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“The First Principles of Man Are Self-Existent with God”: The Immortality of the Soul in Mormon Theology

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“I am dwelling on the immutability of the spirit of man,” Joseph Smith taught in April 1844. “Where did it come from?” he rhetorically asked his Nauvoo, Illinois, congregation.¹ The emphatic answer was as much a repudiation of traditional Christian teachings on the immortality of the human soul as it was a declaration of unique Mormon doctrine—what Smith believed to be lost doctrines taught in antiquity, tenets that had been restored to earth through divine revelation: “I must come to the resurrection of the dead, the soul, the mind of man, the immortal spirit. All men say God created it in the beginning. The very idea lessens man in my estimation; I do not believe the doctrine, I know better. Hear it all ye ends of the world, for God has told me so.”²

Other than on a very superficial level, it is highly unlikely that Joseph Smith was familiar with the great philosophical issues of the ages regarding man’s immortality. While he may have heard of Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato, there is no evidence that he studied Greek philosophy or the works of the world’s great thinkers. In his 1832 history, Smith said, “As it required the exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the Family therefore we were deprived of the bennifit of an education suffice it to say I was nearly instructed in reading writing and the ground rules of Arithmatic which const[it]uted my whole literary acquirements.”³ His mother described him as “much less inclined to the perusal of books than any of the rest of the children, but far more given to meditation.”⁴ It is reasonable to assume that Smith knew little,

if anything, regarding issues such as Neoplatonism, dualism, absolutism, or materialism. His theological views were not shaped by studying the writings of philosophers or early Christian theologians like Clement, Justin Martyr, Origen, Tertullian, or Thomas Aquinas, though he may have been introduced to them by perusing some of the Bible commentaries and theological reference books of his day, such as *Bucks Theological Dictionary*. Smith claimed that his views concerning the soul of man came not by reason but by revelation. Even so, his teachings and revelations, and the teachings of subsequent Mormon prophet-leaders—including those espoused by the Church today—intersect with and sometimes directly respond to the great questions and issues raised by philosophers and theologians.

This chapter will explore significant teachings within early Mormonism that helped shape current doctrine regarding immortality as it relates to three phases of existence—preexistence, life on earth, and life after death. This paper offers a short examination of some of the most important and foundational doctrines relating to what Mormons would call man’s three “estates”⁵ and argues that while Church leaders have hardly elaborated on every possibility, they’ve formulated their most potent challenges to traditional Christianity by shrinking the distance between humans and Deity. While many Christian critics worry about Mormon ideas about God, it’s the Latter-day Saint doctrine of human souls that seems most striking given traditional theologies.

Intelligence: Primal Spirit Element

In 1833, Smith received a revelation—now canonized as section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants—stating that “man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29). Having rejected the traditional Christian view of *ex nihilo* creation, Joseph Smith later taught: “The Spirit of Man is

not a created being; it existed from Eternity and will exist to eternity. Anything created cannot be eternal, and earth, water, etc.—all these had their existence in an elementary state from Eternity.”⁶ As early as September 1830—five months after the Church was organized and when Smith was only twenty-four years old—a revelation declared that all things were created, or organized, spiritually prior to being temporally (or naturally) created (see D&C 29:31–32). While we do not know exactly how Smith understood the concept in 1830—whether he perceived “spiritual creation” to mean merely God’s foreknowledge or whether it referred to a literal creation (or organization) of all things in a pre-creation-of-the-earth, spiritual state—it is clear that a decade later he advocated an *ex materia* creation of both the natural world in general and man in particular.⁷

While in Washington, DC, during the winter of 1839–40, Joseph Smith was invited to preach in local churches and discuss Mormon beliefs with residents of the nation’s capital, who were curious to hear the “Mormon Prophet.” Matthew L. Davis, the Washington correspondent for the *New York Enquirer*, was in attendance at a gathering on February 5, 1840, and reported that Smith declared: “I believe that the *soul* is eternal; and had no beginning; it can have no end” and that “the soul of man, the spirit, had existed from eternity in the bosom of Divinity.” What was Smith referring to? Davis stated that the explanation given “was so brief that I could not perfectly comprehend him.”⁸ What is it about the soul that “existed from eternity”?

Four years later in Nauvoo, Illinois, in what came to be known as the King Follett discourse, Smith amplified his earlier teachings. This may have answered some of the questions about man’s immortality that had arisen in the minds of Church members from Smith’s earlier piecemeal revelations and doctrines, but additional questions and controversies emerged. In one of the accounts of this sermon, Smith reportedly said:

We say that God himself is a self-existing God; who told you so? it is correct enough but how did it get into your heads? Who told you that man did not exist in like manner upon the same principles? The mind of man is as immortal as God himself. . . . Is it logic to say that a spirit is immortal, and yet have a beginning? Because if a spirit have a beginning it will have an end . . . intelligence exists upon a self-existent principle, it is a spirit from age to age, and there is no creation about it. . . . The first principles of man are self-existent with God.⁹

It is interesting to note the various terms Joseph Smith used in this discourse in referring to the immortal spirit of man. Earlier, he used the phrase “elementary state.” In the 1844 discourse, however, he seems to more precisely define what that “elementary state” means. Terms such as “soul,” “mind of man,” “spirit,” “intelligent part,” “intelligence,” and “first principles of man” appear to be used almost interchangeably. This portion of the discourse has generated considerable discussion and debate from 1844 to the present. Although there have been many interpretations through the years, it remains somewhat unclear what Smith meant by these terms. There is no doubt, however, that he taught that a central primal element of man was not created but has existed eternally. But questions remain concerning the exact nature of that eternal element. What is “intelligence”? Did man, as an individual entity, always exist? If so, how?

Even among Joseph Smith’s contemporaries who heard this sermon there was disagreement as to what the Prophet meant. Perhaps this is nowhere more apparent than in the subsequent statements of the Pratt brothers, Parley and his younger brother Orson. Both were close associates of Joseph Smith, ardent defenders of Mormonism, prolific writers, and unlettered theologians in their own right. Yet each came to a different interpretation regarding the immortal or primal nature of man. Parley wrote that man, as an individual entity, was “created” or brought forth from uncreated, eternal, primal spiritual matter. Speaking of these “organized” entities, Pratt declared in 1853:

Organized intelligence. What are they made of? They are made of the element which we call spirit. . . . Let a given quantity of this element, thus endowed, or capacitated, be organized in the size and form of man . . . what would we call this individual, organized portion of the spiritual element? We would call it a spiritual body, an individual intelligence, an agent endowed with life, with a degree of independence, or inherent will, with the powers of motion, of thought, and with the attributes of moral, intellectual, and sympathetic affections and emotions.¹⁰

Like Parley P. Pratt, Brigham Young interpreted Smith's teachings about immortal "intelligence" to mean that man was created out of spirit element but did not exist as an individual, premortal entity prior to a literal spiritual birth.¹¹

At the other end of the spectrum, Orson Pratt, one of Mormonism's most colorful and creative thinkers, argued eloquently, but often controversially, that immortal intelligence is a highly individualized existence. He proposed that "each particle [or intelligence] eternally existed prior to this organization; each was enabled to perceive its own existence; each had the power of self-motion; each was an intelligent, living being of itself."¹²

For decades, Orson Pratt feuded with Brigham Young over their differing views on the eternal nature of man and God. In 1865, Brigham Young and his counselors in the First Presidency issued a statement that Orson Pratt's views on the eternal nature of God and man were not to be viewed as the official doctrine of the Church. They stated that the members of the Church, along with all the "Prophets and Apostles," would have to be "content with the knowledge that from eternity there had been organized (created) beings, in an organized form."¹³

It was Brigham Young's, not Orson Pratt's, view that mostly "carried the day" and was viewed as the Church's doctrine in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It was even further solidified by an 1884 sermon delivered by Charles W. Penrose, a prominent Church leader and writer who would later serve in the First Presidency. In that discourse, Penrose argued that God "is an organized Being" and that "God had a beginning." Commenting on the eternal nature of

God (which Pratt had advocated), he taught that the Almighty is viewed as the “Eternal Father” and that he “never had a beginning” only “in the *elementary particles* of his organism,” not as a personal being. Penrose applied this same principle to the eternal nature of man: “The individual, the organized person may have had a beginning (a creation), but that spirit of which and by which they [were] organized never had a beginning. . . . The *primal particles* never had a beginning. They have been organized in different shapes [as individual entities]; the organism [or individual spirit] had a beginning, but the elements or atoms of which it is composed never had. . . . The *elementary parts of matter as well as of spirit*, using ordinary terms, never had a beginning.”¹⁴

This seemed to settle the issue—at least temporarily. The accepted doctrinal view that man, as an individual entity, came about from the organization of primal spirit element remained virtually unchallenged until the early twentieth century. B. H. Roberts, one of Mormonism’s most articulate defenders and doctrinal expositors and senior president of the Church’s third-highest governing body (First Council of the Seventy,) in 1907 published in the *Improvement Era*, the Church’s official periodical, an article entitled “The Immortality of Man.” Also, from 1907 to 1912, Roberts authored the *Seventy’s Course in Theology*—a five-year theological curriculum for leaders and missionaries of the Church holding the position of Seventy. In that curriculum, Roberts sought to systematically explicate the revealed doctrines of the Church and support them by means of scientific evidences and philosophical arguments. In those publications, Roberts amplified what Orson Pratt had articulated a half century earlier. Roberts’s notion of “personal eternalism” represented a more complex and developed view of human immortality in Mormon thought. He claimed that man existed as a personal, individual, self-conscious entity prior to what Mormons had come to accept as a “spirit birth.” He wrote:

There is a complex thing we call man, an intelligent entity, uncreated, self-existent, indestructible, he—for that entity is a person; because as we shall see he is possessed with power that go with the person. . . .

Under this concept, the eternal ego of man was, in some past age of the other world dim to us, clothed with a spiritual body. That was man’s spiritual birth and his entrance into the spiritual world. . . . The term “an intelligence” is then applied to the eternal ego of man existing even before the spiritual creation. . . .

The difference between “spirits” and “intelligences,” as here used, is this: Spirits are uncreated intelligences inhabiting spiritual bodies; while “intelligences,” pure and simple, are intelligent entities, but unembodied in either spirit bodies or bodies of flesh and bone. They are uncreated, self-existent entities.¹⁵

Although neither Roberts nor the leadership of the Church viewed his teachings as official doctrine for the Church, “personal eternalism”—the view that man was an individual, self-conscious, self-acting “intelligence” prior to being created as a spirit—became widely taught and accepted in Church circles in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, the Church has never officially endorsed either philosophical camp—“primal particles” or “personal eternalism.” As Mormon philosopher Blake Ostler has stated, “The conflict between absolute and finite theologies has yet to be resolved in Mormon thought.”¹⁶

“Ye Are the Offspring of God”: Spirit Sons and Daughters of a Heavenly Father

Although Joseph Smith’s use of the terms “soul,” “spirit,” and “intelligence” was somewhat ambiguous, as evidenced by the conflicting opinions expressed by Church leaders in the decades after his death, the Latter-day Saint doctrine of a preexistent “spirit birth” decreased that ambiguity. An official proclamation by the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles issued in 1995 stated: “All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.”¹⁷ Nearly a hundred years earlier, the First Presidency had issued a doctrinal declaration regarding the spiritual and physical origins of man. “All men and women are in the

similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity,” the presidency of the Church wrote in 1909.

The doctrine of the pre-existence—revealed so plainly, particularly in the latter days, pours a wonderful flood of light upon the otherwise mysterious problem of man’s origin. It shows that man, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming to earth in a temporal body to undergo an experience in mortality. It teaches that all men existed in spirit before any man existed in the flesh, and all who have inhabited the earth since Adam have taken bodies and become souls in like manner. . . . Man is the child of God.¹⁸

Every President of the Church since Joseph Smith has clearly and consistently taught that all humans are, as the Apostle Paul explained to the Athenian intellectuals, “offspring of God” (see Acts 17:28–29). Not only that, but to Mormons, the phrase in Hebrews describing God as “the father of spirits” (see Hebrews 12:9) is to be taken literally.¹⁹ Although this doctrine is ubiquitous today in official Mormon publications and curricula—as well as in sermons spoken, lessons taught, and hymns sung by leaders and lay members all over the world—it was not always so. There is little evidence that Mormons of the 1830s knew much, if anything, about this doctrine. The Latter-day Saint doctrine of preexistence and man’s spiritual nature, as previously demonstrated, unfolded gradually. Even so, there is a paucity of evidence that Joseph Smith taught that men were spiritually begotten sons and daughters of God as preexistent spirit entities. The doctrine does not appear directly in any of Smith’s public discourses or official Church publications in his lifetime; nor is it found in any of the Mormon canonical works.²⁰ However, it was widely taught by some of Smith’s closest contemporaries, who attributed their understanding of the doctrine to the Mormon Prophet. For example, within months of Smith’s death, Orson Pratt along with poetess Eliza R. Snow, one of Smith’s plural wives, published writings that directly spoke of man’s spirit birth to heavenly parents. “What is man? The offspring of God,” Pratt wrote in his 1845 *Prophetic Almanac*. “What is God? The father of man. Who is Jesus Christ? He is our Brother. . . . How many states of existence has man? He has

three. What is the first? It is spiritual. What is the second? It is temporal. What is third? It is immortal and eternal. How did he begin to exist in the first? He was begotten and born of God.”²¹ Some have suggested that Pratt actually wrote this work and prepared it for publication prior to Smith’s death in June 1844.²²

Similarly, a poem penned by Eliza R. Snow entitled “My Father in Heaven” was published in the November 15, 1845, issue of the Nauvoo *Times and Seasons*. Many secondhand accounts claim that Snow learned of spirit birth from Smith himself.²³ Today Snow’s poem is a much-beloved Latter-day Saint hymn entitled “O My Father”:

O my Father, thou that dwellest
In the high and glorious place;
When shall I regain thy presence,
And again behold thy face?
In thy holy habitation
Did my spirit once reside?
In my first primeval childhood
Was I nurtured near thy side?

For a wise and glorious purpose
Thou hast plac’d me here on earth,
And withheld the recollection
Of my former friends and birth:
Yet oft times a secret something
Whispered you’re a stranger here;
And I felt that I had wandered
From a more exalted sphere.

I had learn’d to call thee father
Through the spirit from on high;
But until the key of knowledge
Was restor’d, I knew not why.²⁴

In 1847, Orson Pratt stated that Joseph Smith, before his death, “advanced some new and glorious ideas, that we [h]ad never reflected on it. It was in reg[a]rd to the offspring of the Cel[estial] Male & Female. It was a new thing to me.”²⁵ It is reasonable to assume that Brigham Young was likewise introduced to the doctrine by Joseph Smith, as reflected in this 1852

statement by Young: “Our Father in Heaven begat all the spirits that ever were, or ever will be on this earth; and they were born spirits in the eternal world. Then the Lord by His power and wisdom organized the mortal tabernacles of man. We were made first spiritual, and afterwards temporal.”²⁶

The Mormon notion of spirit birth is an interesting blend of Platonic thought on immortality, traditional Christian views concerning soul creation, Origen’s beliefs regarding preexistence, and the dualists’ views on body and mind, matter, and consciousness. Yet there are also great differences between each of these and Mormon thought. Latter-day Saint scholar Charles Harrell has pointed out that some aspects of the spirit birth doctrine were not as radical a departure from traditional Christianity as is usually assumed. “It is important to realize,” Harrell writes, “that during the early nineteenth century there was a common tendency to view God’s fatherhood much the same way as taught in Mormonism, except for the procreative process implicit in LDS teachings.” As examples, Harrell cites Methodism’s view of “man’s divine sonship eventuating in his moral perfection,” Universalists’ view of the fatherhood of God, and an 1824 article in the *Christian Magazine* stating that man’s soul possesses a “spark of [God’s] intelligence, and continues to be in a high and peculiar sense ‘his offspring.’”²⁷ Clearly, however, the Mormon doctrine of the literal relationship of man to heavenly parents is the great divide. It is this unique LDS doctrine that gives meaning to Latter-day Saints’ understanding of their natures before they were born on earth, as human beings on earth, and what they will be like after death.

The Hand and Glove: Spirit and Body

There is a commonly used object lesson in Mormon circles that teaches in a simplistic manner the dual nature of man. It is the hand and a glove. The hand represents the spirit of man

and the glove represents the physical body. Just as the glove cannot serve its purpose without the hand within it, the body is dependent upon and is the outward “clothing” of the immortal spirit. Clearly, the physical nature of man has a powerful effect on his existence and the “outward man” (or body) is an essential element in man’s existence, but the “inward man” (or spirit) is central to eternal identity. Together, as Mormon scripture declares, “the spirit and the body are the soul of man” (D&C 88:15).

Within months after the organization of the Church, Joseph Smith spoke of the spiritual and temporal (physical) natures of man and all creation (see D&C 29:31–32). In 1832, Smith said that God revealed to him that “that which is spiritual [is] in the likeness of that which is temporal; and that which is temporal in the likeness of that which is spiritual; *the spirit of man in the likeness of his person*, as also the spirit of the beast, and every other creature which God has created” (D&C 77:2; emphasis added). A decade later, Joseph Smith elaborated further on the nature of spirits:

The spirit, by many, is thought to be immaterial, without substance. With this latter statement we should beg to differ, and state that spirit is a substance; that it is material, but that it is more pure, elastic and refined matter than the [physical] body; that it existed before the body, can exist in the body; and will exist separate from the body, when the body will be mouldering in the dust; and will in the resurrection, be again united with it.²⁸

Similarly, Orson Pratt taught that spirits “have form and likeness similar to the human tabernacle.”²⁹ His brother Parley went a step further in his classic *Key to the Science of Theology*, first published in 1855. He taught that the spirit being was not only “in the likeness and after the pattern of the fleshly tabernacle” but “it possesses, in fact, all the organs and parts exactly corresponding to the outward tabernacle.”³⁰ That isn’t official Mormon doctrine, but it is rather fascinating.

The Mormon view of the spirit body being in “the likeness of his person” also shapes Mormon perceptions of what spirit beings—both premortal and postmortal—do. Joseph Smith taught in 1843 that “the same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there” (D&C 130:2). Contextually, he was speaking of post-Resurrection “sociality,” but this notion has been applied by other Latter-day Saint leaders and scholars to preexistent spirits and those who have already lived on earth. For example, Brigham Young taught that “spirits will be as familiar with spirits in the spirit world—will converse, behold, and exercise every variety of communication with one another as familiarly and naturally as while here in tabernacles.”³¹

Death—A Temporary Separation of Spirit from Body

When Joseph Smith castigated the “learned men and doctors of divinity” for what he considered their mistaken views on the immortality of the soul, he may well have been referring not only to their prevailing views regarding preexistence but also to their views concerning the soul’s condition upon death. In contrast to nineteenth-century Christian materialist (or mortalist) teachings that many early Mormons would have known from their Protestant backgrounds, Joseph Smith proclaimed that death is merely a temporary separation of the spirit body from the physical body. The Book of Mormon teaches “concerning the state of the soul between death and the resurrection . . . that the spirits of all men, as soon as they are departed from this mortal body, yea, the spirits of all men, whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life” (Alma 40:11). Rather than “soul sleep” at death or a final judgment where righteous are taken immediately to the heavenly reward and the unsaved are thrust down to eternal torment, as many Christians advocated, the Book of Mormon and early Mormon leaders taught that at death the immortal spirits go to an intermediate realm “until the time of their resurrection” (Alma 40:14). Brigham Young taught that God, the Heavenly Father, was “pleased to organize

tabernacles here, and put spirits into them, and they then became intelligent beings. By and by, sooner or later, the body, this that is tangible to you, that you can feel, see, handle, etc., returns to its mother dust. Is the spirit dead? No. You believe the spirit still exists, when this body has crumbled to the earth again, and the spirit that God puts into the tabernacle goes into the world of the spirits.”³²

Conditions in that postmortal spirit world, Mormons believe, are much like those in the premortal realm. Spirits, like men and women on earth, are capable of acting, thinking, feeling, and learning. Joseph Smith taught in 1843: “The spirits in the eternal world are like the spirits in this world.”³³ The postmortal spirit world is an intermediate “estate”—a preparatory and purifying state where all will be given the opportunity to learn of and accept or reject the principles of eternal salvation. By this they can, as the Apostle Peter taught in the New Testament, be “judged according to men in the flesh” (1 Peter 4:6). This doctrine related to the eternal fate of the unevangelized is a distinctive feature of Mormon theology and practice. It was a prominent teaching of Smith’s in Nauvoo before his death in 1844 and became even more institutionalized in Mormonism with the inclusion of a 1918 vision by Church President Joseph F. Smith known as the “Vision of the Redemption of the Dead” in the Latter-day Saint canon (see D&C 138).

“Resurrection from the Dead Is the Redemption of the Soul”

The foundation of Christianity is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise of man’s Resurrection from death that results therefrom. “For as in Adam all die,” the Apostle Paul taught the Corinthians, “even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). This is the cornerstone of LDS theology, as well: it is the “fundamental principle of the Gospel,” Joseph Smith declared, and all other doctrines of the faith are mere “appendages” to it.³⁴

Mormon scripture teaches that “the spirit *and* the body are the soul of man” (D&C 88:15; emphasis added). Therefore, “the resurrection from the dead is the redemption of the soul” (D&C 88:16). The culminating relationship between body and spirit is found, as taught in Mormonism, in a literal resurrection. Death results in a temporary separation of body and spirit. Resurrection is an eternal and inseparable union of both. The Book of Mormon speaks of the Resurrection as a “restoration” where “the spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame.”

Now, this restoration shall come to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, both the wicked and the righteous; and even there shall not so much as a hair of their heads be lost; but every thing shall be restored to its perfect frame, as it is now, or in the body. . . .

Now, behold, I have spoken unto you concerning the death of the mortal body, and also concerning the resurrection of the mortal body. I say unto you that this mortal body is raised to an immortal body, that is from death, even from the first death unto life, that they can die no more; their spirits uniting with their bodies, *never to be divided*; thus the whole becoming spiritual and immortal, that they can no more see corruption. (Alma 11:44–45; emphasis added)

That there is a universal Resurrection; that all souls will live eternally with tangible bodies of flesh and bone; that these souls will know glory and joy, or the lack thereof, commensurate with their obedience to the law they were willing to obey in time and eternity (see D&C 88:21–38)—these things are widely taught in the Mormon canon and in the sermons and writings of Mormon leaders. What is less discussed, however, is *how* that Resurrection—the redemption of the soul—actually takes place. From the early years after the Church was first organized until today, Church leaders and lay members have speculated about the process of resurrection, but there is virtually no normative teaching in official Church publications regarding this process of resurrection.³⁵ For example, Brigham Young stated that “in the resurrection everything that is necessary *will be brought from the elements* to clothe and beautify the resurrected Saints who will receive their reward.”³⁶ In 1854, Orson Pratt compared the death

of the human body and its ultimate resurrection to a kernel of wheat that becomes a new organism:

When a kernel of wheat falls into the earth, it dies, or rather a portion of its substance is disorganized; and the germ unites itself with other materials, and forms a stalk which heads and blossoms, and numerous other kernels of wheat begin to make their appearance which grow and ripen; and it is at length found that sixty or a hundred other kernels of the same, shape, size, and quality, as the one sown, are produced. Now these kernels are not the same identical materials sown; . . . they are each composed of almost entire new substance that never was before organized as wheat. . . . So likewise man sows not the body that shall be, but sows one containing form, and magnitude, and, in some degree, the elements of the new. Without the sowing of the old wheat, and its dissolution in the earth, the new could not be expected; so also, without our bodies sown in corruption, there would be no foundation for incorruptible bodies. And as the new wheat is mostly composed of new particles never before organized as wheat; so, it is probable, that the new immortal body will contain much matter never before organized in human bodies.³⁷

These views—particularly the phrase “brought from the elements”—reflect the Mormon doctrine that all matter is uncreated and eternal and, as such, can be reorganized but not destroyed. Part of that “reorganization” would necessitate a change of what Paul called “corruptible” bodies that are fallen, die, and decay to an incorruptible, divine body (see 1 Corinthians 15:47–54). Joseph Smith taught: “God Almighty Himself dwells in eternal fire, flesh and blood cannot go there for all corruption is devoured by the fire [of God]—our God is a consuming fire—when our flesh is quickened by the Spirit, there will be no blood in the tabernacles,—some dwell in higher glory than others; . . . all men who are [im]mortal, dwell in everlasting burnings; . . . all men are born to die & all men must rise, all must enter eternity.”³⁸

Conclusion

During his April 7, 1844, sermon in Nauvoo, Illinois, when he was “dwelling upon the immortality of man,” Joseph Smith took off the wedding ring from his finger, held it up before the crowd, and stated, “I take my ring from my finger and liken it unto the mind of man, the immortal spirit, because it has no beginning. Suppose you cut it in two; but as the Lord lives there would be an end.”³⁹ Within Mormonism, man, like God, is an eternal being. Although

neither Joseph Smith nor his successors were able to answer every question regarding how both God and man are uncreated and immortal or elaborate on every related doctrine, Mormons believe in a “two-way” immortality—an eternal past and an eternal future. Like all Christians, Latter-day Saints believe that Jesus Christ makes the immortality of the soul possible, in that he makes resurrected, glorified immortality possible. Mormon doctrine, however, parts company with traditional Christianity in unabashedly proclaiming that man is not only eternal but also the literal “offspring of God”—begotten daughters and sons of Deity with infinite potential. To be sure, that potential can be fully realized only as the Atonement of Jesus Christ is applied, so that lost and fallen men and women are redeemed from sin and put into a right relationship with Deity. Despite differences in doctrinal details, Mormons gladly join with many other Christians in declaring that death does not end man’s existence but merely is a gateway to resurrection and eternal reward—a gift of God, through the power of his Son. A familiar Mormon scriptural passage from the Pearl of Great Price perhaps says it best: “For behold, this is [God’s] work and [his] glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).⁴⁰

These unique views on the immortality of the soul and man’s relationship to God powerfully affect the minds and lives of Mormons today. They are central to Latter-day Saints’ approach to and worship of God. In addition to this “heavenly perspective,” the Mormon theology of the immortality of the soul gives an “earthly view”—an understanding that all people on earth are linked together as brothers and sisters, children of God. As B. H. Roberts declared:

I point out this noble relationship of man to Deity, not to flatter the former, but because I believe it to be a fact. It is a theme that I love to contemplate, not because it debases Deity, but because it elevates man, and must inspire him with noble aspirations, and to the performance of virtuous deeds. If but once understood and realized by mankind, I believe the conception would be a strong incentive to the reformation of the world.⁴¹

Notes

¹ Wilford Woodruff, diary, 137, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. This discourse was delivered by Joseph Smith to an audience of nearly twenty thousand people during a general conference of the Church in Nauvoo, Illinois, on Sunday, April 7, 1844. Several of those present mentioned the sermon in their diaries. Smith stated that it was a funeral sermon given in response to a request from the family of King Follett, a member of the Church who had tragically been killed in an accident in March of that year. The discourse was recorded by four men who had experience and training in taking notes, some of whom at various times served as scribes for Joseph Smith. It was first published in the August 15, 1844, edition of the Mormon periodical *Times and Seasons*. This chapter will quote from these various early sources of the sermon. In 1855 the notes and accounts prepared by the four diarists were merged to form the official version of the sermon, which was published in the Salt Lake City *Deseret News* on July 8, 1857. That version has been published several times in official Church publications since that time, most familiarly in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932–51), 6:310–11.

² “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons*, August 15, 1844, 615.

³ Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 11, available online at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832>.

⁴ Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 84.

⁵The term “estate” is used in the scriptures to mean a condition or dwelling place (see Ecclesiastes 3:18; Ezekiel 16:55; Jude 1:6). Latter-day Saint scripture uses the term “first estate” to mean man’s pre-earthly spirit existence. Although not found in scripture, the term “second estate” is used within Mormonism to refer to earth life. By extension, life after death—either in the postmortal spirit world or after the Resurrection—could be referred to as the “third estate” or “fourth estate,” respectively. Parley P. Pratt used these specific terms in his chapter, “Origin of the Universe,” in *Key to the Science of Theology: Designed as an Introduction to the First Principles of Spiritual Philosophy; Religion; Law and Government; as Delivered by the Ancients, and as Restored in this Age, for the Final Development of Universal Peace, Truth, and Knowledge* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855).

⁶*The Words of Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 9.

⁷See Blake Ostler, “The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 59–78; see also Ostler, “Out of Nothing: A History of Creation *ex Nihilo* in Early Christian Thought” (review of Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, “Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the Mormon Doctrine of Creation and a Defense of *Creatio ex nihilo*,” in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen), *FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005): 253–320.

⁸Manuscript History of the Church, bk. C-1, 152–53, Church History Library.

⁹Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons*, August 15, 1844, 615.

¹⁰Parley P. Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 1:7–8.

¹¹See *Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998), 47–51.

¹²Orson Pratt, “The Pre-existence of Man,” *The Seer*, July 1853, 103.

¹³The First Presidency, 1865, in James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 2:233.

¹⁴Charles W. Penrose, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26:23, 27; emphasis added.

¹⁵B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy’s Course in Theology* (Independence, MO: Zion’s Printing and Publishing, 1907–11), 4:13–14; see also Roberts, “Immortality of Man,” *Improvement Era*, April 1907, 403–23; see also *The Seventy’s Course in Theology*, vol. 4, lessons 1–23.

¹⁶Ostler, “The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought,” 72.

¹⁷The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.

¹⁸The First Presidency (Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, Anthon H. Lund), “The Origin of Man,” *Improvement Era*, November 1909, 75–81; reprinted in James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:203–6.

¹⁹A representative example of how this is taught within Mormonism today can be found in the following statement written in 1985 by one of Mormonism’s most prolific writers and a prominent theologian, Apostle Bruce R. McConkie: “[God] is more than the Father of the Firstborn; more than the Father of the Only Begotten in the flesh; more than the Father in the sense that he created the first mortal man. He is, in deed and in fact, the Father of the spirits of all men in the literal and full sense of the word. Each of us was begotten by him in the premortal

life. We are his spirit children.” *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 61.

²⁰Some Mormon scholars today suggest that the “spirit birth” Joseph Smith would have understood and taught others, if he did so, was not a literal birth, but rather an “adoption” whereby God “claimed these intelligences as his own,” “organizing them into a celestial kindred.” (See Samuel M. Brown, “Believing Adoption,” *BYU Studies* 52, no. 2 (2013): 50; see also Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 147–75. Tracing the historical development of the belief that most Latter-day Saints today espouse of “spirit birth” to “heavenly parents,” Givens wrote: “Even though the transformation or progression of spirit matter or intelligence into spirit through a process analogous to birth, has no verifiable basis in Smith’s teachings, this interpretation is the logical implication of a heavenly pattern—limned by Smith in his King Follett Discourse and in section 132—whereby exalted men and women become the creators of eternal offspring, in imitation of their own Heavenly Parents. . . . Smith may have been heading in the direction of reconciling eternal existence with spirit birth or spirit ‘organization.’ He may, in other words, have been working toward a scheme in which primordial intelligence is transformed into spirit corporeality. . . . When the language of spirit birth is used in the modern church, it is without the clarification that such begetting may be our best near-equivalent for God’s fathering of the human spirit.” Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 160–61.

²¹Orson Pratt, *Prophetic Almanac for 1845* (New York: Prophet’s Office, n.d.), 7–8.

²² See Charles R. Harrell, “The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844,” *BYU Studies* 28, no. 2 (1988): 88.

²³See Jill Mulvay Derr, “The Significance of ‘O My Father’ in the Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow,” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996–97): 85–126.

²⁴ Eliza R. Snow, “O My Father,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 292.

²⁵Orson Pratt, general Church minutes, November 21, 1847, Church Historian’s Office, CR 100 318, box 1, folder 58, November 15, 1847–November 30, 1847.

²⁶Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:50.

²⁷ Harrell, “Doctrine of Preexistence,” 89–90.

²⁸Joseph Smith, editorial, *Times and Seasons*, April 1, 1842, 745.

²⁹ Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:242.

³⁰ Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 79.

³¹Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:239.

³²Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:138.

³³ Joseph Smith, journal, May 21, 1843, 215, MS 155, box 1, folder 6, Church History Library.

³⁴ Joseph Smith, *Elders’ Journal*, July 1838, 42.

³⁵ For a discussion of Joseph Smith’s views regarding a literal resurrection and his criticisms of others’ philosophies regarding such, see Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³⁶Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:192; emphasis added.

³⁷Orson Pratt, “Resurrection of the Saints,” *The Seer*, June 1854, 277.

³⁸ Thomas Bullock, minutes of a discourse, May 12, 1844, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library.

³⁹“Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons*, August 15, 1844, 615.

⁴⁰Mormons accept the Pearl of Great Price as a canonical work like the Holy Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. Although not officially accepted by the Church as canon until 1880, portions of the works contained in it were published in the Church's official newspapers, *Evening and Morning Star* (Independence, MO) and *Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, IL) as early as 1832. To assist the proselyting work of Mormon missionaries and their teaching new converts to Mormonism in Great Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, Apostle Franklin D. Richards compiled those previously published works into a small book entitled *The Pearl of Great Price*, published in Liverpool in 1851. The Book of Moses is one of the works contained within the Pearl of Great Price. It is an extract from Joseph Smith's "inspired translation" of the Bible and contains several visions purportedly given to Moses that differ from or expand the Genesis account. Mormons view this work as a "restoration" of unique doctrinal and historical concepts.

⁴¹B. H. Roberts, *The Gospel and Man's Relationship to Deity*, 10th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 282.