

**LATTER DAY ATHEISTS: THE PROBLEM OF
OMNIPOTENCE IN MORMON THEOLOGY**

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Introduction

Mormons have taken steps to brand themselves as mainstream Christians. From recent statements by Jimmy Carter to the primary campaign of Mitt Romney, Mormonism is undergoing an extreme faith makeover. Despite these attempts to mainstream, I wish to argue Mormonism isn't a theistic religion and thus cannot be Christian.

In classical theism, God is the greatest conceivable being, possessing omnipotence, omnipresence, eternality, freedom, aseity, and omniscience. In the western tradition, the minimal properties a being must possess to be considered God include omniscience, omnipotence, and freedom. Far from being the greatest possible being of Christianity, the Mormon deity isn't a God in the classical sense. Mormon apologists will grant this, but I hope to show that the Mormon deity cannot be a God according to the standards set forth in Mormonism. The critical issue will be the attribute of omnipotence.

In this paper, I will argue that the Mormon deity fails to be God because the property of omnipotence, among other biblical attributes in the classical tradition, cannot be instantiated by more than one being. Much has been written on the fact that the God of Mormonism isn't an eternally existing being but rather has undergone a transformation into godhood through a process called eternal progression.

This article will bypass two issues pertinent to the discussion of Mormon theism; eternality and the relation between Christian theism and Greek philosophy. In the 1996 article "Are Mormon's Theists?" A.A. Howsepian argued that the Mormon God isn't worthy of worship because a being X is only a proper object of worship if X has always been a proper object of worship.¹ Because Mormons believe in eternal progression, God has not always been a proper object of worship.

In a rejoinder article, Mormon lawyer and philosopher Blake T. Ostler² suggests that the Anselmian notion of God as the greatest conceivable being or maximally perfect being is in need of alteration.³ While God cannot be surpassed by any being distinct from God, Ostler contends that he can be surpassed by his own potentiality. This article is problematic for three reasons.

First, Ostler's Whiteheadian notion that God can self-surpass negates the very notion of perfection. If God is perfect there is no point such that God needs to change,

1 A. A. Howsepian, "Are Mormons Theists?" *Religious Studies* 32 (1996), 370.

2 Blake T. Ostler, "Worshipworthiness and the Mormon Concept of God," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997): 315-26

3 According to the preface of the *Proslogion*: "(God) is the supreme good, who depends on nothing else, but on whom all things depend for their being and for their wellbeing and for whatever we believe about the divine being."

grow, increase, or develop. Second, Ostler's article seems to ignore the countless divine beings in Mormon theology. If these countless Gods are at different stages in their potentiality, then one must be more perfect than the others Gods. In this case, Ostler's amended criteria for greatest conceivable being is violated because one divine being (X) is a separate and distinct being from other divine beings (Y, Z) and each is capable of various levels of achieved potentiality. One of these beings is bound to be greater than the others.

Nevertheless, at issue between Ostler and Howsepian is the well-documented Mormon doctrine of eternal progression:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens ... We have all imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute this idea ...⁴

Some people are troubled over the statements of the prophet Joseph Smith ... the matter that seems such a mystery is the statement that our Father in heaven at one time passed through a life and a death and is an exalted man. This is one of the mysteries the Prophet taught that our father had a father and so on. Is not this a reasonable thought, especially when we remember that the promises are made to us that we may become like him?⁵

Mormon prophets have continuously taught the sublime truth that God the Eternal Father was once a mortal man who passed through a school of earth life similar to that through which we are now passing. He became God -an exalted being -through obedience to the same eternal Gospel principles that we are given opportunity to obey today.⁶

You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods in order to save yourselves and be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done -- by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection of the dead, from exaltation to exaltation Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age and there is no

⁴ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (2nd Revised Edition; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978),6.305-6.

⁵ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1.10,12. For an interesting discussion of progress in Mormon thought, see *Mormonism and the Idea of Progress* by David H. Bailey (PhD, Stanford University) available online at <http://www.dhbailey.com/papers/dhb-progress.pdf>.

⁶ Milton R. Hunter, *The Gospel Through the Ages* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1958), 104.

creation about it. The first principles of man are self-existent with God. All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement and improvement. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge.⁷

The basic idea of eternal progression is that all Gods were once men and women on an earth, at which time they were not Gods. By complying with eternal and unchangeable rules of salvation, they can become God and continue eternally to achieve greater levels of potentiality. According to Brigham Young, "It appears ridiculous to the world ... that God [the Father] has once been a finite being."⁸ According to Brigham Young, Joseph Smith, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Milton R. Hunter, God was once a finite being and has since become a God.

Howsepian concludes that Mormonism is a sophisticated form of atheism.⁹ He reasons that while Mormons claim to believe in a plurality of Gods, there is a difference between appearing to believe that p and actually believing that p. One may claim to have eaten Lingonberry Pancakes for breakfast but be (a) lying or perhaps (b) suffering from a mental disorder by which one always thinks one has eaten Lingonberry Pancakes for breakfast. In either case, there exists a circumstance under which one purports to believe that p but in fact doesn't believe -or disbelieves -that p.

How then can Mormons claim to believe in God and yet be atheists? Howsepian argues that Mormon's intentionally distort their theological beliefs¹⁰ and because: "... no entity countenanced as being a God by the LDS Church, given any plausible characterization of the concept of deity, qualifies as being a genuine God."¹¹

I will agree with Howsepian that Mormonism is not polytheistic but is actually atheistic. However, I will not do so on the basis of eternal progression. One other issue I will not endeavor to settle is the debate over the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian theism. Francis Beckwith has argued (I think successfully) on this matter in "Mormon Theism, The Traditional Christian Concept of God, and Greek Philosophy: A Critical Analysis."¹²

⁷ Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *Brigham Young University Studies*, vol. 18 (Winter 1978), 198-208.

⁸ *Journal of Discourses*, v. 7, p. 333.

⁹ *Are Mormon's Theists?* 361.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Instead of focusing on eternity and worshipworthiness or the influence of Greek philosophy, I will demonstrate that (i) Mormons believe in a maximally powerful God, (ii) Mormons believe in at least two Gods (Elohim and Jesus) and (iii) this involves a contradiction because two beings cannot share maximal power.

Omnipotence in Mormon Theology

The issue of omnipotence in Mormon theology raises significant questions of authority. Needless to say, I wish to be fair to what Mormons actually teach. To that end, I will outline what I take to be the Mormon notion of omnipotence.

In traditional Christian theism, omnipotence is the ability of a maximally perfect being to do anything logically possible. A being such that none greater can be conceived is a maximally perfect being, and omnipotence is the possession of maximal power. Mormons believe that God is omnipotent but are sometimes hesitant to use this term.

Some sources specifically use omnipotence to describe God. *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism* uses the words omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent to describe the members of the Godhead.¹³ One Mormon scholar responded to claims that Mormons aren't Christians by declaring, "God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, infinite, eternal and unchangeable."¹⁴ James E. Talmage affirmed omnipotence in his book *The Articles of Faith*.¹⁵

Even Mormon writers who argue that the Christian religion has been wrongly shaped by Greek philosophy seem to affirm omnipotence. In *How Greek Philosophy Corrupted the Christian Concept of God*, Richard R. Hopkins affirms omnipotence and omniscience.¹⁶ Finally, noted LDS apologist B. H. Roberts (1857-1933) offered a

¹² Francis J. Beckwith, "Mormon Theism, The Traditional Christian Concept of God, and Greek Philosophy: A Critical Analysis" JETS 44/4 (December 2001),671-95.

¹³ Daniel H. Ludlow, ed. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: McMillan, 1992). Although not published by an official Mormon publishing house, the Encyclopedia contains entries mostly written by prominent LDS including politicians, BYU professors, and noted LDS scholars Paul Evans, H. David Burton, and Jeffery R. Holland.

¹⁴ Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press 1997) p. 59.

¹⁵ James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966) p.42-44.

qualified support for omnipotence, saying that God is omnipotent but he may not act out of harmony with other conditions or limits.¹⁷

In "a Review of The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis by Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish", Blake T. Ostler criticizes Beckwith and Parrish writing:

... the Mormon deity should be described as having "maximal power," that is, all the power it is (consistently) possible for one being to have among other free beings. The difference between classical and Mormon views is not that God has all power possible; rather, the difference lies in what limits God's power. The authors assume that God is not limited by any *nonlogical conditions*, whereas the Mormon deity must contend with uncreated matter and intelligences. They argue that the Mormon God has less power than is possible and thus is not really all-powerful. However, they fail to provide a consistent notion of omnipotence against which the Mormon claim can be compared.¹⁸

In this section, Ostler accepts the notion that God contains maximal power. He would differ from orthodox Christians in that he limits that power by factors that are nonlimiting in the Anselmian tradition, such as matter. In Mormon theology, matter is manipulated but not created or destroyed. Ostler goes on to say that God is limited by human freedom and is unable to bring about free acts. Christians have options that he ignores, such as Middle Knowledge or Compatibilism.

The index to the *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price* (hereafter Mormon Scriptures) lists references for omniscience but not omnipotence.¹⁹ Interestingly, for whatever reasons one may have for thinking omnipotence limits human freedom, one also encounters with the doctrine of omniscience. Nevertheless, God's power is listed as power while his knowledge is listed as omniscience.

16 Richard R. Hopkins, *How Greek Philosophy Corrupted the Christian Concept of God*, (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Press, 1998), p. 309-311.

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

18 Blake T. Ostler, "Review of *the Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis* by Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish" (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute), pp.99-146.

19 *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price* (New York and London: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1981), 132-33.

Yet when reading the Mormon Scriptures, one is struck with the sense that God, in Ostler's words, contains maximal power. Consider the following passages from the Doctrine and Covenants:

- (1) The purposes of God cannot be frustrated (3:1)
- (2) The Lord retains all power (19:3)
- (3) The Son receives all power from the Father, both in heaven and on earth (93: 1 7)

Furthermore, the Mormon Scriptures speak of God's almighty power (19:14,20; 20:24) and often as God as almighty (84:96, 118; 109:77; 121 :4). *The Book of Moses* refers to God as almighty (1 :3, 25). In the *Book of Mormon*, Jacob 2:5 says:

But behold, harken ye unto me, and know that by the help of the all-powerful creator of heaven and earth I can tell you concerning your thoughts, how that ye are beginning to labor in sin, which sin appeareth very abominable unto me, yeah, and abominable unto God.

From these sources it is clear that God is believed to be almighty in Mormon Scripture, possesses power which cannot be frustrated, holds all power in heaven and earth, and is said to be all-powerful. It seems fair to adopt the wording of Ostler in saying that God is maximally powerful. What else would it mean for God to be almighty than to possess all power?

Regardless of the qualifications that Ostler wishes to place on what it means for God to be omnipotent, the idea of being maximally anything is that you possess quality X to a greater degree than anyone or anything else. He says a maximally powerful being has all the power that is (consistently) possible for one being to have among other free beings.²⁰ So it is that the God of Mormonism is a maximally powerful being, almighty in that he possesses all power which does not involve a limit on others freedom.

By limiting others freedom, I take Ostler to have in mind actions such that God would determine that at TI Jeffrey listens to the Eagles against his own extreme distaste for the music of the Eagles. Jeffrey's freedom not to listen to the Eagles would presumably be impinged upon if God made him listen to the Eagles. So the Mormon God is a maximally powerful being that respects personal decisions such as music tastes, and the like.

The question now becomes, who possesses omnipotence? The simple answer is, God. For any being X such that X is God, X possesses omnipotence or maximal power. "I believe in God" and "I believe in a being who possesses maximum power" are identical statements, given what Mormonism teaches about God's unique possession of "all power" (D&C 19:3) on "earth and in heaven" (D&C 93: 17).

In the next section, we will examine the scope of divine beings in Mormon theology to see that omnipotence is a rather common attribute in their conception of the cosmos. I will then argue that this combination of infinite Gods possessing maximal power is a contradiction such that Mormons must (i) reject the statements found in their Scripture regarding omnipotence, (ii) redefine omnipotence, or (iii) come to faith in the Triune God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The God(s) of Mormonism

In this section I will outline Mormon theism wherein I hope to show that there exist at least two Gods: Elohim (God the Father) and Jesus (God the Son). I agree with Howsepian and Beckwith that Mormonism teaches the existence of an infinite number of Gods, however for my purposes it only needs to be shown that at least two separate and distinct beings are God and thus maximally powerful.

There is great difficulty in determining precisely the Mormon conception of God. Conflicting statements in multiple sources make for tedious investigation. Mormon Scripture contains both the *Book of Mormon* and the *Pearl of Great Price*. In the former, Judaic monotheism can be found (Alma 11:26-31, 38; Moroni 8:18; Mosiah 3:5-8; 7:27; 15:1-5) while in the latter there are clear teachings that many Gods exist (Abraham 4-5)²¹

Yet if any source is to be valid it is certainly the founding prophet of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, who is recorded to say:

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

Also, Joseph Smith:

"Many men say there is one God; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are only one God! I say that is a strange God anyhow-three in one, and one in three! ... He would be a wonderfully big God-he would be a giant or a monster."²³

²¹ *Mormon Theism*, 674.

²² *History of the Church*, 305-6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6:475.

It is safe to say that Mormons believe in at least two Gods; Elohim and Jesus. According to James Talmage, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three separate Gods presiding over the council of the universe.²⁴ Whereas Scripture and the creeds testify to the Tri-Unity of God, Mormonism teaches what appears to be Tri-Theism. In the next section, I hope to show that given the Mormon view of God and omnipotence, neither Father, Son, or Spirit can be maximally perfect, without which they cannot be God.

The Logic of Omnipotence

To this point, it has been established that Mormons believe in at least two Gods and God is a maximally powerful being. In this section, I will move to establish that two beings cannot share omnipotence as defined in Mormon Scripture and by Ostler. To achieve this, I hope to show that holding to multiple Gods and omnipotence involves a contradiction.

Perhaps the most basic rule of logic is the principle of non-contradiction (PNC) which says that something cannot be A and \sim A. In *Metaphysics IV*, Aristotle says "It is impossible to hold (suppose) the same thing to be and not to be."²⁵ In the same book, Aristotle offers three versions of the PNC, the ontological, the doxastic, and the semantic.²⁶ I will focus upon this third version in which Aristotle says "opposite assertions cannot be true at the same time."²⁷

For an assertion X to be opposite or contradictory is to simultaneously assert X of P and \sim X of P. This is true even when assertions are worded differently yet contain the same semantic content. For instance, imagine a man named Jeffrey Lebowski who goes by the nickname, The Dude. Both Jeffrey Lebowski and The Dude refer to the same

²⁴ James Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1975) 237. I am indebted to Francis Beckwith for directing the readers of "Mormon Theism" to David L. Paulsen's "The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives," in *BYU Studies* 35/4 (1995-96) 7-94.

²⁵ Aristotle, *The Metaphysics* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), p. 60-65.

²⁶ Paula Gottlieb, "Principle of Non-Contradiction" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed online at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-noncontradiction/#1>, May 31, 2007: Paula Gottlieb, who has written the introduction to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in *Central Works of Philosophy Volume 1: Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (Acumen, 2005), says (of the semantic version of PNC) that it relates to assertions of truth. For this reason I find it best suited for the present discussion of Mormon doctrine. I don't wish to make more of these versions than needed, only to say I prefer the wording of the third.

²⁷ *The Metaphysics*, 63.

object: Different names but the same semantic content. Thus, to say The Dude is bowling and Jeffrey Lebowski is not bowling would violate the PNC. In the event that there was another person named Jeffery Lebowski (other than The Dude) clarification is necessary, but possible.

In the case of omnipotence, a being X is God if X has maximal power (among other attributes). The God described in Mormon Scripture has maximal power. He is described as almighty throughout Mormon literature. As has been shown, contemporary and past LDS theologians affirm the omnipotence of God, which means (at least) that God has maximal power. Even if that power is qualified (limited by creaturely freedom, for instance) it is still maximal (greater than the same power possessed by other beings).

At this point we must ask the critical question: Can two beings be maximally powerful? My sense is, no. Intuitively, it seems contrary to common sense to hold that two beings can share maximal power. To flesh this out, I wish to make two arguments, the first by analogy (the endless baseball game argument) and the second from the law of non-contradiction.

First, consider an endless baseball game. In this game, two teams with an equal win-loss ratio play for the pennant. By some Herculean effort, both pitchers throw a perfect game and neither team is able to score until, after days of play, the Commissioner calls the game, judiciously declaring both teams victorious. Both teams hold victory parades in their hometowns, but as far as the fans are concerned, something isn't right. I suspect their intuition would be correct.

Given the teams had equal records and played a scoreless game, how can either team be declared victorious? What would such a declaration mean in this scoreless/hitless scenario? There is no greater team. To declare one team greater would be to employ "greater" vacuously.

So it is with God, that if he possesses maximal power this power cannot be shared equally such that a being X and a being Y both possess maximal power. In this case, like the endless baseball game, there is no greater being and thus the property omnipotence is vacuous.

Second, Mormon theism appears to violate the PNC which says that something cannot be and not be in the same respect. X and Y cannot both be maximally powerful because it would involve saying that X is the most powerful being and X is not the most powerful being, because Y is also maximally powerful, negating the plain sense of maximally.

I suppose the Mormon apologist could say that by maximal greatness is meant the achievement of some level of greatness, but not *literally* a supreme state of greatness or ultimate theoretical power. Aside from running contrary to Mormon Scripture and a strong tradition in the LDS Church, this would negate the plain sense of words in use and require an arbitrary limit to greatness. Such a move would also commit the fallacy of

appealing to unlikely meanings²⁸ and would conflict with the notion of God in process as advocated by Ostler.

Trinitarians say that God the Son is omnipotent with the understanding that God the Son is identical to the Trinitarian God. Referring to Jesus Christ in orthodox Christianity has the same semantic content as referring to the God who raised Jesus from the dead, for instance. When one expresses worship to God she is expressing worship to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is one object being referenced.

Mormons violate the PNC because in referring to Jesus as the maximally perfect being they negate Elohim as maximally perfect. They might try to avoid this by saying they somehow exist in different worlds, but Jesus is at the right hand of the Father as he is in Apostles Creed. Albeit, Mormons believe this is a literal right hand. Two separate and distinct beings cannot both possess maximal greatness.

Conclusion

The options for thoughtful Mormons include (1) admitting that (contra Mormon Scripture) God is not all-powerful or almighty; (2) redefining omnipotence such that it is a level of great power but not maximal power, or; (3) bending their knee to the Triune God of Scripture and the Creeds. In this conclusion I hope to evaluate these options and show that only (3) is the only reasonable option for Mormons.

I don't believe that Mormons can simply say their Scripture has been wrong, although this has effectively been done in the past under the guise of "new revelation" (see polygamy, for instance). Polygamy is a kind of peripheral issue, and religions can endure a shift in such issues.

Theism is a different issue altogether. Mormons may admit being wrong about racial bigotry in temple practices, polygamy, or blood sacrifice and Mormonism itself may continue. By Mormonism's own lights, at the point that God is no longer all-powerful he is no longer God. Option (1) would entail atheism.

The second option isn't much better. If God is great but doesn't possess maximal power as currently taught in Mormonism, then he isn't qualitatively different from humans. This undermines the notion of progression that teaches there is a point at which God becomes God. But when does this happen? If not for the achievement of maximal power (among other attributes) God becomes a vague concept. Like Sorites paradox, Mormons would resolve themselves to a content-less theism indistinguishable from atheism. Option (2) would result in a sort of practical atheism.

The third option is the one Christians should hope and pray for their Mormon friends. That Mormons would repent of their idolatry and come to faith and obedience in Jesus Christ as the only rational option.

²⁸ D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 37.

As it is, the Gods of Mormonism represent fictional beings that cannot logically exist. Their existence defies intuition and the PNC. The very terminology of Mormon Scripture demands either biblical Christianity or some other form of Monotheism. Thus, I agree with Howsepian that Mormonism is a sophisticated form of atheism