

# The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse

Van Hale

As the calendars in Nauvoo were changing from March to April in 1844, Saints from up and down the Mississippi began gathering for the fourteenth anniversary of the organization of the Church. Congregations estimated variously from 8,000 to 25,000<sup>1</sup> assembled during the five-day conference. Perhaps the prospect of some sort of confrontation was a factor in drawing many to conference. Not only was tension building rapidly between Mormons and non-Mormons, but dissension within the inner circle of Church leaders was escalating toward a climax. Whatever Joseph Smith did seemed only to fan the flames of discord and dissension on both fronts.

A large segment of non-Mormons had become alarmed at the rapid growth and influence of the Mormons at Nauvoo. Their major concern was the extent of Joseph Smith's religious and civil power. Convinced that he was a "knave," "despot," "tyrant," "false prophet," "fraud," and "a dangerous and powerful man whose actions should be watched, and closely scrutinized," they had organized a group calling themselves the "Anti-Mormons" whose purpose was to expose "Smith's blasphemy, hypocrisy, and political proceedings," and give "him to understand that his career of usurpation and aggression must be stayed, or otherwise the consequence to himself will be fearful."<sup>2</sup> The *Warsaw Signal* alone printed fourteen articles on the Mormons the month preceding this conference criticizing Joseph's teachings, political views, writings, and actions as mayor and Church leader.<sup>3</sup>

Of greater concern to the Prophet was the growing dissension among some of his most intimate associates. He stated, "Our difficulties and persecutions have always arisen from men right in our midst."<sup>4</sup> The difficulties apparently began in the summer of 1843

---

Van Hale is an independent Salt Lake City businessman.

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of the estimates, see Donald Q. Cannon, "The King Follett Discourse: Joseph Smith's Greatest Sermon in Historical Perspective," in this issue of *BYU Studies*.

<sup>2</sup>*Warsaw Signal*, 6 March 1844.

<sup>3</sup>*Warsaw Signal*, 6, 13, 20, and 27 March and 3 April 1844.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), 6:241 (hereafter cited as *HC*).

when the revelation on plural marriage was written and then read on several occasions. This revelation created a breach between Joseph and several other Church leaders.<sup>5</sup> By March of 1844, a strong resistance to the Prophet was forming as indicated by a report in the 3 April *Warsaw Signal*:

It is said however that a difficulty originated some time since between the Prophet and some of his most conspicuous followers, in relation to the doctrine of spiritual wives.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph even feared that some of them had joined in a conspiracy to take his life.<sup>7</sup> The dissenters too were scrutinizing Joseph's teachings and actions in search of material which might support their opposition. Joseph indicated his awareness of this element among those attending conference:

I suppose I am not allowed to go into an investigation of anything that is not contained in the Bible. If I should, you would cry treason, and I think there are so many learned and wise men here who would put me to death for treason.<sup>8</sup>

In this explosive atmosphere conference opened on Friday, 5 April 1844. Joseph declared that "those who feel desirous of sowing the seeds of discord will be disappointed on this occasion." He admonished the police, "I want you to exercise your authority; and don't say you can't do anything for us, for the constitutional power calls you to keep good order, and God Almighty calls you, and we command you to do it."<sup>9</sup> Never had there been a more appropriate occasion for Joseph to avoid the controversial and seek the passive. He seldom had time to prepare for his speaking engagements,<sup>10</sup> but on this occasion he had made some preparation.<sup>11</sup> His material was controversial, but he would not be sidetracked from his subject. Some had requested that he devote his time to resolving the "petty difficulties" which had arisen at Nauvoo,<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>Interview with William Law, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 31 July 1887.

<sup>6</sup>*Warsaw Signal*, 3 April 1844.

<sup>7</sup>HC, 6:272, 278-80.

<sup>8</sup>"King Follett Discourse." All quotations from this discourse are quoted from Stan Larson's newly amalgamated text, in this issue of *BYU Studies*. This text has been chosen because of its strict reliance on the original minutes.

<sup>9</sup>HC, 6:288.

<sup>10</sup>Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), p. 320 (hereafter cited as *Teachings*).

<sup>11</sup>This is indicated by his remarks on April 5 (see HC, 6:288). Also, he probably had Willard Richards and Thomas Bullock prepare the Hebrew and German quotations used in this sermon. (See Thomas Bullock Journal, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.)

<sup>12</sup>HC, 6:288.



but Joseph would not allow his time, nor the time of so large a congregation, to be occupied in that manner. On Friday he revealed his intention to give "some instruction on the principles of eternal truth. . . . The Great Jehovah has ever been with me, and the wisdom of God will direct me in the seventh hour."<sup>13</sup> Considering his upcoming sermon to be of great importance, he had assigned three clerks to take minutes. On only one other occasion had any of his discourses been reported by more than one clerk.<sup>14</sup>

With his clerks to record his words and thousands of Saints, sinners, gentiles, and dissenters to hear, discuss, and react to his comments, Joseph took the stand at 3:15 P.M., Sunday, 7 April 1844, and delivered the most controversial sermon of his life, unparalleled in Mormonism in historic and doctrinal significance. Mormonism could never be the same thereafter. The dispersing congregation would alter Joseph's life and significantly change the course of the Church.

Joseph spoke with such power on that occasion that Wilford Woodruff, at a temple dedication in 1893, after forty-nine years of rich experience,

testified that only on one previous occasion had he felt the spirit of God more powerfully manifest than during the dedication of this Temple [Salt Lake]—that was when the Prophet Joseph delivered his last address. The Prophet in that instance stood on his feet three hours, and the spirit of God was present like a flame of fire.<sup>15</sup>

Of that sermon Joseph Fielding wrote in his diary,

Joseph's Discourse . . . was the most interesting matter of this time, and anyone that could not see in him the Spirit of Inspiration of God must be dark, they might have known that he was not a fallen Prophet, even if they thought he was fallen.<sup>16</sup>

This attitude, however, was to be found only among Joseph's firm supporters. His dissenters found the sermon strong evidence that Joseph had fallen as a prophet. Granville Hedrick once declared it to be "one of the most infamous sermons of blasphemy ever preached from the pulpit," and on another occasion stated, "A more high handed and degrading infamous attempt in blasphemy

---

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>*Teachings*, pp. 287-94. This is the only discourse reported by more than one clerk (Willard Richards and William Clayton). Two reports of a number of others do exist. Wilford Woodruff recorded a number of Joseph's sermons in his journal, but he was not acting officially, and none of his reports found their way into the official records of the Church until the 1850s.

<sup>15</sup>Diary of L. John Nuttall, 20 April 1893, typescript, p. 537, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

<sup>16</sup>Journal of Joseph Fielding, April 1844, p. 29.

never was uttered by mortal tongue.”<sup>17</sup> William Cadman even claimed a revelation concerning it, “‘That Joseph Smith (in that case) taught a worse doctrine than the Devil did in the Garden of Eden.’ The Devil only taught that men should be as Gods. But Joseph taught that men should be Gods.”<sup>18</sup> The doctrines of the sermon were declared “false and damnable” in a resolution by another group of dissenters.<sup>19</sup>

Joseph reacted publicly to these negative feelings in Nauvoo on at least two occasions. In a discourse on 12 May Joseph replied, “My enemies say that I *have* been a true prophet. Why, I had rather be a fallen true prophet than a false prophet.”<sup>20</sup> On 16 June he stated:

Now, you know that of late some malicious and corrupt men have sprung up and apostatized from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and they declare that the Prophet believes in a plurality of Gods, and, lo, and behold! we have discovered a very great secret, they cry—“The Prophet says there are many Gods, and this proves that he has fallen.”<sup>21</sup>

He continued to teach the doctrine of the plurality of gods with several significant additions to what he said in the King Follett Discourse.

#### ORIGIN OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE PLURALITY OF GODS.

The strong reaction to the King Follett Discourse creates the impression that Joseph shocked the Saints with a startling revelation of new doctrine, previously unknown to the members. The absence of any reaction among the Saints prior to the Discourse, adds support to this impression. But Joseph had taught several concepts individually before, though he did not tie them all together until the King Follett Discourse. Fawn Brodie notes this very idea:

For the first time he proclaimed in a unified discourse the themes he had been inculcating in fragments and frequently in secret to his most favored saints: the glory of knowledge, the multiplicity of gods, the eternal progression of the human soul.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup>*Truth Teller* 1 (September and October 1864):37 and 53.

<sup>18</sup>William Cadman, *Faith and Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ* (Roscoe, Pa.: Roscoe Ledger Print, 1902), p. 16.

<sup>19</sup>*Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844.

<sup>20</sup>*Teachings*, p. 365.

<sup>21</sup>*Teachings*, p. 369.

<sup>22</sup>Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows my History* (New York: Knopf, 1945), p. 366.



Of the several concepts taught by Joseph Smith in the King Follett Discourse, four are of primary importance to this discussion, because of their impact on Mormonism:

1. Men can become gods,
2. There exist many gods,
3. The gods exist one above another innumerable, and
4. God was once as man now is.

That these ideas had been taught by 7 April 1844 cannot be disputed. Fragments of them appeared in pamphlets, books, and periodicals (Mormon and non-Mormon); and in unpublished letters, diaries, and sermons.<sup>23</sup> Research for this article uncovered forty-nine references to these concepts before the King Follett Discourse.

Evidence strongly suggests Joseph's concepts of God were not fully developed in the spring of 1820, but rather grew, "precept upon precept," and possibly had not reached their full stature even at his death in 1844.

These four concepts appear to have developed in the following order, and approximately on the following timetable:

1. 1832—Joseph received a revelation, detailed in "The Vision," that men can become equal with God.
2. 1835–1839—He began to teach that there were many gods, a council of whom directed the creation of this earth, ideas which may have come from his translation of the Book of Abraham and his study of Hebrew.
3. 1835–1839—He conceived, perhaps from revelation through work with the Egyptian papyri, that gods "exist one above another, so that there is no end to them."
4. 1838–1841—With the foregoing ideas established, Joseph taught that God had not always been a God, having once existed as a man.

### *"As God is Man May Become"*

The idea that men can become equal with God is not only the most common of the four concepts but is also the earliest.

On 16 February 1832, Joseph and Sidney Rigdon recorded a vision in which those who attain the highest, or Celestial, glory are promised to receive of God's "fullness, and of his glory" be-

---

<sup>23</sup>A chronological list of references pertaining to the doctrine of plurality of gods has been included with this discussion.

coming “gods,”<sup>24</sup> even the sons of God” (D&C 76:58). Seven months later in a revelation, Jesus Christ, speaking of the “elect of God,” promised “all that my Father hath shall be given” (D&C 84:38). Three months later another revelation declared that in the resurrection “the saints shall be filled with his [God’s] glory, and receive their inheritance and be made equal with him” (D&C 88:107).

Lorenzo Snow’s first encounter with this doctrine occurred 5 June 1836 (two weeks before he was baptized) at a patriarchal blessings meeting at Kirtland where he was told by Joseph Smith, Sr.: “You will become as great as you can possibly wish—EVEN AS GREAT AS GOD, and you cannot wish to be greater.”<sup>25</sup> To Snow, this was a “dark parable,” approaching almost to blasphemy.<sup>26</sup> By 1838 this concept had become known to at least one non-Mormon, L. R. Sunderland, as he leveled a charge of blasphemy against the Mormons in *Zion’s Watchman*, a paper he edited.<sup>27</sup> In a pamphlet that same year, Parley Pratt, defending against Sunderland’s attack, quoted the Bible in support of the idea that the Saints of God shall be joint heirs with Christ and thus,

the spirit should guide his saints into all truth, God is in possession of *all truth*, and *no more*: consequently, his saints will *know* what he *knows*: and it is an acknowledged principle, that “knowledge is power;” consequently, if they have the *same knowledge that God has, they will have the same power*. . . . Hence the propriety of calling them “GODS, even the *sons of God*.”<sup>28</sup>

Pratt’s pamphlet, however, did not lay the matter to rest. Rather it prompted further charges of blasphemy during the next several

---

<sup>24</sup>In 1843 “A Vision” (D&C 76) was written in poetic verse apparently by Joseph Smith. In this version “gods” is written “Gods,” perhaps indicating the increased emphasis placed upon man’s possible attainment, *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 March 1843):84, verse 45.

<sup>25</sup>Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1884), p. 10. This reference comes from a reminiscence account by Lorenzo Snow. Since most of his papers are in private possession, it is difficult to determine when the account was written. The date of the event in this reference was 5 June 1835.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46. In 1840 Snow received an “extraordinary manifestation” in which “the eyes of his understanding were opened” and the “dark parable” was unfolded, and he formed the often quoted couplet:

As man now is, God once was:  
As God now is, man may be.

<sup>27</sup>This series of articles was also published in the pamphlet, *Mormonism Exposed and Refuted* (1838). These articles are discussed briefly in Peter Crawley, “A Bibliography of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in New York, Ohio, and Missouri,” *BYU Studies* 12 (Summer 1972):522.

<sup>28</sup>Parley P. Pratt, *Truth Vindicated* (New York: Parley P. Pratt, 1838), p. 27. This was written in answer to Sunderland’s article and published in four editions between 1838 and 1842.



years.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the existence of this concept by the time the Saints settled at Nauvoo is well-established. During the Nauvoo years, it received further development<sup>30</sup> and criticism.<sup>31</sup>

### *The Plurality of Gods and the Grand Council*

With the idea established that men can become gods, the foundation was laid for the next precept—the idea of the existence of many gods, a council of whom planned and created the earth. No recorded expression by Joseph of the existence of a plurality of gods has been found dating earlier than 1839, but he was probably introduced to the idea in 1835–36, as a result of his Hebrew studies at the Church-sponsored Hebrew school in Kirtland and his work on the Egyptian papyri. His major arguments in 1844<sup>32</sup> for the existence of a plurality of gods were founded on some basic Hebrew grammar, which would have been the subject of his first several Hebrew lessons. Joseph argued that “*Eloheim* is from the word *Eloi*, God, in the singular number; and by adding the word *heim*, it renders it Gods.”<sup>33</sup> He also related a conversation with a learned Jew in which Joseph asked, “If the Hebrew language compels us to render all words ending in *heim* in the plural, why not render the first *Eloheim* plural?” The Jew replied, “That is the rule with few exceptions; but in this case it would ruin the Bible.” Joseph went on to state that “The word *Eloheim* ought to be in the plural all the way through—Gods.”<sup>34</sup> He also argued the correct translation of the first line of the Bible to be “‘In the beginning the head of the Gods brought forth the Gods,’ or as others have

---

<sup>29</sup>Several anti-Mormon writers responded to Pratt’s pamphlet: Henry Caswall, *City of the Mormons* (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1843), p. 35. (At least two editions were published.) J. B. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages* (New York: Platt & Peters, 1842), pp. 240–43. (Turner was a professor at Jacksonville, Illinois, about forty-five miles from Nauvoo.) John C. Bennett, *Mormonism Exposed* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842). (At least three editions were published.)

<sup>30</sup>Before the Nauvoo period, the concept of becoming gods probably consisted of man’s possibility of becoming a joint heir with Christ of the Father’s kingdom, with the concept, as Turner put it in 1842, “say they, we shall create, uphold, redeem, save, and reign for ever, over still greater worlds than that which Christ governs,” being a development of the Nauvoo period. The chart indicates other references on this point.

<sup>31</sup>See the three references in footnote 29. See also: Henry Caswall, *The Prophet of the Nineteenth Century* (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1843), p. 95 (anti-Mormon); “Buckeye’s Lamentation for Want of More Wives,” *Warsaw Message*, 7 February 1844. This is a poem obviously written by a person of considerable knowledge. He does not identify himself except to indicate himself to be a dissenter at Nauvoo. The last line hints that it was written by one of the Laws. It was reprinted in the *Warsaw Signal*, 24 April 1844.

<sup>32</sup>King Follett Discourse, 7 April 1844; discourse of 16 June 1844, *Teachings*, pp. 369–76.

<sup>33</sup>*Teachings*, pp. 369–76. This is a report of Joseph’s last doctrinal discourse, 16 June 1844, reported by Thomas Bullock. A brief report of this sermon is also found in William P. McIntire’s *Minute Book*, p. 21, Church Historical Department.

<sup>34</sup>*Teachings*, pp. 369–76. Joseph followed this rule throughout Abraham 5 and 6.

translated it, 'The head of the Gods called the Gods together.'"<sup>35</sup>

The earliest reference to these concepts by Joseph is in his letter to the Church from Liberty Jail, 20 March 1839.<sup>36</sup> Although the letter was signed by all five in the jail, a letter the following day from Joseph to Emma indicates Joseph had dictated the letter himself:

I have sent an Epistle to the Church directed to you because I wanted you to have the first reading of it, and then I want Father and Mother to have a copy of it. Keep the original yourself as I dictated the matter myself. . . . I want you to have the Epistle copied immediately and let it go to the brethren, first into the hands of Father, for I want the production for my record.<sup>37</sup>

The record he mentions is the personal history he had begun dictating a year earlier. At least some of his instructions were followed, as the original was preserved, and is now among the holdings of the LDS Church Historical Department.

Although the concept of the existence of a plurality of gods did not become an official doctrine<sup>38</sup> of the Church until the King Follett Discourse, it was mentioned in the Mormon press, criticized in the non-Mormon press, touched upon in several discourses of Joseph and Hyrum, taught by some of the elders on missions,<sup>39</sup> and undoubtedly was the topic of many private discussions some years prior to 1844.

### *"Gods Higher Than the Highest"*

Concurrently with his study of Hebrew, Joseph was working on the Book of Abraham. This work solidified the plurality of gods idea, and also stimulated additional development. Joseph's records of 1835–1836 indicate that he spent a considerable amount

---

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>D&C 121:28, 32. This comes from a letter to the Church from Joseph, 20 March 1839, the original of which is in the Church Historical Department. It was first printed in *Times and Seasons* 1 (May 1840):99–104. This first printing was edited, eliminating the statements of interest to this discussion. The original compares with the current D&C printing, rather than the 1840 *Times and Seasons* printing. The editing out of the plurality of gods references in 1840 indicates the unofficial status of the doctrine before 1844.

<sup>37</sup>Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 21 March 1839, Church Historical Department.

<sup>38</sup>What constitutes an official teaching of the Church is open to debate; in fact, from one point of view, Joseph's teachings in the King Follett Discourse are not yet official LDS doctrine, never having been accepted as such by a general conference of the Church. The distinction being made in this discussion is that before the King Follett Discourse, the concept of the existence of a plurality of gods was presented as an idea, not to be considered doctrine, or to be taught by the elders, whereas, after the Discourse, it was considered "eternal truth" and part of the "Mormon Creed."

<sup>39</sup>A complete listing of the references to this concept can be found by referring to the chart, concept 3.



of time translating the Book of Abraham. Some evidence does indicate that at least the ideas contained in the last three chapters were known to Joseph by 1839.<sup>40</sup> Chapter 3:16–19 is of particular importance to this discussion since Joseph stated that he learned this concept through the translation<sup>41</sup> of these verses. He said that in the resurrection, the believers will

... all come to dwell in unity, and in all the glory and everlasting burnings of the Gods; and then we shall see as we are seen, and be as our God and He as His Father. I want to reason a little on this subject. I learned it by translating the papyrus which is now in my house. I learned a testimony concerning Abraham, and he reasoned concerning the God of heaven. "In order to do that," said he, "suppose we have two facts: that supposes another fact may exist—two men on the earth, one wiser than the other, would logically show that another who is wiser than the wisest may exist. Intelligences exist one above another, so that there is no end to them."

If Abraham reasoned thus—If Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and John discovered that God the Father of Jesus Christ had a Father, you may suppose that He had a Father also.<sup>42</sup>

Mosiah Hancock wrote in his autobiography of 1838 that when Joseph was asked, "Who made the father of our God?" he said that "it is just as natural for God to have a father as it is for you or me to have one."<sup>43</sup>

Joseph explained the establishment of this order of one God above another in the King Follett Discourse.

What did Jesus Christ do? "Why I do the same things that I saw my Father do when worlds came rolling into existence." Saw the Father do what? "I saw the Father work out His kingdom with fear

---

<sup>40</sup>The Church Historical Department has manuscripts written by 1837 containing Abraham 1:1–2:18. In addition to this, many items found in Abraham 3–5 can be found in other works prior to 1842. A good example of this is a comparison of these chapters with D&C 121.

<sup>41</sup>The idea that this concept may have been the result of revelation, was intimated earlier. The question of the method Joseph employed in producing the Book of Abraham has not been resolved. It is of interest that the idea was somewhat prevalent during Joseph's lifetime, and shortly after, that the Book of Abraham was the result of revelation, and perhaps not a "translation" in the generally accepted usage of the term. Several references suggesting this idea are: Jay M. Todd, *The Saga of the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), pp. 221, 223, 224, 256; Richard Livesay, *An Exposure of Mormonism* (Preston, Mass.: J. Livesay, 1838), p. 10; A statement by Joseph's one-time secretary, Warren Parrish, while working on the Book of Abraham; Reuben Miller, *James J. Strang, Weighted in the Balance of Truth and Found Wanting* (Burlington, Iowa: Reuben Miller, 1846), p. 7; *Millennial Star*, 4 (1844):91; *True Latter day Saints' Herald* 1 (December 1860):270.

<sup>42</sup>*Teachings*, pp. 372, 373. The mention of John's discovery is a reference to Revelation 1:6. The knowledge gained from his work on the Egyptian papyri apparently changed Joseph's attitude toward the correct translation of this verse. The King James Version gives some support to this argument here, while his change of that verse in the "New Translation," several years earlier, does not. *Teachings*, pp. 369, 370.

<sup>43</sup>Autobiography of Mosiah Hancock, p. 2. This is a reminiscent account of a statement of Joseph in 1838. Mosiah Hancock was only four years old in 1838.

and trembling and I am doing the same, too. When I get my kingdom, I will give it to the Father and it will add to and exalt His glory. He will take a higher exaltation and I will take His place and am also exalted, so that He obtains kingdom rolling upon kingdom." So that Jesus treads in His tracks as He had gone before and then inherits what God did before.<sup>44</sup>

This was particularly offensive to the dissenters. They included an additional idea in their resolution against this concept. They claimed Joseph was teaching "a plurality of Gods above the God of this universe, and his liability to fall with all his creations."<sup>45</sup> This idea that God could fall is not found in any of Joseph's recorded teachings, but Isaac Scott corroborated that Joseph taught this. Scott wrote on June 16:

Joseph says there are Gods above the God of this universe as far as he is above us, and if He should transgress the laws given to Him by those above Him, He would be hurled from his Throne to hell.<sup>46</sup>

We don't know how accurately Scott reports the Prophet, but his notation bears the same date that Joseph taught on the plurality of gods. The report of that sermon was taken by Thomas Bullock, but he did not report the entire sermon due to a rainstorm.<sup>47</sup>

The same year the Book of Abraham appeared in print, this concept had become prominent enough to attract the attention of an anti-Mormon writer who shocked his readers with the "horrid Mormon blasphemy" that there are "gods, higher than the Highest."<sup>48</sup> However, references to this idea prior to 1844 are rare, indicating that it was less familiar than the idea of men becoming gods, or the existence of a plurality of gods—less familiar, probably because it developed later, again indicating a precept upon precept development of Joseph's concept of God.

### *"As Man Now Is, God Once Was"*

The earliest record of Joseph's teaching of this concept is 1841, when he taught that Christ did "all things that he had seen the Father do. He had done nothing but what he saw

---

<sup>44</sup>King Follett Discourse, Larson amalgamation.

<sup>45</sup>*Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844.

<sup>46</sup>"The Death of a Mormon Dictator: Letters of Massachusetts Mormons, 1843–1848," ed. George F. Partridge, *The New England Quarterly* 9 (December 1836):593–605 contains three letters of importance to this discussion: Sarah and Isaac Scott to Sarah's parents, 16 June 1844; Sarah Scott to her parents, 22 July 1844; Sarah Scott to her brother, 1 March 1845.

<sup>47</sup>*Teachings*, p. 369.

<sup>48</sup>Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages*, p. 243.



the Father do, John the 5th,”<sup>49</sup> and that “As the Father hath life in himself, even so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself. God the Father took life unto himself precisely as Jesus did.”<sup>50</sup> In 1843 he also taught that “the father has some day laid down his body and taken it again so he has a body of his own—so has his son a body of his own so each one will be in their own body.”<sup>51</sup> Or as Lorenzo Snow put it, “As man now is, God once was.”<sup>52</sup>

Although Joseph taught this idea in Nauvoo on several occasions prior to the King Follett Discourse, no mention of it has been found in print until the fall of 1844, in the first printing of the Discourse. Also, no reference has been found of this concept in non-Mormon writings before 1844, suggesting that it was less widely known and taught than the previous concepts, since the non-Mormons certainly would have found it at least as “blasphemous,” and valuable as ammunition in their efforts to discredit Mormonism.

One significant change in earlier doctrines resulted from the development of this idea. Prior to 1841, Church doctrine described the Father as “being a personage of spirit,” while the Son was a “personage of tabernacle, made or fashioned like unto a man.”<sup>53</sup> This was a well-established doctrine, having been taught to the elders at the School of the Prophets in 1834,<sup>54</sup> published in the Church paper in Kirtland in 1835,<sup>55</sup> approved by a general assembly of the Church at Kirtland in 1835 to be a part of the “Doctrine” section of the Doctrine and Covenants,<sup>56</sup> and taught by the elders until at least 1840.<sup>57</sup> However, by 2 April 1843 the new

---

<sup>49</sup>McIntire Minute Book, p. 4, contains statements made by Joseph at a lyceum held in Nauvoo in early 1841. The handwritten book appears to have been written at the time of the lyceum.

<sup>50</sup>*Teachings*, p. 181. This is a report of Joseph’s discourse to a school at Nauvoo, probably the lyceum mentioned in footnote 49. The original report of this has not been located, 5 January 1841.

<sup>51</sup>*Teachings*, p. 312. This is an amalgamation of Willard Richard’s and Wilford Woodruff’s reports of Joseph’s 11 June 1843 discourse. The quotation used is from the Woodruff report, Church Historical Department.

<sup>52</sup>Snow, *Biography of Lorenzo Snow*, p. 46.

<sup>53</sup>“Lectures on Faith,” Lecture 5, paragraph 2, N. B. Lundwall, comp. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.), p. 48.

<sup>54</sup>HC, 2:176.

<sup>55</sup>*Messenger and Advocate*, 1 (May 1835):122–24.

<sup>56</sup>HC, 2:176. In the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants the book was divided into two sections: the Doctrine section consisting of the seven “Lectures on Faith”; and the Covenants consisting of the revelations. Although the Doctrine section was deleted from editions printed since 1921, the book has retained its original name.

<sup>57</sup>Parley P. Pratt, *An Answer to Mr. William Hewitt’s Tract* (Manchester, England: W. R. Thomas, 1840), p. 9. “Whoever reads our books, or hears us preach, knows that we believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as one God. That the Son has flesh and bones, and that the Father is

doctrine taught, of Jesus, that "all things that he had seen the Father do, he had done, and that he had done nothing but what he saw the Father do." Thus, the Father is a resurrected being of flesh and bones like the Son. The old doctrine gave way to the new, upon Joseph's frequent teaching on the subject,<sup>58</sup> and its harmony with the concepts of eternal progression which were becoming more common at Nauvoo.

#### DOCTRINAL IMPACT OF THE KING FOLLETT DISCOURSE

The King Follett Discourse deeply affected many Saints even though the doctrines were not new. What then caused the considerable reaction to this Discourse? A discussion of two questions may provide an answer: How familiar were the doctrines generally? and What was the difference in the attitude of the Church toward the doctrines before and after the Discourse?

The number of references to the plurality of gods may be somewhat misleading if the conclusion is drawn that almost all the Saints were familiar with the doctrine. Many of the references had not been published by 1844. Some of the published works would have been inaccessible to most of the Saints. Still other references are lines and phrases, which easily could have been passed over by the reader, not being a part of the major theme of the work. After the King Follett Discourse references to the plurality of gods, Joseph stated, "It has been my intention for a long time to take up this subject and lay it clearly before the people, and show what my faith is in relation to this interesting matter,"<sup>59</sup> perhaps an indication that Joseph felt most Saints were unaware of his beliefs on the subject. On the other hand, Isaac Scott wrote that this doctrine was taught by Joseph and Hyrum "day and night the last two years of their earthly career."<sup>60</sup> Probably this teaching "day and night" was to those who were considered prepared to receive of the "mysteries," but not to the Church in general. In 1843 Joseph informed the Saints that "In the resurrection,

---

a spirit. But we would inform Mr. H. that a personage of Spirit has its organized formation, its body and parts, its individual identity, its eyes, mouth, ears, &c., and that it is in the image or likeness of the temporal body, although not composed of such gross materials as flesh and bones; hence it is said that Jesus is 'the express image of his (the father's) person.' This represents at least Pratt's understanding of Mormon doctrine on the godhead in 1840.

<sup>58</sup>McIntire Minute Book, pp. 4, 12, 14, 21; *Teachings*, pp. 181, 312, 370; The King Follett Discourse, and D&C 130:22.

<sup>59</sup>*Teachings*, p. 370.

<sup>60</sup>Sarah and Isaac Scott to Sarah's parents, 16 June 1844, in "The Death of a Mormon Dictator," pp. 593-605.



some are raised to be angels, others are raised to become Gods. These things are revealed in the most holy places in a Temple prepared for that purpose.”<sup>61</sup> He had, however, begun revealing the temple ordinances and doctrines by that time to a small group of his closest associates. This group may have been the Saints to whom Scott referred. All things considered, it seems impossible to determine with certainty, how familiar the doctrine was before the King Follett Discourse, but most of the Saints may have been virtually unfamiliar with it.

The more important question centers around the attitude of the Church before and after the Discourse. Joseph’s very first written statement on the subject, from Liberty Jail in 1839, intimated that the time was coming, “in the which nothing shall be withheld whether there be one God or many gods, they shall be manifest” (D&C 121:28). This attitude of uncertainty apparently prevailed until the King Follett Discourse. An 1842 editorial comment, probably by John Taylor, is of the same attitude: “Joseph Smith opposes vice and error, and supports his positions from revelation: no odds whether there be two, three or ‘Gods many.’”<sup>62</sup> Also in 1842, a non-Mormon reported an interview at Nauvoo with a man he identified as “a Mormon doctor,” who stated “We believe that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God; that makes three at least who are God, and no doubt there are a great many more.”<sup>63</sup> Just three weeks before Joseph’s Discourse, a letter of Hyrum Smith’s appeared in the *Times and Seasons* in reply to an inquiry by a concerned elder. This letter undoubtedly presented the Church position at that time, stating that

... an elder has no business to undertake to preach the mysteries in any part of the world. Neither has any elder any authority to preach any mysterious thing to any branch of the church unless he has a direct command from God to do so. Let the matter of the grand councils of heaven, and the making of gods, worlds, and devils entirely alone: for you are not called to teach any such doctrine—for neither you nor the people are capacitated to understand any such principles—less so to teach them. For when God commands men to teach such principles the saints will receive them. Therefore beware what you teach! for the mysteries of God are not given to all men; and unto those to whom they are given they are placed under re-

---

<sup>61</sup>*Teachings*, p. 312.

<sup>62</sup>*Times and Seasons* 3 (15 September 1842):926. This was probably written by John Taylor, who was assisting Joseph as editor of the *Times and Seasons* at the time.

<sup>63</sup>Caswall, *City of the Mormons*, p. 35.

strictions to impart only such as God will command them . . . and let the mysteries alone until by and bye.<sup>64</sup>

Hyrum did not deny any of the concepts mentioned, but merely indicated that they were not to be taught to the world, nor to the Saints in general, until "by and bye." This "by and bye" came in twenty-two days.

Following the King Follett Discourse, the doctrine of the plurality of gods was no more a matter of speculation to be approached with caution. Joseph claimed the doctrine he was about to preach to be "eternal truth." He declared,

I have the truth of God . . . the world is wrong . . . and I speak as one having authority. . . . If you don't believe it, you don't believe the Bible. The Scriptures say it and I defy all hell—all the learned wisdom and records and all the combined power of earth and hell together to refute it!

He even laid his prophetic claims on the line, stating that if he could not show "the character of the only wise and true God . . . it becomes my duty to renounce all of my pretensions to inspiration or to being a prophet."<sup>65</sup> Isaac Scott recognized a change had taken place, and that the plurality of gods, which had been taught "for two years past . . . now assumes a portentous aspect."<sup>66</sup>

Following the Discourse, the plurality of gods doctrine immediately became a common subject. Despite the apostasies caused and the strong objections voiced, Joseph would not back down from the doctrine, stating:

"And as it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of Man." And if it does rain, I'll preach this doctrine for the truth shall be preached.<sup>67</sup>

Before Joseph's death, he preached the doctrine publicly once more on 16 June, and Orson Pratt published it as "The Mormon Creed."<sup>68</sup> Shortly after Joseph's death, the doctrine was the major topic of three articles in the *Times and Seasons*,<sup>69</sup> was touched upon

---

<sup>64</sup>*Times and Seasons* 5 (15 March 1844):474. This was a letter written by Hyrum Smith.

<sup>65</sup>King Follett Discourse, Larson amalgamation.

<sup>66</sup>Sarah and Isaac Scott to Sarah's parents, 16 June 1844.

<sup>67</sup>*Teachings*, p. 370.

<sup>68</sup>Orson Pratt, *The Prophetic Almanac for 1845* (New York: Prophet Office, 1845–46). This was advertised for sale in *The Prophet*, 27 June 1844.

<sup>69</sup>*Times and Seasons* 6 (February 1845):808, 809. This is an article written by John Taylor; "Paracletes," *Times and Seasons* 6 (May 1845):891, 892. The author is suspected to be W. W. Phelps, but Orson Pratt should also be considered. This article was concluded in *Times and Seasons* 6 (June 1845):917.



four more times in other printed matter,<sup>70</sup> was the subject of at least one discourse,<sup>71</sup> and was mentioned in a poem.<sup>72</sup>

It was, then, the King Follett Discourse which identified what had been considered a speculative doctrine as "eternal truth," part of the "Mormon creed," a transition which tested the faith of many Church members. Were it not for the King Follett Discourse, the doctrine of the plurality of gods may have remained obscure, among the purported teachings of Joseph of which his sanction is yet uncertain. The doctrinal impact of Joseph's canonization of the doctrine of the plurality of gods in the King Follett Discourse must be considered the most significant aspect of the sermon.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup>*Nauvoo Neighbor*, 25 December 1844. This also appeared in W. W. Phelps to William Smith, *Times and Seasons* 5 (1 January 1844):758. See also Parley P. Pratt, "Materiality," *The Prophet*, 24 May 1845; and Thomas Ward, editorial comment on the King Follett Discourse, *Millennial Star* 5 (September 1844):95.

<sup>71</sup>William P. McIntire Minute Book, p. 27, Church Historical Department. He mentions that Phineas Young preached a sermon on the plurality of gods, 20 April 1845.

<sup>72</sup>*Times and Seasons* 5 (January 1845):767. This song was written by John Taylor for the dedication of the Seventies Hall, 26 December 1844.

<sup>73</sup>The Discourse itself received unprecedented attention. It was printed four times by the end of 1845 (see Donald Q. Cannon's article in this issue of *BYU Studies*), at a time when only five other of Joseph's discourses had been printed by the Church (see *Teachings*, pp. 11, 187, 191, 196, and 324). Before the Saints left Nauvoo, the plurality of gods had become a basic doctrine, so widely printed that hardly any member could have been uncertain of the Church's position on it.

A CHRONOLOGICAL LISTING OF REFERENCES TO THE  
FOUR PLURALITY OF GODS CONCEPTS

Date	Reference	Plurality of Gods Concepts*			
		1	2	3	4
1832	D&C 76:58	X			
	D&C 88:107	X			
1835	Eliza R. Snow Smith, <i>Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow</i> (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1884), p. 10	X			
1838	Abraham 3-5		X	X	
	<i>Autobiography of Mosiah Hancock</i> n.p., n.d.), p. 2.				
	LaRoy Sunderland, <i>Mormonism Exposed and Refuted</i> (New York: Piercy & Reed, 1838).	X			
	Parley P. Pratt, <i>Truth Vindicated</i> New York: Parley P. Pratt, 1838), p. 27	X			
1839	D&C 121:28, 32		X		
1840	Parley P. Pratt, <i>Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt</i> (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), pp. 297, 248	X			
	Smith, <i>Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow</i> , p. 46.	X		X	
	A Philanthropist, <i>Mormonism Unmasked</i> (Philadelphia: T.K. & P.G. Collins, 1840), pp. 18, 22.	X			
1841	Wm. P. McIntire Minute Book, p. 4, Church Hist. Dept.			X	
	Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., <i>Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith</i> (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), p. 181 (hereafter cited as <i>Teachings</i> ).				X
1842	Lorenzo Snow Letterbook, pp. 75-77, Church Hist. Dept.	X			
	<i>Times and Seasons</i> 3 (March 1842):703-706, 718-722		X	X	
	<i>Teachings</i> , p. 216	X			
	Henry Caswall, <i>City of the Mormons</i> (London: J.G.F. & J. Rivington, 1843), p. 35.	X	X		
	J. B. Turner, <i>Mormonism in All Ages</i> (New York: Platt & Peters, 1842), pp. 240-43.	X	X	X	
	John C. Bennett, <i>Mormonism Exposed</i> (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842).	X	X	X	
	<i>Times and Seasons</i> 3 (15 September 1842): 474		X		



Date	Reference	Plurality of Gods Concepts*			
1843	"A Vision," <i>Times and Seasons</i> 4 (1 March 1843):84, verse 45.	X			
	<i>Times and Seasons</i> 4 (1 March 1843):121		X		
	Journal of George Laub, pp. 22-44, Church Hist. Dept.	X	X	X	X
	Heber C. Kimball Papers, 28 May 1843, Church Hist. Dept.	X			
	<i>Teachings</i> , p. 312	X	X		X
	D&C 132	X			
	Henry Caswall, <i>The Prophet of the Nineteenth Century</i> (London: J.G.F. & J. Rivington, 1843), p. 95.	X			
1844	"Buckeye's Lamentation for Want of More Wives," <i>Warsaw Message</i> , 7 February 1844	X			
	<i>Times and Seasons</i> 5 (15 March 1844):474	X			
	King Follett Discourse	X	X	X	X
	<i>Nauvoo Expositor</i> , 7 June 1844		X	X	
	<i>Teachings</i> , pp. 369-76	X	X	X	X
	Sarah and Isaac Scott to Isaac's parents, 16 June 1844 (see footnote 46).		X	X	
	Orson Pratt, <i>The Prophetic Almanac for 1845</i> (New York: Prophet Office, 1845-46).	X	X		X
	Sarah Scott to her parents, 22 July 1844 (see footnote 46).		X		
	<i>Millennial Star</i> 5 (September 1844):95.	X			
	<i>Nauvoo Neighbor</i> , 25 December 1844		X		
	<i>Times and Seasons</i> 5 (January 1845):767		X		
1845	<i>Times and Seasons</i> 6 (February 1845):808, 809	X	X	X	
	Sarah Scott to her brother, 1 March 1845 (see footnote 46)		X		
	McIntire Minute Book, p. 27		X		
	"Paracletes," <i>Times and Seasons</i> 6 (May-June 1845):891, 892, 917.		X	X	
	"Materiality," <i>The Prophet</i> , 24 May 1845	X			
		26	23	11	10

\*Plurality of Gods Concepts

1. Men can become gods.
2. There exist many gods.
3. The gods exist one above another innumerably.
4. God was once as man now is.