

Eternal Progression and the Foreknowledge of God

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James R. Harris

Introduction

Emphatic statements have been made by Church authorities regarding the nature of eternal progression. For example, Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie have stated: “It should be realized that God is not progressing in knowledge, truth, virtue, wisdom, or any of the attributes of godliness. He has already gained these in their fulness.”¹

Other statements have been made by other Church leaders that appear to confirm and also to conflict with the statement quoted above. Both conflicting and confirming statements have often come from the same persons. A few examples are quoted in parallel columns below. Statements in the left-hand column represent God as progressing in knowledge and glory. Statements in the right-hand column indicate that God possesses all knowledge.

God Is Progressing in Knowledge

My Father worked out his kingdom with fear and trembling, and I must do the same; and when I get my kingdom, I shall present it to my Father, so that he may obtain kingdom upon kingdom and it will exalt him in glory, He will then take a higher exaltation, and I will take His place, and thereby become exalted myself.”

Joseph Smith, Jr.²

And they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever.⁴

All organized existence is in progress to an endless advancement in eternal perfections, . . . there is no period in all the eternities, where organized existence will become stationary, that it cannot advance in knowledge, wisdom, power, and glory.

Brigham Young⁵

God Knows All Things

Without the knowledge of all things, God would not be able to save any portion of his creatures; for it is by reason of the knowledge which he has of all things, from the beginning to the end, that enables him to give understanding to his creatures by which they are made partakers of eternal life; and if it were not for the idea existing in the minds of men that God had all knowledge it would be impossible for them to exercise faith in him.

Joseph Smith, Jr.³

“For whom he did foreknow he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son.” He (God) knew millions of years before this world was framed that Pharaoh would be a wicked man. He saw—He understood; his work was before him, *he could see it from the beginning to the end.*

Brigham Young⁶

There is progress for our Father and for our Lord Jesus. There is no such thing as standing still in the eternal work of our God. It is endless progress, *progressing from one degree of knowledge to another degree.*

George Q. Cannon⁷

And is it too bold a thought, that with this progress, even for the mightiest, *new thoughts, new vistas* may appear, inviting to new adventures and enterprises that will yield new experiences, advancement, and enlargement even for the most high?

Brigham H. Roberts⁹

Why did the Lord ask such things of Abraham? Because, knowing what his future would be and that he would be the father of an innumerable posterity, he was determined to test him. God did not do this for his own sake, for he knew by his foreknowledge what Abraham would do; but his purpose was to impress upon Abraham a lesson and to enable him to attain unto knowledge that he could not attain any other way. That is why God tries all of us. It is not for his own knowledge for *he knows all things beforehand. He knows all your lives and everything you will do.*

George Q. Cannon⁸

By Omniscience is meant all-knowing. "*Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world,*" said the Holy Spirit-inspired council of the apostles and elders of the early Christian Church. "Remember the former things of old. *I am God* and there is none like me, *declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done,* saying my counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure." A sparrow falls not to the ground without the Father's notice. . . .

I think, not that God is more intelligent than any other one of the intelligences, but more intelligent than all of them together.

Brigham H. Roberts¹⁰

The Prophet Joseph Smith defined the glory of God as "intelligence or light and truth."¹¹ Light seems to be divine direction in the application of truth (which application leads one to salvation). Truth he said was a "knowledge of things as they are, as they were, and as they are to come."¹² Therefore those who keep their "second estate" (including God) and consequently have "glory added upon their heads for ever and ever," shall actually increase in the "knowledge of things as they are, as they were, and as they are to come." Our Lord is God and his is the great success story of one who kept his second estate. Our Lord is growing and will continue to grow in knowledge; yet it is also clear that the Prophet understood that Christ our Lord is possessor of all knowledge and that he knows all things "from the beginning to the end."

It is obvious from an examination of the above quotes by presidents Brigham Young, George Q. Cannon, and Brigham H. Roberts, that these brethren recognized that a God could somehow *grow in knowledge* and *at the same time experience no deficiency in his knowledge, being, in fact, a possessor of all knowledge.*

There is a tendency for some students of the prophets to build their theological understanding from all statements that might fit into either one or the other of the columns and to ignore the other list. This is probably done because the statements in one column *seem* to be incompatible with the statements in the other column. And still, others, out of frustration or perhaps a false sense of gospel scholarship, may pit one prophet against another, or a prophet against himself.

Standing in the shadow of so much confusion, it would be refreshing to have someone explain the compatibility of statements such as those cited above. It is intended that this article will illustrate and explain, at least to this writer's mind, the capacity of God to "know all things" and at the same time to progress eternally in "light and truth."

The Nature of God's Foreknowledge

Statements about the foreknowledge of God are characteristically associated with references to the "beginning and the end," i.e., that the scope of God's knowledge spans all of man's experience (premortal, mortal, post-mortal, and immortal) and that man's end (i.e., his final condition as an individual) was known by God, "from the beginning."

"The beginning" may represent that period of man's eternal existence when, as a primal intelligence or entity capable of acting and being acted upon, he used his agency to enter God's program of progression. Or, "the beginning" may refer to that great planning session when all things were organized and prepared to launch the program of redemption and salvation under our Lord Jesus the Christ. The phrase certainly identifies some time during man's premortal association with God. (See Chart, Item 1.)

"The end" is reached when man has passed through all stages of preparatory existence and has "arrived" or "become" what he was determined to become, be it a telestial, terrestrial, or celestial being or a son of perdition. (See Chart, Item 2.)

The scope of God's foreknowledge would, at the least, encompass that period of man's existence cradled between the "beginning and the end." Scriptural testimony of this attribute of Deity is abundant. Characteristic of such scriptures are the following:

But the Lord *knoweth all things from the beginning*; wherefore he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the *children of men*; for behold, he hath all power unto the fulfilling of all his words. And thus it is. Amen.¹³ (Italics added)

And I do this for a wise purpose: for thus it whispereth me, according to the workings of the Spirit of the Lord which is in me. And now, I do not know all things; *but the Lord knoweth all things which are to come*; wherefore he worketh in me to do according to his will.¹⁴ (Italics added)

It is apparent from the statements quoted above¹⁵ that the Latter-day prophets were, and are, no less vigorous than the ancient prophets were in declaring the foreknowledge of God. In addition to the words of the great spiritual leaders already cited on this subject, the reader may be led to further conviction and confirmation by recalling these lines from the familiar text of *Jesus the Christ* by Elder James E. Talmage. He wrote:

Our Heavenly Father has a full knowledge of the nature and disposition of each of his children, . . . By reason of that surpassing knowledge, God reads the future of child and children, of men individually and of men collectively as communities and nations; He knows what each will do under given conditions, and sees the end from the beginning.¹⁶

Elder Talmage appealed to the reason and experience of man to make this doctrine (of the foreknowledge of God) more understandable to the Saints. He reasoned that God obtained his knowledge by a long observation of his children through premortal ages or eons. However, while such observations may have been a source of God's foreknowledge, it may not have been the only source or even the most significant source. The instructions given by the Prophet Joseph Smith (D. & C. 130) indicate another means by which God, Christ, and all who dwell upon their celestial globe may observe all things pertaining to an inferior kingdom, where things past, present, and future are continually before the Lord. The scripture explains:

The angels do not reside on a planet like this earth;

But they reside in the presence of God, on a globe like a sea of glass and fire, where all things for their glory are manifest, past, present, and future, and are continually before the Lord.

The place where God resides is a great Urim and Thummim.

This earth, in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon, whereby all things pertaining to an inferior kingdom, or all kingdoms of a lower order, will be manifest to those who dwell on it; and this earth will be Christ's.¹⁷(See Chart, Item 3.)

The third lecture on faith, given by the Prophet in the School of the Prophets, is in the main concerned with the character of Deity. It is made clear that a correct idea of the character of Deity is imperative if one is to exercise faith of a quality that will enable him to lay hold upon life and salvation.¹⁸ Specific qualities of the divine character are enumerated in the chapter as follows: (1) power to fulfill all his promises, (2) mercy, grace,

and goodness, (3) unchangeableness in his character, (4) truth, as integrity in his relationship with man, (5) and lastly love. It should be observed that it is the idea of unchangeableness in the above-mentioned qualities of his *character* that is indispensable to faith. There is no insistence that our God cannot grow in knowledge; however, there is, in lecture four, an insistence that God has knowledge of all things from beginning to end. It is possible for God to grow in knowledge and at the same time have a knowledge of all things from the beginning to the end.

The Nature of Eternal Progression

Eternal progression, like eternal punishment and eternal life, may represent a quality of experience and not exclusively a duration of experience. Eternal progression would be God's kind of progression, an experience exclusively for those who possess the character of a god and therefore enjoy the powers of a god. Participation in this kind of experience is possible for man only in an elementary and relatively imperfect sense. There are elements of corruption in the nature of man that seem to render him incapable of maintaining a continuous and perfect union with the mind of God. The methods by which men strain to attain new truth are an evidence of man's very limited mental and spiritual powers. Whether men learn by trial and error, or by the best-planned experimental program, their path to knowledge is long and tedious. This natural deficiency in human nature can be modified as the regenerating and sanctifying powers of the gospel renew the human system so that men may, in an imperfect way, have "the mind of Christ,"¹⁹ through the Holy Spirit.

In contrast with the *relatively* weak union described above, the mind of our God is in *constant* and *perfect union* with all that is divine throughout the immensity of space.

The nature of eternal progression cannot be understood outside of this divine union. The union of a divine society rests upon celestial law and two foremost principles in that body of law are consecration and stewardship. (See Chart, Item 4.)

The earthly system of Zion is a reflection, or type, of the heavenly society of Gods. As men faithfully consecrate all they possess to God, under Zion's law, they become heirs to all that God possesses. However, man must demonstrate that he possesses the character of a God before he can have access to the "Grand Heavenly Storehouse of Divine Powers and Gifts." As the faithful steward in Zion may have access to the earthly wealth of the earthly storehouse, his faithfulness will also give him access to heavenly treasures. However, while he is clothed in the imperfection of mortality his access to heavenly treasures must be limited.

Our Lord, Jesus the Christ, has the character of a God and under the law of consecration he is possessor of all things. All that the Gods possess in wisdom, knowledge, and power, are his through a union of property among all Exalted Fathers. (See Chart, Item 5.) The announcement that Christ received the full powers and prerogatives of the Eloheim (Gods or Exalted Fathers) is found in the following verses of scripture:

And I, John, bear record that he received a fulness of the glory of the Father;

And he received all power both in heaven and on earth, and the glory of the Father was with him, for he dwelt in him.²⁰

Thus, through the indwelling divine Spirit, Christ enjoys a perfect union with the Eternal Father of our spirits. This union is so perfect that the Father is described as dwelling “in him.” The Eternal Father of our spirits also enjoys a perfect union with all divine beings throughout the immensity of space. This union is so perfect that the Father correctly bears the title Eloheim, meaning Gods, for he represents all Gods as if they dwelt in him. This communion of the Gods (with which our God, Jesus the Christ, is in perfect union), constitutes a “storehouse” of knowledge and power from which, as a faithful steward of the Gods, Christ may and does constantly and instantly draw.

Our Lord, therefore, is at this instant possessor of all knowledge and power (i.e., he is joint owner with all the Gods, even as all of us may become joint heirs with Christ—without detracting from his power and possessions).²¹ The experience of our Lord through the ages, as he moves to ever higher degrees of exaltation (See Chart, Item 6) will call forth a constant flow of knowledge and power from the “Grand Union of Divine Minds.” And while he is thus progressing in knowledge there is never a practical deficiency in his knowledge—because his perfect union with all other divine beings enables him to recall, *as from his own mind and experience*, all the experiences and all the knowledge of all the Gods. It is from this plane of experience that the quotations of the prophets (*supra*, pp. 37–39) in the right-hand column are understood to be consistent with statements in the left-hand column.

The Church is an heir to a fine statement on the nature of the divine union described above. It is found in the masterful theological studies of Elder Brigham H. Roberts:

It is possible for the mind of God to be in man, to will and to do, as seemeth (God) good. The nature of the Whole clings to the Parts, and they may carry with them the light and truth and glory of the Whole. Moreover, by appointment, any One or Three of the union Intelligences may become the embodiment and representative of all the power and glory and authority of the sum total of the Divine Intelligences; in which capacity either the One or the Three would no longer stand only in their

individual characters as Gods, but they would stand also as the sign and symbol of all that is divine—and would act and be to all intents and purposes the One God. And so in every inhabited world, and in every system of worlds, a God presides. Deity in his own right and person, and by virtue of the essence of him; And also by virtue of his being the sign and symbol of the Collectivity of the Divine Intelligences of the universe. Having access to all the councils of the Gods, each individual Deity becomes a partaker of the collective knowledge, wisdom, honor, power, majesty, and glory of the Body Divine—in a word, the embodiment of the Spirit of the Gods whose influence permeates the universe.²²

In Conclusion

For the man who would possess that quality of faith that will enable him to become an heir to life in the celestial kingdom, only one attitude toward God will suffice. And that is, to regard God as an all-powerful, all-knowing being. There is no sense or situation in which God is in any way deficient in knowledge or power, and as one who enjoys a perfect union with all exalted Fathers *he is the legal possessor of all knowledge and power.*

For God there is no floundering, no experimentation, no misapplication of truth, for all things, past, present, and future are present with him at his will to recall from the “Grand Union of Divine Minds” or/as from his own mind.

As man may, in an imperfect way, have the “mind of Christ,” so also does Christ have, in perfection, the mind of the Eloheim (Gods). His words are their words, his thoughts are their thoughts. He represents Deity in his own right and he represents the composite glory, power, knowledge, and dominion of all that is Deity anywhere in the immensity of space.

But, although our God *possesses all knowledge, he lives in the constant flow of divine power, thought, and experience which constitutes eternal progression.* Eternal progression is God’s kind of progression, to be enjoyed only by those who become Gods.

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1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1958), p. 221.

2. Joseph Smith, Jr., *Documentary History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1902), VI, 306. (hereafter D.H.C.)

3. N. B. Lundwall (ed.), *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: N. B. Lundwall), p. 43.

4. Abraham 3:26.

5. *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: G. D. Watt, 1854), 1:349.

6. *Ibid.*, 7:290.

7. *The Millennial Star* (Liverpool, 1899), LXI, 117.

8. *Conference Report* VII, 290. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1899), April 9.
9. Brigham H. Roberts, "The Doctrine of Deity," *Seventies Course in Theology* (Salt Lake City: The Caxton Press, 1910), pp. 69–70.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
11. Doctrine and Covenants 93:36.
12. *Ibid.*, 93:24.
13. 1 Nephi 9:6.
14. Words of Mormon 7 (See also: 1 Nephi 14:22; 2 Nephi 7:10; Alma 13:3; 37:2, 14, 18; 46:23–24; Ether 3:25–27; Doctrine and Covenants 93:28).
15. *Infra.*, pp. 1–2.
16. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1945), p. 29.
17. Doctrine and Covenants 130: 6–9.
18. Lundwall, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
19. 1 Corinthians 2:16.
20. Doctrine and Covenants 93:16–17.
21. Lundwall, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
22. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 198.