DOES THE BOOK OF MORMON TEACH MAINSTREAM TRINITARIANISM OR MODALISM?

by Barry R. Bickmore

Latter-day Saints have no problem with the suggestion that our teachings have evolved to some extent over the years. One of our Articles of Faith states, "We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God."[1] When God reveals something new, it does not follow that He contradicts previous revelations. However, sometimes our human interpretations of the former revelations turn out to be wrong, and need to be adjusted in light of the new information. Critics of the Church of Jesus Christ, on the other hand, often charge that later LDS revelations blatantly contradict the former. For example, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, the founders of Utah Lighthouse Ministries, wrote a book entitled *The Changing World of Mormonism*, designed to support such charges. Among other things, the Tanners pointed out that the earliest LDS texts, such as the Book of Mormon, consistently speak of only one God, whereas Joseph Smith later taught the existence of a plurality of gods.[2]

On its face this fact presents no problem for Latter-day Saints, because in a certain sense we believe there is, in fact, only one God. Apostle Bruce R. McConkie wrote, "Monotheism is the doctrine or belief that there is but one God. If this is properly interpreted to mean that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—each of whom is a separate and distinct godly personage—are one God, meaning one Godhead, then true saints are monotheists."[3] Robert L. Millett, former dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University explained, "It is true the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one in mind and power and glory. Indeed they are infinitely more one than they are separate; they just happen to be separate personages."[4] In summary, Latter-day Saints can say that there is only one God in a *functional* sense; i.e. all persons who are gods function with complete harmony of will, purpose, love, and covenant.

This definition is not some overly convenient redefinition of "monotheism." Pennsylvania State University's Baruch Halpern wrote, "Scholars have traditionally taken a theological and prescriptive approach to the issue of Israelite monotheism: monotheism is the conviction that only one god exists, and no others. This conviction, however, is difficult to document. … Monotheism, Yehezkel Kaufmann observed, postulates multiple deities, subordinated to the one. … Two elements distinguish it from polytheism: a conviction that the one controls the pantheon, and the idea of false gods."[5] The Bible speaks in many places of "one God" contrasted with false gods, but in some cases mentions real beings who are called "gods." For instance, the Hebrew text of Psalm 8:5 says that God made man "a little lower than the gods." Given facts such as this, scholars such as Peter Hayman and Margaret Barker have gone so far as to claim Judaism and earliest Christianity were not, in fact, monotheistic.[6] Larry Hurtado of the University of Manitoba argues against such a view, as well as anachronistic projections of modern "orthodox" definitions of monotheism back on ancient Judaism.

> That is, on both sides there is a tendency to proceed as if we can know in advance what "monotheism" must mean, which turns out to be a very modern, monistic form of monotheism, and can accordingly evaluate ancient Jewish texts and beliefs as to whether or how closely they meet an a priori standard of "pure" monotheism.[7]

But the critics charge this sort of explanation is anachronistic—an ad hoc harmonization made up after the fact to cover up the contradiction. They assert that the Book of Mormon clearly teaches some version of mainstream Trinitarianism, from which Joseph Smith departed in his later teachings. And while the Tanners and their anti-Mormon ilk generally do not provide much in the way of coherent historical analysis, essentially the same charge

has been made by a number of more serious historians and researchers such as Thomas Alexander,[8] Melodie Moench Charles,[9] and Dan Vogel.[10]

While the accusation that Joseph Smith originally taught some version of mainstream Trinitarianism cannot be brushed away in a sentence or two, a careful examination of the evidence reveals that the orthodox LDS explanation is the only viable one proposed so far. Furthermore, it will be shown that this examination leads to significant new evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

THE CASE AGAINST THE PROPHET

Four main categories, representing the most relevant evidence the critics bring to bear against Joseph Smith, will be briefly discussed in this article. 1) Passages in The Book of Mormon that refer to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as "one God." 2) Passages in The Book of Mormon that refer to Jesus as both "the Son" and "the Father." 3) Passages in the Bible changed by Joseph Smith (in the Joseph Smith Translation, hereafter JST) to seemingly equate the Father and the Son. 4) The earliest (1832) account of Joseph Smith's First Vision, which says only that "the Lord appeared" to Joseph Smith, rather than specifying both the Father and the Son.

In the first category, we have passages such as 2 Nephi 31:21, which refers to "the Father, and…the Son, and…the Holy Ghost, which is one God." In the second category we find statements like that of the premortal Jesus, "Behold I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son."[11] In his inspired revision of the Bible, Joseph changed the text of Luke 10:22 to read, "no man knoweth that the Son is the Father, and the Father is the Son, but him to whom the Son will reveal it." Finally, in his 1832 history, Joseph Smith wrote of the First Vision, "a piller of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee."[12] Since Joseph Smith did not say there was only one personage, but rather mentioned only one, this passage is neutral as evidence, and will be passed over for the remainder of our discussion.

A few more facts are sometimes put forward, but these are by far the strongest evidences to support the conclusion that in 1830 Joseph Smith believed the Father and the Son were the same person.

TRINITARIANISM OR MODALISM?

Thomas Alexander called the earliest Mormon doctrine of God "essentially trinitarian," explaining, "The Book of Mormon tended to define God as an absolute personage of spirit who, clothed in flesh, revealed himself in Jesus Christ."[13] However, the idea that the Father and the Son are the same person specifically violates standard Trinitarian orthodoxy.[14] Dan Vogel pointed out that such an idea is, rather, "modalistic."[15] Modalism is a heresy with roots in the late second century. This doctrine affirms that there is one person who is God, and that person reveals Himself in three different "modes" (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) to men. On the other hand, Evangelical scholar E. Calvin Beisner wrote that orthodox Trinitarianism affirms "that in the nature of the one true God, there are three distinct persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, each fully God, coequal and coeternal."[16] That is, there are three distinct *Persons* who are one indivisible *Being*. Just how three Persons can be one indivisible Being is a mystery too lofty for human minds to comprehend. Beisner also wrote, "As the differences between Modalism and pure Trinitarianism are rather minute, 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."[17] Therefore, if Joseph Smith was not inspired, but simply produced the Book of Mormon from his fertile imagination, it would not be surprising if he inserted a modalistic concept of God into the narrative, since it has been a common belief for many centuries.

However, if the Book of Mormon teaches modalism, it is demonstrably a very odd variation. For example, in Mosiah 15:1–5, the prophet Abinadi equated "the Father" with Jesus' premortal spirit, and "the Son" with His body.

> 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.

In Ether 3:16, the premortal Jesus indicated that His spirit is anthropomorphic (having human form). "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." Typically modalists have held to a mainstream definition of God as an eternal, omnipresent, indivisible, immaterial spirit essence, "without body, parts, or passions."[18] The adoption of this definition of God, derived from the Greek philosophical schools, was in fact the entire reason why modalism came into existence. If "God" is defined as an eternally unchanging and indivisible essence, how can there be three persons who are called "God"? The solution of the modalists was to deny the real existence of three Divine Persons.[19] Therefore, if the Book of Mormon is modalistic, it presents a version of the doctrine that is much more restrictive. That is, "the Father" is an anthropomorphic spirit that is not physically present in more than one place. Specifically, "the Father" is located inside "the Son," which is the physical body of Jesus Christ.

THE CASE WEAKENS

It must be admitted that the facts presented so far fit very well with a modified modalist interpretation of the Book of Mormon, but the devil is in the details. A number of passages in the Book of Mormon appear to contradict the modalistic thesis proposed by Vogel, and support the interpretation proposed by the First Presidency and the twelve Apostles in 1916.[20] In this statement, it was explained that while the Father and the Son are indeed separate persons, Jesus is sometimes given the title "Father" in certain contexts. For instance, the Book of Mormon often modifies the title "Father" with respect to Jesus Christ by specifying the He is "the Father of Heaven and of Earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning."[21] Thus, this is nothing more than the biblical teaching that "All things were made by [Christ]; and without him was not any thing made that was made."[22] Second, Jesus is called "Father" in the sense that those who are saved by Him become His children, as explained by Abinadi in Mosiah 15:10-13.

> And now I say unto you, who shall declare his generation? Behold, I say unto you, that when his soul has been made an offering for sin he shall see his seed. And now what say ye? And who shall be his seed? Behold I say unto you, that whosoever has heard the words of the prophets, yea, all the holy prophets who have prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord -

I say unto you, that all those who have hearkened unto their words, and believed that the Lord would redeem his people, and have looked forward to that day for a remission of their sins, I say unto you, that these are his seed, or they are the heirs of the kingdom of God. For these are they whose sins he has borne; these are they for whom he has died, to redeem them from their transgressions. And now, are they not his seed? Yea, and are not the prophets, every one that has opened his mouth to prophesy, that has not fallen into transgression, I mean all the holy prophets ever since the world began? I say unto you that they are his seed.

Similarly, Jesus called the wicked the children of the Devil.[23] Finally, Jesus is called Father by "Divine Investiture of Authority." That is, Jesus Christ has always been the chief agent of the Father's will. "Thus the Father placed His name upon the Son; and Jesus Christ spoke and ministered in and through the Father's name; and so far as power, authority, and Godship are concerned His words and acts were and are those of the Father."[24] The statement goes on, "We read, by way of analogy, that God placed His name upon or in the Angel who was assigned to special ministry unto the people of Israel during the exodus. Of that Angel the Lord said: 'Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not; for he will not pardon your transgressions: for my name is in him.' (Exodus 23:21)"[25]

Clearly this interpretation explains the above-mentioned passages, and there are clear precedents for this sort of language usage in the Bible and Book of Mormon. In addition, the orthodox LDS belief that the Godhead is one in will, love, purpose, and covenant, rather than one in Being, fits equally well. However, at this point the modalistic interpretation still has the advantage of taking the passages we have treated so far in a literal sense. Are there any other passages that contradict modalism when taken literally? Consider the following.

In 3 Nephi 9:15 the resurrected Christ referred to the Father in the third person and said He was with the Father in the beginning. "Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are. I was with the Father from the beginning. I am in the Father, and the Father in me; and in me hath the Father glorified his name." If "the Father" referred to here is the anthropomorphic spirit inside Jesus' body, how could Jesus be "with" the Father at the creation? A literal interpretation demands that there be another person with the title "Father."

In 3 Nephi 17: 15, the resurrected Christ is said to have prayed to the Father. Who prays to their own spirit? "And when he had said these words, he himself also knelt upon the earth; and behold he prayed unto the Father, and the things which he prayed cannot be written, and the multitude did bear record who heard him."

The resurrected Christ also was said to have "gone unto the Father" by ascending into heaven. "And it came to pass that after he had ascended into heaven?the second time that he showed himself unto them, and had gone unto the Father."[26] Again, if "the Father" referred to here is the anthropomorphic spirit inside Jesus' body, why would Jesus have to ascend to heaven to be with His own spirit?

Finally, nearly six hundred years before Jesus' incarnation, Nephi reported hearing the voices of both the Father and the Son.

> And the Father said: Repent ye, repent ye, and be baptized in the name of my Beloved Son. And also, the voice of the Son came unto me, saying: He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost, like unto me; wherefore, follow me, and do the things which ye have seen me do.... But, behold, my beloved brethren, thus came the voice of the Son unto me, saying: After ye have repented of your sins, and witnessed unto the Father that ye are willing to keep my commandments, by the baptism of water, and have received the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost, and can speak with a new tongue, yea, even with the tongue of angels, and after this should deny me, it would have been better for you that ye had not known me. And I heard a voice from the Father, saying: Yea, the words of my Beloved are true and faithful. He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.[27]

The problem that now presents itself for those who see the Book of Mormon through the spectacles of modalism is that most of these passages do not lend themselves to any figurative interpretation. Whereas it is not at all unusual to find figurative uses of the title "Father" or of the adjective "one" (e.g. when describing "oneness" among a group of people or, in this case, the oneness of the Godhead), most of the above passages simply report *events.* Perhaps God could conceivably have represented Himself to Nephi as both Father and Son *before* the incarnation to symbolically convey His design to come to Earth as the Son. But what is the symbolic interpretation of Jesus ascending to heaven to be with His Father? Why would Jesus pray to Himself?

Undaunted by such passages, Dan Vogel asserted that

> the voice of the Father introducing the Son, the subjection of the Son unto the Father, the Son ascending to the Father (3 Ne. 11:6-8, 32; 15:1, 18-19; 18:27; 26:2, 5, 15)—all have parallels in the New Testament (Matt. 3:13-17; Jn. 14:28; 15:10; 16:28; 20:17). But 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."[28]

The problem with this comparison, however, is that modalists have typically been stuck with the scriptures they inherited. On the other hand, Joseph Smith not only produced new scripture, but felt so comfortable in his prophetic calling that he actually revised the Bible! Vogel himself pointed this out. So why, if the Prophet wished to promote a modalistic theology, did he leave *anti-modalistic* passages in the Bible unrevised, and reinforce those same passages in the Book of Mormon?

Another point worth noting is that J.N.D. Kelly referred to "the ancient view that 'Father' signified the Godhead Itself" as one of the factors involved in the rise of third-century modalism.[29] Although Kelly was speaking of the second-century Christian apologists[30] who accepted various Greek philosophical concepts of the nature of God, none of these men were modalists, or even trinitarians in the later sense of the word.[31] Furthermore, it is quite likely that this practice had antecedents in earlier, Jewish forms of Christianity, since the Hebrew text of Isaiah 9:6 calls the Messiah "son" and "everlasting Father." It appears that Vogel and others may have misinterpreted the Book of Mormon based on the same sorts of statements that "simple and uncultured"[32] Christians of the third century used to misinterpret the Bible and earlier Christian traditions.

Although Vogel's thesis has been shown to be quite weak, it must be admitted at this point in the argument that his modalistic interpretation of the Book of Mormon is still arguably possible. And while the orthodox LDS interpretation explains all the data presented adequately, certainly the Book of Mormon does not state this doctrine explicitly.

WHY THE AMBIGUITY?

The question naturally arises of why the Book of Mormon is somewhat ambiguous on this point. The answer to this question can be found in the Book of Mormon itself. Mormon wrote,

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.[33]

In other words, Mormon, the principal editor of the Book of Mormon, explicitly stated that he was leaving some information out, which would be revealed at a later time to the faithful. Therefore, the assumption that every teaching in the Book of Mormon should be perfectly clear is misguided, whether one believes in the historical authenticity of the book or not.

Jesus also used this method of teaching. His normal method of operation was to teach a series of parables, and then take His disciples aside and explain the meaning. Contrary to the popular myth that He taught in parables to bring his teachings down to the level of the common man, Jesus said that He used this method to *conceal* His teachings.

And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive.[34]

Jesus also said, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you."[35] And although the Corinthian saints had been Christians for years, Paul wrote to them, "I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able."[36]

Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 110 A.D.), reputed to have been a disciple of the Apostle John, wrote the following to the Roman saints on his way to martyrdom. "I am able to write to you of heavenly things, but I fear lest I should do you an injury. Know me from myself. For I am cautious lest ye should not be able to receive [such knowledge], and should be perplexed."[37]

St. Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 200) stated that in his *Miscellanies* he was deliberately concealing higher teachings by sprinkling the truth sparsely through his book.

But since this tradition is not published alone for him who perceives the magnificence of the word; it is requisite, therefore, to hide in a mystery the wisdom spoken, which the Son of God taught. … Such were the impediments in the way of my writing. And even now I fear, as it is said, 'to cast the pearls before swine, lest they tread them under foot, and turn and rend us.' [Matthew 7:6] For it is difficult to exhibit the really pure and transparent words respecting the true light, to swinish and untrained hearers. … But the wise do not utter with their mouth what they reason in council. "But what ye hear in the ear," says the Lord, "proclaim upon the houses;" [Matthew 10:27] bidding them receive the secret traditions of the true knowledge, and expound them aloft and conspicuously; and as we have heard in the ear, so to deliver them to whom it is requisite; but not enjoining us to communicate to all without distinction, what is said to them in parables. But there is only a delineation in the memoranda, which have the truth sowed sparse and broadcast, that it may escape the notice of those who pick up seeds like jackdaws; but when they find a good husbandman, each one of them will germinate and produce corn.[38]

Another Alexandrian Christian, Origen (early third century), stated that the Church in his time had some exoteric (public), and some esoteric (hidden) teachings.

In these circumstances, to speak of the Christian doctrine as a *secret* system, is altogether absurd. But that there should be certain doctrines, not made known to the multitude, which are (revealed) after the exoteric ones have been taught, is not a peculiarity of Christianity alone, but also of philosophic systems, in which certain truths are exoteric and others esoteric.[39]

We have shown that esoteric teaching was a commonplace in ancient Christianity,[40] so if Joseph Smith used this method in his restoration of ancient Christianity, it would hardly be surprising.[41] The following quotations from the book *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* show that Joseph Smith did indeed use esoteric teaching methods.

The reason we do not have the secrets of the Lord revealed unto us, is because we do not keep them but reveal them; we do not keep our own secrets, but reveal our difficulties to the world, even to our enemies, then how would we keep the secrets of the Lord? I can keep a secret till Doomsday.[42]

I could explain a hundred fold more than I ever have of the glories of the kingdoms manifested to me in the vision [D&C 76], were I permitted, and were the people prepared to receive them.[43]

Upon reaching this point in our discussion, critics of the Book of Mormon might be scoffing. Isn't it a little too convenient to postulate that Book of Mormon theology is ambiguous because it is concealing a teaching the Prophet was to reveal years later?[44] Perhaps, but the fact is that Joseph Smith *did not* wait years to reveal that the Father and Son are separate personages.

THE PROSECUTION'S CASE CRUMBLES

Just a few months after the publication of the Book of Mormon, the Prophet produced another text known as the Book of Moses, part of his inspired revision of the Bible. In this text we witness a three-way conversation between Satan, the Father, and the Son.

> 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.[45]

Perhaps realizing this passage is devastating to his case, Vogel relegated an incoherent discussion of Moses 4:1–2 to a footnote.

> Some have referred to Joseph Smith's revision of Genesis as evidence that as early as June 1830 he conceived the Father and Son as distinct persons in the Godhead (Moses 1:6; 2:26-27; 4:1–3). However, Smith's revision does not necessarily imply that there were two "personages" in the Godhead before the incarnation. Rather consider the following: "By the word of my power, have I created them [the inhabitants of the earth], which is mine Only Begotten Son." (Moses 1:32)[46]

If we stretch our imaginations, we might conceive of a modalistic God who ascends to Himself or was with Himself in the beginning. But a modalistic God who talks to Himself and says He will do His will (rather than His will), giving all the Glory to Himself instead of Himself?

And what of Vogel's suggestion that we consider Jesus' designation as "the Word?" Does he mean that this designation necessarily implies modalism? Yet, the Apostle John used the same title for Jesus,[47] and Vogel would be hard pressed to find a single New Testament scholar or historian of early Christianity who would claim John or any of the other New Testament writers were modalists.[48]

We have already seen that the Book of Mormon explicitly claims to be an *exoteric* text—one that does not clearly teach certain "greater things." But is there any evidence that chapter 4 of the Book of Moses is the corresponding *esoteric* text, where certain doctrines are taught more clearly, but are intended only for believers? At the end of the chapter we find the following insertion.

> (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.)[49]

The Book of Moses explicitly claims to be an esoteric text, and it just happens to do so at the end of the chapter where the Father and Son are clearly represented as two separate personages.

THE DEFENSE RESTS

Vogel and company don't stop with Joseph Smith's 1829–1830 beliefs, however. They generally tend to be oblivious to any signs of a doctrine of separate personages within the Godhead before the 1835 publication of the *Lectures on Faith*. Consider the following sources, which predate 1835. John Whitmer wrote in 1831 of a vision of Joseph Smith, where he "saw the heavens opened, and the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of the Father making intercession for his brethren, the Saints."[50] In February of 1832, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon recorded a vision of the Son of God sitting at the right hand of the Father.

> And we beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father, and received of his fulness; And saw the holy angels, and them who are sanctified before his throne, worshiping God,

and the Lamb, who worship him forever and ever. And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives! For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God. (D&C 76:20–24)

Summarizing, Milton V. Backman wrote that no one

> has located a publication (such as an article appearing in a church periodical or statement from a missionary pamphlet) written by an active Latter-day Saint prior to the martyrdom of the Prophet that defends the traditional or popular creedal concept of the Trinity. … Moreover, there are no references in critical writings of the 1830s (including statements by apostates) that Joseph Smith introduced in the mid-thirties the doctrine of separateness of the Father and Son.[51]

With these final pieces of evidence, the case against the Prophet crumbles to nothing. Whatever their motivation, historians such as Thomas Alexander and Dan Vogel have had to ignore a significant body of evidence to construct their case for trinitarianism or modalism in the Book of Mormon.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented a detailed argument that can be summarized as follows.

- A strict trinitarian interpretation of Book of Mormon theology is impossible because the text calls a single person both Father and Son.[52]

- A modalist interpretation is possible, if we base it solely on Book of Mormon texts, but several passages contradict this thesis if taken literally. Furthermore, some of these passages are not really amenable to figurative interpretation.

- The orthodox LDS explanation that the Father and Son are separate personages perfectly united in will, love, purpose, and covenant, and that Jesus Christ is sometimes given the title "Father," fits all the data in the Book of Mormon. It is superior

to the modalistic thesis because the sort of language that must be taken figuratively in this view is often used figuratively in the scriptures.

- The fact that the Book of Mormon is somewhat vague on this point, while Joseph Smith's later teachings are quite clear, can be explained by noting that 3 Nephi 26:8–11 states there were "greater things" not clearly taught in the text, reserved for believers.

- This method of teaching—concealing higher doctrines in public (exoteric) texts and revealing them in those meant only for believers (esoteric)—was common in ancient Christianity, and Joseph Smith explicitly claimed to use it himself.

- This thesis is strongly supported by the observation that a few months after the publication of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith produced the Book of Moses, which explicitly claims to be an esoteric text and clearly presents the Father and Son as separate persons.[53]

- Moses 4:1–2 effectively destroys the theory that Joseph Smith was a modalist in 1830.

- Records of Joseph Smith's visions (such as D&C 76:20–24) make clear that he considered the Father and Son separate personages by 1832, so charges that he developed this belief in the mid-1830s are pure fantasy.

The reader may be satisfied that the argument presented here is sound, but still be wondering how this is evidence in favor of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. In answer we offer this challenge. Try producing a document wherein you present information relating to your theology in such a way that your beliefs are not contradicted, but neither are they presented clearly. In fact, the information must be presented in such a way that a reader might be misled if he does not pay close attention. Certainly this is possible—it has been done before. But consider the planning and effort required! How likely is it that the ill-educated farmboy could weave such a thing into a narrative of over 500 pages? We might interpret it as simply a case of bad writing, but consider how clearly many of the other doctrines in the Book of Mormon are presented. Since the writers were at least capable of coherent thought processes, and since the Book of Mormon specifically claims to be withholding higher teachings, we have every reason to believe that the concealing of doctrine demonstrated here

was done intentionally. To do such a thing intentionally would take a good deal of planning, effort, and probably copious editing on Joseph Smith's part.

At the very least we can add this complexity to the long and continuously growing list of astonishing feats Joseph Smith had to accomplish to produce the Book of Mormon. He had to rattle off the entire text to scribes in around two months with no revisions, creating a coherent picture of a complex culture over a thousand-year history.[54] He had to convince eleven apparently sane and honest men that they saw and touched a set of gold plates engraved with strange characters, and later excommunicate many of them without any fear they would retract their testimonies. (None of them ever did.)[55] He had to accurately describe a route through Arabia, including a place name (Nahom) used for a burial ground described as existing in an area where the site of an ancient burial ground associated with the very same name is now known to exist. (Of course, this was *not* known in Joseph Smith's day.)[56] He had to include authentic, extrabiblical, ancient Near Eastern personal names, including a male Hebrew name (Alma) not known before the twentieth century.[57] He had to use Hebrew poetic forms essentially unknown in his day.[58] He had to use different writing styles when translating different Book of Mormon authors.[59]

We could go on in this vein considerably longer, but this is not the proper place. For more information the reader is referred to the notes at the end of this paper. However, the point of this exercise has been to add context to our little challenge. Perhaps it is barely possible that Joseph Smith hatched a plan and put in the necessary effort to create exoteric and esoteric versions of his doctrine, but when we add this to the already long list of things he had to do to produce the Book of Mormon, naturalistic explanations of its origin appear patently ridiculous.

This is yet another incidence where a criticism of the Book of Mormon has turned out to be a point in its favor. However, such things are not foolproof tests. We invite the reader to gain a sure testimony of the truthfulness of this book of scripture by studying it and praying in faith to God.

FURTHER READING

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NOTES

1. Article of Faith 9.

2. Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 173–177. This book is a condensation of the Tanners' *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* I cite *Changing World* only because of its suggestive title.

3. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine,* Second Edition (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 511.

4. Robert L. Millet, "By What (Whose) Standards Shall We Judge the Text? A Closer Look at Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6:1 (1994): 192.

5. Baruch Halpern, "Monotheism," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible,* edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 524–525.

6. Peter Hayman, "Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?" *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (1991): 1–15; Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

7. Larry W. Hurtado, "What Do We Mean by 'First-Century Jewish Monotheism'?" *Society of Biblical Literature 1993 Seminar Papers,* edited by E.H. Lovering, Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 348–368.

8. Thomas Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," *Sunstone* 10 (May 1985), 8–18. Originally printed in *Sunstone* 5:4 (July–August 1980), 24–33.

9. Melodie Moench Charles, "Book of Mormon Christology," *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology, edited by Brent Lee Metcalf* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 81–114.

10. Dan Vogel, "The Earliest Mormon Doctrine of God," *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine, edited by Gary James Bergera* (Salt Lake City, Signature Books, 1989), 17–33.

11. Ether 3:14.

12. Joseph Smith, History (1832), *The Papers of Joseph Smith,* edited by Dean C. Jessee, Volume 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), 6. Original spelling and punctuation.

13. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 25.

14. Alexander's article has a number of such errors, and it is

apparent that at the time of writing he was unaware of the conceptual baggage accompanying some of the theological terms he used. An excellent example is his discussion of the history of the concepts of "original sin" and free will in Mormonism. In one instance, he cited a statement in James E. Talmage's *Articles of Faith* that man "inherits absolute freedom to choose the good or the evil in life as he may elect." God "has left the mortal creature free to choose and to act, with no semblance of compulsion or restraint, beyond the influences of paternal counsel and loving direction." [James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), 47. Alexander cited the 1899 edition, p. 54.] Alexander opined, "Such a radical doctrine of free will essentially rejected the ideas implicit in the Book of Mormon by denying man's predisposition under any conditions to evil, whether before or after the Fall." However, Talmage's statement said nothing whatever about whether men inherit a predisposition to do evil, but denied that *God* forces anyone to obey Him. Later in the same work, Talmage explicitly asserted that man *does* inherit a predisposition toward evil.

> To a degree, children are born heirs to the good or evil natures of their parents; the effects of heredity are admitted. Good and evil tendencies, blessings and curses, are transmitted from generation to generation. Through this divinely-appointed order, the justice of which is plain in the revealed light of knowledge concerning the ante-mortal state of the spirits of mankind, the children of Adam are natural heirs to the ills of mortality; but through Christ's atonement they are all redeemed from the curse of this fallen state. The debt, which comes to them as a legacy, is paid for them and thus are they left free. [1984 ed., p. 79; 1899 ed., p. 90.]

This is entirely consistent with the doctrine presented in the Book of Mormon. For instance, Lehi told his sons,

> And the Messiah cometh in the fullness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given. Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh. … And now, my sons, I would that ye should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit; And not choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein. (2 Nephi 2:26–29, see also 4:27.)

Here it is stated that Jesus Christ redeemed all men from the Fall, making them completely free to act, but man inherits a sinful nature that specifically resides in "the flesh." Elsewhere it is made clear that Christ's Redemption removed the *guilt* associated with the Fall (Moroni 8:8; see also Moses 6:54). Since the sinful nature is identified with the mortal body, this is also consistent with the 1833 revelation that "Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning; and God having redeemed man from the fall, men became again, in their infant state, innocent before God." (D&C 93:38) Brigham Young explained,

> You design evils in your neighbourhoods, in your families, and in yourselves. The disposition to produce evil, to annoy, to disturb the peace of families, neighbours, and society, is produced by the power of the enemy over the flesh, through the fall. Every person who will examine his own experience – who will watch closely the leading of his own desires – will learn that the very great majority prefer to do good rather than to do evil, and would pursue a correct course, were it not for the evil power that subjects them to its sway. In wrong doing, their own consciences condemn them. They are taught what is right, they read what is right, and at times the Spirit of the Lord is upon them, teaching them what is right, and would be upon them from their youth, were it not that they give way to temptation and let the flesh overcome the spirits that God has placed within us. [Brigham Young, "Light and Influence of the Spirit, Etc.," *Journal of Discourses,* reported by G.D. Watt 19 June 1859, Vol. 6 (London: Latter-Day Saint's Book Depot, 1859), 330–331.]

Thus, the main differences between the LDS concept of original sin/guilt and that of mainstream Christians are that we do not believe the guilt associated with Adam's transgression is passed on, we do not believe the *spirit* in man is tainted by the Fall, and therefore we reject notions of "total depravity." This doctrine—which has been taught throughout LDS history—is also quite consistent with the doctrine implied by the New Testament. Peter spoke of "fleshly lusts, which war against the soul." (1 Peter 2:11) A number of the earliest Christian documents preached this doctrine even more explicitly. [See Barry R. Bickmore, *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity* (Ben Lomond, California: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 1999), 172–176.] In any case, where is the massive "reconstruction of Mormon doctrine" Alexander posited? Certainly there has been some confusion and disagreement among the saints about various doctrines over the years, but it appears that a good deal of the confusion Alexander tried to document was of his own making.

15. Vogel, "The Earliest Mormon Doctrine of God."

16. E. Calvin Beisner, *God in Three Persons* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1984) 19.

17. Ibid., 18.

18. John H. Leith, "Westminster Confession of Faith," *Creeds of the Churches—A Reader in Christian Doctrine From the Bible to the Present,* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), 197.

19. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Revised Edition (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), 119–123. See also Barry Bickmore, "Does God Have a Body in Human Form?" (2001), FAIR e-booklet available at http://www.fair-lds.org.

20. James E. Talmage, "The Father and The Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by The First Presidency and The Twelve," *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), 420–426.

21. Helaman 14:12; 2 Nephi 25:12; Mosiah 3:8; 15:4; Alma 11:39; Helaman 16:18.

22. John 1:3.

23. Matthew 13:38.

24. Talmage, *Articles of Faith,* 425.

25. Ibid.

26. 3 Nephi 26:15; see also 3 Nephi 17:4.

27. 2 Nephi 31:11–12, 14–15.

28. Vogel, "The Earliest Mormon Doctrine of God," 24.

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

30. Ibid., 100.

31. Ibid., 101–104.

32. This characterization of modalists was made by the early Christian writer Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 3.

33. 3 Nephi 26:8–11.

34. Matthew 13:10–14.

35. Matthew 7:6.

36. 1 Corinthians 3:2.

37. Ignatius, *Romans* 9.

38. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1:12.

39. Origen, *Against Celsus* 1:7.

40. Some scholars have argued that early Christianity adopted esoteric practices from the Greek mystery cults, popular at the time. However, Jewish scholar Guy Stroumsa has recently shown that a more objective approach to the documents demonstrates the early Christians inherited their esoteric traditions directly from their Jewish background. [Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996,) 41–45.]

41. Given that several Bible passages clearly show that there was some reticence in revealing certain teachings to unbelievers, it would still not be surprising if Joseph Smith used esoteric teaching methods, even if one denies his calling as a prophet.

42. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith,* edited by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City; Deseret Book Company, 1976), 195.

43. Ibid., 305.

44 Some have argued against the idea that in the original Christian sphere certain doctrines were kept from neophyte Christians, but it is an irrefutable fact, and one generally admitted, that the earliest Christians were reticent about revealing some of their doctrines to unbelievers. [See R.P.C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 22–35.] Since this is exactly the thing we are postulating, we need not argue for a more pervasive secret tradition within early Christianity here. (See instead Bickmore, *Restoring the Ancient Church*, 290–329. However, it can be noted that the cited passage from Ignatius can be considered clear evidence against Hanson's thesis.) Furthermore, Hanson was primarily arguing against the claim, made by Catholic theologians from late antiquity on, as well as early Gnostics, that the reason many of their doctrines were not found in (or were contradicted by!) the writings of earlier Christians was that the doctrines in question were part of the secret tradition. In the case of Joseph Smith, it has already been shown that his later doctrine *does not* contradict the picture of the Godhead painted in the Book of Mormon. As well, the Book of Mormon specifically characterizes itself as an exoteric document, while it is shown elsewhere in this paper that another 1830 document produced by Joseph Smith clearly portrays the Father and Son as separate persons, and specifically claims to be an esoteric document. Therefore, the inference presented here has a clear basis in fact, and certainly cannot be characterized as "wishful thinking."

45. Moses 4:1–2.

46. Vogel, "The Earliest Mormon Doctrine of God," 32 n. 32. Editorial brackets in original.

47. John 1:1.

48. Of course, Vogel might find exceptions to this rule among Oneness Pentecostals. E.g., see David K. Bernard, *Oneness and Trinity A.D. 100–300: The Doctrine of God in Ancient Christian Writings* (USA: Word Aflame Press, 1991).

49. Moses 4:32.

50. *An Early Latter Day Saint History: The Book of John Whitmer, edited by F. Mark McKiernan and Roger D. Launius* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1980), 67, as cited in Robert L. Millet, "Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism: Orthodoxy, Neoorthodoxy, Tension, and Tradition," *BYU Studies* 29:3 (Summer 1989), 49–68.

51. Milton V. Backman, Jr., "Joseph Smith's First Vision: Cornerstone of a Latter-day Faith," *To Be Learned Is God, If..., edited by Robert L. Millet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 29.

52. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that a strict Trinitarian interpretation is impossible *unless* the Son is called "the Father" only in a figurative sense. But if this is the case, there is no particular reason to choose a strict Trinitarian interpretation over the "social trinitarianism" Joseph Smith later explicitly taught.

53. See Moses 4:1–2, 32.

54. Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins,* edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997) 61–93.

55. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1981).

56. Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi's Arabian Journey Updated," *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 379–389.

57. Daniel C. Peterson, "Is the Book of Mormon True? Notes on the Debate," *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins,* edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 141–177.

58. John W. Welch, "What Does Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon Prove?," *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 199–224.

59. John L. Hilton, "On Verifying Wordprint Studies: Book of Mormon Authorship," *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 225–253; Roger R. Keller, *Book of Mormon Authors: Their Words and Messages* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1996).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barry R. Bickmore is married to the former Keiko Guay, and they have three children. He holds a Ph.D. in Geological Sciences from Virginia Tech, and is the author of *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity.* Currently he is assistant professor of Geology at Brigham Young University. In the Church he has been a seminary teacher, ward clerk, elder's quorum president, and quorum teacher, among other things.

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