What has Athens to do with Mormonism?

Benjamin Wade Harman

In his lecture, Terryl Givens presents one with a new way to approach the prophecy of Enoch that was received by Joseph Smith. Contained in this short narrative is a new, innovative conception about God that differs greatly from traditional Christianity. This notion is that of a passible deity, a God that is susceptible to feeling and emotion. It is a God who weeps, a God who is vulnerable and suffers emotional pain. God, as defined by the Christian creeds, is one who lacks passions.[1] Givens, in drawing attention to the passible deity, is illuminating just a small portion of a much larger tension that exists between Mormonism and traditional Christianity. The God of Mormonism is not just a slight modification of the God of the creeds. Traditionally Christians, who now will be referred to as orthodox, have endorsed a view of deity that is more or less in line with the God of Classical Theism, or the God of the philosophers. However, the difference between these two conceptions of God is much greater than this one attribute. The God of Mormonism has undergone such a vast transformation from the God of Classical Theism that it no longer resembles its predecessor. In this essay, I'm arguing that the God of Mormonism is not only different than the God of orthodox Christianity in terms of passibility, but is different in every other major characteristic.

In order to understand the God of Mormonism, one must first understand the orthodox Christian God. As noted by Diarmaid MacCulloch, the first generations of Christians were Jews that lived in a world that was shaped by Greek culture. The Jewish conception of God was one of passion, in both anger and love, as well as all-powerful. The Greeks thought of God as all-perfect, immune to change, and devoid of all passions. "[Christians] had to try and fit together these two irreconcilable visions of God, and the

---

[1] Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Crawfordsville: Ensign Peak, 2012), 22.

results have never been and never can be a stable answer to an unending question."[2] The marriage of Jewish and Greek culture changed the conception of God forever. The contemplation of the mixing of biblical doctrine and Greek philosophy led to Tertullian's famous question; "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[3]

Since the God of Mormonism is distinct from orthodox Christianity, the question now becomes: what has Athens to do with Mormonism? Some Mormons would answer, nothing. As noted by one prominent Mormon philosopher, "[his] project has been a rescue operation to save the heart of God's revelations to the Hebrews from the Greek mind."[4] Two of the most influential thinkers in Mormon thought were Parley P. Pratt and Orson Pratt. They were the first to attempt to construct a systematic theology for Mormonism. In doing so they were engaged in this millennia long struggle to reconcile attributes of both the Hebrew God, and the Greek God. They also had to reconcile these along with Joseph Smiths new notions of God.[5]

Joseph Smith never sat down to systematize a theological system.[6] This fact makes it rather difficult to produce an all-encompassing definition of what all Mormons believe. Some have compared it with trying to nail green Jell-O to a wall.[7] For orthodox Christianity it is no different. Diarmaid MacCulloch remarked that when sketching

---

[2] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking Penguin Group, 2009), 2.
[3] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History if the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 49.
[4] Blake Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: Vol. 3, Of God and Gods* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008), *ix*.
[5] Blake Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: Vol. 1, The Attributes of God* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), 82.
[6] Ibid, 74.
[7] Robert L. Millet, *Discourses in Mormon Theology,* ed. James M. McLaughlan and Loyd Ericson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 266.

Christian doctrines, it is a reminder of the diversity of Christianity. There is "a vital lesson to learn for modern Christians who wish to impose a uniformity on Christian belief and practice which has never in fact existed."[8] For this reason I am forced to lay out a general definition. I have done my best to give an accurate account of both traditions, broad as it may be. With these circumstances, the best one can do is provide a definition where most adherents would agree with most of the definition.

God is defined in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy:* "Most theologians have tried to say something about what God is like. In so doing, they have generally regarded him as a personal being, bodiless, omnipresent, creator and sustainer of any universe there may be, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and a source of moral obligation; who exists eternally and necessarily, and…. is the greatest conceivable being."[9] For the remainder of my paper I will address each of these attributes, how orthodox Christianity has regarded of them, and how Mormonism differs from it.

Personal Being. God is a being that can have person like qualities, but nevertheless is genderless and is a different species than man. French theologian, Peter Abelard, opposed any form of an anthropomorphic Deity. Abelard thought that God could have no human qualities, even emotions. God, according to Abelard, is an absolute perfection and is the incarnation of power, goodness, and wisdom.[10] In Mormonism, God

---

[8] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, 176-177.
[9] Ted Honderich, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 314.
[10] George P. Fedotov, *Peter Abelard: The Personality, Self-Consciousness and Thought of A Martyr of 'Enlightenment,'* trans. Alexander I. Lisenko (Belmont: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1988), 131.

is male and most Mormons believe there is a female counter part.[11] God, humans, and angels, are all of the same species. They are one race and are of one family.[12] John A. Widtsoe taught that man is god in embryo and he comes of a race of gods. "God's relation to man is, in a literal sense, that of a father to a son, for we are of the same race with God."[13]

Bodiless. William of Ockham taught, "God cannot be composed of matter and form as material creatures are." Since God is the creator of matter, and God existed before matter, one must conclude that He cannot be comprised of matter.[14] Mormonism developed a view similar to Thomas Jefferson, which is to talk about God as immaterial was "to talk of *nothings*." This is why Joseph Smith changed from an orthodox Christian belief in God as only a spirit to a belief that He was embodied.[15] Joseph explicitly taught that God has a body of flesh and bone as tangible as man's.[16]

Omnipresent. The Roman philosopher Boethius taught that God is present everywhere and has the ability to act anywhere. God's knowledge of the past, present, and future, is like our knowledge of the present. That is because God is outside time. Even talking about foreknowledge for God makes little sense because there is no future

---

[11] David L. Paulsen, *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies,* ed. Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen (Macon: Mercer University Press. 2007), 532-538.
[12] Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology: A Voice of Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 21.
[13] John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 25-27.
[14] Gyula Kilma, *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion, Vol. 2: Medieval Philosophy of Religion,* ed. Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 202.
[15] Richard Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 420.
[16] Joseph Smith, *The Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 265.

for God. God does not have foreknowledge; he just has knowledge. He is eternal. God does not live a successive life. He does not experience one thing after another, for he has no past and no future. He only has an all-encompassing eternal present.[17] In Mormonism God is a temporal being that has a past, present, and future.[18] James E. Talmage stated that it is unreasonable to suppose that God could be physically present in more than one place at one time.[19] Later B. H. Roberts taught that not only can God not be in two places at once, but He also in unable to go beyond the boundary of space and time.[20]

Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Augustine of Hippo taught that when God created the universe *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing. God created the very matter that the universe is composed of and that matter was created literally out of nothing.[21] Augustine also taught that God was the sustainer of the universe as well and that all things depend on God for their being.[22] In Mormonism God created *ex materia* as opposed to *ex nihilo*.[23] That is to say that God created, or rather organized, out of already existing material. Joseph Smith taught that there was chaotic matter that has existed for all time. So God took this matter and organized it into the universe.[24] In addition God does not

---

[17] Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy,* trans. David R. Slavitt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 168-174.
[18] Sterling McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 13.
[19] James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1899), 42.
[20] B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology: Fourth Year, The Atonement* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1911), 17, 70.
[21] William E. Mann, *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine,* ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 41.
[22] Scott MacDonald, *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine,* 84.
[23] Charles R. Harrell, *"This Is My Doctrine" The Development of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 231.
[24] Joseph Smith, *History of the Church: Vol. 6* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1950), 308.

even have the ability to create or destroy, space or matter.[25] Furthermore, since spirit and matter are eternal, God didn't even create the spirits of humans.[26]

Perfectly free. Nothing causes or even influences God and how He chooses to act. God is free to do as He pleases. John Duns Scotus, a High Middle Ages philosopher taught a version of Divine Command Theory, which will be discussed I greater detail later. Scotus believed in free will and that for anyone to be free they must have the ability to choose otherwise. Since, in Divine Command Theory, God is not governed by a law of what good is but rather he decides what good is, God must be free to choose otherwise as well.[27] Since what is good is arbitrary in this construct, God is free to do anything and is bound by no laws. God in Mormonism is in no sense the Creator of natural laws, rather He directs them. Joseph Smith departed from the idea that God superior to nature. Joseph taught that "God is part of nature, and superior to it only in the sense that the electrician is superior to the current that is transmitted along the wire. The great laws of nature are immutable, and even God can not transcend them."[28]

Omnipotent. God has the power to do anything that is logically possible. The Italian philosopher, Bonaventure, held that "God is almighty in that he is the all-powerful principle…. But this does not mean that God can carry out acts that contradict the very

---

[25] B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology: Fourth Year, The Atonement, 70*.
[26] John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 242.
[27] Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Second Edition,* ed. Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1973), 598.
[28] John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith as Scientists: A Contribution to Mormon Philosophy* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 137, 138.

notion of divinity." God cannot sin for example.[29] In Mormonism the attribute omnipotence, according to B. H. Roberts, must be thought of as somewhat limited. Roberts suggested that God could bring anything to pass that was consistent with natural laws.[30] This view is more or less in line with Blake Ostler's. "God is omnipotent even though there are logically possible states of affairs which he cannot unilaterally bring about." So while God may not be all-powerful, he as all power possible. "[God's] power must be maximal and such that it cannot be thwarted by any other being."[31] David Ray Griffin elaborates this position more clearly. Though Griffin is not Mormon, he asserts that God is not all-powerful, but exerts *some* power over *all* things. God is not an all-powerful being but is the most powerful being.[32]

Omniscient. This view is that God literally knows everything. God know every true proposition and even future events. Thomas Aquinas said, "God knows all things, and since some of these are contingent events in our future, it follows that God knows contingent future events."[33] In Mormonism, Brigham Young taught that God did not know all things but is still progressing in knowledge.[34] B. H. Roberts declared "that God is Omniscient up to the point that further progress in knowledge is impossible to him; but that all knowledge that is, all that exists, God knows."[35]

---

[29] Christopher M. Cullen, *Bonaventure* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 68.
[30] B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology: Fourth Year, The Atonement*, 70.
[31] Blake Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: Vol. 1, The Attributes of God*, 133.
[32] David Ray Griffin, *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy,* ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 114-115.
[33] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Questions on God,* ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 191.
[34] Charles R. Harrell, *"This Is My Doctrine" The Development of Mormon Theology*, 129.
[35] B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology: Fourth Year, The Atonement*, 70.

Perfectly good and source of moral obligation. William of Ockham supposed a form of Divine Command Theory. Essentially anything can potentially be good if God commands it. God is the creator of morals and could sanction anything that is not a logical contradiction. "[Ockham] emphasized that God is not under any obligation to do anything; what ever he wills is by this fact just. All obligation has its foundation in divine command and in man's dependence on God. 'Evil is nothing else than to do something when one is under an obligation to do the opposite.'"[36] The moral law in Mormonism exists outside of God. What is good stands independent of what God does. The Book of Mormon teaches that there is a moral law that God follows and if He does not follow it then God would cease to be God.[37] Blake Ostler said, "There are eternal moral principles which condition even God, and these principles are found in the constraints inherent in intelligences to mutual self-realization as divine persons."[38]

Exists eternally and necessarily. There was never a time when God did not exist and it is necessary that He does exist. René Descartes concluded that God must necessarily exist because it would be contradictory if He did not.[39] There can only be one necessary being. Two beings couldn't necessarily exist simultaneously because their existence would be tied with the other, and if something's existence is dependent on another's, then it does not necessarily exist. The God of Mormonism cannot have this

---

[36] D. E. Luscombe, *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy,* ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 714.
[37] Joseph Smith, *The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 312-313.
[38] Blake Ostler, *Discourses in Mormon Theology,* ed. James M. McLaughlan and Loyd Ericson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), pg. 154.
[39] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: A Bilingual Edition,* ed. & trans. George Heffernan (Norte Dame: University of Norte Dame Press, 1990), pg. 137.

kind of existence because there is more than one God. Joseph Smith taught that God has not been God for all eternity and also that there is a plurality of Gods.[40] Orson Pratt said, "We were begotten by our Father in Heaven; the person of our Father in Heaven was begotten on a previous heavenly world by His Father; and again, He was begotten by a still more ancient Father, and so one, from one generation to generation…. Do you seek for a *first* link where the chain is endless? Can you conceive of a *first* year in endless duration?.... All these things you will readily acknowledge have no *first*: why, then, do you seek for a *first* personal Father in an endless genealogy? "[41] However, it must be noted that Pratt taught elsewhere that there was a time in which no God existed.[42] Which ever view Pratt eventually decided on, neither once could be a God with necessary existence.

Greatest conceivable being. This notion comes from Anselm's Ontological Argument for God's existence. Without restating the argument, it states that God has to be the greatest possible being and that nothing could even be conceivably greater than God, that to claim that something could be greater than God would be a contradiction because God is a being where nothing great can be conceived.[43] However, in Mormonism, God's greatness is constantly increasing. While in a sense nothing is, or ever will be greater than God in Mormonism, God's greatness has, is, and will continue to surpass its self so He is not the greatest conceivable being. Joseph Smith said, "My

---

[40] Joseph Smith, *History of the Church: Vol. 6*, 305, 474.
[41] Orson Pratt, *The Seer* (Salt Lake City: Segal Book & Tape, 1993), p. 132.
[42] Kurt Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theological Evolution, 1830-1915* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2000), 138.
[43] Brian Davies, *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm,* ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 159.

Father worked out his kingdom… and I must do the same; and when I get my kingdom, I shall present it to my Father, so that he may obtain kingdom upon kingdom, and it will exalt him in glory. He will then take a higher exaltation, and I will take his place, and thereby become exalted myself."[44]

As I have demonstrated, the God of Mormonism is vastly different than the God of orthodox Christianity. I am deliberately not making any judgments about which view is better or more philosophically sound. I think each side has its own merits and its shortcomings. I do realize that I have just presented one view of God from each side, and had someone else written this same essay, the results may have been different. It was my goal to be fair to both sides for there is no one definition that all Mormons would agree with, as there is no one view that every orthodox Christian would agree with. However, as it is stated in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* "every LDS person is encouraged to become a profound theologian. Becoming such necessitates a heavy commitment to active study 'in theory, in principle, in doctrine' to search out the weighty matters of time and eternity, which include the basic questions of the philosophers. The imperative 'study it out in you mind' is a standard for all LDS persons, not just for academics.[45] If anyone has any disagreements about what I have presented, it is his or her task to study it out and find what works for them. Reconciling different conceptions of God is nothing new and with Mormonism maintaining an open cannon, all of this could change tomorrow. Blake Ostler remarked given this concept of continuing revelation, "There is no authoritative

---

[44] Joseph Smith, *History of the Church: Vol. 6*, 306.
[45] Chauncey C. Riddle, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: Vol. 3,* ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 1080.

systematic development of Mormon beliefs. There is no final, once and for all, statement of truth."[46]

However, when presented with this information, I do side with Givens that one the most innovative and profound theological developments has been the notion of a passible deity. "In Enoch's vision, heaven shocks by its familiarity. God, it would appear, is first and foremost a relation Being, and the heaven toward which we aspire consists of loving relationships that are eternal."[47] With that one idea, it makes reconciling every other attribute a little easier.

---

[46] Blake Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: Vol. 1, The Attributes of God,* 69.
[47] Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life,* 106.

Bibliography

Aquinas. Thomas. *Summa Theologiae: Questions on God.* ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy.* trans. David R. Slavitt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Brooke, John L. *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bushman, Richard. *Rough Stone Rolling.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

Cullen, Christopher M. *Bonaventure.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Davies, Brian, and Brian Leftow, edited. *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Davis, Stephen T., edited. *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy: A Bilingual Edition.* ed. & trans. George Heffernan. Norte Dame: University of Norte Dame Press, 1990.

Fedotov, George P. *Peter Abelard: The Personality, Self-Consciousness and Thought of A Martyr of 'Enlightenment.'* trans. Alexander I. Lisenko. Belmont: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1988.

Givens, Terryl, and Fiona Givens. *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life.* Crawfordsville: Ensign Peak, 2012.

Harrell, Charles R. *"This Is My Doctrine" The Development of Mormon Theology.* Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books.

Honderich, Ted. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Hyman, Arthur, and James J. Walsh, edited. *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Second Edition*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1973.

Kretzmann, Norman, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg, edited. *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Ludlow, Daniel H., edited. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: Vol. 3.* New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992.

MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. New York: Viking Penguin Group, 2009.

McLaughlan, James M., and Loyd Ericson, edited. *Discourses in Mormon Theology.* Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007.

McMurrin, Sterling. *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion.* Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000.

Musser, Donald W., and David L. Paulsen, edited. *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies.* Macon: Mercer University Press. 2007.

Oppy, Graham, and Nick Trakakis, edited. *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion, Vol. 2: Medieval Philosophy of Religion.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Ostler, Blake. *Exploring Mormon Thought: Vol. 1, The Attributes of God.* Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001.

Ostler, Blake. *Exploring Mormon Thought: Vol. 3, Of God and Gods.* Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. *The Christian Tradition: A History if the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.

Pratt, Orson. *The Seer.* Salt Lake City: Segal Book & Tape, 1993.

Pratt, Parley P. *Key to the Science of Theology: A Voice of Warning.* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978.

Roberts, B. H. *The Seventy's Course in Theology: Fourth Year, The Atonement*. Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1911.

Smith, Joseph. *The Book of Mormon.* Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981.

Smith, Joseph. *The Doctrine and Covenants.* Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981.

Smith, Joseph. *History of the Church: Vol. 6.* Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1950.

Stump, Eleonore, and Norman Kretzmann, edited. *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Talmage, James E. *The Articles of Faith.* Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1899.

Widmer, Kurt. *Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theologocal Evolution, 1830-1915.* Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2000.

Widtsoe, John A. *Joseph Smith as Scientists: A Contribution to Mormon Philosophy.* Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964.

Widtsoe, John A. *Rational Theology.* Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997.