

“Show Them unto No Man”

Part 1. Esoteric Teachings and the Problem of Early Latter-day Saint Doctrinal History

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Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) who attempt to educate themselves about the history of their religion can sometimes be confronted with a bewildering array of interpretations made by historians who range in perspective from traditional believers to atheists and include numerous variations in between. When asked about the origins of such discrepancies, the historians will naturally refer to *biases* exhibited by the others and perhaps even to their own possible sources of bias.¹

When most people read historical writing, they assume what they are reading is something very close to what actually happened. It is now generally admitted among historians, however, that what ultimately makes it onto the page incorporates a healthy dose of the author’s imagination and prejudice. Certainly, historical writing incorporates what we might call “facts” (for example, documentary evidence), but the author connects these widely spaced dots with lines formed from *choices* about which sources are relevant to the subject, their relative trustworthiness, the meaning of the words, and so on. “The problem with historical narrative, . . .” says Georg Iggers, “is that, while it proceeds from empirically validated facts or events, it necessarily requires imaginative steps to place them in a coherent story.”²

The second part of this two-part article series will appear in volume 62, number 2.

1. For a broad spectrum of perspectives on bias among historians writing about Latter-day Saint history, see the essays in George D. Smith, ed., *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

2. Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2005),

The problem of bias becomes especially apparent when dealing with polarizing subjects like religious doctrinal history. For example, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints claims to be a *revealed* religion, whose tenets have been delivered to prophets through divine inspiration and primarily constitute a restoration of the essentials of primitive Christianity (A of F 1:5–7). Obviously, these claims cannot imply that no doctrinal modifications have taken place over time. After all, the Latter-day Saint canon of revealed scripture includes the claim that there are “great and important” truths to be revealed in the future (A of F 1:9), admonishments to give allowance for “the mistakes of men” in the revelations (Book of Mormon, title page), and an instance where a prophet was surprised to learn that he had misinterpreted an earlier revelation (D&C 137:5–10; compare D&C 76:50–113). Nevertheless, believing LDS historians tend to couch doctrinal modifications over time in terms that suggest natural outgrowth from previously revealed knowledge, even though the LDS faith includes no concept of infallibility that would preclude a few surprises along the way.³ Conversely, historians with a more secular outlook tend to depict doctrinal modifications as abrupt reversals driven by environmental influences, even though ignoring the possibility of supernatural intervention does not require such an interpretation.

It takes little imagination to appreciate that this sort of behavior might stem not only from a divergence of perspective but also from a certain reluctance among historians to give any more ammunition than necessary to intellectual rivals. That is, even though it is not entirely clear from a Latter-day Saint perspective how smoothly doctrinal shifts *should* occur via continuing revelation, the narrative that abrupt, drastic changes have occurred can more easily be used by critics to depict the religion as essentially man-made. Not wanting to give the critics more ammunition than necessary, believing historians might feel at least subconscious pressure to shy away from such narratives. Historians coming from a more secular perspective, even if they feel no personal animosity toward the LDS faith, might feel subconscious pressure to distance themselves from

2; compare Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

3. “Revelations, when they have passed from God to man, and from man into his written and printed language, cannot be said to be entirely perfect, though they may be as perfect as possible under the circumstances; they are perfect enough to answer the purposes of Heaven at this time.” Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 9:310 (July 13, 1862).

the supernatural claims of the religion, and so they gravitate toward narratives that are less easily accommodated by believers.

The problem of grappling with doctrinal change is, unfortunately, not always as simple as supplying alternative interpretations for *why* and *how* people came to believe different things at different times. Rather, answering even the basic questions of who believed *what*, *when*, can become ever more difficult as the sources become more sparse and further removed from the interpreter in language, culture, and time. One might think that figuring out who believed what, when, would not be an acute problem for historians of a religion like that of the Latter-day Saints, which was founded as recently as 1830 and has always considered diligent record keeping to be a religious observance (D&C 21:1).⁴ However, this is much more difficult than many historians of LDS doctrinal history have realized because of the practice of “esotericism.”

Esotericism is the practice of keeping two sets of doctrines—an “exoteric” set meant to be understood by the general public and an “esoteric” (that is, hidden) set meant to be understood only by believers, or even a privileged subset of believers. What is more, the exoteric teachings may be deliberately crafted to make extrapolation to the esoteric doctrines difficult. For example, it is now widely recognized that esotericism was practiced in early Christianity, and when Jesus’s disciples asked him why he taught in parables, he replied that “it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given” (Matt. 13:10–11). Christian writers in the first few centuries after Christ often noted that they were in possession of an esoteric tradition handed down from the Apostles, withheld from unbelievers and rarely written down. Such esoteric teachings clearly existed,⁵ but although we can find clues about what they involved, their specific content remains largely unknown.⁶ Because of this, it is an inescapable fact that historical reconstructions of early Christian doctrinal history must involve a heavy dose of speculation and bias. Regarding the esoteric tradition in early Christianity, Methodist scholar Margaret Barker writes, “It is the unwritten nature of this tradition which proves to be the greatest problem in any investigation which relies entirely on written sources, there

4. See also Marlin K. Jensen, “There Shall Be a Record Kept among You,” *Ensign* 37, no. 12 (December 2007): 28–33.

5. Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2005), 27–45.

6. Margaret Barker, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven: Temple Symbolism in the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 76.

being nothing else to use. We can proceed only by reading between the lines and arguing from silence, always a dangerous procedure.”⁷

The bias involved is not limited to the influence of religious, political, or other points of view. In addition, historians approaching the doctrinal history of a religion that incorporates esotericism often exhibit a bias toward downplaying its importance. That is, they make the practical assumption that even if they know they are missing some information about esoteric teachings, that information probably is not critical for drawing correct conclusions about the belief system. For instance, even several decades after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls showed that Second Temple Judaism was rife with exactly the sort of esotericism practiced in early Christianity, Guy Stroumsa could write that “the existence of esoteric trends in the earliest strata of Christianity . . . [is] still ignored or played down by some scholars.”⁸ If its existence is acknowledged, it is too often viewed “almost exclusively within the context of the Hellenistic mystery cults.”⁹

Given that the whole point of esotericism is to withhold from public view the clearest and most advanced expositions of doctrine, downplaying the importance of esoteric teachings seems problematic. But how can we assess the seriousness of the problem, when the issue is one of missing information?

In this essay, I argue that the cost of ignoring esotericism when reconstructing doctrinal history is very steep indeed. To demonstrate this point, I present some examples of early Latter-day Saint doctrinal statements that, upon reflection, appear difficult to interpret correctly without referring to Joseph Smith’s documented practice of esotericism. In these cases, we actually have both the exoteric and esoteric versions of Smith’s early teaching. Among Joseph Smith’s earliest writings are the Book of Mormon and the book of Moses, a pair of documents unquestionably produced by Smith near-contemporaneously and respectively claiming to expound exoteric and esoteric teachings.

I also show that a number of historians have nevertheless proposed pathways of early Latter-day Saint doctrinal change that are demonstrably implausible, precisely because they have misunderstood the exoteric-esoteric relationship between these documents, and because

7. Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 3.

8. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 147.

9. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 149.

they have too often refused to even consider the possibility that Joseph Smith was working from a sophisticated, and perhaps even successful, plan to restore legitimately primitive aspects of early Christianity. No matter what the source of their bias, it is clear that these historians have made very serious mistakes of interpretation, with the result that they present early Church doctrinal history as much more disjointed than it actually was.

The Book of Mormon and Book of Moses as an Exoteric-Esoteric Pair

Essentially contemporaneous exoteric-esoteric pairs of religious documents written by a single author, such as the Book of Mormon and book of Moses, are exceedingly rare. (In this essay, when I refer to Joseph Smith as the “author” or “source” of these documents, I am simply referring to the fact that he is known to have dictated the text. For believers, God was also involved, but this would clearly still indicate a single source.) There are two main reasons for this rarity. First, for many groups the strategy for protecting esoteric teachings has been to transmit them orally rather than in writing. Certain traditions of the Apostles were alluded to in a number of early Christian documents, for example, but the authors uniformly expressed trepidation about writing any of them down.¹⁰ Second, groups that have produced written esoteric teachings have typically paired them with much older documents they claim contain the exoteric teachings, so that the exoteric and esoteric documents were written neither contemporaneously nor by the same author. Early Christian Gnostics, for instance, produced a number of “secret books” attributed to the Apostles (for example, the *Secret Book of James* and the *Secret Book of John*) to go along with the apostolic writings now collected in the New Testament. However, these esoteric texts were clearly not produced by the Apostles and were written decades after their supposedly exoteric counterparts.¹¹

I am aware of only one possible exception to this rule in the esoteric literature of antiquity—the *Secret Gospel of Mark*. This document survives only in two excerpts from a letter by Clement of Alexandria (late second century CE), who claimed that it was a second, “more spiritual” version of the Gospel of Mark, written by Mark himself, and which was

10. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 27–45.

11. Marvin W. Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts, Complete in One Volume* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010), 19–30, 103–32.

read in the Alexandrian church “only to those who [were] being initiated into the great mysteries.”¹² But though the majority of scholars who have written on the subject accept the letter as genuine,¹³ so little is preserved of the Secret Gospel that it is impossible to say with any certainty whether it was actually written by Mark.

There can be no doubt, however, that the Book of Mormon and book of Moses form one of these rare exoteric-esoteric pairs produced by the same source near-contemporaneously. Joseph Smith produced the text of the Book of Mormon in roughly sixty to seventy-four working days during multiple sessions over a roughly thirteen-month period in 1828–1829¹⁴ and produced the book of Moses between June 1830 and February 1831 as part of his revision of the Bible.¹⁵ There were witnesses to the production process in both cases.¹⁶ On the one hand, the Book of Mormon explicitly claims to be an exoteric text, with more knowledge to be given later to those who believe it:

And these things have I written, which are a lesser part of the things which he taught the people; and I have written them to the intent that they may be brought again unto this people, from the Gentiles, according to the words which Jesus hath spoken. And when they shall have received this, which is expedient that they should have first, to try their faith, and if it shall so be that they shall believe these things then shall the greater things be made manifest unto them. And if it so be that they will not believe these things, then shall the greater things be withheld from them, unto their condemnation. Behold, I was about to write them, all which were engraven upon the plates of Nephi, but the Lord forbade it, saying: I will try the faith of my people. (3 Ne. 26:8–11)

The book of Moses, on the other hand, contains two passages admonishing Smith not to share its contents with nonbelievers for the time

12. Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel according to Mark* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 15. I contacted Guy Stroumsa, Martin Buber Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, about this question, and he could not think of any examples other than *Secret Mark*. Guy G. Stroumsa, personal communication, October 2021.

13. Scott G. Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel: Rethinking Morton Smith's Controversial Discovery* (Waterloo, Ont., Can.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 68.

14. John W. Welch, “Timing and Translation of the Book of Mormon: ‘Days [and Hours] Never to Be Forgotten,’” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4, (2018): 11–50.

15. Robert J. Matthews, “A Plainer Translation”: *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, a History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 26–30.

16. For example, see Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981); and Matthews, “Plainer Translation,” 21–54.

being—that is, at the time it explicitly claimed to be an esoteric text. “These words were spoken unto Moses in the mount, the name of which shall not be known among the children of men. And now they are spoken unto you. Show them not unto any except them that believe. Even so. Amen” (Moses 1:42). “And these are the words which I spake unto my servant Moses, and they are true even as I will; and I have spoken them unto you. See thou show them unto no man, until I command you, except to them that believe. Amen” (Moses 4:32).

Given the *explicitly stated* status of the Book of Mormon and book of Moses as respectively exoteric and esoteric and the timing of their composition within such a short time of one another, one would think that any reconstruction of Joseph Smith’s 1830 theology ought necessarily to be based on the expectation that the book of Moses should contain clearer statements than the Book of Mormon. That is, historians should be using Moses to interpret the meaning of the Book of Mormon more than the reverse. And yet just the opposite has too often been the case.

Early Latter-Day Saint Doctrinal History

When historians construct a time line of doctrinal history from available documents, they must supply an interpretive context, and the specific context they choose is sometimes more indicative of their biases than anything else. In his influential book on the development of early Christology, for instance, Larry Hurtado criticizes the scholars of the influential “history of religions” school for assuming that “all characteristics of early Christianity (all beliefs, ethics, practices, and concepts) must have been borrowed from the surrounding religious environment,” rather than allowing sufficiently for genuinely distinctive elements within the Christian community to exert influence in the other direction. They were “heavily influenced in their historical work by their own religious preferences,” which leaned toward “theological liberalism” and a certain disdain for “religious intensity, preferring what they saw as a more urbane and dignified devotion that emphasized ethical principles over doctrine.” Given these predilections and an oversimplified view of first-century Judaism, these historians saw phenomena such as the cultic veneration of Jesus as drastic breaks from Christianity’s “parent” religion, which was explained as “merely a particular example of the syncretistic tendencies characteristic of Greco-Roman religion.” In their zeal to paint early Christian doctrinal history as a haphazard pastiche drawn from disparate sources, this school “commit[ed] a kind of ‘etymological fallacy’ by uncritically reading the meaning of a phenomenon from one

religious setting into another setting.” Hurtado cautions that “one must always study a particular religious phenomenon in the overall ‘pattern’ of each religious movement, for the overall pattern may give to the phenomenon very different significance and meaning.”¹⁷

I argue that some historians who address early Latter-day Saint doctrinal history make similar mistakes. Perhaps wishing to curb the apologetic excesses of more traditionalist believers, they portray any changes as the syncretistic adoption of disparate ideas drawn from Joseph Smith’s broader environment, resulting in a process characterized by abrupt shifts between contradictory positions. Supporting such a narrative requires pointedly ignoring much of what Joseph Smith said about what he was trying to do (restoring primitive Christianity) and how he was trying to do it (which involved esotericism).

A reasonable test of these historians’ approach, therefore, would be to compare how well it explains the historical data with the results of an approach that explicitly takes seriously Smith’s stated goals and methods. That is, I will assume that Joseph Smith actually succeeded, on some level, at tapping into the thought forms of some of the most primitive Christian groups (early Jewish Christianity) and engaged in a sophisticated program to roll out a very similar doctrinal framework by employing common methods of esotericism. If this approach explains the data in a clearly superior manner, it will at least show that my assumed interpretive context is probably closer to the truth than some others.

“Early Jewish Christianity” is difficult to precisely define,¹⁸ but in this discussion I will refer mainly to documents that Jean Daniélou, in his classic work *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, identifies as primarily drawing from Jewish apocalyptic traditions of the period, rather than Hellenistic philosophy and other influences.¹⁹ It is generally agreed that “there was a first form of Christian theology expressed in Jewish-Semitic terms”²⁰ and that “Jewish apocalyptic [was] the dominant conceptual

17. Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, 3rd ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 3, 10.

18. Richard N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 1–24.

19. Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, trans. John A. Baker (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), 7–54. Compare Barry R. Bickmore, *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Redding, Calif.: FairMormon, 2013), 261–84.

20. Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 10, emphasis in original. Compare Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, 7 vols. (New York: Dover, 1961), 1:287.

framework of earliest Christianity."²¹ Only a limited number of early Jewish-Christian documents have survived, but what we have available makes clear that Joseph Smith somehow managed to forge a surprisingly deep connection with the thought forms of the groups that produced them, whether by revelation or naturalistic means.

Modalism and the Book of Mormon

One common criticism of Joseph Smith's later theology has always been that it departs drastically from the monotheistic scruples of traditional Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, it might be surprising that a number of historians allege that Joseph Smith's original theology, recorded in the Book of Mormon, is best described as modalism,²² perhaps the most stringently monotheistic interpretation of the Christian Trinity. Modalism is the belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are a single person who is manifested in three different modes. This doctrine first appeared in the late second century CE and was popular in the third.²³ By the fourth century, it was declared heretical and has generally not been officially accepted in Christian churches since, except among a few minor groups like the Oneness Pentecostals. However, the officially accepted doctrine of the Trinity (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct Persons in one eternally unchanging, homogeneous, and indivisible Being) has always been difficult for rank-and-file Christians to understand, so "it is not surprising that a great number of Christians in mainline denominations, including Roman Catholicism, hold a modalistic conception of the Trinity, at least unconsciously."²⁴ Therefore, it is certainly conceivable for Joseph Smith to have absorbed some sort of modalistic view of God from his religious environment and inserted it

21. R. G. Hammerton-Kelly, *Pre-existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man: A Study of the Idea of Pre-existence in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 276.

22. Thomas Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone* 5, no. 4 (1980): 24–33; Melodie Moench Charles, "Book of Mormon Christology," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 81–114; Dan Vogel, "The Earliest Mormon Doctrine of God," in *Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 17–33; Boyd Kirkland, "The Development of the Mormon Doctrine of God," in Bergera, *Line upon Line*, 35–52; Kurt Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theological Evolution, 1830–1915* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000).

23. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), 115–23.

24. E. Calvin Beisner, *God in Three Persons* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1984), 18.

into the translation of the Book of Mormon. And if so, it would be hard to imagine a wider gulf between the theology taught there and Smith's later teachings.

Supporters of this interpretation typically point to Book of Mormon passages that express generic Trinitarian formulae, for example, "the Father, and . . . the Son, and . . . the Holy Ghost, which is one God" (2 Ne. 31:21), but especially to passages that equate the human body of Jesus as "the Son," and the spirit inhabiting that body as "the Father," such as Mosiah 15:1–5.

And now Abinadi said unto them: I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son—the Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son—and they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth. And thus the flesh becoming subject to the Spirit, or the Son to the Father, being one God, suffereth temptation, and yieldeth not to the temptation, but suffereth himself to be mocked, and scourged, and cast out, and disowned by his people. (Mosiah 15:1–5; compare 3 Ne. 1:14; Ether 3:14; 4:12)

But is this enough to definitively label the theology of the Book of Mormon "modalist"? Historically, modalists have appealed to similarly worded passages in the New Testament.²⁵ For instance, in John 10:30 Jesus says that "I and my Father are one," and in John 14:8–11 he says both that "he that hath seen me hath seen the Father" and "the Father . . . dwelleth in me." Before the late second century, there is no record of any modalist Christians, so how did the earlier believers interpret these passages? J. N. D. Kelly notes that premodalist Christians still held to "the ancient view that 'Father' signified the Godhead Itself"²⁶ and that the first post–New Testament Christological formulations involved variations on a sort of "Spirit Christology," the idea that "in the historical Jesus Christ the pre-existent Son of God, Who is divine spirit, united Himself with human nature."²⁷ In many of these formulations, the body of Jesus was indwelt by the divine spirit, just as a human soul inhabits the flesh. For instance, Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 170–235 CE) claimed the "*Logos* we

25. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 120.

26. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 119.

27. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 143.

know to have received a body from a virgin,”²⁸ and Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 110 C.E.) wrote that “God the Word did dwell in a human body, being within it as the Word, even as the soul also is in the body.”²⁹ As John phrased it, “The Word was made flesh” (John 1:14). Clearly, equating Jesus’s spirit with “the Father” and his body with “the Son” is not sufficient evidence to label a document “modalist.”

Indeed, at least since Matthew, Christians have applied the prophecy in Isaiah 9 to Jesus (compare Matt. 4:16 and Isa. 9:2). The Hebrew text has “for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6). Rather than including several different titles for the messianic figure, the Septuagint³⁰ has “and his name is called the Angel of Great Counsel.” This was seen by the early Christians as a simple summary of the titles in the Hebrew text, as can be seen by the following passage from Clement of Alexandria (late second century CE):

The Spirit calls the Lord Himself a child, thus prophesying by Esaias: “Lo, to us a child has been born, to us a son has been given, on whose own shoulder the government shall be; and His name has been called the Angel of great Counsel.” Who, then, is this infant child? He according to whose image we are made little children. By the same prophet is declared His greatness: “Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace; that He might fulfil His discipline: and of His peace there shall be no end.” O the great God! O the perfect child! The Son in the Father, and the Father in the Son.³¹

In other words, Clement considered it proper to call Jesus “Angel,” “God,” “Prince,” “Son,” and “Everlasting Father.” He could speak of the “Son in the Father, and the Father in the Son,” and yet Clement was no modalist.³²

28. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 10:29, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885–1896), 5:152, emphasis in original. Compare Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:9:3, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:423.

29. Ignatius, *Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians* 6, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:83.

30. That is, the second and third century BCE Greek translation of the Old Testament primarily used by the New Testament authors.

31. Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor* 1:5, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:215. Compare Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 36.

32. See Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* 4:25, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:438.

Passages about the Father “dwelling in” Jesus are at least consistent with some sort of modalism, but why did it take so long for this interpretation to occur to an appreciable number of early Christians? Two reasons for this lag were that (1) the earliest Christians did not think of the “oneness” of God in the same manner as later Christians and that (2) there are other passages in the New Testament that present serious difficulties for a modalist interpretation.

By the time the earliest modalists came on the scene in the late second century CE, the Christian concept of *what God is*, and consequently *what it means for God to be One*, was in flux. Christopher Stead asserts that the earliest concept of God for both the Jews and Christians was of a person “having a body and mind like our own, though transcending humanity in the splendour of his appearance, in his power, his wisdom, and the constancy of his care for his creatures.”³³ By the mid-second century, however, many educated Christians were adopting a description of God’s nature identical to that taught by the Greek philosophical schools—“the One” of the Middle Platonists, who was the pure essence of Mind, transcendent, immaterial, eternally existent, unchanging, and homogeneous within itself.³⁴ It became commonplace for educated Christians to defend their persecuted faith by claiming that their God was essentially the same as that believed in by most educated citizens of the empire.³⁵ Thus, the early Christian writer Tertullian (ca. 155–220 CE) could bluntly claim, “Whatever attributes therefore you require as worthy of God, must be found in the Father, who is invisible and unapproachable, and placid, and (so to speak) the God of the philosophers.”³⁶ Christians who adapted their theology to the God of the philosophers sometimes contrasted their more sophisticated views to those of the Jews and Jewish Christians. For instance, Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165 CE) chided the Jews for “fancying that the Father of all, the unbegotten God, has hands and feet, and fingers, and a soul, like a composite being.”³⁷ Origen (ca. 184–253 CE) accused the Jews of the same vice but grudgingly

33. Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120.

34. See passages from the Middle Platonist philosophers Numenius and Plutarch, quoted in Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*, trans. E. H. Gifford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 525–29.

35. Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 187–88.

36. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2:27, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:319.

37. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 114, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:256.

admitted that some Christians believed in an anthropomorphic God. He rejected these beliefs, however, as anathema to the philosophers. "The Jews indeed, but also some of our people, supposed that God should be understood as a man, that is, adorned with human members and human appearance. But the philosophers despise these stories as fabulous and formed in the likeness of poetic fictions."³⁸ Elsewhere, he confessed that the issue of God's corporeality was still an open question in Christian teaching. "For it is also to be a subject of investigation how God himself is to be understood—whether as corporeal, and formed according to some shape, or of a different nature from bodies—a point which is not clearly indicated in our teaching."³⁹

Consider how this shift in views about the nature of God would affect perceptions of both the divinity of the Son and the Divine Unity. If God and humans are not wholly disparate types of beings, the old Spirit Christology provides a coherent framework for understanding how the Son can be both truly human and truly God. That is, the Word (a spiritual being not unlike a human soul) could take on a human body and in a real sense be a human. And although the Word would not be the same person as the Father, he could nevertheless be God by virtue of belonging to the same class of being as the Father, although in a subordinate sense and by virtue of unity in will, love, and purpose with the Father. In contrast, how could adding a wrapper of human flesh to the God of the philosophers result in anything that could be called truly human? And if the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are truly God, what is to be done with the philosophers' claim that God must be completely homogeneous and indivisible?

In early Jewish-Christian circles, they appear to have equated Jesus's spirit with the archangel from earlier Jewish beliefs about the principal angelic helper to God who went before the children of Israel in the Exodus and of whom God said, "My name is in him" (Ex. 23:20–21).⁴⁰ In the visions of Hermas (late first half of the second century, brother of bishop Pius of Rome), the Holy Spirit is described as "the angel of the prophetic

38. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 3:1, in *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, The Fathers of the Church, trans. Ronald E. Heine, 142 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 71:89; compare David L. Paulsen, "Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses," *Harvard Theological Review* 83, no. 2 (1990): 105–16.

39. Origen, *De Principiis* preface:9, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:241. For a more complete discussion of these and related sources, see Paulsen, "Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity," 105–16.

40. Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 117–63.

Spirit” and Jesus as the “glorious . . . angel” or “most venerable . . . angel.”⁴¹ And although Justin Martyr had adopted an essentially Middle Platonist view of God, Robert Grant⁴² considers it likely that he was influenced by the earlier writings of Hermas when he referred to Jesus as “another God and Lord subject to the Maker of all things; who is also called an Angel.” He is “distinct from Him who made all things—numerically, I mean, not [distinct] in will.”⁴³ In another passage, Justin seemed to equate the Son and Holy Spirit with the “other” angels. “We reverence and worship [the Father] and the Son who came forth from Him and taught us these things, and the host of other good angels who are about Him and are made quite like Him, and the Prophetic Spirit.”⁴⁴ The early Jewish-Christian *Ascension of Isaiah* (second century) referred to both Jesus and the Spirit as angels: “And I saw how my Lord worshipped, and the *angel of the Holy Spirit*, and how both together praised God.”⁴⁵ The early Jewish-Christian⁴⁶ Pseudo-Clementine literature both referred to the Son as an angel and specifically claimed that the Father is similar in nature to humans.

But to the one among the archangels who is greatest, was committed the government of those who, before all others, received the worship and knowledge of the Most High God. . . . Thus the princes of the several nations are called gods. But Christ is God of princes, who is Judge of all.⁴⁷

Learn this also: The bodies of men have immortal souls, which have been clothed with the breath of God; and having come forth from God, they are of the same substance, but they are not gods. But if they are gods, then in this way the souls of all men, both those who have died, and those who are alive, and those who shall come into being, are gods. But if in a spirit of controversy you maintain that these also are gods, what great matter is it, then, for Christ to be called God? for He has only what all have.⁴⁸

41. See Richard N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (1970; Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2001), 27.

42. Robert M. Grant, *The Early Christian Doctrine of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1966), 81.

43. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 56, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:223, bracketed text in original.

44. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 6, in William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, 3 vols. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1970), 1:51.

45. *Ascension of Isaiah*, in *The Other Bible*, ed. Willis Barnstone (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 528, emphasis in original.

46. Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 55–64.

47. Peter, in *Recognitions of Clementine* 2:42, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:109.

48. Peter, in *Clementine Homilies* 16:16, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:316.

Adapting Christian theology to the God of the philosophers was no easy task, and the stage was set for centuries of theological conflict about the ways in which the Persons of the Trinity could be both One and in some sense distinct and the degree to which Jesus could be said to be truly human. Finally, it was decided that there are three distinct Persons within the Being of God, combined in such a way that the distinction is maintained without causing any division of essence,⁴⁹ and that Jesus has two natures—one a Person of the Trinity, and the other a complete humanity, including a body and a soul—somehow seamlessly combined.⁵⁰

The point I wish to make with the foregoing discussion of early Christian theology is that interpretation of the modalist-sounding statements in documents like the Book of Mormon and the Bible *has always* been dependent on the underlying concept of *what God is*. On the one hand, if the underlying concept was of a more anthropomorphic sort, it seems more likely that Joseph Smith interpreted such passages more like the early Jewish Christians. In fact, the Book of Mormon does explicitly teach an anthropomorphic concept of God. In vision, the premortal Christ explained, "Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; and man have I created after the body of my spirit; and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh" (Ether 3:16). On the other hand, the only reason for adopting a modalist interpretation would be if the underlying concept of God was an eternally unchanging, homogeneous, and indivisible spiritual essence, because otherwise there would be no reason to assume the Oneness of God implies anyone called "God" must be the same Person.

Why else would anyone bother with the mental gymnastics required to accommodate a modalist interpretation to the many *antimodalist* passages in both the Bible and the Book of Mormon?⁵¹ The New Testament, for instance, has Jesus saying that he kept his Father's commandments (John 15:10), that he "came forth from the Father" and would later "go to the Father" (John 16:28) but had "not yet ascended to [his] Father" (John 20:17), that "[his] Father is greater than [he]" (John 14:28), and that he prayed to the Father (John 17). Other passages describe "the Spirit of God" descending upon Jesus and the Father's voice coming from heaven while Jesus was on the earth (Matt. 3:13–17). And of course, there is Stephen's

49. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 252–79.

50. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 310–43.

51. For a comprehensive review of evidence for and against a modalist interpretation of the Book of Mormon, see Ari D. Bruening and David L. Paulsen, "The Development of the Mormon Understanding of God: Early Mormon Modalism and Other Myths," *FARMS Review of Books* 13, no. 2 (2001): 109–69.

vision of the risen Jesus “standing on the right hand of God” in heaven (Acts 7:56). Similarly, the Book of Mormon has Jesus claiming to have been “with the Father from the beginning” (3 Ne. 9:15), praying to the Father (3 Ne. 17:15), and going “unto the Father” by ascending to heaven (3 Ne. 26:15; compare 3 Ne. 17:4). It also includes a passage in which the preincarnate Son and the Father speak with different voices (2 Ne. 31:11–15).

In response to the criticism that antimodalistic passages preclude a modalistic interpretation of Book of Mormon theology, Dan Vogel notes that “such passages never dissuaded modalists. In view of the explicit modalistic passages in the Book of Mormon, the presence of apparent contradictions does not necessarily detract from a modalistic interpretation.”⁵² No doubt it is true that modalists have always had ways of dealing with such texts, but throughout their history they merely inherited the New Testament documents and had to creatively interpret difficult passages as they stood. In Joseph Smith’s case, however, Vogel’s position requires that Smith was the one actually producing the Book of Mormon. If Vogel were correct about Joseph Smith originally being a modalist, we would have to believe that he was too dim-witted to realize that some of the passages he was dictating contradicted his theology. Vogel might object that Smith was merely parroting similar passages in the New Testament, but there is a compelling reason to believe both that he was paying attention to apparent contradictions and that he would not have felt constrained to parrot antimodalist passages from the Bible. Within months of publishing the Book of Mormon and organizing a church, Joseph Smith began his new “translation” of the Bible, in which he corrected what he saw as errors and omissions and changed wording for clarity.

This brings us to the book of Moses, which comprises the opening chapters of Smith’s revision of the Bible. In this document, God describes to Moses a pre-earthly conversation between the Father, the Son, and Satan, the latter two of which appear to be presented as *angels*, both vying to become the Savior of mankind.

And I, the Lord God, spake unto Moses, saying: That Satan, whom thou hast commanded in the name of mine Only Begotten, is the same which was from the beginning, and he came before me, saying—Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor. But, behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever. (Moses 4:1–2)

52. Vogel, “The Earliest Mormon Doctrine of God,” in Bergera, *Line upon Line*, 24.

The difficulties involved in imposing a modalistic interpretation on Moses 4:1–2 are both obvious and profound, which illustrates a problem I mentioned above. If the Book of Mormon explicitly claims to be an exoteric document, with more information to come for those who believe (3 Ne. 26:8–11), and the near-contemporaneous book of Moses explicitly claims to be an esoteric document meant to give further enlightenment only to believers, why would historians not give priority to Moses for interpreting the Book of Mormon, rather than vice versa? Proponents of the modalist interpretation have sometimes gone to extraordinary lengths to shunt aside such passages from Moses. For instance, Kurt Widmer dismisses a similar passage in Moses as a “minor [reference],” and “a Christian interpolation.”⁵³ Similarly to Vogel, Widmer apparently envisages Joseph Smith clumsily inserting biblical phrases that *flatly contradicted his theology* into a text he was producing as part of *an effort to harmonize the Bible with his theology*.

Monotheism and Subordinationism

Drawing on the work of Vogel, Widmer, and others, Charles Harrell describes the history of Latter-day Saint theology as beginning with “a lay trinitarianism with elements of both orthodox and modal trinitarianism using language that is mixed and sometimes inconsistent” in the Book of Mormon. Harrell explains that in 1830 “the Prophet began differentiating more clearly between the Father and the Son,” evidently referring to Moses 4:1–2. However, he assigns to the earlier trinitarian/modalist/inconsistent period a March 1830 revelation identifying Christ as “God, the greatest of all” (D&C 19:18) and an 1831–1832 passage⁵⁴ from Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible in which Jesus said, “No man knoweth that the Son is the Father, and the Father is the Son” (JST, Luke 10:22). By 1834–1835, this allegedly morphed into a “binitarian” theology in the *Lectures on Faith*, which explains that “there are two personages who constitute the . . . supreme . . . power over all things. . . . They are the Father and the Son . . . possessing the same mind, . . . which mind is the Holy Spirit, . . . and these three constitute the godhead, and are one.” By 1841, Joseph Smith was “leaning toward social trinitarianism, which considers members of the godhead to be distinct individuals who are one only in purpose, and not in substance,” with a statement that “the three were separate bod[ies].” But back in 1839, Smith had “hinted that there may be”

53. Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of God*, 45.

54. Matthews, “*Plainer Translation*,” 30–34.

multiple gods in Doctrine and Covenants 121:28, which says that at some future time it would be revealed “whether there be one God or many gods.” Finally, in 1844, the Prophet allegedly “repudiated” trinitarianism by saying that the godhead is “3 distinct personages & 3 Gods,” which Harrell calls “tritheistic.”⁵⁵

This reconstruction of early Church doctrinal history is difficult to defend. Harrell imposes a series of dubiously applicable technical terms on Joseph Smith’s language to manufacture contradiction and fails to take seriously anything Smith explicitly claimed he was about. If the Book of Mormon identifies the Son with the Father but sometimes uses language that is “inconsistent” with a modalist interpretation, then perhaps we should reject the modalist label and adopt another interpretation. If the identification of the Son with the Father must be taken in a strictly literal sense as referring to their “Being,” however, why would Smith only a few months later begin “differentiating more clearly between the Father and the Son” by depicting the pre-Incarnate Son as obviously both separate from, and subordinate to, the Father (Moses 4:1–2) but then in 1831–1832 once again identify the Son as the Father? As I explained above, making this connection merely involves taking seriously the explicit claims in the Book of Mormon and book of Moses to be exoteric and esoteric documents, respectively. Moving on, if Moses is accepted as the clearer of the two, what is the difference between its depiction of the Father and Son and their depiction a few years later in the *Lectures on Faith* as “two personages” unified with the Holy Spirit in one godhead? Certainly the 1839–1844 descriptions of the Holy Spirit as a distinct “personage” or “body” express a different understanding than that in the *Lectures on Faith*, but given the data from Moses 4:1–2, why is the earlier expression described as binitarianism instead of “social” binitarianism?⁵⁶ Furthermore, if “social trinitarianism” is the idea that the three personages of the Godhead are “distinct individuals who are one only in purpose, and not in substance,” how is that anything but superficially different than calling them “3 Gods” if they were always conceived as operating in complete harmony of will and purpose? Some may still resist my

55. Charles R. Harrell, “*This Is My Doctrine*”: *The Development of Mormon Theology* (Sandy, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 114.

56. Bruening and Paulsen argue that other evidence indicates Joseph Smith did, in fact, consider the Holy Spirit as a distinct entity at that time. See Bruening and Paulsen, “Development of the Mormon Understanding of God,” 133–39. Whatever label we put on it, however, it seems likely that the *Lectures on Faith* were describing something different than the later LDS understanding of the Holy Spirit.

insistence that, almost from the beginning, Moses 4:1–2 provided a critical key to harmonizing all this data, but if Joseph Smith was not involved in any sort of planned rollout of gradually clearer doctrinal statements, then what was he doing “hinting” (as Harrell put it) in 1839 that there may be “many gods”?

If we do prioritize the description of the Father and Son in Moses 4:1–2, however, we can summarize the entire progression of Joseph Smith’s theology with a single term—“monarchic monotheism.” Some might wonder how language like “3 Gods” or “many gods” can possibly be equated with “monotheism.” However, a number of scholars have convincingly shown that an overly monistic definition of monotheism (that is, God as a single “being” or “substance”) is inconsistent with what is known of ancient Judaism and Israelite religion, in which God was pictured as an absolute monarch, but a variety of heavenly beings (angels) within God’s retinue, including “principal agent” figures, shared many of God’s attributes and powers and sometimes were even given God’s name (YHWH), called “gods,” or conflated with the One God. Some scholars, such as Peter Hayman in his article “Monotheism—a Misused Word in Jewish Studies?”⁵⁷ and Margaret Barker in her book *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God*,⁵⁸ argue that “monotheism” should not be used to describe such beliefs. Others, such as Larry Hurtado in his article “What Do We Mean by ‘First-Century Jewish Monotheism?’” argue that since the Jews claimed they worshipped the “One God,” then in some sense they were “monotheists,” whether or not this more monarchic type of monotheism (any number of divine beings acting under the direction of one monarch) satisfies later definitions.⁵⁹ Clearly, when Joseph Smith wrote in 1839 of the “Council of the Eternal God of all other gods” (D&C 121:32), he had something very similar in mind.

This is not to say that there was perfect agreement about the degree of similarity between God and the angels. Rabbinic Jews of the period argued forcefully against a number of “Two Powers” heresies, including Christianity, which they considered to have elevated one or more

57. A. Peter Hayman, “Monotheism—a Misused Word in Jewish Studies?,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42, no. 1 (1991): 1–5.

58. Barker, *Great Angel*, 70–73.

59. Larry W. Hurtado, “What Do We Mean by ‘First-Century Jewish Monotheism?’” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1993 Seminar Papers*, ed. E. H. Lovering Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 348–68. Compare Larry W. Hurtado, “First-Century Jewish Monotheism,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 71 (1998): 3–26; and Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*.

principal angelic figures too close to the One God.⁶⁰ For example, in 3 *Enoch*, a fifth- or sixth-century CE Jewish apocalypse,⁶¹ the exalted Enoch⁶² and several other angels are given the name “YHWH”⁶³ and stand “before Him who is exalted above all gods.”⁶⁴ Enoch originally had a great throne before the door to God’s throne room, but a visitor saw him and exclaimed, “There are indeed two powers in heaven!” In response to this misunderstanding, God sent another angel to publicly give Enoch sixty lashes with a fiery whip and force him to stand up from his throne.⁶⁵ The early Christian version of God was apparently more relaxed about such things, however, given that John depicted Jesus as sitting on God’s throne (Rev. 7:17) and promised Jesus’s followers that they would be given the divine name (Rev. 3:12) and sit with Jesus on God’s throne (Rev. 3:21).

As I pointed out above, it was common in early Jewish Christianity to refer to the premortal Christ as the chief archangel, who was given the name of God (YHWH) and was sometimes even called a “second god.” Although early Christian writers expressed a number of variations on this theme as they accommodated their theology to the “god of the philosophers,” one thing remained constant. That is, aside from the modalists, all of them expressed some form of subordinationism—the idea that the Son and Holy Spirit are subordinate to the Father in rank and glory. R. P. C. Hanson writes that “until Athanasius began writing, every single theologian, East and West, had postulated some form of Subordinationism. It could, about the year 300, have been described as a fixed part of catholic theology.”⁶⁶ J. N. D. Kelly notes that even at the Council of Nicea, the largest party present believed “that there are three divine hypostases [or ‘persons’], separate in rank and glory but united in harmony of will.”⁶⁷

60. Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1977).

61. P. Alexander, “3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 1:229.

62. 3 *Enoch* 4:1–3, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 258.

63. 3 *Enoch* 10:3–4 and 12:5, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 264–65.

64. 3 *Enoch* 15B:1, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 303.

65. 3 *Enoch* 16, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 268.

66. R. P. C. Hansen, “The Achievement of Orthodoxy in the Fourth Century AD,” in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 153.

67. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 247–48.

To this point, it is clear that, whatever the process involved, Joseph Smith was relatively successful at restoring some points of theology that would have been at home in the most primitive strata of Christianity. Shortly before his death, however, he expressed the belief that God the Father was himself once a man, with his own Father in Heaven, and so on.⁶⁸ Such beliefs are not known to have existed in early Christianity, except perhaps among some Christian Gnostic groups,⁶⁹ although Smith’s revelations claimed God would reveal truths that had been “kept hid from before the foundation of the world” (D&C 124:41). In any case, even this more extreme version of a “many gods” theology is consistent with the “monarchic monotheism” label, if we keep in mind the perfect functional oneness that is supposed to prevail in the heavenly realm. Consider the following comments given by Brigham Young after Smith’s death:

If men are faithful, the time will come when they will possess the power and the knowledge to obtain, organize, bring into existence, and own. “What, of themselves, independent of their Creator?” No. But they and their Creator will always be one, they will always be of one heart and of one mind, working and operating together; for whatsoever the Father doeth so doeth the son, and so they continue throughout all their operations to all eternity.⁷⁰

When will we become entirely independent? Never, though we are as independent in our spheres as the Gods of eternity are in theirs.⁷¹

Then will be given to us that which we now only seem to own, and we will be forever one with the Father and the Son, and not until then.⁷²

Is he one? Yes. Is his trinity one? Yes. Is his organization one? Are the heavens one? Yes.⁷³

68. See “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton,” 13, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 7, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-william-clayton/3>; see also Harrell, “*This Is My Doctrine*,” 114–15.

69. For instance, Irenaeus of Lyons criticized Gnostic tendency to speculate about what God was doing before he created the earth and warned against “starting the question whether there is another God above God.” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2:28, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:399–402.

70. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:304 (June 3, 1855).

71. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:190 (September 30, 1860).

72. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:106 (January 5, 1860).

73. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 14:92 (April 8, 1871).

Here, in a practical sense there has never been anything other than “One God,” and there will never be any more than “One God,” no matter how many “personages” (that is, “gods” or “Gods”) are identified with the “One God.” This sort of “oneness” is consistent with the *only* passage in the New Testament where the mode of divine unity is given any explanation. Jesus prays to the Father that his followers “all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us” (John 17:21). According to this, the divine unity is qualitatively identical to the kind of “oneness” humans can share with each other, and with God.

Of course, one might object that mainstream Christians have long interpreted this passage in a metaphorical sense—that the Divine Unity is perhaps *analogous* to the ways in which humans can be “one” with each other and God, but it isn’t *the same*. However, this clearly illustrates the problem at hand. Human language is full of terms that are used both literally and metaphorically, and it is rare for people to speak so precisely as to always make it clear to cultural outsiders or future historians which they intend. If we take figuratively the passages in the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible that identify the Son with the Father and passages stating that God is “One,” then we are only applying common idioms—for example, when Rameses tells Moses, “I am Egypt!” in the 1998 animated movie *The Prince of Egypt*, or when Jesus prayed that all his followers would “be one.” And once these interpretive choices are made, it is a simple matter to frame Joseph Smith’s theology as a progression of ideas that all fit into a single, broad category—monarchic monotheism. In contrast, Harrell, Vogel, and the others must figuratively interpret much more complex passages (for example, Moses 4:1–2, which is clearly a three-way conversation between the Father, the pre-Incarnate Son, and Satan) and implicitly impose a definition of God as some indivisible essence that Joseph Smith explicitly rejected in the Book of Mormon to arrive at an interpretation of early Latter-day Saint theology as a series of contradictions.

Premortal Existence of Souls

The tug-of-war over which language should be interpreted literally or figuratively continues with respect to the introduction of the Restoration doctrine of the premortal existence of souls. It is generally acknowledged that some version of this doctrine is articulated in the book of Moses, where God says he “created all things . . . spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth” (Moses 3:5), and God tells Adam that “I made the world, and men before they were in the flesh” (Moses

6:51). The doctrine is not as clearly presented in the Book of Mormon, however, so rather than interpreting relevant Book of Mormon passages in light of the book of Moses, some historians again assume there was a seismic shift in Joseph Smith's beliefs about the origin of souls over the course of a few months in 1830. Charles Harrell, for instance, writes that when the Book of Mormon says that anciently, priests were "called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works" (Alma 13:3), it is simply parroting an "early nineteenth century Free Will Baptist idea" that people are elected to salvation based on God's foreknowledge of their future faith and good works. In support of his conclusion that premortal existence of souls is not taught at all in the Book of Mormon, Harrell quotes Latter-day Saint Apostle Orson Pratt saying that, were it not for subsequent revelations, "I do not think that I should have ever discerned" the doctrine of premortal existence in the Book of Mormon.⁷⁴ However, Harrell leaves out the passage Pratt used to argue that the doctrine is clearly implied: "Yea, even all men were created in the beginning after mine own image" (Ether 3:15). If God created "all men . . . in the beginning," then how are we to avoid positing some sort of doctrine of premortal existence of souls? Obviously, this is another case where ignoring the *explicitly stated* exoteric-esoteric pairing of the Book of Mormon and book of Moses leads to serious mistakes interpreting early Latter-day Saint doctrinal history.

Given the Book of Mormon characterization of Jesus as God, having a premortal spirit with an intrinsically anthropomorphic spirit "body" (Ether 3:16), the account of the premortal spiritual creation in Moses reinforces the view that Joseph Smith's later teachings about God's essential similarity to humans (for example, D&C 93:1, 22) were broadly consistent with his earliest theology. Applying this backdrop, including the doctrine of premortal existence in Moses, to Book of Mormon passages like Ether 3:15 can provide greater clarity. For example, consider Nephi's account of Lehi's vision at the very beginning of the Book of Mormon.

And being thus overcome with the Spirit, he was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God. And it came to pass that he saw one⁷⁵ descending out of the midst of heaven, and

74. Harrell, "This Is My Doctrine," 207; compare Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Preexistence in Mormon Thought," in Bergera, *Line upon Line*, 127–44.

75. "One" was not capitalized in the 1830 edition but is in the current edition.

he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day. And he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament. And they came down and went forth upon the face of the earth. (1 Ne. 1:8–11)

Interpreted in light of the depiction in Moses of Jesus as the principal angelic helper to the Father (Moses 4:1–2) and of the spiritual creation of human souls, passages like this take on greater possible meaning. Was this a vision of the premortal Jesus and his Apostles, or perhaps of the twelve disciples chosen to represent Jesus among the Nephites? The text does not say who the one and the twelve were supposed to represent, but a little later Nephi recounted one of his own visions, in which he saw the mortal Jesus ministering in Palestine and “twelve others following him” (1 Ne. 11:27–29). Nephi was next shown “angels descending upon the children of men” to minister (11:30) and the rest of Jesus’s mortal ministry (11:31–33). He then saw “the multitudes of the earth” and “the house of Israel . . . gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (11:34–36). Finally, he witnessed Jesus descend from heaven to minister to Nephi’s descendants and choose twelve representatives there as well. “And I saw the heavens open, and the Lamb of God descending out of heaven; and he came down and showed himself unto them. And I also saw and bear record that the Holy Ghost fell upon twelve others; and they were ordained of God, and chosen” (12:6–7). This parallel account is at least strongly suggestive of who the one and the twelve in Lehi’s vision were supposed to be. In fact, surveying all the other occurrences of the number “twelve” in the Book of Mormon, I found only three incidental mentions of “twelve years” (Mosiah 9:11), “twelve days” (Mosiah 24:25), and twelve sons and daughters (Ether 6:20), whereas all the others refer to the twelve Apostles, the twelve Nephite disciples, or the twelve Apostles judging the twelve tribes of Israel (1 Ne. 11–14; Morm. 3; 3 Ne. 12–13, 15, 19). If there was any purpose at all for mentioning the heavenly descent of the one and the twelve in Lehi’s vision, the Book of Mormon provides very limited options for interpretation.

Once again, we find that the doctrine of premortal existence of souls was taught in early Jewish Christianity. In the *Clementine Recognitions*, for instance, Peter told Clement of Rome that “after all these things He made man, on whose account He had prepared all things, whose internal species is older, and for whose sake all things that are were made.”⁷⁶

76. *Recognitions of Clement* 1:28, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:85.

It turns out that this was part of the esoteric tradition of the Jewish-Christian group that produced the document, just as it was first clearly introduced to Latter-day Saint teachings in the esoteric book of Moses. Elsewhere in the *Recognitions*, when the arch-heretic Simon Magus confronted Peter with the question of the origin of souls, Peter said, "You seem to me not to know what a father and a God is: but I could tell you both whence souls are, and when and how they were made; but it is not permitted to me now to disclose these things to you, who are in such error in respect of the knowledge of God."⁷⁷

Charles Harrell and Blake Ostler⁷⁸ separately argue that the New Testament, and even the book of Moses, only supports a doctrine of preexistence involving the corporate or "ideal" existence of mankind in the mind of God. For example, Paul taught that God promised eternal life "before the world began" (Titus 1:2), and the early Jewish Christian *Shepherd of Hermas* (late first half of the second century) claimed the church "was created first of all. . . . And for her sake was the world made."⁷⁹ In the case of Moses, this interpretation seems unlikely, given that it describes the Lord telling Cain that he was "also before the world" (Moses 5:24). As for the Book of Mormon, if we accept that 1 Nephi 1:8–11 refers to the descent from heaven of Jesus and his Apostles, a merely corporate preexistence seems out of the question. In any case, the idea of an ideal preexistence of souls is not mutually exclusive of real preexistence as individual entities, so if the *Clementine Recognitions* was correct that a real preexistence was part of the earliest Christian esoteric tradition, it would explain why it seems only weakly attested in the New Testament and why by the early third century Origen could report that there was no clear teaching about the origin of the soul in the church of that time.⁸⁰

In fact, the most striking references to the real premortal existence of human souls come from Jewish and early Jewish Christian apocalyptic literature—accounts of prophets who temporarily ascended to heaven,

77. *Recognitions of Clement* 2:60, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:114.

78. Harrell, "This Is My Doctrine," 207; Ostler, "The Idea of Preexistence in Mormon Thought," 127–44.

79. *The Pastor of Hermas*, Vision 2:4, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:12. Compare "Moreover, the books and the Apostles declare that the Church belongs not to the present, but existed from the beginning." 2 *Clement* 14:2, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Robert M. Grant and Holt H. Graham, 6 vols. (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1965), 2:126.

80. Origen, *De Principiis* preface:5, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:240.

which Daniélou identifies as the locus of the early esoteric traditions.⁸¹ For example, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (a first-century Jewish document likely modified by a Jewish Christian group and first published in 1863⁸²) depicts Abraham's vision of the premortal spirits of humanity standing before God. The scene is joltingly similar to Abraham's vision of premortal humanity in Joseph Smith's book of Abraham (ch. 3).

And everything I had planned to be came into being: it was already pre-figured in this, for all *the things and all the people* you have seen stood before me before they were created. And I said, Mighty and Eternal Ruler, who then are the people in this picture on this side and on that? And he said to me, Those on the left side are the many peoples which have existed in the past, and after you are appointed, some for judgment *and* restoration, some for vengeance *and* perdition, until the end of the age. And those on the right side of the picture, they are the people set apart for me from the people with Azazel [Satan]. These are the people who are going to spring from you and will be called my people.⁸³

2 *Enoch* (Jewish with probable Christian interpolations, written perhaps as early as the first century CE⁸⁴) states that "all souls are prepared to eternity, before the formation of the world"⁸⁵ and specifies that the premortal Adam was an angel. "And I placed him on earth, a second angel, honorable, great and glorious, and I appointed him as ruler to rule on earth and to have my wisdom, and there was none like him of earth of all my existing creatures. . . . I called his name Adam."⁸⁶ In support of his own belief in a real premortal existence of souls, the early third-century Christian theologian Origen quoted a Jewish apocryphal document called the *Prayer of Joseph*, which depicts the patriarch Jacob saying, "I am an

81. "Jewish apocalyptic was, in other words, a gnosis. It was made up of information about the hidden realities of the heavenly world and the ultimate secrets of the future. These revelations on the fringe of the canonical scripture were put under the patronage of the ancient sages, Noah, Enoch or Abraham. The Christians adopted the same method." Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 26.

82. H. F. D. Sparks, ed., *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 363–67.

83. *The Apocalypse of Abraham* 22, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 384, emphasis in original.

84. Harry Alan Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Nature in Romans 8.19–22 and Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 83–86.

85. *Secrets of Enoch* 23:5, in R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 2:444.

86. *Secrets of Enoch* 30:11–12, in Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, 2:449.

angel of God, a ruling spirit, and Abraham and Isaac were created before every work of God."⁸⁷ In this context, the account of Peter's escape from prison in Acts 12 may be significant. When Peter showed up at the home of Mark's mother, a girl named Rhoda saw him and ran in to tell the other Christians that Peter was standing at the gate. "And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel" (Acts 12:15). The most straightforward interpretation of this passage is that they thought Peter was dead (probably because he had been imprisoned and James had recently been executed) and were referring to his disembodied spirit as "his angel." Joseph Smith, in his later theology (for example, see D&C 129:1-3), classified angels as either pre-mortal or postmortal humans. It appears to me that it was most common in Jewish and Jewish-Christian apocalyptic to treat humans and angels as nonidentical categories, but the examples above clearly show that the categories were thought to overlap, at least. Just as we found with the early Spirit Christology, the early Jewish Christians must have thought of the spirits of humans, angels, and Jesus as in some sense interchangeable.

The "Overall Pattern" of Joseph Smith's Theology

Throughout this essay, I have been arguing that some historians exaggerate discontinuities in Joseph Smith's early theological expansion by imposing an interpretive substrate that was actually foreign to his way of thinking. What was the "overall pattern" (as Hurtado called it) of Smith's theology that is needed to understand the meaning of his writings? I would summarize this pattern as the idea that, while God is far beyond humans in every way, the distance between God and his creations is not the unbridgeable gulf traditional Christianity posits. Christ's divine spirit is human in form (Ether 3:16), and when he became incarnate as a human, this merely involved placing the divine spirit in a human body (Mosiah 15:1-5; Ether 3:14). Although the Son is clearly a separate person subordinate to the Father (2 Ne. 31:11-15; Moses 4:1-2), their relationship is one of such profound unity that it is entirely appropriate to conflate the titles of the two beings (Mosiah 15:1-5; JST Luke 10:22) and refer to them (with the Holy Spirit) as "one God" (2 Ne. 31:21). Just as Christ existed premortally as a spirit, human spirits were also created before the world began (Ether 3:15; Moses 3:5; 5:24; 6:51). *All* of these ideas are found in the Book of Mormon, although some are made clearer by the

87. Origen, *Commentary on John* 2:25, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 9:341.

book of Moses. After 1830, all major additions to Joseph Smith's theology (doctrines about the nature of God) were merely expansions of this theme. For example, by 1832 Smith was teaching that exalted humans would become "gods" (D&C 76:58–59) and later gave more specific information about what that might entail (for example, D&C 132:20, 63). By 1833, Joseph Smith was teaching at least the bare essentials of the idea that both matter and souls are uncreated (D&C 93), further narrowing the gap between Creator and creature.

Once again, analogues of these later additions can be traced back to early Jewish Christianity. For instance, the earliest Christians almost certainly assumed creation *ex materia* (out of preexisting material), because there is no solid evidence that anyone believed in creation *ex nihilo* (out of absolute nothingness) until well into the second century CE. Genesis posits creation from a sort of watery chaos, consistent with the creation myths of other ancient cultures. "In the beginning of creation . . . the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss, and a mighty wind that swept over the surface of the waters" (Gen. 1:1–2, New English Bible). This belief was repeated in the New Testament, where Peter wrote that "there were heavens and earth long ago, created by God's word out of water and with water" (2 Pet. 3:5, New English Bible). There are a few passages in the New Testament that could be consistent with *ex nihilo* creation, such as "God . . . summons things that are not yet in existence as if they already were" (Rom. 4:17, New English Bible). However, Gerhard May and others have pointed out several examples of ancient authors who wrote of creation "out of nothing" or "out of non-being," but they also specifically mentioned creation from unformed matter. In other words, they used terms like "nothing" in a more mundane sense than "absolute nothingness." There are no examples of statements explicitly indicating creation from absolute nothingness until the mid-second century CE, with the Gnostics, Basilides, and the Christian apologist Tatian.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, several second-century Christian writers explicitly taught *ex materia* creation.⁸⁹ David Winston suggests that Christian

88. Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 83; compare Hayman, "Monotheism—a Misused Word in Jewish Studies?," 1–5; Jonathan Goldstein, "The Origins of the Doctrine of Creation Ex Nihilo," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 35, no. 2 (1984): 127–35; Jonathan Goldstein, "Creation Ex Nihilo: Recantations and Restatements," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38, no. 2 (1987): 187–94; David Winston, "Creation Ex Nihilo Revisited: A Reply to Jonathan Goldstein," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 37, no. 1 (1986): 88–91.

89. Frances Young, "'Creatio ex Nihilo': A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991): 139–51.

thinkers from the late second century onward readily adopted creation *ex nihilo* because it provided a powerful argument against the extreme Gnostic position that matter is not just a lower reality than the world of Mind, as the Platonists taught, but actually *evil*.⁹⁰

Similarly, the deification of the faithful was taught by nearly everyone within early Christianity.⁹¹ For instance, in the late second century, Irenaeus of Lyons wrote that we are "at first merely men, then at length gods"⁹² and that Jesus Christ became "what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."⁹³ What exactly this meant to different Christian writers varied widely, especially after the widespread adoption of *ex nihilo* creation, which posits an unbridgeable ontological gap between God and everything else. Before anyone is known to have explicitly taught creation *ex nihilo*, however, New Testament writers provided some of the most powerful affirmations of human deification. As discussed above, humans were depicted being given the divine name (Rev. 3:12) and sitting with Jesus on God's throne (Rev. 3:21). The faithful were to become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet.1:4), "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17). Human deification was also taught in some strands of Judaism during that period; for example, one fragment in the Dead Sea Scrolls has a clearly human speaker claiming that he had been granted "a mighty throne in the congregation of the gods" and was to be "reckoned with the gods."⁹⁴

Implications

Georg Iggers had the following to say about the problem of "objectivity" in history.

Peter Novick has in my opinion rightly maintained that objectivity is unattainable in history; the historian can hope for nothing more than plausibility. But plausibility obviously rests not on the arbitrary invention of an historical account but involves rational strategies of determining what in fact is plausible. It assumes that the historical account relates to a historical reality, no matter how complex and indirect the process is by which the historian approximates this reality. Thus, although many

90. Winston, "Creation Ex Nihilo Revisited," 89.

91. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 469.

92. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4:38:4, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:522.

93. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5:Preface, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:526.

94. Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 49.

historians have taken contemporary linguistic, semiotic, and literary theory seriously, they have in practice not accepted the idea that the texts with which they work have no reference to reality. To be sure every historical account is a construct, but a construct arising from a dialog between the historian and the past, one that does not occur in a vacuum but within a community of inquiring minds who share criteria of plausibility.⁹⁵

In this essay, I have shown that the problem of objectivity is sometimes exacerbated for historians approaching religious texts to reconstruct doctrinal history. Even if we discard the postmodernist notion that the texts “have no reference to reality,” it is evident that religions practicing esotericism may produce texts in which the full reality of the belief system is intentionally obscured. And when this is the case, historians should proceed with caution, or risk serious errors of interpretation.

There can be no doubt that from the beginning Joseph Smith *claimed* he was employing esotericism to gradually roll out a theological framework that emphasizes the relatedness of God and humankind, and I have shown that this claim is well founded. After all, well-informed historians can evidently read the Book of Mormon and come away believing that God creating “all men . . . in the beginning” (Ether 3:15) cannot refer to any sort of premortal existence of souls and that conflating the Father and Son *must* refer to a strange variant of modalism, even if Joseph Smith made such statements both before and after directly contradicting a modalist interpretation. What further proof is needed that Joseph Smith was actually successful at obscuring teachings that were only meant to be encountered head-on *after* reading and believing the Book of Mormon (3 Ne. 26:8–11)?

The problem of objectivity is further exacerbated by the fact that, at least when approaching the doctrinal history of a religion that still has adherents in the community of historians, it is difficult to achieve complete agreement about shared “criteria of plausibility.” Even if believing and nonbelieving historians can agree, for practical reasons,⁹⁶ to forego explicit appeals to supernatural explanations in their professional writing, their belief or nonbelief in the actual possibility of such things most certainly affects which naturalistic narratives they consider “plausible.” For example, I have shown here that Joseph Smith introduced point after

95. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, 145.

96. See Barry R. Bickmore and David A. Grandy, “Science as Storytelling,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2014): 37–60.

theological point that can be found in the writings of early Jewish-Christian sects, using a strategy (esotericism) also employed by these ancient groups. Given that he explicitly claimed to be enacting a Restoration of primitive Christianity and to be employing esotericism, this naturally leads to the conclusion that Smith's Restoration proceeded according to a fairly sophisticated strategy, based on a coherent set of ideas. As a believer, I found the idea that Smith could have been largely successful at such a program plausible from the outset, precisely because I accept the possibility of supernatural intervention.

It is not as if supernatural explanations are an absolute requirement to explain the data, however. Smith could not have had access to most of the early Jewish Christian sources I have cited, but there are some more or less plausible sources in Joseph Smith's environment that historians can use to naturalistically explain the origin of many of his ideas. For example, although the vast majority of Christians in early nineteenth-century America believed God creates human souls around the time of birth, Charles Harrell quotes an 1825 Presbyterian magazine article and an 1804 book by a Methodist preacher that taught the premortal existence of souls.⁹⁷ Similarly, Harrell finds that there were a number of Christian primitivist groups at the time who believed God the Father is a spirit with a human form⁹⁸ and points to Unitarians as examples of those teaching a subordinationist Christology.⁹⁹ The scientific consensus in Joseph Smith's day was that matter is indestructible, and some early nineteenth-century Christians had adopted the view that God's creation was *ex materia*, against the orthodox Christian belief in creation *ex nihilo*.¹⁰⁰ For instance, Joseph Priestley wrote in 1777 that there are "two distinct things, or *principles*, [which] had been from eternity, viz. *matter* and *Spirit*."¹⁰¹ Joseph Smith could easily have derived his views on human deification from the Bible or, far less likely, some contact with Eastern Orthodoxy. Therefore, there is no compelling reason why the historians I have critiqued in this essay could not have constructed naturalistic narratives of early Latter-day Saint doctrinal development that acknowledge the basic coherence of Smith's thought over

97. Harrell, "This Is My Doctrine," 206.

98. Harrell, "This Is My Doctrine," 135.

99. Harrell, "This Is My Doctrine," 137.

100. Harrell, "This Is My Doctrine," 231–33.

101. Joseph Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (London: J. Johnson, 1777), 177, emphasis in original.

time and the fact that he developed legitimate insight into primitive forms of Christianity.

I contend that these historians have not considered such narratives precisely because of the opening they might create for believers to point to them as evidence for their supernatural beliefs. That is, the idea that Smith drew in all the ideas discussed from such disparate sources as those just mentioned to form a coherent theology that would have been at home within primitive Jewish-Christian sects seems wildly improbable. And if historians point to someone like Smith as the sort of “genius” who occasionally accomplishes wildly improbable things, it is guaranteed that believers will latch onto this as evidence for divine inspiration.

At this point, I should note that the point of this essay has not been to promote appeals to esotericism as a method to minimize any apparent shifts in doctrine over time. Here I have examined an extremely rare type of case, in which we have near-contemporaneous exoteric and esoteric documents unquestionably dictated by the same religious figure. In this specific case, we have the necessary data to show that some historians have misinterpreted the history of early Church doctrine by ignoring this relationship between the documents. It is very likely that the same dynamic was not in play for other important doctrinal changes, and any claims to the contrary would necessarily be speculative in the absence of documentary evidence. However, the case of early Restoration doctrinal history should serve as a caution to historians who want to assume they can successfully reconstruct the doctrinal history of religious groups that explicitly claimed to employ esotericism. If, even when the esoteric teachings are known, historians can badly misinterpret the content of the doctrines themselves, it is virtually guaranteed that this will happen in cases where the esoteric teachings are incompletely known.

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