

because it is absolutely unnecessary and totally deceptive: it keeps people from coming to know themselves as they really are and, more importantly, from knowing God as He really is.

Of course, when I talk about people knowing themselves as they really are, I'm talking about the reality of human sin. And when I speak of knowing God as He really is, I'm talking about mercy and grace. In Christian circles we hear so much about these two attributes of God. We are continually told that God loves us (despite) the way we are (bad). You see! That's mercy; that's grace.

Where Law would punish, mercy offers compassion.

Where Legalism must reject (it has no choice!), grace embraces.

Say what???

Are you telling me that love, true love, God's Love, the essence of who God is, the heart and soul of the Living God—embraces adulterers, liars, murderers and the like???

Precisely.

And to misunderstand this is to misunderstand mercy and grace. And to misunderstand mercy and grace is to misunderstand the very heart of God.

So what is this great stuff? What is mercy and what is grace? Simply put, these are two of the things that love does. Grace is what Love does when it come face to face with human guilt and shame. To guilt it says, "Be quiet. Don't ever speak of this again. It's all been taken care of." To shame grace commands, "Come out of him/her!" And then shame—that deep-seated sense that something is horribly wrong with me, that there's something terribly flawed about me as a person—has no choice but to slip away, having been vaporized by the power of grace.

Now this is a very serious matter: to reject grace—the fact that God loves us despite ourselves—is to reject God Himself. For this is who God is and this is what God does, and He can do no other. If you will not have His grace, you cannot have Him. If you cannot or will not accept the fact that God loves you despite yourself, then you will not be able to accept God's love for you. God doesn't declare you innocent, nor does He minimize your sin. He simply loves you despite your sin, which leads us to the definition of mercy.

Just as grace is what God's love does when it comes face to face with human guilt and shame, mercy is what God's love does when it comes face to face with human pain and suffering. As deserved as that pain and suffering might be, in the face of it all, Love has compassion, Love offers mercy. It does not seek to add to the punishment, but to alleviate it.

This is God's way, and (naturally) I think it is the better way. Rather than minimize our sin, why

not learn to recognize how awesome is God's love. He comes to us as the soothing salve called Grace in the midst of our guilt and our shame and He comes to us as Mercy in the anguish of our pain and our suffering.

Can you accept this kind of love?

Are you able to accept the fact that you are loved even though you are bad?

Will you welcome merciful relief from sins you have not yet fully paid for?

MAY 1998

MORMON MATTERS (PART 4)

The Biblical Support for One God

by Robert Sivulka

Introduction

Last time we saw that the arguments Mormons use to support a plurality of Gods from the Bible fail. In this article I will begin to proffer a "positive apologetic" for the doctrine that there is only one God. What are the arguments Christians use to support their doctrine of God with?

The Biblical Support

To begin with, what do we mean when we talk about the term "God"? Ephesians 4:4-6 tells us that "there is one Spirit", "one Lord", and "one God". This one God is love and is therefore personal (1 John 4:8-19). This one God is referred to as "He" throughout Scripture (e.g., Psalms 7:11-13), and also speaks in the first person singular ("I", e.g., Isaiah 46:9). So the God of Scripture is a living, personal being, not a group of beings who form a certain external relationship (by "external" I simply mean that a particular member could continue to be what he is regardless of the relation to the rest of the members of the whole relation).

This last point is critical when it comes to Mormons sometimes wanting to reduce the term "God" to meaning the same thing as the term "Godhead", which for them refers to a divine purpose or function in which the separate members of the Trinity comprise. Here the term "Godhead" is a functional use of the term "God". Here a group of Gods act as one God. For example, in Ezra 3:1 the men or people acted as one man. Or, as another example, we may say something like, "The White House said it would not rush to judgment concerning

the accusations." Here the "White House" is a functional use of the group of certain individual members that form the executive branch of our government with the president being the head. A final example could be, "Microsoft said they are not running a monopoly." The singular company, Microsoft, is here using a third person plural pronoun to refer to itself.

Mormons will attempt to employ this functional use when confronted with certain biblical passages that seem to support monotheism. For example, in the Ephesians 4 passage cited above, Mormons claim that there is only one God for us. When asked who that God is, Mormons generally respond in one of two ways: 1. Our God is our heavenly Father. But when asked about what they do with other passages that claim that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are God (e.g., the title page of the Book of Mormon refers to Jesus as "the Eternal God"), Mormons then shift to: 2. There is only one Godhead for us. And here is where Mormons make their identity statement between "God" and the "Godhead".

The problem for Mormons is not simply that the Bible never mentions any other true god (for Mormons, a plurality of true gods could be explicitly revealed in latter-day revelation), but that the Bible actually rules out there being any other true gods. Isaiah 43:10 claims that there is not a god before or after our God. Isaiah 44:6 & 8 claim that besides our God there is no god, and that He does not know of any other one. Isaiah 46:9 claims that He is unique; there is no one like Him. These Isaiah passages have been referred to as "the *locus classicus* of explicit monotheism" (Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1967, p. 32).

How do Mormons respond to these passages? To begin with, Mormons point to the context. The passage is condemning the worship of nationalistic deities or idols that individuals make with their own hands (cf. 44:10ff.). It has nothing to do with whether there are any true gods that rule over other planets in distant galaxies or not. And we know that there are primarily through latter-day revelation. So these Isaiah passages should be understood as having a specific condemnation of worshipping other gods, not a general condemnation of a belief in there being any other true gods somewhere in the universe.

In response, is this really what the passages are talking about? Some Christians may attempt to stress the "before" and "after" in 43:10 to dismiss the possibility of there being any other true god for any other planet. If these terms are taken temporally, I guess this would rule out there being any other god before or after our God. The problem with this is that there really isn't anything temporally prior to God. God, even if He is in time as some Christian thinkers have thought, is still the necessary precondition for there being time in the first place. If this is so, and all Christians would want to affirm that it is, then how could there be anything temporally before God? I'd rather go along with Mormons here in understanding the "before" and "after" here as being logical terms of dependence. Hence, there is nothing that comes "before" or "after" God in terms of His position of authority.

Well if this is the case, doesn't this still ruin the Mormon position? It would except for what they add in their understanding to these passages. Again, they add the two terms "for us", so there is only one God "for us." This is also sometimes referred to as "for this world." Here Mormons distinguish a world from the universe. For Mormons, the universe is made up of many worlds. This obviously implies that there are other gods for other worlds. The Mormons claim that this interpretation is *allowed* by the text, but never *contradicted* by the text. Hence, latter-day revelation is what guides our understanding of these passages. Mormons also claim that this would also seem implied since God is condemning the Israelites for idolatry.

But is there anything in the text that would *contradict* this understanding? The Scripture seems to have a much broader perspective than simply *this world* in which the people on this planet engage in the shameful act of idolatry with images they make with their own hands. The God of the Bible is not only a God for us, but He is a God for anyone on any planet. The Bible, and these Isaiah passages in particular, indicate that God created the universe or the "highest heavens" (cf. Isa. 44:24, 45:12 & 18, & Deuteronomy 10:12-18). Thus, God is due the worship fit for Him, no matter where in the universe one may be.

How do the Mormons respond to this? Mormons could claim that their latter-day

revelation has told them that there are actually three heavens to this world of ours. There is the telestial heaven, which is the lowest and is where the wicked go to live. The next highest would be the terrestrial, which is where good people go. The highest is the celestial, which is where God dwells and is where good Mormons go. So of course God is the God of the "highest heavens"... *for this world.*

At this point, it won't do to tell Mormons that the Bible does not teach this, because again, they will simply play the latter-day revelation card. A Christian may try Matthew 7:13 & 14 to demonstrate that there are only two roads: one that leads to life, and one that leads to destruction. Most end up in the latter. It is difficult to see how this could fit into the Mormons' view of the afterlife. How could the lowest heaven on their view be compared with "destruction"? They may try to claim that the road that leads to destruction is really another place called "outer darkness". But this won't seem to work, since on their view, very few people go there. Only Satan and his angels, certain apostates, and perhaps other extremely wicked people.

Now instead of going this route, perhaps it would be better to ask if there are other gods for other worlds along the lines of a Mormon world view, then what would this entail for the nature of our God? Well for starters, God would be finite. That is God would be a dependent being. He would be dependent on the being(s) who brought him into existence. If Mormons say that He, as well as the rest of us, has always existed as an intelligence, then what would be so distinctive of verses that attribute self-existence or being from everlasting to God (e.g., John 5:26, 8:58, Isaiah 9:6, Psalms 90:2, & Habakkuk 1:12)? I mean, what is the big deal about attributing this to God if we are all eternal?

Furthermore, even if for the sake of argument He is not dependent for His existence, Mormons think that He is dependent in other ways. He is dependent on heavenly parents for a spirit body, and He is dependent on earthly parents or at least one earthly parent for a physical body (since in the case of Jesus, He had one earthly parent and one heavenly parent). Without these bodies, He could not become a god. He needed them in order to

become a god. Recall the famous Mormon aphorism, "As man is God once was, as God is man may be." God progressed to becoming a god, just as we all must. But the Bible is clear that God does not, nor ever has changed (Malachi 3:6 & Hebrews 13:8-- how Jesus could have always remained the same when He grew is an interesting question, cf. Luke 1:80). The Bible gives a picture of God such that He never was not God (Ps. 90:2).

If Mormons are correct in their world view, then God would not be an omnipresent God. But the Bible presents God, *not simply His power or His influence*, as filling both heaven and earth (Jeremiah 23:24, 1 Kings 8:27, & 2 Chronicles 2:5 & 6). From these verses it is evident that God is not a containable sort of being.

What else can be said about the Mormons' *for us* argument? A Christian could also try asking Mormons who precisely is this God for us. We have seen that usually they will say that it is the heavenly Father. If this is the case, then what about the Son and the Holy Spirit? Aren't they also gods for us? Doesn't the Father know about them, since this God claimed that He knew of no other god (Isa. 44:8)? Here Mormons will switch to the impersonal functional use of the term "God", such that there is no other Godhead for us. The problem is that Isaiah references God in singular first and third person terms (e.g., Isa. 43:13-- "I am he"), not in impersonal or personal functional terms (i.e., "I", "me" or "he" vs. "it" or "they"). In other words, God is a personal being, not a function of a plurality of gods. If the Mormons were correct, Isaiah should have said something like, "It (the Godhead) or they (the gods) said, 'there is no god (Godhead) but us.'"

The next problem for understanding "God" in these passages as the Mormon Godhead would be related to the problem raised earlier about the finiteness of God. For the same problem occurs here, since it can always be asked when this Godhead began. According to Mormons it began when all three gods decided to become a team to rule over this particular world. So this Godhead certainly, even for Mormons, is not eternal. But the Bible knows nothing of a Godhead that is not eternal (cf. verses listed earlier).

Another problem for the Mormon Godhead is that the Bible is quite clear that God created the heavens and the earth by *Himself* (not *Itself*); *He* did it *alone* (Isa. 44:24), and did not need any counsel to put them together (Isa. 40:14). This is quite in contrast to the Mormons' Book of Abraham in the *Pearl of Great Price*, chapters 4 & 5. Here is a rework of the creation account in Genesis in which the Gods are doing the work, and took counsel amongst themselves as to how to put it together (4:26, & 5:1-5). The Mormon Godhead is by definition a counsel.

Now it should be mentioned that the Genesis account does mention a plurality to God ("us" in 1:26), but this is still no reason to think that "God" should be understood as a Mormon "Godhead". Christian thinkers have either understood the "us" here as referring to a plurality of majesty (e.g., an earthly king may say something similar of himself), or a somewhat cryptic reference to the Trinity in which one of the persons of the being of God speaks to the other persons. It is peculiar that the third person plural pronoun "they" is not used in the Genesis account but used in the Book of Abraham account (e.g., 4:1). Most likely the Genesis account does this to safeguard an understanding that there was only one God involved in creation. But even if the Biblical account chose to use this term it would not necessitate that it should be understood in Mormon "Godhead" categories vis-à-vis Christian Triune God categories.

The final problem for understanding "God" here as the Mormon Godhead is that the personal being (not a function or team of gods) who is speaking is Jehovah. This is known in the King James Old Testament by the term "LORD" being all in capital letters. And Jehovah in Mormon theology refers to the person of Jesus, not the Father. The Father is referred to as "Elohim" in Mormon theology. (The Bible on the other hand teaches that Elohim is the same being as Jehovah [e.g., Deuteronomy 6:4 says that Jehovah is our Elohim]). So according to Mormon doctrine, the Godhead cannot be speaking here. Finally, if Jesus is speaking here, why doesn't He know about the other Mormon gods, viz., the Father and the Spirit?

Conclusion

We have seen that the Bible clearly teaches that there is only one God for any planet in the entire universe. This God has revealed Himself as a *Himself*, and not an *Itself*. The arguments to the contrary have been demonstrated to be failures. In the next article, I will demonstrate how this one God eternally exists as three distinct persons-- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

NEWS YOU CAN USE

This month's News You Can Use is excerpted from a recent issue of Focus on the Family Magazine. The article was titled The Beloved and was written by John Eldredge.

Let me tell you a dramatic story of a foreign adoption, a true story that was more of a rescue than an adoption. A precious child, stolen from his parents, had been sold into slavery and led into the dark interior of a barbarous country. The broken-hearted parents tried to negotiate with the embassy for their child's release, but they were continually frustrated by endless red tape. Dishonest bureaucrats denied outright the existence of child slave labor in their country. Months went by, then years. Fears that they would never see their little one again kept the parents awake many nights on end.

Finally, they conceived the most daring of plans. They would slip into this foreign country in disguise and buy their child back no matter what the price. It was a bold, almost ridiculous plan, but at least they had to try. Though it came at an enormous personal cost, which I can hardly describe, I'm delighted beyond joy to say that the strategy worked; their once-captive child is now safe in their arms again.

And I wonder sometimes...will that child ever doubt that his life is sacred, that he is wanted in the deepest way?

The story is the gospel, and you are that child. As Paul tells us in Ephesians:

Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he [God] had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) (1:47, The Message).

Editor's note: If you're interested in more, I HIGHLY recommend the book Mr. Eldredge co-wrote with