

# The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844

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Perhaps no doctrine has had greater impact on Latter-day Saint theology than the doctrine of preexistence, or the belief in the existence of the human spirit before its mortal birth.<sup>1</sup> Fundamental concepts such as the nature of man as an eternal being, his singular relationship as the offspring of Deity and concomitant brotherhood with all mankind, the talents and privileges with which he is born into the world, and his potential godhood are all inextricably connected to the doctrine of preexistence. This distinctive LDS doctrine was not immediately comprehended by the early Saints in the more fully developed form in which it is understood today. Like many of the other teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, it was revealed line upon line and adapted to the Saints' understanding. Moreover, there was a natural tendency to view initial teachings on preexistence in light of previously held beliefs until greater clarity was given to the doctrine. This study traces the early development of the doctrine by examining chronologically the revelations and recorded sermons and writings on preexistence by the Prophet Joseph Smith in light of contemporary commentary by his associates. Seeing how early Saints perceived preexistence enhances our own understanding of the doctrine and leads to a greater appreciation of our theological heritage.

What is presented here as early LDS thought is not an attempt to portray "official" or revealed positions on the doctrine of preexistence, but an effort to describe how the doctrine appears to have been understood in the Church from 1830 to 1844. Regrettably, personal records from this period are virtually silent on the subject; most of what can be discovered regarding early beliefs about the nature and origin of the human spirit comes from published doctrinal works and LDS periodicals of this era. Thomas Alexander notes, however, that "the monthlies and doctrinal expositions like the Lectures on Faith since they were meant for public dissemination provide the most reliable sources for contemporary perceptions of doctrine."<sup>2</sup>

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY VIEWS ON THE ORIGIN OF SPIRITS

To fully appreciate the beliefs of the early Saints regarding the nature and origin of spirits, it is helpful to have some idea of contemporary religious beliefs that may have been influential on their thinking. The predominant Christian view with which most of the early LDS converts were probably familiar was creationism, which held that man's immaterial spirit was created *ex nihilo* through a fiat act of God at the time of conception or birth of the individual. That is, as each body is prepared through mortal procreation, God's will brings into existence the immaterial spirit to inhabit that body. Characterizing this common belief, Orson Pratt observed:

It is believed, by the religious world that man, both body and spirit, begins to live about the time that he is born into this world, or a little before; that then is the beginning of life. . . . How was the spirit formed? Why says one, we suppose it was made by a direct act of creation, by the Almighty Himself; that He moulded the spirit of man, formed and finished it in a proper likeness to inhabit the tabernacle He had made out of the dust.<sup>3</sup>

Two less commonly held views were traducianism, which stated that every human spirit was seminally created in Adam and then individually and naturally propagated through mortal parentage,<sup>4</sup> and materialism, which maintained that what is called spirit is really the result of corporeal organization and matures and dies along with the body.<sup>5</sup>

While traditionally the doctrine of creationism held that the creation of man's spirit occurred either at the time of conception or at birth, a variation of creationism incorporating preexistence attracted scattered interest. This doctrine of preexistencism differed from creationism only in that it placed the time of the creation of all spirits at the beginning of the world. As characterized in an 1836 religious encyclopedia, preexistencists held that

at the beginning of the world, God created the souls of all men, which, however, are not united to the body till the individuals for whom they are destined are begotten or born into the world. This was the opinion of Pythagoras, Plato, and his followers, and of the cabalists among the Jews. The doctrine was taught by Justin Martyr, Origen, and others of the fathers, and has been the common opinion of mystics, both of ancient and modern times.<sup>6</sup>

The doctrine of preexistence was anathemized in the post-Apostolic church, but by the nineteenth century the idea had regained a certain degree of acceptability. After giving a summary of historical and contemporary arguments for and against preexistence, one prominent nineteenth-century theologian concluded that, though still considered unorthodox, "There is no reason to denounce the simple doctrine of the preexistence of souls as heretical."<sup>7</sup> Poets and philosophers were



becoming intrigued with the idea of preexistence, and even such noted clergymen as the venerable Isaac Watts was reputed to have believed it.<sup>8</sup> Nowhere was the belief more prevalent than among the mystic groups that were beginning to spring up. Indeed, there was a wide currency of occult and Kabbalistic ideas at the time of Joseph Smith in which notions regarding the preexistence of souls were prevalent. Modern Spiritualism, which grew out of this environment, originated later in the same region of New York as Mormonism and espoused preexistence.<sup>9</sup> It was in such a setting that the Prophet Joseph Smith sought to bring the Saints to a true understanding of the origin of spirits.

#### EARLY LDS INTERPRETATIONS OF "PREEXISTENCE" SCRIPTURES

The Latter-day Saints did not at first deduce the idea of preexistence from the biblical passages so frequently summoned today to prove it. Except for acknowledging the preexistence of Christ, nineteenth-century Christians were reluctant to admit any biblical support for the doctrine as it applies to man. Edward Beecher, an avowed believer of preexistence himself, observed in 1854, "Even those serious theologians who assert the doctrine of preexistence do not claim any express scriptural evidence for it, only that it nowhere expressly refutes it."<sup>10</sup> Spirits or angels mentioned in the Bible as being with God in the first estate, including Lucifer and the spirits who followed him (Isa. 14:12–15; Jude 6; Rev. 12:3–4), were traditionally viewed as being a separate species from humans, not preexistent spirits. Biblical passages used today to support preexistence were interpreted differently when cited by the Saints during the first decade of the Church. Parley P. Pratt, for example, referred in 1838 to the sons of God who shouted for joy when the foundations of the earth were laid (Job 38:4–7) as being sons of God through redemption and resurrection from bygone worlds.<sup>11</sup> In 1841 W. W. Phelps cited Deuteronomy 32:7–8, which refers to when God "separated the sons of Adam [and] set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel," to show that Adam had twelve sons.<sup>12</sup>

The first intimation of preexistence in the Prophet's teachings is commonly believed to be found in the Book of Mormon, which was first published in March 1830. It is doubtful, however, whether the Book of Mormon elicited the idea of preexistence in the minds of the Saints at that time. In reflecting back on his own initiation to the doctrine of preexistence, Orson Pratt, who was among the most theologically perceptive of the early Saints, observed that had it not been for revelations subsequent to the Book of Mormon, "I do not think that I should have ever discerned it in that book."<sup>13</sup> Modern Saints most frequently point to the teachings on foreordination found in the thirteenth chapter of



Alma for evidence that preexistence is a Book of Mormon doctrine. Alma explains that priests are “called and prepared from the foundation of the world, according to the foreknowledge of God” (Alma 13:3). This language is identical to that used in the New Testament to describe how the elect are “afore prepared” (Rom. 9:23) and “chosen . . . before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4) “according to the foreknowledge of God” (1 Pet. 1:2). The Saints in 1830 would have been no more disposed to infer preexistence from Alma’s teachings on foreordination than their contemporaries would from the New Testament teachings on election. Furthermore, debates on the meaning of election were so common that it would have been difficult for anyone caught up in the early nineteenth-century religious movement in America to have escaped the influence of Protestant indoctrination on the subject. This influence can certainly be expected to have implications for the way in which the early Saints viewed preexistence.

Few doctrines polarized nineteenth-century Protestantism as much as the doctrine of election. Presbyterian Calvinists insisted that God elected or foreordained certain individuals to become believers in this life according to his will and pleasure, and that his foreknowledge that these individuals will believe results from his having foreordained or decreed them to do so. This doctrine of predestination, which states that God foreknows *because* he foreordains, was vehemently opposed by adherents to the Arminian doctrine of free will, espoused by the Methodists, towards whom young Joseph Smith was “somewhat partial” (JS–H 8). These opponents to Calvinism contended that while individuals are elected from the foundation of the world, this calling or election *results* from God’s foreknowledge that these individuals will be holy. In other words, God foresees who will be obedient through their own free will and foreordains them to holiness accordingly. For neither Calvinists nor Arminians did foreordination or God’s foreknowledge presuppose prior existence of those who were foreordained or foreknown. In explaining how God, through his foreknowledge, foreordains or elects certain individuals from the foundation of the world, even though they do not yet exist until born in mortality, the official Methodist doctrine approved at a general conference held in 1784 declared:

Christ was called the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, and yet not slain till some thousands of years after, so also, men are called elect from the foundation of the world, and yet are not elected perhaps till some thousands of years after, till the day of their conversion to God. . . . The act of election is in time, though known to God before, who according to his foreknowledge, often speaketh of things which are not as though they were.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, God’s foreknowledge enables him to speak of one’s future election as though it had already occurred.



For those Saints familiar with this controversy surrounding the doctrine of election, Alma's teaching may have been received as being merely a free will statement on priesthood: (1) that all humans are born into this world "on the same standing" in their favor with God; (2) that every man has the same opportunity to live worthy to receive the priesthood, "being left to choose good and evil"; and (3) that because God knew who would be obedient and receive the priesthood, their calling was (with him) "before the foundation of the world." In 1841, approximately one year prior to the publication of the Book of Abraham, in which foreordination based on preexistent worthiness was first publicly introduced,<sup>15</sup> Brigham Young and Willard Richards published a widely circulated article entitled "Election and Reprobation," which shows evidence of this interpretation of Alma. They write that "God chose, elected, or ordained, Jesus Christ, his son, to be the Creator, governor, Savior, and judge of the world; and Abraham to be the father of the faithful, on account of his foreknowledge of their obedience to his will and commandments."<sup>16</sup> Citing the aforementioned passage in Alma 13, they make no mention of a preexistence, concluding only that "God chose Abraham to be the father of the faithful, (viz.) because he knew [Abraham] would command his children and his household after him."<sup>17</sup> Given this apparent coincidence of the Saints' belief in foreordination with contemporary views on election, it seems unlikely that the early Saints perceived the idea of preexistence in Alma's teachings.

The only other Book of Mormon passage that might have been construed as referring to preexistence is Ether 3:15. In fact, this verse was later mentioned by Orson Pratt as "the only place in the Book of Mormon where pre-existence is clearly spoken of."<sup>18</sup> In this passage, the preexistent Christ reveals his spirit body to the brother of Jared and states that "all men were created in the beginning after mine own image" (Ether 3:15). Any overtone of preexistence in this declaration tends to be overshadowed by the text immediately before and after it which discusses men's creation in the flesh. For Orson Pratt, in the light of his later understanding of the concept of preexistence, the clear implication was that all men were created spiritually in the beginning in the image and likeness of Christ's spirit. However, it is unlikely that the earliest converts, who did not have the additional revelation, would have perceived this abstruse passage as being a reference to a preexistence. Orson Pratt himself reported that he saw a reference to preexistence in this verse only after reading "the new translation of the Scriptures, that throwing so much light and information of the subject, I searched the Book of Mormon to see if there were indications in it that related to the pre-existence of man."<sup>19</sup> It would seem, then, that neither the Bible nor the Book of Mormon was sufficient to establish the idea of preexistence in the minds of the Saints.



## SPIRITUAL CREATION AND THE JOSEPH SMITH TRANSLATION

Orson Pratt indicated that it was Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible, which began soon after the publication of the Book of Mormon, that first drew his attention to the idea of a preexistence in latter-day revelation. The first seven chapters of the revised account of the creation (revealed in June 1830) as recorded in the Book of Moses make repeated reference to man's spiritual creation.<sup>20</sup> Several revelations during the next two years also appear to refer to this spiritual creation. In September 1830, the Lord declared that he created "all things both spiritual and temporal—first spiritual, secondly temporal, which is the beginning of my work; and again, first temporal, and secondly spiritual, which is the last of my work" (D&C 29:30–32). In March 1831, the Lord stated that it was the purpose of the earth to "be filled with the measure of man, according to his creation before the world was made" (D&C 49:17). One year later the Lord revealed, "that which is spiritual [is] in the likeness of that which is temporal; and that which is temporal in the likeness of that which is spiritual; the spirit of man in the likeness of his person, as also the spirit of the beast, and every other creature which God has created" (D&C 77:2). Interestingly, the Prophet makes no further recorded mention of a spiritual creation after 1832.

It has been argued that the *spiritual* creation spoken of in these early revelations does not refer to the spirit creation or the creation of the human spirit. Some commentators regard it as being a reference to an intellectual or conceptual creation.<sup>21</sup> Others view it as referring to the creation of Adam's paradisiacal physical body in the Garden of Eden.<sup>22</sup> Much of the confusion as to whether *spiritual* means *spirit* arises because use of the word *spirit* as an adjective is a modern LDS convention that does not appear in earlier literature. Consequently, all early references to the spirit body or the spirit creation invariably use the adjective *spiritual* instead of *spirit*. Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary defines *spiritual* as "consisting of spirit; not material; incorporeal; as a spiritual substance or being. The soul of man is spiritual." Whatever the intended meaning of the word *spiritual* in these passages, no record from the early era of the Church offers any evidence that this spiritual creation was ever viewed in any way other than as a spirit creation.<sup>23</sup> Orson Pratt's statement cited earlier suggests that it was precisely the scriptural references to a spiritual creation that opened his mind to the reality of a preexistent spirit creation. He further spoke for his fellow Saints in saying that in June 1830

[the Lord] told us about the spiritual creation, something we did not comprehend before. We used to read the first and second chapters of Genesis which give an account of the works of the Almighty, but did not distinguish between the spiritual work and the temporal work of Christ. Although there are some things in the King James' translation that give us a little distinction between the two creations, yet we did not comprehend it.<sup>24</sup>



With the insight received from D&C 29:30–32 and Moses chapter 2, Elder Pratt related that it became evident that “all things that dwell upon the earth, had their pre-existence. They were created in heaven, the spiritual part of them; not their flesh and bones.”<sup>25</sup> If Orson Pratt’s hindsight is reliable, it would appear that the idea of a preexistent spirit creation began to form in the minds of at least those most closely associated with Joseph Smith concurrent with his work on the translation of the Bible.

Widespread awareness of a spirit creation did not occur immediately upon the receipt of the spiritual creation revelations. Because of the delay in getting revelations published and disseminated, a considerable amount of time often lapsed before a doctrine that had been revealed became common knowledge. The Book of Moses, in particular, was not formally published and distributed until 1851 although portions other than those pertaining to the spiritual creation began to appear in print in 1832. To be sure, the Saints’ awareness of revelations was not entirely dependent on publication as many of the revelations were circulated among the Prophet’s associates either verbally or through handwritten copies before they were ever published.<sup>26</sup> It wasn’t until June 1835, however, three months prior to the publication of the Doctrine and Covenants, that an explicit reference to preexistence first appeared in print. W. W. Phelps, one of Joseph’s scribes in translating the scriptures, announced in the *Messenger and Advocate*: “New light is occasionally bursting into our minds of the sacred scriptures, for which I am thankful. We shall by and by learn that we were with God in another world, before the foundation of the world, and had our agency.”<sup>27</sup>

While a rudimentary concept of preexistence began to take hold in the Church by the mid-1830s, it was still quite different from our current thinking. It appears to have merged with creationist thinking to produce a notion similar to contemporary preexistencism. The creationist view, that the human spirit was a fiat creation ex nihilo, is nowhere contradicted in the earliest revelations given through the Prophet Joseph Smith. The first revelations only speak of a spiritual creation and say that God created all things by the word of his power.<sup>28</sup> The Mormon receptivity to creationist thinking is shown by an extract from Jacques Saurin, a French theologian, that appeared in the *Latter-day Saint Evening and Morning Star* in October 1832. Saurin emphasizes the contingent nature of the human spirit, stating, “the annihilation of a being that subsists requireth an act of power similar to that which gave it its existence at first. . . . The creator, who, having created our souls at first by an act of his will, can either eternally preserve them, or absolutely annihilate them.”<sup>29</sup> In May 1835, Warren Cowdery, a correspondent for the *Latter-day Saint Messenger and Advocate*, spoke in a similar vein, stating that it is God who is “self existent” while “man is dependent on



the great first cause and is constantly upheld by him, therefore justly amenable to him.”<sup>30</sup>

In addition to believing that the spirits of all men were created through a divine fiat, creationists also considered spirit to be immaterial. This idea also appears in early LDS literature. Saurin’s treatise in the *Evening and Morning Star* rejects materialism, which “affirmed the materiality of the soul and attributed to matter the faculties of thinking and reasoning.” He avers that the soul “is a spiritual, indivisible and immaterial being.”<sup>31</sup> In March 1835, Warren Cowdery also affirmed the immateriality of the spirit, reasoning that “if there be intelligence, there must be spirit or mind, for matter is inert and abstract from mind, has neither intelligence or mind.”<sup>32</sup> In December 1836, the *Messenger and Advocate* printed an extract from the philosopher Thomas Dick containing the popular argument for the immateriality of the spirit deduced from the immortality of the spirit.<sup>33</sup> While the appearance of views from non-LDS thinkers in LDS publications is not necessarily an endorsement, it certainly suggests an influence on the Saints’ thinking that, in the absence of contrary teachings, may have been significant.

Because of the appearance of these creationist views in LDS literature during the early 1830s and the absence of references to a preexistence, historians have concluded that a general ignorance of the doctrine prevailed before the Church’s move to Nauvoo in 1839.<sup>34</sup> What seems to be overlooked is that these creationist teachings were totally consistent with contemporary preexistencist views. It is possible, therefore, that knowledge of a preexistence may have been more widespread than some modern historians believe.

#### UNCREATED, DIVINE INTELLIGENCE (D&C 93)

In May 1833, the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith that man was in the beginning with God as intelligence, and that this “intelligence or the light of truth was not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29). In early LDS literature, the words *intelligence*, *truth*, and *light*, which denoted understanding or awareness of reality (note in D&C 93:24 that truth is not defined as reality but as *knowledge* of reality), were often used to denote the life force or spirit in man. According to Parley P. Pratt’s *Mormon Proverbs*, “Intelligence, or the light of truth, never was created, neither indeed can be. Truth is light—light is spirit—spirit is life.”<sup>35</sup> There is no recorded instance during the Prophet’s lifetime in which his associates ever used the term *intelligence* to designate a personal preexistent spirit. Uncreated intelligence, or light and truth, was generally believed to have become a spirit when a portion of it was infused into the body at birth. It seems to have been in this sense that intelligence or truth was perceived as becoming “independent in the sphere in which God has



placed it, to act for itself” (D&C 93:30). In July 1843, Thomas Ward declared that “what the church of Jesus Christ understood by salvation, . . . was this, that intelligence, or the light of truth [i.e., spirit] being connected with elementary matter [i.e., the physical body], which constituted our existence, had become, through the fall as Gods, knowing good and evil.”<sup>36</sup> Whether the idea of intelligence being uncreated was immediately grasped by the Saints is uncertain. Oliver Cowdery, for example, wrote in December 1836, “It is certain that we had no more agency in forming or creating the intelligence, without which these bodies are a lifeless lump, than we had in forming the body.”<sup>37</sup> Even after the idea of uncreated intelligence caught on, it wasn’t understood that individual spirits were uncreated, but only the intelligence that was considered to be the conscious, quickening principle in man.

Many early Saints recognized a divinity in the intelligence or spirit in man. They made no essential distinction between the intelligence that constitutes a man’s spirit and the intelligence that constitutes God’s glory. It should be noted that section 93 reveals that man was in the beginning with God, not only as uncreated intelligence, but also as “Spirit, even the Spirit of truth” (D&C 93:23). Additionally, the revelations represent intelligence, light, and truth as the glory of God, radiating from his presence to fill the immensity of space.<sup>38</sup> The human spirit was seen by many as merely an extension of this universal spirit. Benjamin F. Johnson, one of the Prophet’s associates, recalled many years later,

[Joseph Smith] was the first in this age to teach . . . that light and truth and spirit were one, that all light and heat are the “Glory of God,” which is his power, that fills the “immensity of space” . . . that light or spirit, and matter, are the two first great primary principles of the universe, or of Being . . . and from these two elements both our spirits and our bodies were formulated.<sup>39</sup>

This view that spirits were derived from the same divine light or spirit that constitutes God’s glory was particularly espoused by Parley P. Pratt, who was initially the most influential expounder of LDS doctrine among the Prophet’s associates. In July 1839, Pratt wrote a treatise entitled “The Regeneration and Eternal Duration of Matter,” in which man’s spirit is equated with the spirit or intelligence that emanates from God. Writing before Joseph Smith introduced the concept that spirit is matter, Pratt distinguishes between spirit and matter, stating that “matter and Spirit are the two great principles of all existence. Everything animate and inanimate is composed of one or the other, or both of these eternal principles. I say eternal, because the elements [i.e. matter] are as durable as the quickening power [i.e. Spirit] which exists in them.”<sup>40</sup> Pratt explained that “spirit is eternal, uncreated [and] self-existing,” and that when earth and water were “filled with the quickening, or life giving substance, which we call spirit, they produced living creatures.”



According to Pratt, this same principle, when breathed into man, “quickened him with life and animation.”<sup>41</sup> For Parley P. Pratt, it was not a personal spirit that quickened the body, but rather an infused portion of the divine spirit. Elaborating on this spirit or intelligence, he wrote in 1842, “the *spirit of truth*, proceeding from the Father and the Son, fills immensity, comprehends all things, and is the light, life, and spirit of all things.”<sup>42</sup> The “spirit of all things” (humankind included) was thus advanced by Pratt to be none other than the divine or holy spirit emanating from the presence of God.<sup>43</sup>

Parley P. Pratt’s earliest recorded views on the derivation of man’s spirit correspond remarkably to the classical doctrine of emanation, which uses the analogy that man emanates from God the way a spark is emitted from a fire. Verging on pantheism, the doctrine of emanation emphasizes that all men are parts of God, a notion Orson Pratt claimed was taught by Joseph Smith.<sup>44</sup> Emanation differs from creation in that it implies that man’s existence is derived from God’s being or essence rather than being merely a creature of his making. This notion is not to be confused with spirit birth, however. Man is seen more as being an offshoot of God rather than his offspring. Emanation was the most common form of preexistencism in the early Christian church. This Platonic concept regarded the soul as a part of the divine nature from which it proceeded and to which it will again return. Pratt chose to use similar language in 1838, when he wrote that mortals are “animated by the spirit of life” and, at death, will “return to the fountain and become part of the great all from which they emanated.”<sup>45</sup> Pratt’s teachings clearly evidence an early belief that the human spirit was merely an individual expression of God’s uncreated, inexhaustible intelligence.

#### MATERIALITY OF SPIRIT

In April 1842, the concept that all spirit is a form of matter was introduced in Joseph Smith’s recorded teachings. Joseph explained that “the spirit, by many, is thought to be immaterial, without substance. With this latter statement we should beg leave to differ, and state the spirit is a substance; that it is material, but that it is more pure, elastic and refined matter than the body.”<sup>46</sup> This was a very direct pronouncement on what was generally regarded as a metaphysical mystery. Buck’s *Theological Dictionary*, published in 1832, defined the spirit as

that vital, immaterial, active substance, or principle, in man, whereby he perceives, remembers, reasons and wills. It is rather to be described to its operations, than to be defined as to its essence. Various, indeed, have been the opinions of philosophers concerning its substance. The Epicureans thought it a subtle air composed of atoms, or primitive corpuscles. The Stoics maintained it was a flame, or portion of heavenly light. The Cartesians make thinking the essence of the soul.<sup>47</sup>



Although spirit was generally regarded in the nineteenth century as being immaterial in its composition, this characterization was not necessarily intended to exclude the quasimaterial substance that was believed to pervade the spirit realm. It was rather an effort to state what spirit isn't than what it is. One noted Protestant writer observed in 1835: "The soul is a substance; for that which is nothing can do nothing. . . . It is not bones and flesh that understand, but a purer substance, as all acknowledge."<sup>48</sup> Perhaps Joseph Smith was objecting to the inconsistency of calling spirit immaterial and yet substantive when he corrected a Methodist minister by stating, "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes" (D&C 131:7).

Joseph's ascribing materiality to spirit does not appear to have had an immediate impact on the Saints' concept of preexistence. The emphasis given by the Prophet to the materiality of spirit during the Nauvoo period did prompt later attempts, particularly by Parley P. Pratt in *Key to the Science of Theology* and Orson Pratt in the *Seer*, to develop a detailed system of metaphysics, not too unlike materialism, to describe the behavior and various properties of spirit matter.

#### UNCREATED SPIRITS AND THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

After six years of silence on the subject of spirit origins, Joseph Smith revived the topic in 1839 with the sole emphasis being given to the eternal nature of spirits. This idea corresponds to teachings concurrently being brought to light in the Book of Abraham. The Prophet began translating the Book of Abraham in 1835 and was acquainted with the material contained in chapter 3, such as Abraham's teaching on the planetary systems, at least as early as May 1838.<sup>49</sup> This chapter records the Lord's instructions to Abraham that even though one spirit may be more intelligent than another, these two spirits "have no beginning; they existed before, they shall have no end, they shall exist after, for they are gnolaum, or eternal" (Abr. 3:18). The idea of spirits being uncreated appears in all other pronouncements of the Prophet on the origin of spirits after 1833:

*c. August 1839:* "The Spirit of Man is not a created being; it existed from Eternity and will exist to eternity."<sup>50</sup>

*February 1840:* "I believe that the *soul* is eternal; and had no beginning."<sup>51</sup>

*January 1841:* "If the soul of man had a beginning it will surely have an end. . . . Spirits are eternal."<sup>52</sup>

*March 1841:* "The spirit or the intelligence of men are self Existant principles."<sup>53</sup>

*April 1842:* "The spirits of men are eternal."<sup>54</sup>



*April 1844:* “I wish to speak of . . . the soul—the immortal spirit—the mind of man. Where did it come from? All doctors of divinity say that God created it in the beginning; but it is not so. . . . Is it logical to say that a spirit is immortal and yet have a beginning? Because if a spirit of man had a beginning, it will have an end. . . . God never had power to create the spirit of man at all. . . . Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age, and there is no creation about it. All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement.”<sup>55</sup>

As might be expected, these sayings of the Prophet led some to believe that each individual spirit or intelligence, not just collective intelligence, has existed eternally. Furthermore, Joseph Smith makes no mention of these uncreated spirits ever undergoing a change of state, such as spirit birth, prior to entering the physical body. Even the apparent contradiction to spirits being uncreated found in the same chapter in Abraham, which mentions that intelligences “were organized before the world was” (Abr. 3:22), seems to have been interpreted by the Prophet as a social organization of intelligences and not a material organization of intelligence into intelligent entities.<sup>56</sup> The following quotations represent the extent of the recorded usage made by the Prophet of the term *organization* when referring to spirits:

- c. August 1839:* “The Father called all spirits before him at the creation of man, and *organized* them.”<sup>57</sup>
- January 1841:* “At the first *organization* in heaven we were all present and saw the Savior chosen and appointed, and the plan of salvation made and we sanctioned it.”<sup>58</sup>
- April 1842:* “The spirits of men are eternal. . . . They are *organized* according to that Priesthood which is everlasting.”<sup>59</sup>
- May 1843:* “He who rules in the heavens when he has a certain work to do calls the Spirits before him to *organize* them.”<sup>60</sup>
- October 1843:* “The *organization* of . . . spiritual and heavenly beings, was agreeably to the most perfect order and harmony—that their limits and bounds were fixed irrevocably, and voluntarily subscribed to by themselves.”<sup>61</sup>

The only organization of intelligences envisioned by the Prophet in these statements is a social organization and not an organization of intelligence into intelligences. Joseph taught that spirits, like God, are self-existent and that “God Himself found Himself in the midst of spirits and glory. Because He was greater He saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest, who were less in intelligence, could have a privilege to advance like Himself. . . . So He took in hand to save the world of spirits.”<sup>62</sup> In the absence of later teachings of a spirit birth, one might have supposed from Joseph Smith’s sayings that God’s plan for saving spirits



was simply a benevolent gesture arising from the happenstance of a superior intelligence finding himself in the midst of unorganized, inferior intelligences. As the Prophet declared in March 1841, “God is good and all his acts is for the benifit of infereir inteligenes—God saw that those inteligenes had Not power to Defend themselves against those that had a tabernicle therefore the Lord Calls them togather in Counsel [organizes them] and agrees to form them tabernicles.”<sup>63</sup>

Rather than establishing a doctrine in the Church of uncreated spirits, the records show that the Prophet’s insistence on spirits being uncreated served primarily to reinforce the already growing concept that the essential part of man, whether it be the intelligence he possesses or his spirit element, has always existed. The references to preexistence by Joseph Smith’s associates in Church periodicals during the last two years of the Prophet’s life, particularly in the editorials of John Taylor and Thomas Ward, emphasized that while the spirit or intelligence may have had no beginning, individual spirits are the product of creation.<sup>64</sup> Some Saints did adopt the idea of uncreated spirits from the Prophet’s teachings in Nauvoo. However, the idea was evidently neither long nor widely held as it soon gave way to the later concept of spirit birth. Joseph Lee Robinson recorded that in 1845, while the Saints were still in Nauvoo,

Some of the Elders said that the Prophet Joseph Smith should have said that our spirits existed eternally with God, the question arose then, How is God the Father of our spirits? I wondered, studied and prayed over it for I did want to know how it could be. I inquired of several of the brethren how that could be—a father and son and the son as old as the father. There was not a person that could or that would even try to explain that matter, but it came to pass that in time a vision was opened, the voice of the spirit came to me saying: that all matter was eternal, that it never had a beginning and that it should never have an end and that the spirits of all men were organized of a pure material or matter upon the principle of male and female so that there was a time when my immortal spirit as well as every other man’s spirit that was ever born into the world—that is to say, there was a moment when the spirit was organized or begotten or born so that the spirit has a father and the material or matter, that our tabernacles [i.e., spirit bodies] are composed of is eternal and as we understand are organized upon the principles of male and female.<sup>65</sup>

By the end of Joseph Smith’s ministry, several different views on the origin of man’s spirit appear to have been in circulation. A sermon delivered by Sidney Rigdon in 1845, after his disaffection from the Church, is revealing in this regard. Admonishing his followers to accept only those teachings concerning the origin of spirits that the Lord had plainly revealed, Rigdon deferred to the biblical account of the creation: “[Moses] states that God formed a body out of the dust of the earth, and, after he had formed it, he put a spirit or life into it . . . we can conceive of his putting spirit into it and of its then having life.” This, according to



Rigdon, is all that can be known with any certainty about what he termed “the principle of intelligence” in man. Disturbed by the Prophet’s King Follett Sermon as well as speculative teachings, many of which he had undoubtedly encountered among the Saints in Nauvoo, he declared:

If our spiritual existence was the effect of creative power [i.e., creationism], we do not know it, and whether the great creator formed them out of nothing [ex nihilo creation] or something [e.g., eternal intelligence or spirit element] . . . or whether they exist on the same principle he does [i.e., uncreated, self-existing spirits], are matters which can only be settled by revelation; for everything else which any may pretend to know is conjecture only. . . . Endless are the conjectures of men in relation to our spiritual existence. Some say the spirits of all were created in the six days [i.e., preexistencism]; others that they are created as their bodies are prepared for them.<sup>66</sup>

If Rigdon’s statement can be taken as a commentary on contemporary LDS views with which he was in disagreement, it certainly attests to the diversity of views among the Saints.

#### SPIRIT BIRTH AND JOSEPH SMITH’S NAUVOO TEACHINGS

The belief that man is literally the offspring of God in the spirit is by far the most significant concept related to preexistence in LDS theology.<sup>67</sup> This doctrine, however, does not explicitly appear in the scriptural or other writings and recorded sermons of Joseph Smith.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the doctrine is conspicuously absent from the records of his associates during his lifetime. It appears that during the Prophet’s lifetime the Saints’ thinking conformed to the traditional belief that the fatherhood of God was only figurative and not to be taken literally.

Eliza R. Snow is often credited with first publicly introducing the idea of a literal spirit birth through heavenly parents in October 1845 when she penned the sublime poem “O My Father.”<sup>69</sup> Much speculation exists in fact as to whether Eliza R. Snow received the idea from Joseph Smith or through direct revelation.<sup>70</sup> Actually, the first pronouncement in print on spirit birth was provided by Orson Pratt in his *Prophetic Almanac* for 1845. Under a section entitled “The Mormon Creed,” Pratt declares, “What is man? The offspring of God. What is God? The father of man. Who is Jesus Christ? He is our Brother. . . . How many states of existence has man? He has three. What is the first? It is spiritual. What is the second? It is temporal. What is the third? It is immortal and eternal. How did he begin to exist in the first? He was begotten and born of God.”<sup>71</sup> Pratt’s almanac went on sale 3 August 1844, though it was advertized in the *Prophet* as being at the printer’s as early as 22 June 1844, with a note that it “contains much matter interesting to the Saints.”<sup>72</sup> The doctrine of premortal spirit birth next appeared publicly at the dedication of the Seventies Hall on 26 December 1844,



some six months after the death of the Prophet. A hymn composed especially for the dedication by W. W. Phelps contained the following stanza:

Come to me; here's the myst'ry that man hath not seen:  
Here's our Father in heaven, and Mother, the Queen:  
Here are worlds that have been, and the worlds yet to be:  
Here's eternity,—endless; amen: Come to me.<sup>73</sup>

A second hymn written also for the dedication by John Taylor eulogized Joseph Smith in these words:

Of noble seed—of heavenly birth,  
He came to bless the sons of earth."<sup>74</sup>

George Laub reported that a sermon was also delivered by Brigham Young at the dedication in which he taught that "Christ is our head and Elder Brother. For we were once organized before God, and Jesus was the firstborn or begotten of the Father."<sup>75</sup> The day before the dedication, Phelps wrote a letter published in the *Times and Seasons*, which referred to Jesus Christ as "our eldest brother" who "kept his first estate . . . and [was] crowned in the midst of brothers and sisters, while his mother stood with approving virtue."<sup>76</sup> With the basic preexistent family organization being delineated near the end of 1844, the idea of humankind originating as spirit children of heavenly parents became a subject of great interest throughout 1845.<sup>77</sup> Eliza R. Snow's "O My Father," written in October 1845, is significant only in that it so eloquently captures the essence of this already developed thought.

While it is interesting that the first recorded teaching of premortal birth did not occur until after Joseph Smith's death, to suppose that the doctrine entirely originated at that time would be as erroneous as believing that the fully developed doctrine was preached from the early beginning of the Church. The more probable explanation is that the idea gradually took shape, beginning with the strong paternal concept of God popular in nineteenth-century Protestantism combined with the enlightenment imparted through Joseph Smith on the nature of God and man. From this point it took only a little inspired reasoning to realize that individuals began their career as spirit offspring of heavenly parents.

The LDS doctrine of spirit birth is often depicted as being a radical departure from the traditional creator-creature dichotomy of Patristic theology that supposedly dominated nineteenth-century Christianity. It is important to realize, however, that during the early nineteenth century there was a common tendency to view God's fatherhood much the same way as taught in Mormonism, except for the procreative process implicit in LDS teachings. The Methodists spoke of man's divine



sonship eventuating in his moral perfection. Universalists appealed to the endearment implicit in the fatherhood of God to prove the ultimate rescue of the wicked from endless punishment. In 1824 the *Christian Magazine* echoed the growing sentiment that man's soul possesses "a spark of his intelligence, and continues to be in a high and peculiar sense 'his offspring.' Hence the nature of the soul, and its relation and resemblance to the divinity, proclaim its worth."<sup>78</sup> One theologian writing at the beginning of the twentieth century reflected back on this trend to paternalize God, stating, "No doctrine of the relationship of God to men has assumed such prominence during the last half-century as that of His Fatherhood."<sup>79</sup> Even the Heavenly Mother and Father concept of Mormonism was to be found in the esoteric teachings of the Kabbalah, which intrigued Christian mystics at the time of Joseph Smith. According to this tradition, the soul is "born into this world in which we live, through the union of the King and Queen who are, as regards the generation of the soul, like the human species in the generation of the body."<sup>80</sup> It was primarily the development and advancement of the belief in this literal spirit birth that set Mormonism apart from mainstream Protestant thought on the meaning of God's fatherhood.

Early LDS literature generally reflects contemporary attitudes toward God as a father figure, exemplified in a *Messenger and Advocate* editorial dated August 1837, which observed, "the great God is called our Father, as well as our preserver and bountiful benefactor: what fond endearments, what tender ties are not associated with the expression our Father."<sup>81</sup> For the Saints, however, the concept of God's fatherhood grew to be more than just a sentimental metaphor. The Saints were taught to believe that "that which is temporal [is] in the likeness of that which is spiritual" (D&C 77:2), so that everything on earth, including the birth process, has its likeness in heaven. Furthermore, they were instructed that God is an exalted man who once experienced mortality,<sup>82</sup> and that righteous couples are to become Gods themselves, receiving "their exaltation in the eternal worlds, that they may bear the souls of men."<sup>83</sup>

The belief that man may become as God in bearing the souls of men certainly would have been sufficient to establish the corollary belief that man himself is the offspring of God. It is quite possible in fact that the revealed destiny of man became the key which unlocked for many of the Saints the mystery of man's origin. In addition to scriptural inferences of spirit birth, there is evidence that the Prophet privately taught the doctrine to others. An isolated incident related secondhand some seventy years after its occurrence purports that Zina D. Young, who lost her mother when she was eighteen, was consoled by the Prophet, who told her she would see not only her earthly mother again, but also her Heavenly Mother.<sup>84</sup> Several of the Prophet's associates did not hesitate later to attribute their knowledge of premortal spirit birth to his teachings.



Parley P. Pratt, for instance, later recollected that in the latter part of 1839 he spent several days with Joseph Smith in which he learned “many great and glorious principles concerning God and the heavenly order of eternity.” Reflecting back on his impressions received during these conversations with the Prophet, Pratt wrote, “I felt that God was my Heavenly Father indeed, that Jesus was my brother.”<sup>85</sup> Benjamin F. Johnson wrote late in life of Joseph Smith, “He taught us that God was the great head of human procreation—was really and truly the father of both our spirits and our bodies.”<sup>86</sup> The fact that Joseph’s associates attributed their knowledge of spirit birth to Joseph Smith coupled with the unequivocal way in which they proclaimed the idea of spirit birth beginning near the time of his death strongly suggest that the doctrine originated with the Prophet. At the very least, Joseph Smith must be credited with having provided the impetus that led to an awareness of spirit birth.

One of the important effects of the doctrine of spirit birth was to unify the diverse views extant in the Church. While spirit or intelligence could still be thought of as being uncreated as an essence or individual (an issue still unsettled), it was recognized that spirit birth was a kind of creation. The divine parentage in spirit birth imbues each spirit with a portion of divinity as well, which is close to the ideas espoused by Parley P. Pratt resembling emanation. Thus the doctrine of spirit birth helped solidify and even integrate the Saints’ thinking on preexistence.

The development of the doctrine of preexistence from 1830 to 1844 illustrates the expanding theology of the early Church. It was especially meaningful for Saints at this time to lift their voices and sing, “The Lord is extending the Saints’ understanding.”<sup>87</sup> While it is difficult to determine precisely how prevalent particular beliefs were and when they began to take root or change form, it is clear that the basic idea of preexistence began to emerge shortly after the organization of the Church but was not fully expounded in Church publications until after Joseph Smith’s death. While the Prophet’s initial teachings on preexistence were perceived in the light of contemporary views on the nature and origin of spirits, these tentative beliefs were continually being reevaluated and revised in light of the ongoing teachings of the Prophet until, by the end of 1844, all of the basic elements of the current LDS doctrine of preexistence were in place. Nearly a century and a half later, this doctrine continues to vitalize LDS theology, adding a significant dimension to nearly every precept of the gospel of Jesus Christ.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Although many consider *preexistence* to be a self-contradictory term, it should be realized that the prefix *pre* can signify either “prior” or “prior to” depending on the root word with which it is used. In the case of *preexistence*, the obvious intended meaning is “prior” existence, not “prior to” existence. Other synonyms found in modern LDS literature include *first estate*, *premortal*, *antemortal*, *pre-earth*, *primeval*, *primordial*, and *primal existence*.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology,” *Sunstone* 5 (July-August 1980): 32 n. 4.

<sup>3</sup>*Journal of Discourses* 1:54.

<sup>4</sup>While creationism was the prevalent theory in the post-Apostolic church among the Eastern fathers, traducianism was generally accepted in the West and essentially held that “the first man bore within him the germ of all mankind; his soul was the fountainhead of all human souls; all varieties of individual human nature were only different modifications of that one original spiritual substance. Creation was finally and completely accomplished on the sixth day. As the body is derived from the bodies of the parents, so the soul is derived from the souls of the parents—body and soul together being formed by natural generation” (James Franklin Bethune-Baker, *An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine* [London: Methuen, 1903], 303).

<sup>5</sup>From an early nineteenth-century viewpoint, materialists represented “a sect in the ancient church, composed of persons, who, being prepossessed with the maxim in philosophy ‘ex nihilo nihil fit,’ out of nothing, nothing can arise, had recourse to an eternal matter on which they suppose God wrought in the creation, instead of admitting Him alone as the sole cause of the existence of all things. . . . Materialists are also those who maintain that the soul of man is material, or that the principle of perception and thought is not a substance distinct from the body, but the result of corporeal organization” (Charles Buck, *A Theological Dictionary* [Philadelphia: James Kay and Co., 1830], 345).

<sup>6</sup>John Newton Brown, *The Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Brattleboro, Pesenden and Co., 1836), 964.

<sup>7</sup>John Henry Blunt, *Dictionary of Doctrinal and Historical Theology* (London: Rivertons, 1872), 590. Many nineteenth-century religious thinkers were neutral as to “whether the souls of all mankind were actually created, as some suppose, at the time of Adam’s creation, or whether they were successively created” (Samuel Worcester, *Sermons on Various Subjects Practical and Doctrinal* [Salem, Mass.: Henry Whipple, 1823], 36).

<sup>8</sup>Elder Elijah Bailey, *Primitive Trinitarianism Examined and Defended* (Bennington, Vt.: Darius Clark, 1826), 92. Bailey was a Methodist elder who disagreed with some of Isaac Watts’s views saying: “The first difficulty and mistake we think the Doctor labored under was in imagining all souls were created at once, or were created before their bodies were created for them.”

<sup>9</sup>Spiritualist views bore some similarity to LDS ideas expressed during the Nauvoo period as evidenced by one Spiritualist who wrote in 1869: “Something from nothing, a self-evident absurdity, there are no absolute creations in the universe, only new and higher formations. Spirit and matter both eternal; spiritual substance in connection with physical substance in its various gradations constitute one eternal duality” (J. M. Peebles, *Seers of the Ages* [Boston: William White, 1869], 13). And again: “The basis of man’s immortality is deific substance. As a conscious spirit in the innermost, he is compounded and therefore indissoluble. Having in spirit neither a beginning nor end, he is eternally past and eternally future” (*ibid.*, 262).

<sup>10</sup>Edward Beecher, *The Conflict of the Ages; or, the Great Debate on the Moral Relations of God and Man*, 5th ed. (Boston: Phillips, Samson, 1854), 563. Edward Beecher’s brother, Charles, was also an advocate of *preexistence*.

<sup>11</sup>Parker Pratt Robinson, *Writings of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Privately published, 1952), 65, 216. Pratt maintained this interpretation of Job at least until 1844 when he wrote that as we rise to the station of a son of God in the resurrection, “we may be called upon, with the other sons of God to shout for joy at the organization of new systems of worlds, and new orders of being” (*ibid.*, 39). In March 1841 Joseph Smith used this same passage to prove *preexistence*, not from the viewpoint that the sons of God were premortal children, but based on the reasoning that Job must have *preexisted* for the Lord to have asked him where he was when the foundations of the world were laid (see Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* [Provo: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1980], 68).

<sup>12</sup>*Times and Seasons* 2 (1 February 1841): 299. President Harold B. Lee has interpreted this passage more recently to mean that those spirits who were faithful in the *preexistence* were there foreordained to be born into the house of Israel (Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1974], 10–11).

<sup>13</sup>*Journal of Discourses* 15:249. Orson Pratt was baptized 19 September 1830 after hearing the preaching of his brother Parley. He therefore would not have had an awareness of *preexistence* before that time.



<sup>14</sup>John Potter, *An Inquiry Concerning the Most Important Truths* (Uniontown, Pa.: J. and T. Patton, 1820), 80, 86.

<sup>15</sup>The only mention prior to this time of a belief among the Saints that preexistent behavior determined one's opportunities in this life comes from J. B. Turner, a Mormon antagonist, in his book *Mormonism in All Ages: or the Rise, Progress, and Causes of Mormonism; with the Biography of Its Author and Founder, Joseph Smith, Junior* (New York: Platt and Peters, 1842), 242. Turner wrote: "Their sublime faith teaches them that their action and destiny here are the result, and can be explained only upon admission, of their existence and action before they inhabited their present bodies. This notion, however, does not distinctly appear in their published revelations. It was at one time promulgated, but from its unpopularity, their leaders suppressed the full development of their peculiar scheme of preexistence until faith on the earth should increase."

<sup>16</sup>*Millennial Star* 1 (January 1841): 218.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 220. Orson Pratt also expressed this idea of foreordination based on foreknowledge of the future in the case of the Savior, and argued that this foreordination was not an actual calling but rather an anticipated calling that was to be effective retroactively: "Jesus was called and made a High Priest centuries after the law [of Moses] was given, yet there is no doubt that he was considered in the mind of his Father the same as a High Priest before the foundation of the world; and that by virtue of the Priesthood which he should, in a future age, receive, he could organize worlds and show forth mighty power. *God, by his foreknowledge, saw that His Son would keep all his commands, and determined, at a certain time [i.e., mortality] to call and consecrate him a High Priest.* He determined also that by virtue of that future consecration to the priesthood, he should, thousands of years beforehand, have power to create worlds and govern them, the same as if he had already received the consecration" (Orson Pratt, *Seer* 1 [October 1853]: 147 [italics added]).

<sup>18</sup>*Journal of Discourses* 3:352.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.* 15:249.

<sup>20</sup>Moses 3:1–7; 5:24; 6:36, 51, 59, 63. An interesting addition to the revelation of Enoch comes from the Kirtland Revelation Book under date of February 1833, when a song was sung by the gift of tongues and translated (the persons involved are unknown). Part of the translation alludes to preexistence: "He [Enoch] saw the beginning [and] the ending of men; he saw the time when Adam his father was made, and he saw that he was in eternity before a grain of dust in the balance was weighed. He saw that he emanated and came down from God" (cited in Fred Collier, *Unpublished Revelations of the Prophets and Presidents of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* [Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 1979], 63).

<sup>21</sup>See Thomas Alexander, "Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 33 n. 32; Blake Ostler, "The Idea of Preexistence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1982): 75 n. 11. In both of these sources, the interpretation that *spiritual* means *intellectual* has its basis in the fact that this is one of the meanings (meaning 6) given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Ostler further notes, "the treatment of the first chapter of Genesis as a 'conceptual blue-print' formulated by God before creation, was a popular means of resolving the seeming contradiction between Genesis 1:26–27 and 2:4 as Joseph had done in the Book of Moses" (Ostler, "Idea of Preexistence," 61). This interpretation of the first account of the creation as a conceptual or ideal creation was popular in the nineteenth century only among Kabbalists who claimed that "the first chapter of Genesis applies only the Prototypic or Upper Adam, who was androgenic and made in the image and likeness of Elohim. . . . Indeed the second account expressly says, the plants, i.e., man, were not yet on the earth and the terrestrial man did not yet exist" (Isaac Myer, *Qabbalah* [Philadelphia: Privately printed, 1888], 273). Kabbalists, however, used the term *spiritual body* to designate Adam's paradisiacal physical body created from the dust of the earth as recorded in Gen. 2:7, which followed the ideal creation (*ibid.*, 248).

<sup>22</sup>Elder Bruce R. McConkie was a proponent of this view. He conceded that the word *spiritual* in these passages has "a dual meaning and applies to both the premortal life and the paradisiacal creation," but he emphasized that the "more pointed and important meaning" is that of a "paradisiacal creation" (Bruce R. McConkie, "Christ and the Creation," *Ensign* 12 [June 1982]: 13–14).

<sup>23</sup>If later commentaries are any indication of earlier thought, Orson Pratt consistently taught after the Saints moved west that the account of the creation in the first chapter of Genesis (corresponding to the second chapter in the Book of Moses) refers in its entirety to the spirit creation. While the current tendency is to view both the first and the second chapters as an account of the physical creation with only an interjectory reference to a spirit creation (Moses 3:5), Elder Pratt contended that "to suppose that these two chapters only give the history of the natural creation would involve us in numerous difficulties when we endeavor to reconcile the description given in the second chapter with that given in the first. But to receive them as the descriptions of two successive creations, the first being spiritual (as it truly was), and the second being temporal, all different descriptions vanish away, and a flood of light bursts upon the mind" (Pratt, *Seer* 1 [February 1853]: 22). Concerning D&C 29:30–32, both Orson Pratt (*Journal of Discourses* 15:265; 21:200–205; *Millennial Star* 10 [1 August 1848]: 238) and Brigham Young (*Journal of Discourses* 1:50; 4:218; 18:257) interpreted the first spiritual creation mentioned as having reference to the spirit creation and not to the paradisiacal physical creation. No contrary interpretation of these passages by any of the Prophet's associates could be found.

<sup>24</sup>*Journal of Discourses* 21:199–200.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.* 21:200.

<sup>26</sup>Orson Pratt relates: "We often had access to the manuscripts when boarding with the Prophet; and it was our delight to read them over and over again, before they were printed; and so highly were they esteemed by us, that we committed some to memory; and a few we copied for the purpose of reference in our missions; and also to read them to the saints for their edification" (Pratt, *Seer* 26 [March 1854]: 228).



<sup>27</sup>*Messenger and Advocate* 1 (June 1835): 130. Phelps may have had reference to D&C 93:29–30 since preexistent agency is implied elsewhere only in the Book of Abraham, which had not yet come into Joseph Smith's possession. Preexistent agency was not a widely held belief among contemporary preexistencists although it was taught by Origen and preserved in Kabbalistic teachings that held that "souls had freedom of will as to good and evil and this was exercised by them before the creation of the universe" (Myer, *Qabbalah*, 273). Origen believed, however, that earth life was a punishment for disobedient spirits rather than a reward for the righteous.

<sup>28</sup>See Jacob 4:9; Moses 1:32. That Christ is often designated as the agent in all of God's acts of creation, including that of man (see Ether 3:16; Moses 1:32; D&C 76:42, 93:10), corresponds with certain contemporary Protestant views and may have given the general impression to the early Saints that Christ was the actual creator of man's spirit. Today these passages are explained by invoking the doctrine of divine investiture of authority (see vol. 1 of Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966], 73).

<sup>29</sup>*Evening and Morning Star* 1 (October 1832): 78.

<sup>30</sup>*Messenger and Advocate* 1 (May 1835): 113.

<sup>31</sup>*Evening and Morning Star* 1 (October 1832): 77, 80.

<sup>32</sup>*Messenger and Advocate* 1 (April 1835): 97.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.* 3 (December 1836): 424–25. The basic argument states that since all things that are material tend toward dissolution and decay, the spirit must be immaterial since it is immortal and does not dissolve or decay.

<sup>34</sup>T. Edgar Lyon, "Doctrinal Development of the Church During the Nauvoo Sojourn," *Brigham Young University Studies* 15 (Fall 1975): 439; Alexander, "Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 333; Ostler, "Idea of Preexistence," 60–61. By at least 1840 it was public knowledge that the Saints were teaching preexistence although it was viewed in at least one early Mormon pamphlet as being "a matter of little or no consequence" whether the spirit was created at birth or at some time prior to birth (Benjamin Winchester, "An Examination of a Lecture Delivered by the Rev. H. Perkins," 1840, 7, photocopy in possession of David J. Whittaker, original at Harvard University Library).

<sup>35</sup>*Millennial Star* 6 (July 1845): 26. Alexander opposes the view that the term *intelligence* in section 93 was understood prior to 1838 to mean "the essential uncreated essence of each individual." He cites the fact that *intelligence* was used elsewhere to mean facts or information ("Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 33, n. 23). I would argue that *intelligence* was also understood to mean the uncreated essence of man, not in the sense in which it is understood today, but in the sense of a divine light or truth that is the life-giving and conscious principle in man. Later expressions of Brigham Young (*Journal of Discourses* 7:286–87) and Orson Pratt (*Seer* 1 [September 1853]: 132–33) preserve this same thought as they allude to the uncreated intelligence spoken of in section 93 as a divine endowment giving man life and identity.

<sup>36</sup>*Millennial Star* 4 (July 1843): 32.

<sup>37</sup>*Messenger and Advocate* 3 (December 1836): 428.

<sup>38</sup>D&C 84:45; 88:7–13, 40, 66; 93:36. In February 1834, Joseph Smith declared not only that God's radiance but that God himself "is perfect intelligence" (*History of the Church* 2:12). A current tendency is to arbitrarily distinguish between intelligence that is "Light and truth" and intelligence that is the "light of truth"; the former being an attribute, while the latter denotes the primal essence of spirits.

<sup>39</sup>Benjamin F. Johnson to George S. Gibbs, cited in E. Dale LeBaron, "Benjamin Franklin Johnson: Colonizer, Public Servant and Church Leader" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1967), 331 (italics added).

<sup>40</sup>Robinson, *Writings of Parley P. Pratt*, 63–64. This work was originally published with Parley P. Pratt's book of poems and later republished by itself "corrected and revised" as "The World Turned Upside Down, or Heaven on Earth" (see *Millennial Star* 2 [June 1841]: 32; 3 [August 1842]: 80; and *History of the Church* 4:54).

<sup>41</sup>Robinson, *Writings of Parley P. Pratt*, 66–67.

<sup>42</sup>*Millennial Star* 2 (April 1842): 187.

<sup>43</sup>The view that the human spirit is essentially an extension of the Holy Spirit, although in its more unrefined state, can be found in Parley P. Pratt's teachings as late as 1853, when he declared that portions of the "Holy Spirit . . . [are] organized in individual form and clothed upon with flesh and bones . . . also that there are vast quantities of this spirit or element not organized in bodily form" (Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* [Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855], 43–45). Pratt also taught in 1853 that this pure and holy spirit that is organized into individual intelligences is "invisible to us, unless we are quickened by a portion of the same element" (*Journal of Discourses* 1:8).

<sup>44</sup>*Journal of Discourses* 2:342–43. Orson Pratt here cites an unpublished revelation that was intended to show that "intelligent beings are all parts of God, and . . . wherever a great amount of this intelligent Spirit exists, there is a great amount or portion of God."

<sup>45</sup>Robinson, *Writings of Parley P. Pratt*, 216.

<sup>46</sup>*History of the Church* 4:575.

<sup>47</sup>Buck, *Theological Dictionary*, 567.

<sup>48</sup>Leonard Bacon, *Baxter's Works* (New Haven: Durrie and Peck, 1835), 28. The materiality of spirit was being advanced within the Church at least as early as 1840 as evidenced in a pamphlet written by Samuel Bennett in which he reasoned, "The moment we attempt to conceive of a thing we invest it with materiality; and we cannot, according to our mental constitution, conceive of immaterial existence" (Samuel Bennett, "A Few Remarks by Way of Reply to an Anonymous Scribbler" [Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking and Guilbert, Printers, 1840], 11).



<sup>49</sup>*History of the Church* 3:27.

<sup>50</sup>Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 9.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>54</sup>*History of the Church* 4:575.

<sup>55</sup>Stan Larsen, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 203–4. Larsen's amalgamated version of the King Follett discourse is particularly significant here in that it preserves the wording of the original firsthand accounts, which read "a spirit" is uncreated. This has since been altered to read "the intelligence of spirits" (see Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1938], 353), which is frequently quoted as proof that the Prophet had in mind the intelligence of spirits, not spirits themselves, when he spoke of spirits as being uncreated.

<sup>56</sup>It is noteworthy that Joseph Fielding Smith also made use of the word *organize* in Abraham 3:22 to describe the social or ecclesiastical organization of preexistent spirits in his book *The Way to Perfection* under the heading "Intelligences Organized before the World Was Formed." From Abraham's teaching that there were many intelligences (spirits of men) and that they were organized before the world was formed, Elder Smith concludes: "Men were organized in some such way as we are organized here in the kingdom of God. Among the spirits of men there were superior intelligences chosen to act in authority" (Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1975], 27–28).

<sup>57</sup>Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 9 (italics added).

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 60 (italics added).

<sup>59</sup>*History of the Church* 4:575 (italics added).

<sup>60</sup>Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 207 (italics added).

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 253 (italics added).

<sup>62</sup>Larsen, "King Follett Discourse," 204.

<sup>63</sup>Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 68. Joseph Smith taught that in preexistence, "the Spirits of all Men were subject to oppression and the express purpose of God in Giveing it a tabernicle was to arm it against the power of Darkness" (*ibid.*, 62).

<sup>64</sup>See *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 March 1843): 121, 135, 332; 5 (15 December 1844): 748; and *Millennial Star* 4 (June 1843): 18–19; 5 (November 1844): 95. Even in a direct commentary on the King Follett discourse, which has since become the primary basis for arguing that spirits have always existed individually as intelligences, Thomas Ward concluded: "We believe in the eternal nature of spirit [not spirits] and elements, and of the continued progression of intelligence [not intelligences] . . . attaining to the perfection of existence" (*Millennial Star* 5 [November 1844]: 95).

<sup>65</sup>Joseph Lee Robinson, *Journal*, 21. Regarding the confinement of the idea of uncreated Spirits, Ostler concludes from his survey of nineteenth-century LDS thought on preexistence that "the view that man originated when spirit matter was organized into an individual through literal spirit birth seems to have been the only view consistently elucidated between 1845–1905" (Ostler, "Idea of Preexistence," 68).

<sup>66</sup>*Messenger and Advocate of the Church of Christ*, 15 June 1845, 225, 227.

<sup>67</sup>President Marion G. Romney, for example, wrote that the truth that "man is a child of God is the most important knowledge available to mortals" (*Ensign* 3 [July 1973]: 14). Elder Bruce R. McConkie termed this knowledge, along with the knowledge of God's existence, as "the greatest truth in all eternity, bar none" (1976 *Devotional Speeches of the Year* [Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1976], 393–94).

<sup>68</sup>The modern LDS scripture cited today as a proof text for spirit birth is D&C 76:24, which testifies of Christ's universal creative and redemptive works, proclaiming "that by him, and through him, and of him; the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God." Grammatically speaking, the preposition *unto* is dative, making God the indirect object of the birth mentioned. It would require the genitive preposition *of* to make God the one who is giving birth. The preposition *unto* is only used elsewhere in scripture when associated with birth to describe the siring of a child by one person to be given to or for the benefit of another. For example: "*unto* us a child is born" (Isa. 9:6); "his brother shall . . . raise up seed *unto* his brother" (Matt. 22:24); "if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed *unto* me" (Jacob 2:30). The implied meaning of D&C 76:24 is that just as the worlds were created by Christ, so also are the inhabitants thereof begotten unto God by or through Christ. That is, the birth spoken of is the spiritual rebirth through Christ. This appears to have been the interpretation given by the Prophet himself (*Times and Seasons* 4 [1 February 1843]: 82–83) and is the interpretation given in an official doctrinal exposition of the First Presidency and the Twelve in James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1974), 470. This clarification is also made by Bruce R. McConkie in *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 130, 745, and in the subject matter summary for D&C 76:18–24 contained in the 1981 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, which states that the "inhabitants of many worlds are begotten sons and daughters unto God through the atonement of Jesus Christ."

There is no indication that the Saints viewed this passage as a reference to spirit birth prior to their trek west. Interestingly, Orson Pratt, who in 1852 was the first to use this passage as evidence of a spirit birth, still acknowledged the indirect nature of this birth, stating: "Notice, this does not say that God, whom we serve and worship, was actually the Father Himself, in His own person, of all these sons and daughters of the different worlds, but they're begotten sons and daughters unto God, that is, begotten by those who are made like him. . . . [T]hey begat sons and daughters, and begat them unto God, to inhabit these different worlds" (*Journal of Discourses* 1:57).



<sup>69</sup>*Times and Seasons* 6 (15 November 1845): 1039.

<sup>70</sup>For recent discussions on this issue, see Ostler, "Idea of Preexistence," 76, nn. 26 and 27; Linda Wilcox, "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," *Sunstone* 5 (September-October 1980): 10, 15 n. 10.

<sup>71</sup>Orson Pratt, *Prophetic Almanac for 1845* (New York: Prophet's Office, n.d.), 7–8.

<sup>72</sup>*Prophet* 1 (22 June 1844): 4.

<sup>73</sup>*Times and Seasons* 6 (15 January 1845): 783.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.* 5:767.

<sup>75</sup>Eugene England, "George Laub's Nauvoo Journal," *BYU Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 178.

<sup>76</sup>*Times and Seasons* 5 (1 January 1845): 758.

<sup>77</sup>See *ibid.* 6:809, 891–92, 917–18; *Millennial Star* 6:4, 19–21, 157–58, 174–75. Orson Pratt became immediately fascinated with the doctrine of spirit birth, publishing several articles on the subject in issues of the *Prophet* and the *New York Messenger* during 1845 in which he delved into nearly every imaginable implication of the idea.

<sup>78</sup>*Christian Magazine* 1 (April 1824): 107.

<sup>79</sup>J. Scott Lidgett, *The Fatherhood of God in Christian Truth and Life* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1902), 1. Lidgett explains that this fatherhood consists of "the creation of mankind as the calling into existence by God, out of His own life, of beings at once kindred with Himself, and having a distinct individuality of their own. But this, so far from exhausting what is meant by Fatherhood, touches only the surface. The calling into existence of such beings—kindred with Himself, yet having personal independence—is motivated by the love of God; introduces them into a world, a home, of love, which environs their whole life; and has as its end, that fellowship of mutual giving and receiving, that most intimate communion which can only be between those who are spiritually akin" (*ibid.*, 288). This writer further emphasizes the divine potential of man resulting from God's "giving existence to a kindred nature, whose life consists in growing up into the perfection of its Source" (*ibid.*, 291).

<sup>80</sup>Myer, *Qabbalah*, 273.

<sup>81</sup>*Messenger and Advocate* 3 (August 1837): 557.

<sup>82</sup>Larsen, "King Follett Discourse," 200.

<sup>83</sup>D&C 132:63 (compare vv. 19–20, 30). See Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 232, 269–70, 293 for evidence that offspring in the world to come was understood to mean spirit offspring and not just a continuation of physical seed.

<sup>84</sup>Susa Gates Young, *History of the Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Association of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from November 1869 to June 1910* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1911), 25–26. A separate incident has been cited, which was related thirdhand, concerning a vision in which Sidney Rigdon and Zebedee Coltrin in company with Joseph Smith were shown the Father and Mother in Heaven (see Wilcox, "Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," 10). In actuality, what Zebedee Coltrin repeatedly confirmed they saw on this occasion was "father Adam and mother Eve" (see Calvin Robert Stephens, *The Life and Contributions of Zebedee Coltrin* [Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, August 1984], 46–47).

<sup>85</sup>Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1972), 297–98.

<sup>86</sup>LeBaron, "Benjamin Franklin Johnson," 340.

<sup>87</sup>William W. Phelps, "The Spirit of God," *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 2.