only the physically concrete is a genuinely real entity, is importantly exhibited in the denial of the doctrine of the trinity as set forth by the Nicene Creed, which is normative for both Catholicism and Protestantism. . . . This anti-trinitarian position is consistent with the nominalistic position that only particular objects and events have reality. It is sometimes found associated with nominalism in the history of Christian philosophy because a nominalistic metaphysics necessarily denies the possibility of a universal substance over and above the particularity of the three members of the Godhead.⁴⁴

Mormon theology affirms tritheism, the belief that there exists three gods with which this world should be concerned (though Mormon theology teaches that there exist many other gods as well): Elohim (the Father), Jehovah (the Son), and the Holy Ghost.⁴⁵ Writes Smith: "The Father has a body of flesh and bone as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Spirit could not dwell in us."⁴⁶ The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, according to apostle James Talmage, are "three separate individuals, physically distinct from each other," forming "the great presiding council of the universe."⁴⁷ And even the Holy Ghost is not really a spirit, since, according to Smith, there is no such thing as a non-physical reality: "There is

⁴² Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology* 4.70–71. See McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* 544–45.

⁴³ HC 6:476.

⁴⁴ McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* 41.

⁴⁵ Recently LDS scholars have defended a version of social trinitarianism. See, for example, Blake Ostler, "Re-visioning the Mormon Concept of Deity," *Element* 1.1, at http://www.nd.edu/~rpotter/ostler_element1-1.html (20 Aug. 2001).

⁴⁶ DC 130:22.

⁴⁷ James Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1975) 237. For a sophisticated discussion of Mormon tritheism, see David L. Paulsen, "The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives," in *BYU Studies* 35/4 (1995–96) 7–94.

no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes."⁴⁸ Mormon writings, including the LDS scriptures, are unclear about the Holy Ghost. This is why Mormon scholar Vern G. Swanson concludes his essay on this subject by saying: "In the end, there are few details from which to construct an adequate theology of God the Third. . . . But I suspect that we will be left at some point with Brigham Young's promise that 'when we go through the veil we shall know much more about these matters than we now do.'"⁴⁹

It is worth mentioning that the preincarnate Jesus, Jehovah (or Yahweh), does not have a body of flesh and bone in Mormon theology. McConkie writes that "Christ is *Jehovah*; they are one and the same Person."⁵⁰ According to one LDS book, Jehovah "was the birthright son, and he retained his birthright by his strict obedience. Through the aeons and ages of premortality, he advanced and progressed until, as Abraham described it, he stood as one 'like unto God' [Abr. 3:24]. 'Our Savior was a God before he was born into this world.'"⁵¹

II. THE CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF GOD

It is not my purpose in this section either to assess the contemporary debates among Christian philosophers and theologians over contrasting and

⁴⁸ DC 131:7–8. It is interesting to note that Robinson maintains that the Mormon God can be physical as well as omnipresent: "[O]ne such assumption I hear a lot is that if God were to possess a physical body, this would make divine omnipresence impossible; such a God would be 'limited' or rendered 'finite' by that body. Therefore, the argument continues, God as perceived by the LDS could not be omnipresent. But the Latter-day Saints affirm only that the Father has a body, not that his body has him. The Father is corporeal and infinitely more, and if a spirit can be omnipresent without being *physically* present, then so can a God who possesses a body and a spirit" (*How Wide the Divide?* 88). But if the Prophet Joseph Smith is correct that even "spirits" are physical, then God cannot be omnipresent spiritually, since that would entail that God physically takes up every bit of space in the universe. It seems, then, that Robinson's solution, though philosophically coherent, is inconsistent with the LDS definition of "spirit." For a critique of Mormon materialism, see J. P. Moreland, "The Absurdities of Mormon Materialism: A Reply to the Neglected Orson Pratt," in *The New Mormon Challenge* (forthcoming).

⁴⁹ Vern G. Swanson, "The Development of the Concept of the Holy Ghost in Mormon Theology," in *Line Upon Line* 98. The quote from Brigham Young cited by Swanson is from JD 8:179. In the past, some LDS scholars made a distinction between the Holy Spirit and the Holy Ghost. For example, John Widtsoe writes: "The Holy Spirit is an agent, means, or influence by which the will, power, and intelligence of God, and the Godhead, personal Beings, may be transmitted throughout space. . . . It is a spirit of intelligence that permeates the universe and gives understanding to the spirits of men. The phenomena of existence are but expressions of this divine medium. . . . The Holy Ghost, sometimes called the Comforter, is the third member of the Godhead, and is a personage, distinct from the Holy Spirit" (*Evidences and Reconciliations* [Collector's Edition; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987; orig. 1960] 76).

⁵⁰ McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* 392. It should be noted that some Mormon scholars admit that it is not always clear in Mormon literature as to whom the name Jehovah refers. See Boyd Kirkland, "Elohim and Jehovah in Mormonism and the Bible," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (Spring 1986) 77–93; and Boyd Kirkland, "Jehovah as Father," *Sunstone* (Autumn 1984) 36–44.

⁵¹ *The Life and Teachings of Jesus and His Apostles* 15, as quoted in Mark J. Cares, *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993) 78.

competing concepts of God and their numerous variations, or to provide a biblical and/or philosophical defense of classical theism.⁵² Rather, my purpose here is to merely offer a presentation of the classical Christian concept of God in a way that represents a consensus of major, influential Christian thinkers across all three major branches of Christianity: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant.⁵³ This view of God is either presupposed or explicitly articulated in the classic ecumenical creeds as well as all the denominational confessions.⁵⁴ I present this view of God, so that the reader may be able to appreciate the stark contrast between the LDS concept and nearly every version of Christian theism. Although I believe that some views of God embraced by some Christians are flawed, I do not want the reader to suppose that disagreement between creedal Christians about the nature of God means that *any* alternative offered for consideration, including the Mormon one, therefore ought to be considered a legitimate option under the rubric of Christian theism.

1. *God is metaphysically unique.* The traditional Christian view of God is that he is “uncreated, underived, one, infinite, eternal, self-sufficient” and “necessary. . . .”⁵⁵ At minimum, this means that God is the sort of being who is metaphysically independent and necessary (he cannot not exist). This

⁵² It should be pointed out, however, that some supporters of the Openness view make a charge similar to that made by the Mormons about Greek philosophy’s corrupting influence on the formation of Christian dogma. See John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understandings of God* by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994) 59–100. For reviews of this book, see Edward Wierenga, *Faith and Philosophy* 14/2 (April 1997) 248–52 and Alfred J. Freddoso, “The ‘Openness of God’: A Reply to Hasker,” *Christian Scholars Review* 28/1 (Fall 1998) 124–33. Freddoso’s piece was in response to Hasker’s presentation of the Openness view, “The Openness of God,” *Christian Scholars Review* 28/1 (Fall 1998) 111–39.

⁵³ Since the reality of this consensus is virtually never disputed, not even by the LDS (though some, like the LDS, dispute whether the consensus is correct), I will only cite sources that I believe accurately and carefully present this consensus view. It should be noted, however, that even among those who accept the consensus view there is disagreement about the precise meaning of particular divine attributes. Thus, the sources I cite may disagree about certain aspects of the divine but nevertheless agree that classical theism, broadly defined, is the correct way to think about the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus of Nazareth.

⁵⁴ See, for example, J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (rev. ed.; San Francisco: Harper, 1960); *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988); *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 1994); and *Creeds of the Churches* (3d ed.; ed. John H. Leith; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982).

⁵⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God: Systematic Theology: Volume One* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) 54. Oden’s presentation of the classical view is fairly typical. For example, compare Oden’s exposition of God with some recent as well as standard works from theologians in differing Christian traditions: Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993); B. Davies, *Thinking About God* (London: Churchman, 1985); Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible says about God the Creator* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1983); J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962); Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–85); Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1978); and Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1907).

is why God is said to be eternal or everlasting,⁵⁶ for a being who is metaphysically necessary and uncreated is not the sort of being who can begin to or cease to exist.

When the theist speaks of God as infinite, he is not committed, as B. H. Roberts supposes, to God not really being a person: “if God has personality, he is a person, a some-thing, and hence limited . . . ; if limited, as he must be when conceived of as *this* or *that*, as a person, for instance, then of course not infinite being. . . .”⁵⁷ Roberts’s argument rests on a misunderstanding of what the classical theist means when she calls God “infinite.” What she means is that there is no extra-divine limit to God’s virtue, power, knowledge, or wisdom. In fact, one could say that God’s infinite attributes *presuppose* his personhood, as Thomas Oden points out: “[I]nfinity is a quality that applies to every divine attribute, for God is infinitely merciful, infinitely holy, infinitely just.”⁵⁸ Because God is metaphysically unique, he is by definition one (or the only being who is God).

2. *God is creator and sustainer of all else that exists.* In classical theism, all reality is contingent on God—that is, all reality has come into existence and *continues* to exist because of him. Unlike the Mormon God, who forms the universe out of preexistent matter (*ex materia*), the God of classical theism created the universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).⁵⁹

3. *God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent.* The classical God is omniscient: he has all propositional knowledge of past, present, and future.⁶⁰ He is omnipotent as well: he is the sovereign Lord of the universe, is

⁵⁶ Some Christian thinkers argue that God has existed forever in time, while others say that God has existed forever outside of time though he acts in time. The former is called the everlasting (or temporal) view while the latter is called the eternal (or atemporal) view. For an overview of both perspectives, see Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 73–83; and Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991) 119–38. See also the special theme issue of the journal *Philosophia Christi*, “God and Time,” Series 2, 2/1 (2000), which contains essays by Christian scholars who take differing positions on the question of God and time, though each is within the parameters of traditional Christian theism: Nicholas Wolterstorff (“God and Time”), Alan G. Padgett (“God the Lord of Time: A Third Model of Eternity as Relative to Timelessness”), Paul Helm (“Divine Timeless Eternity”), William Lane Craig (“Timelessness and Omnitemporality”), Douglas K. Blount (“Swinburne and the Doctrine of Divine Timelessness”), and Garrett DeWeese (“Timeless God, Tenseless Time”).

⁵⁷ Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity* 111. A similar criticism has been raised against the personhood of God by some believers in Eastern religious thought who are pantheists. They argue that the classical God’s personhood means that he cannot be infinite, and thus not truly God. For a critique of this argument, see Beckwith and Parrish, *See the Gods Fall* 213–16.

⁵⁸ Oden, *The Living God* 58.

⁵⁹ For a historical and biblical defense of *creatio ex nihilo*, see any of the works cited in footnote 55 as well as Paul Copan, “Is *Creatio Ex Nihilo* A Post-Biblical Invention? An Examination of Gerhard May’s Proposal,” *Trinity Journal* 17NS (1996) 77–93; and Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, “Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the Mormon Doctrine of Creation and a Defense of *Creatio ex Nihilo*,” in *The New Mormon Challenge* (forthcoming).

⁶⁰ This is a typical formulation of the attribute of omniscience. For a historical and biblical defense, see any of the works cited in note 55. For a philosophical discussion of this attribute, see Morris, *Our Idea of God* 83–104 and Nash, *The Concept of God* 51–72. There are some theists who

not by nature limited by anything external to himself, and is limited only by His character and the laws of logic.⁶¹

God is also omnipresent. Since God is not a physical being who takes up space, it would be wrong to think of him as a sort of gas that fills up the universe. In that sense, he is not everywhere, since God is not a thing, like water or air, that can take up space. Rather, God is everywhere insofar as he is not limited by a spatio-temporal body, knows everything immediately without benefit of sensory organs, and sustains everything that exists. In other words, God's omnipresence logically follows from his omniscience, incorporeality, omnipotence, metaphysical uniqueness, and role as creator and sustainer of the universe. Although neither identical to creation (as in pantheism) nor limited by it (as in Mormon theism), God is immanent, spiritually and personally present at every point of the universe.⁶²

4. *God is personal and incorporeal.* God is a personal being who has all the attributes that we may expect from a perfect person: self-consciousness, the ability to reason, know, love, communicate, and so forth. God is also incorporeal. Unlike humans, God is not uniquely associated with one physical entity such as a body.⁶³ In addition, if God is creator and sustainer of every-

deny this view of omniscience and claim that God does not know the future. However, they do not deny that God knows everything. They argue that since the future is not an actual thing, because it has not happened yet, it is impossible for God to know it. Hence, they conclude that God knows everything and yet does not know the future. For defenses of this position, see Gregory Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); Clark Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," in *Predestination and Free Will* (ed. David and Randall Basinger; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986) 141–62; Richard Rice, "Divine Knowledge and Free-Will Theism," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (ed. Clark Pinnock; Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985) 121–39; Richard Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985); Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) 162–78; David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996); Pinnock *et al.*, *The Openness of God*; and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998). For analyses and responses to this view of omniscience, see the responses to Pinnock in *Predestination and Free Will*; Wierenga, review of *The Openness of God*; Freddoso, "The 'Openness of God': A Reply to Hasker"; and William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987). Because it still maintains God's metaphysical uniqueness and sovereignty over all that he created *ex nihilo*, the Openness view is a far cry from the LDS doctrine of God, which denies God's metaphysical uniqueness as well as his role as sovereign creator of the universe.

⁶¹ This is a typical formulation of the attribute of omnipotence. For a historical and biblical defense, see any of the works cited in note 55. For a philosophical discussion of this attribute, see Morris, *Our Idea of God* 65–81 and Nash, *The Concept of God* 37–50.

⁶² This is a typical formulation of the attribute of omnipresence. For a historical and biblical defense, see any of the works cited in note 55. For a philosophical discussion of this attribute, see Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* 91–125.

⁶³ Although creedal Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth was both corporeal and God the Son at the same time, they do not believe that God the Son is essentially corporeal. This is why Paulsen is incorrect in asserting that since "natural theologians have argued that God (logically) must be incorporeal, without body or parts . . . [this] apparently contradicts the common Christian belief that God (the Son) was incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and now exists everlastingly with a resurrected body" (David Paulsen, "Must God Be Incorporeal?" *Faith and Philosophy* 6 [January 1989] 76). Paulsen is mistaken, for natural theologians also assert that God the Son's incorporeality is not essential to his nature. Thus, there is no contradiction in asserting that God is essentially incorporeal and that God the Son *took on* a human nature that is

thing else that exists as well as being omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, it is difficult to see how such a being could be physical. For a physical being who is limited by time, space, and other forces (which the Mormons believe about God) cannot be the creator and sustainer of everything else that exists (since he did not create everything and does not sustain it), omnipotent (since the universe is something outside of his ultimate sovereignty and control), and omnipresent (since he is in a particular place in space and time).

III. THE LDS CHARGE AND ITS PROBLEMS

Virtually every Mormon scholar who writes on the nature of deity asserts that the classical concept of God is the result of Greek philosophy corrupting the picture of God one would find in both a correct reading of the Bible as well as in the beliefs embraced by the first Christians.⁶⁴ According to one Mormon scholar, Stephen Robinson, "Much traditional Christian theology has been wedded with Greek philosophical categories and assumptions. . . . [T]he God of Christian 'orthodoxy' is virtually indistinguishable from the God of the Hellenistic philosophers."⁶⁵ Ostler writes,

Mormons have rejected the strangle-hold of Hellenistic philosophy on Christian thought embodied in the various creeds. The LDS Church teaches that traditional Christian thought took a wrong turn when it *replaced the God of biblical revelation with the metaphysical absolutes derived from Greek philosophy*. Anyone familiar with the history and development of traditional Christian thought is aware that Christian theology has imbibed a good deal of Hellenistic philosophy.⁶⁶

It is, however, difficult to find in LDS literature an identifiable case in defense of this charge that is more than merely an accurate observation that many Christian thinkers in church history cite the works and arguments of pagan philosophers as part of their theological project.⁶⁷ For this reason, I

unessential to his status as God the Son. See Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

⁶⁴ Consider just the following citations, though many more could be marshaled: Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen C. Ricks, *Offenders for a Word* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992) 42; Ostler, "The Mormon Concept of God" 89; McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* 15; idem, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* 41; David L. Paulsen, "Early Christian Belief in Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses," *HTR* 83 (1990) 105-7; Richard R. Hopkins, *How Greek Philosophy Corrupted the Christian Concept of God* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1998); Robson, "Omnis on the Horizon" 23.

⁶⁵ Robinson in *How Wide the Divide?* 88, 79.

⁶⁶ Blake Ostler, "Worshipworthiness and the Mormon Concept of God," *Religious Studies* 33/3 (September 1997) 326 (emphasis added).

⁶⁷ McMurrin's works (*The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* and *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*) come closest to making a case. However, McMurrin also points out affinities between LDS theology and a number of pagan philosophical perspectives. LDS scholar Hugh Nibley, in the *The World and the Prophets* (3d ed.; Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1987), shows an impressive command of the primary and secondary literature, but he, like McMurrin, seems to confuse citation and reliance of arguments with corruption. This, of course, begs the question.

will consider this charge a conclusion resulting from the accurate observation that most philosophers and theologians in the history of the Christian church have employed in varying degrees the language, categories, and arguments found in pagan traditions.⁶⁸

Of course, someone may reply that LDS scholars are not saying that classical Christian theism merely borrowed concepts and terminology from Greek thought. Rather, these scholars seem to be saying that some church Fathers and medieval thinkers (St. Augustine and St. Thomas, for example) unwittingly allowed Greek philosophical concepts and categories to distort the Scripture's depiction of God.⁶⁹ This claim, however, cannot be demonstrated by merely citing the influence of Greek thought, whether or not this influence was wittingly or unwittingly allowed. It is an exegetical issue that falls outside the scope of this paper. In other words, as I will argue in my critique below, whether or not the biblical depiction of God has been corrupted by Greek thought or any other philosophical perspective cannot be decided conclusively by looking at the conceptual categories and philosophical tools employed or presupposed by the exegetes, even though such an analysis may be informative in making one's case against a particular concept of God.

I will argue that the LDS charge is flawed in at least five ways:⁷⁰ (a) it rests on a vague definition of Greek philosophy; (b) it commits the genetic fallacy; (c) its proponents misunderstand the nature of philosophical reflection; (d) it presents an unclear notion of what constitutes "influence"; and (e) it leaves open the possibility that corruption may occur (or already has occurred) in the restored church.

1. *Vague definition of philosophy and Greek philosophy.* It is not clear what Mormon critics of the classical concept mean by Greek philosophy. Surely they cannot mean that philosophical reflection has no place in theological reasoning, since their own assessment of traditional Christian theology is based on a philosophical judgment about the nature of knowledge and theology: Greek philosophy is bad for Christian theology. After all, Mormon scholars assume the logical law of non-contradiction when they claim that Mormonism and traditional Christianity cannot both be correct theo-

⁶⁸ It should be noted that one LDS scholar, Todd Compton, diminishes the influence of Greek thought in the apostasy, largely because of the claim by Orson Whitney, an LDS apostle, that Socrates and Plato were "servants of the Lord" in a "lesser sense" than the prophets. See Todd Compton, "Apostasy," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (ed. Daniel H. Ludlow; New York: Macmillan, 1992) 1.58. I owe this reference to Carl Mosser whose insights are recorded in an unpublished essay.

⁶⁹ I owe this point to Roger Olsen.

⁷⁰ For more detailed responses to the general question of Hellenistic influence on Christian theology, see Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*; idem, *Creeds, Councils, and Christ: Did the Early Christians Misrepresent Jesus?* (2d ed.; Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 1997); Ronald H. Nash, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); Richard A. Muller, "Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism," *WTJ* 45 (1983) 22–40; and Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, "Appendix: Hellenism, Greek Philosophy, and the 'Creedal Straight Jacket' of Christian Orthodoxy," in their review of *How Wide the Divide?* *FARMS Review of Books* 11/2 (1999) 82–102.

logical systems in every way. Clearly, even if one believed that Mormonism is more biblical than traditional Christianity or *vice versa*, it cannot be that they are both correct theological systems in every way. Even though this assessment appeals to a logical principle first formulated by the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, it would be wrong to dismiss it as “good Aristotelian thinking.” It is simply good thinking. This is why it is no refutation when Robinson rejects a philosophical criticism of LDS theology on the grounds that it is merely “good Platonic thinking.”⁷¹

Perhaps these Mormon scholars are not attacking philosophy, but just Greek philosophy. But it is not clear what they mean by “Greek” philosophy. For example, in one place Robinson calls it “Platonic”⁷² and in another place he calls it “Hellenistic.”⁷³ Ostler seems to employ the terms “Greek” and “Hellenistic” interchangeably.⁷⁴ But this is very confusing, since these terms can mean so many things. For instance, when Robinson writes of Platonism he may be referring to the thought of the historical Plato, whose philosophy, some scholars argue, had changed in his later dialogues when compared to his earlier ones. It is possible that Robinson may be thinking of the work of the neo-Platonists, including the pantheistic and mystical Plotinus, or he may mean the writings of St. Augustine, who employed Platonic language to explain many biblical ideas. Then again, Robinson may be referring to Philo, the Middle Platonists, or the Gnostics. Hellenistic thinking is even more diverse, since it includes the Platonists as well as numerous other philosophical systems, including the materialism of Democritus, Stoicism, Epicurianism as well as Aristotelianism in all its different versions.⁷⁵

2. *The genetic fallacy.* It is not clear why affinities with a pagan tradition would make one’s concept of God necessarily false. After all, Plato wrote about the Demiurge, a godlike being who took pre-existent matter by which he fashioned the world.⁷⁶ Plato also believed that the soul pre-existed before it was born mortal.⁷⁷ Democritus held that “everything in the universe (including the human soul) is composed of different combinations of solid, eternal bits of matter called atoms.”⁷⁸ Aristotle maintained that future tense statements have no truth value,⁷⁹ which may serve as a philosophical basis for denying that God can have exhaustive knowledge of the future. In addition, Plato seems to have held to some view of deification.⁸⁰ Yet these beliefs

⁷¹ Robinson in *How Wide the Divide?* 92. Robinson goes on to say: “I simply point out that this objection is philosophical rather than biblical. Why can’t the finite become infinite, or vice versa, other than that the idea contradicts Plato’s assumptions about the nature of things?” (ibid. 92).

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid. 17 and 92.

⁷⁴ Ostler, “Worshipworthiness and the Mormon Concept of God” 326.

⁷⁵ For an overview of these schools of thought, see Nash, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World* 27–56; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* 1–28; and W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greek Philosophers: From Thales to Aristotle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

⁷⁶ See Plato, *Timaeus* 29a–53.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Plato, *Meno* 82a ff.

⁷⁸ Nash, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World* 31.

⁷⁹ See Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* ch. 9.

⁸⁰ Plato, *Theatetus* 176b.

are more consistent with Mormon theology than with classical Christian theology. John L. Brooke has made a persuasive case that LDS theology contains doctrines from many earlier philosophies and sects, including Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Anabaptism, Masonry, and many others.⁸¹ Yet, it would seem odd as well as philosophically irresponsible that one would reject Mormon theology on such a basis, since truth is truth regardless of where it is found.⁸² To dismiss an idea simply because it has affinities with a pagan system is to commit the genetic fallacy (and/or guilt by association fallacy). Mormon scholar and elder, John Widstoe, recognized this: "A rational theology is founded on truth, on all truth . . . and 'A truth has no end.' In building a philosophy of life, a man, therefore, cannot say that some truth must be considered and other truth rejected. Only on the basis of all truth, that is, all true knowledge can his religion be built. . . ."⁸³ So, whether one's theology is "Platonic" or not is irrelevant; the question is whether or not it is true.⁸⁴

Mormon scholars may choose to embrace a form of critical realism (or what some non-sympathetic critics call "anti-realism")⁸⁵ or epistemological

⁸¹ John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). See also Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (rev. ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) and Craig James Hazen, *The Village Enlightenment in America: Popular Religion and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000) ch. 1.

⁸² As Hazen writes concerning early Mormonism,

As revelation continued to come, they addressed other questions: Were there beings on other planets? What was the nature of life before and after death? How did the mind affect the body? What was spirit? How was action possible at a distance? What happened to infants who experienced a premature demise? What was the nature of electricity? Why were there different races of humans? Most of the answers the Mormons had to such questions—not to mention most of the themes of Mormon doctrine and practice—were available in popular form from one source or another during the period. *Whether Joseph Smith acquired the ideas from his environment or from God or created them himself is not the point.* Rather, it is that the basic doctrines and answers the early Mormons offered met many of the intellectual needs of people on the frontier. Popular American movements and teachings had paved the way for what was to come. The prophecies and doctrines Smith announced had strong cultural precursors in rural society. Smith's greatest contribution might be characterized as recognizing, capturing, and sacralizing these disparate currents and then building a church structure to support them and ordaining missionaries to preach them (emphasis added; Hazen, *The Village Enlightenment* 61).

⁸³ John Widstoe, *A Rational Theology as Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1929) 8, as quoted in Floyd Ross, "Process Philosophy and Mormon Thought," *Sunstone* 7/1 (January–February 1982) 19.

⁸⁴ Of course, most Mormon scholars would undoubtedly agree with this in principle. But if that is the case, then why is the historical and authorial sources of certain philosophical categories even relevant? After all, no LDS adherent would consider abandoning LDS theology on the grounds that his religion was founded by a nineteenth-century farm boy unwittingly influenced by contemporary notions not explicitly found in the Christian Scriptures or in the historic creeds or confessions. He would, correctly, reply to this charge by saying that the truth of LDS theology is the issue, not its historical origins. That is all that I am saying in reference to the LDS charge concerning the classical concept of God.

⁸⁵ I am writing here of the type of epistemological anti-realism that is typically associated with thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and W. V. O. Quine rather than the metaphysical anti-realism that is associated with the nominalism of William of Occam. One could be an anti-realist (or nominalist) in the second sense while being a realist in the first.

relativism when it comes to philosophical systems, maintaining that the metaphysical and ontological speculations of philosophers are impositions on reality rather than possible descriptions of it.⁸⁶ Robinson seems to flirt with this possibility when he makes the following statements:

[I]n LDS orthodoxy, the ontological frame [i.e. the Mormon view of reality or the universe], while a vital part of our theology, is secondary to the truth of the gospel itself, yet Evangelicals and others (including many of our own people) often get it backwards.⁸⁷

[I]t may seem incorrect by Platonic philosophical standards to believe both in the materiality of God and in the omnipresence of God. Nevertheless, that is what Mormons believe. . . . If I understand Prof. Blomberg one of his major objections to the LDS view seems to be that finite beings cannot become infinite beings, and that infinite beings cannot ever have been finite—good Platonic thinking. I simply point out that this objection is philosophical rather than biblical. *Why* can't the finite become infinite, or vice versa, other than that the idea contradicts Plato's assumptions about the nature of things.⁸⁸

Just as it would be wrong for a traditional Christian to dismiss LDS theology because it is "Mormon" rather than because it is false, Robinson cannot dismiss a philosophical argument against Mormonism simply because he thinks the argument is "Platonic."⁸⁹ But perhaps Robinson is embracing critical realism and thinks that philosophical systems, whether Platonic or Mormon, are mental constructs that interpret and shape rather than correspond to reality. This move, however, does not seem to help the LDS, since the philosophical foundations of their theological system presuppose epistemological realism.⁹⁰ After all, if Robinson is claiming that the philosophical foundations of the LDS theological system are not accurate descriptions of reality, then in what sense can he claim that the classical concept of God is a corrupted, that is, inaccurate, description of the true and living God? In addition, if no theological systems in principle describe reality, then precious notions integral to the plausibility of the LDS story, such as apostasy, restoration, and "the truth of the gospel itself," make little or no sense. So, contrary to Robinson's philosophical assessment, the truth of the ontological framework, is a necessary condition for the "truth of the gospel itself," and in that sense is more important than he supposes.

3. *The nature of philosophical reflection.* There is no doubt that Christian scholars through the centuries have used philosophical terminology and concepts to convey what they believe are certain biblical and theological

⁸⁶ For a critique of epistemological relativism, see James Harris, *Against Relativism* (Chicago: Open Court, 1992).

⁸⁷ Robinson in *How Wide the Divide?* 19.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 92.

⁸⁹ I am not saying that Robinson is accurate in his depiction of Professor Blomberg's argument. My point is simply that the argument has to be evaluated on its merits and not dismissed on grounds that, in this instance, may commit as many as three fallacies of informal logic: guilt by association, genetic fallacy, and *ad hominem* argumentation.

⁹⁰ See McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology*.

truths. And there is no doubt that Mormons have done so as well.⁹¹ The question, however, is whether these “truths” are being accurately conveyed by the terminology and concepts. For example, the language of “rights” does not appear in the Scriptures, for such language has its origin in the political philosophy of such Enlightenment thinkers as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and John Stuart Mill. Nevertheless, one could say that the Bible teaches that rights exist.⁹² For instance, the command not to steal implies a “right to property,” and the command not to murder implies a “right to life.” Thus, it would not be necessarily wrong for a Christian to say that the Bible teaches a “right to property,” even though such a right is not literally spelled out in Scripture. In other words, one could coherently make the argument that the concept of rights is in Scripture, though the language of rights is not.

Many Mormons are quite active in the Right to Life movement. Although “rights” language does not literally appear in the Bible, Mormon scholars surely would not deny that the Bible teaches that the unborn have a right to life on the grounds that the language of rights does not appear in Scripture and is merely the product of Enlightenment philosophy.

It seems that one can make the case that virtually every position one may embrace on whatever topic presupposes or entails certain philosophical concepts and that once one extracts and articulates those concepts, even if they have affinities with, or are communicated with language and ideas found in, traditions that have elements that are contrary or hostile to one’s own tradition, the initial position ought not to be abandoned on that basis, for to do so would be logically fallacious (i.e. at the least such reasoning commits both the genetic fallacy and the guilt by association fallacy).

Consider another example. Because I am a Christian committed to the belief that there exist objective moral laws that apply to all persons in all times and in all places, and I believe that I can find that belief clearly taught in Scripture, I want to develop a convincing case that would persuade my fellow citizens of the truth of this belief. I am convinced that if my fellow citizens embrace this belief, it would further the good of my community and perhaps make the cultural ground more fertile, so that I may be able more easily to share other aspects of my faith. In the process of developing my case I come across the writings of the Greek philosopher, Plato, a non-Christian who shared my belief in objective morality as well as an aversion to relativism in all its forms. Although I recognize that Plato held many views inconsistent with my Christian worldview, his work in the area of ethical reasoning is quite impressive and helpful in supporting my be-

classical materialism, and process philosophy. See, for example, McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology*; McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*; Paulsen, *Comparative Coherency*; Ross, “Process Philosophy and Mormon Thought”; and Garland E. Tickemeyer, “Joseph Smith and Process Theology.”

⁹¹ For example, some thinkers, including Mormons, have noticed strong conceptual similarities between Mormon theism and other finite theisms and philosophical positions, such as nominalism,

⁹² Louis P. Pojman makes a case for equality and rights being grounded in the Judeo-Christian God. See his article “A Critique of Contemporary Egalitarianism: A Christian Perspective,” *Faith and Philosophy* 8/4 (October 1991) 481–504.

lief in objective morality.⁹³ Suppose I develop a sophisticated case against moral relativism, using many of the arguments, rhetorical techniques, and terminology employed by Plato. For example, when confronted with the claim that pleasure is identical to the good, I point out that there are many things, such as murder and robbery, that are not good even though they may bring pleasure to the agents who engage in them. Now suppose that members of an idiosyncratic religious sect of “Christian” moral relativists dismiss my case against relativism by pointing out that because my case apparently relies on Platonic philosophy, I hold to a corrupted view of ethics that is clearly not biblical or Christian. Does such an objection really have any serious bearing on the plausibility of the case I make against relativism and whether or not moral objectivism is biblical and Christian?⁹⁴

In 1978, the LDS First Presidency (Spencer W. Kimball, N. Eldon Tanner, and Marion G. Romney) released a pronouncement that seems to encourage just this sort of philosophical reflection: “The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.”⁹⁵

It seems to me therefore that if Christians use the language of philosophy to convey what they believe to be the biblical concept of God, they are justified in doing so if they have accurately conveyed what the Bible teaches about the nature of God.

4. *The nature of philosophical “influence.”* The argument can be made that although Christian thinkers have used and continue to use the language of philosophy, especially Greek philosophy, to convey what they believe are biblical truths, it is the Bible that reshaped Greek thought rather than the other way around. According to the church historian J. N. D. Kelly, “the classical creeds of Christendom opened with a declaration of belief in one God the maker of heaven and earth.” The reason for this is simple: “The monotheistic idea, grounded in the religion of Israel, loomed large in the minds of the earliest fathers; though not reflective theologians, they were fully conscious that it marked the dividing line between the Church and paganism.” Kelly goes on to say that “the doctrine of one god, the Father and creator, formed the background and indisputable premise of the Christian faith. Inherited from Judaism, it was her bulwark against pagan polytheism, Gnostic emanationism and Marcionite dualism.”⁹⁶ Philosopher Etienne Gilson makes the argument that the Greeks did not think of their

⁹³ See, for instance, two of Plato’s dialogues, *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*.

⁹⁴ Virtually all LDS and traditional Christians would answer that clearly it does not. However, even though the LDS and traditional Christians agree that there is such a thing as objective morality, it is difficult to ground it in the LDS worldview. See Francis J. Beckwith, “Moral Law, the Mormon Universe, and the Nature of the Right We Ought to Choose,” in *The New Mormon Challenge* (forthcoming).

⁹⁵ Quoted in Spencer J. Palmer, *The Expanding Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1978) v.

⁹⁶ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* 83, 87.

ultimate metaphysical principle as the personal God from whom all contingent existence comes. This is what the Hebrew-Christian tradition taught. Consequently, argues Gilson, Greek metaphysics was transformed by the Hebrew-Christian view of God “whose true name is ‘He who is’ [Ex. 3:14] . . .”⁹⁷

Thus the starting point of the Christian concept of God is God’s metaphysical uniqueness, grounded in both Scripture and the Judaism from which Christianity was born: God is the personal and historically active self-existent Creator of all else that exists. That truth, joined with philosophical reflection and numerous passages of Scripture, have led Christian theologians to conclude that God is also incorporeal, necessary, infinite, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent (see Part II for a brief presentation of the divine attributes).

It is interesting to note that Robinson seems to implicitly concede the reasonableness and scriptural fidelity of such theological reflection. For he admits that one aspect of the classical view, God’s immateriality (or incorporeality), is not inconsistent with the biblical portrayal of God. Robinson writes that he does “not expect to find the [Mormon] view of the Godhead or the corporeality of God described clearly in the Old Testament,” nor does he “argue that it was once there and has been removed.” That is to say, “the Bible makes no unambiguous statement about the materiality or immateriality of the Father, and that we may therefore think of him either as having a body or as not having a body without ‘contradicting’ the Bible.”⁹⁸ This is an interesting concession, for it seems to imply that in respect to God’s immateriality the classical view *could be* an accurate portrayal of the God of Scripture. But why stop at God’s apparent immateriality? For it seems that there is just as much if not more scriptural support (albeit, in Robinson’s mind, not unambiguous) for God’s eternity, creation of the universe *ex nihilo*, and metaphysical uniqueness,⁹⁹ the attributes from which Christian theologians developed the classical view broadly defined.¹⁰⁰ Given that, Robinson’s concession makes his charge that the classical view is merely Greek philosophy Christianized more difficult to sustain.

It is not surprising, then, that many of the heresies in the early church are the result of trying to remake Christian theology so that it squares with certain Hellenistic philosophies.¹⁰¹ Ironically, as I pointed out above, some

⁹⁷ Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941) 51.

⁹⁸ Robinson in *How Wide the Divide?* 79. Ostler, an LDS finitist, praises Robinson on this point: “Robinson quite properly acknowledges that the doctrine of the Father’s having a material body cannot be found in the Bible” (Blake T. Ostler, “Bridging the Gulf,” *FARMS Review of Books* 11/2 [Fall 1999] 104).

⁹⁹ The scriptural support for these doctrines is found in the works cited in footnote 55.

¹⁰⁰ See Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ* and Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine*.

¹⁰¹ See Copan, “Is *Creatio Ex Nihilo* A Post-Biblical Invention?”; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*; Muller, “Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism” 28–29; and Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998; reprint of 1984 Doubleday edition).

rejected doctrines, such as the eternality of matter, the pre-existence of the soul, and deification, whose origin can be traced to pagan philosophies, are consistent with certain aspects of the *Mormon* worldview.

Consider the comments of philosopher Paul Copan concerning some early church Fathers who, like present-day Mormons, believed that matter is eternal:

[I]t seems doubtful that an un-hellenized Jewish student of the [Old Testament] would have formulated something analogous to a Middle Platonist cosmology on his own. What is clear is that these church fathers were strongly influenced by (Middle-) Platonism, which held firmly to belief in eternal formless matter. Their belief in God as an artificer was not due to Scripture's ambiguity on the topic but because of the strength of the philosophical grid within which they operated.¹⁰²

LDS scholars argue that they can find in the early church parallels to Mormon beliefs.¹⁰³ These beliefs were eventually discarded by the Christian church as inconsistent with Christian orthodoxy. Yet, as Carl Mosser and Paul Owen point out, "the very places in which LDS scholars find parallels with Mormonism among certain segments of ancient Christianity are [usually] where some variety of *Platonism* or some other philosophical school of thought has had the most influence." To cite an example: "LDS scholars have pointed out many parallels with Clement of Alexandria and Origen—perhaps the two most Platonic of the church fathers." These scholars "have also pointed out parallels in the Gnostic Nag Hammadi texts. Gnosticism could aptly described as Platonism on steroids; it invariably takes Platonic beliefs to the extreme." Moreover, "what is perhaps the strongest parallel between Latter-day Saint theology and the theology of the early Christians is the doctrine of theosis or divinization. Yet it is this doctrine of the early church that has been described as the prime example of the acute Hellenization of Christianity."¹⁰⁴ Thus, one could say that Joseph Smith, Jr. restored, not the true Christian concept of God, but long forgotten aspects of several schools of Greek philosophical thought.

¹⁰² Copan, "Is *Creatio Ex Nihilo* A Post-Biblical Invention?" 92.

¹⁰³ In their *Offenders for a Word*, Peterson and Ricks make this point many times by citing numerous examples. See also Paulsen, "Early Christian Belief in Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses."

¹⁰⁴ Mosser and Owen, "Appendix" 89. Bray, for example, writes that

Origen received his education in the philosophical schools of Alexandria. His chief mentors were Ammonius Saccus, the pagan philosopher who later taught the founder of Neoplatonism, Plotinus, and Clement of Alexandria, a Christian who had absorbed the biblical scholarship of Philo the Jew. As a result, Origen's writings betray a profound interest in the Scriptures which are refracted through the prism of Middle Platonism. . . . Origen's writings are handicapped by a fatal flaw which pervaded the whole of his work and compromised its value in the estimation of subsequent generations. This was his commitment to Platonism. . . . (*Creeeds, Councils and Christ* 78).

Concerning the doctrine of deification (or divinization), it should be noted that even though the LDS claim that this early church belief is the strongest parallel to Mormon doctrine, it is not at all like the Mormon notion of eternal progression/exaltation.

5. *Corruption may occur (or has already occurred) again.* The LDS charge that the Christian concept of God was corrupted by Greek philosophy, as I noted in the beginning of this essay, is important for the LDS in order to show that pristine Christianity vanished from the face of the earth. For if that had occurred, the LDS claim that Christianity must be restored by a latter-day prophet is buttressed. Although I think the LDS charge is mistaken, let us assume that the LDS view of early church corruption is correct, that the leaders of pristine Christianity, Christ's apostles and their disciples, failed to protect the church from corruption. Although it is unlikely that the LDS would directly blame the apostles (though they do blame the apostles' disciples),¹⁰⁵ it seems reasonable to infer from the LDS interpretation of church history that the apostles inadequately prepared the church, both in teaching and ecclesiastical structure, for possible corruption.¹⁰⁶ For if their preparation were adequate, corruption would not have occurred. Given that, one would seem justified in believing that such an apostasy could happen again, and may have already happened. After all, the Mormon concept of God, as we have seen, has changed significantly from the time of the church's founding in 1830 until the presidency of Joseph Smith's successor Brigham Young. If "change" in a church's concept of God opens it up to charges of apostasy, one would seem justified in saying that the restoration failed and the "restored" church fell into apostasy like the early church. If not, then which Mormon concept of God is the restored one? Is it the Book of Mormon's classical view, Joseph Smith's corporeal God of his early post-Book of Mormon phase, the plurality of finite gods view embraced towards the end of Smith's life, or Brigham Young's radically finite Adam-God? Although referring to the early church, Stephen Robinson asserts the epistemological principle that provides a reason for entertaining the possibility of another apostasy: "But there is no guarantee recorded in the Bible that the perfect revelation in Christ would always and forever remain perfectly recorded in Scripture and unaltered by human agency."¹⁰⁷

IV. CONCLUSION

I believe that I have made a convincing case that the LDS charge concerning the classical concept of God does not succeed. Appealing to the

¹⁰⁵ Robinson writes, "Feeling the language of Scripture to be unsophisticated, incomplete, vague, ambiguous, and imprecise, the second-, third-, and fourth-century church sought to 'improve' the New Testament gospel by standards of Hellenistic philosophy, but compromised it instead" (*How Wide the Divide?* 17).

¹⁰⁶ Mormon scholars Daniel W. Graham and James L. Siebach do in fact place blame for the apostasy on the apostles for failing to select ecclesiastical progeny who would take over the reigns of leadership. Thus, according to Graham and Siebach, the apostasy was caused by apostolic negligence, and the apostasy resulted in the incorporation of Greek thought rather than the incorporation of Greek thought causing the apostasy. See Daniel W. Graham and James L. Siebach, "Philosophy and Early Christianity," *FARMS Review of Books* 11/2 (1999) 210–20.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 61.

historical influence of Greek philosophical notions on Christian thought (whether or not the influence was witting or unwitting), as many LDS critics do, simply has no relevancy unless the exegetical case against the classical view can be made as well. After all, the classical view of God was developed not merely because its defenders thought it the most accurate picture of the biblical God, but also because they thought it consistent with a divine ontological status that was adequate to capture both God's actions in history as well as the sort of Being deserving of the name "God" who at the same time is able to perform the actions ascribed to him in Scripture.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Bray, *The Doctrine of God*; A. A. Howsepian, "Are Mormons Theists?," *Religious Studies* 32 (September 1996) 357–70; Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* 71–88; Morris, *Our Idea of God* 26–45; Stephen E. Parrish, *God and Necessity: A Defense of Classical Theism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997); and Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001). I want to thank Carl Mosser for taking the time to read this article in the midst of his Ph.D. studies at Aberdeen. His suggestions and insights made it a better paper, though its flaws are entirely my responsibility.