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## MORMONS AND PATRISTIC STUDY: HOW MORMONS USE THE CHURCH FATHERS TO DEFEND MORMONISM

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### SYNOPSIS

The *patristic* period of church history refers to the first few centuries following the New Testament period. The Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches typically have held this period in higher regard than have other churches. This is not surprising, since they share many points of theology and morality from this period. These churches also claim a line of divine authority from the New Testament period through the patristic period to this day.

Mormons have studied patristic writers increasingly since the middle of the twentieth century so as to use them to justify their church's claim to be the true church. In doing this, they presuppose without qualification that Mormon theology and practice are true, and that the same Mormon theology and practice that are prevalent in the present day also were normative in the New Testament period. They then examine patristic writings to find similarities and dissimilarities to their theology and practice. The similarities, they say, were a remnant of authentic New Testament belief. The dissimilarities, however, they blanketly attribute to Hellenistic (Greek) philosophy, which they suppose entered and corrupted the church after the apostles died. In using patristic sources, Mormons have scoured unorthodox as well as orthodox Christian writings. Many of these Mormon scholars are competent in their various fields, but their constant motive to validate Mormonism often distorts the conclusions of their study of this period.

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The first 500 to 600 years after the New Testament period is referred to as the *patristic* period,<sup>1</sup> a time during which many theological beliefs and ecclesiastical traditions developed and solidified. Protestants generally have little knowledge of what occurred in the church during this period. The Eastern Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church have always had the most regard for the patristic period. In the earliest writings, beginning at the end of the first century, it is quite easy to see trends, practices, and beliefs developing that correspond most closely with the Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic churches. There are, however, relatively few points of contact between the writings of the patristic period and modern conservative Protestantism apart from some similarities of Christology (the study and nature of Christ), theology proper (the study and nature of God), and morality. Protestants' views of this period have ranged from outright rejection or indifference (Anabaptist traditions) to high regard (Anglican, Lutheran, and other "high church" denominations that claim to be lineally related to the patristic period).

### THE BLACK HOLE OF CHURCH HISTORY

The notion that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as the LDS or Mormon Church) is even interested in the patristic period at all may come as some surprise to those who are

familiar with LDS teachings. Mormons historically have taught that with the death of the New Testament apostles and prophets, divine authority left the church. This authority was reestablished in the 1800s by Joseph Smith, Jr., founder of Mormonism, who claimed to be the recipient and restorer of divine authority back to earth. Mormons claim that this authority had been lost for centuries because of the advent and supremacy of wickedness and religious corruption in the place of Christian truth. Mormons initially demonstrated little positive regard for the theological and historical formulation of Christianity after the New Testament period because of their belief in this *apostasy*, or falling away from the truth.

### Filling the Black Hole

Like the LDS, most newly formed religious movements believe that Christianity started pure but became corrupt, resulting in a period of church history that they see as a black hole. To them, little or nothing in this black hole has real value. After a certain period of time passed, they claim, some individual or group arose at last to restore Christianity to its pure form. Divine favor now rests on the earth again, they believe, because of the presence of either the *new* or *restored* church.

In their early years, Mormons largely ignored the patristic period because of this black-hole mentality, but increasingly they have found the period useful, even essential. Mormons, like most authoritarian groups that claim either exclusive or the purest divine favor, have an ulterior motive behind their newfound interest in this period: the validation of their sect. Note, however, that denominational validation is irrevocably tied to the presupposition that a black hole existed in Christian history. Mormon scholar Kent P. Jackson says, "It is the apostasy of early Christianity which creates the very need for the [Mormon] faith: if there had not been an apostasy, there would have been no need for a restoration."<sup>2</sup> In other words, Mormonism would have been—and would currently be—irrelevant. This of course is unacceptable to devotees of any given sect who claim that their institution is necessary for the attainment of God's fullest favor.

### MEASURING PATRISTIC BELIEFS BY MORMON STANDARDS

The fundamental standard by which Mormons measure patristic beliefs is modern LDS theology and practice. This nonnegotiable premise must be recognized in order to understand Mormon work in patristics.

Mormons have demonstrated two ways of looking at the patristic period. First, they look for what they consider *incorrect* theology; that is, any ancient doctrine (or practice) that does not agree with current Mormon beliefs. They believe that these teachings were the result of corruption. One of the most common explanations that modern Mormon academics use for this corruption is a line of argumentation elaborated by nineteenth-century German liberal Protestant scholar Adolph Harnack. Harnack and several contemporaries asserted that, during the patristic period, Hellenistic (Greek) philosophy entered the Christian church, secularizing and defiling true theology and ecclesiastical practice. Mormons teach that this happened because the divinely appointed officials (and hence their authority) had already left the earth. The first Mormon to use this argument was B. H. Roberts in the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Since then, Mormons have built on, elaborated, and refined this notion of corruption such that it is now a foundational construct in modern Mormon claims for an ancient apostasy.

Second, Mormons look for remnants of what they consider *correct* theology; that is, theology that agrees with current Mormon beliefs. To Mormons, an important feature of this alleged correct theology is that historically the Eastern and Western Catholic churches either rejected it as heretical or ignored it as incidental. Mormons inductively argue that the existence of ancient teachings that are similar to current Mormon theology is evidence that the earliest Christians in the period of purity before the apostasy also believed such theology. Mormons then assert that as the Catholic churches grew corrupt and politically dominant, they pushed this alleged true theology out of existence, suppressing it and its advocates. Mormon academicians thus pick through the proverbial patristic refuse pile for scraps of theology that actually or potentially can match their own, while scarcely touching the banquet of teaching in the Bible.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the reason for this is that the Bible provides a poor foundation for Mormon theology and

practice. This realization drives the diligent Mormon examination of extrabiblical sources, from ancient discarded beliefs to heretical new revelation, to find support for the existence of their Church.

### IMPOSING MODERN MORMON THOUGHT ONTO ANCIENT CHRISTIAN TEXTS

Hugh Nibley (1910–2005), the father of modern Mormon patristic study, educated at Brigham Young University (BYU), University of California at Los Angeles, and University of California at Berkeley, served as a beacon for other Mormon scholars. He was an example in terms of his natural intelligence and language ability, but also in his thorough knowledge of patristic and intertestamental source material. Nibley, a voracious reader, had an uncanny knack of finding ignored or discarded elements of patristic and intertestamental theology and practice. Prior to Nibley, Mormons who used patristic sources mostly looked for elements of theology that were incorrect (according to Mormon standards) and that could be attributed to corruption entering the church. Nibley was the first to search comprehensively for theology that *supported* Mormon beliefs and to use it competently to the advantage of Mormonism.

Roughly two generations of LDS religious scholars have arisen since Nibley. Like Nibley, most have sought graduate-level education at recognized schools outside of Utah. Unlike Nibley, whose knowledge was broad (though still surprisingly deep), most of these scholars have specialized in areas of intertestamental literature or patristics that are quite narrow. Due to the apologetic nature of their commitment to Mormonism, however, and its sustained, wide-ranging search for correct and incorrect early Christian theology, many of these scholars have successfully crossed into areas of study outside of their training.

David Paulsen, who is trained as an attorney and a philosopher, and who currently teaches at BYU in the Department of Philosophy, is one such person.<sup>5</sup> Paulsen has done much work on patristic statements that say God is embodied and physical. He has shown, for example, that Origen (d. AD 254?) as well as Augustine (d. AD 430) wrote that some Christians variously believed that God was physical, having an embodied form.<sup>6</sup> Tertullian (d. AD 220) went beyond these third-person affirmations and personally claimed to believe that God is physical. Then, in an excessive generalization common to Mormon scholarship regarding the patristic period, Paulsen asserts that this belief in a physical, embodied God represents the earliest widespread Christian belief. Paulsen conjectures that by the late patristic period this *true* (i.e., Mormon) belief was being choked out of existence by the *false* (i.e., non-Mormon), philosophically infused teaching of the Catholic majority, which taught instead that God the Father was a spiritual entity without a physical, bodily form.

Nibley frequently uses the same inferential logic in his chapter on the doctrine of baptism for the dead in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*.<sup>7</sup> Nibley claims that the earliest Christians believed that salvation for the dead was the preeminent postresurrection message of Jesus. He presents patristic parallels to Mormon baptism for the dead that he has found in ancient Coptic inscriptions, in secret teaching alluded to by various ancient persons, in a statement by the second-century Shepherd of Hermas, and in the third-century theologian Origen.<sup>8</sup> Nibley typically picks over incidental patristic points while he ignores the canonical Gospel accounts that nowhere show Jesus having an interest in this type of baptism. Nibley takes certain early statements that he interprets in a *distinctly Mormon sense* of baptism for the dead, applies these statements to the *earlier* time of Jesus, and arrives at a theology literally read back in time.

This method of reading modern belief back in time is common in the history of biblical interpretation. First, an individual or group finds one or two Bible verses that seem to support a peculiar theology that is already held by the individual or group. The intent of these verses is then assumed to be the same as the modern practice or belief. Once a connection has been made, no matter how weak, those Bible verses become “proof” for what must have been normative for the Christian community in the pure, original, early church. Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, have done this with verses in Acts 15 to justify their blood restrictions, and with verses such as Acts 5:42 to justify their door-to-door ministry. Certain groups have interpreted the “keys of the kingdom” passage in Matthew 16 to support their line of authority. No one is immune from this or other types of errant biblical construction, showing the necessity of careful biblical interpretation for all persons.

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO FRUITFUL PATRISTIC STUDY

Not all Mormon use of patristic sources is incorrect, biased, or sloppy. The notion that whatever Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, or other unorthodox groups say is automatically incorrect is false. Conservative Protestantism often has promoted this type of thinking, at least implicitly, in regard to these groups. Arguments need to be weighed on their own merits, not on the merits of those who present them. Cults and false religious movements actually have much truth to teach Christians and serve as adversarial sharpening stones by which authentic Christianity historically has become stronger. This has occurred through the opportunity to exercise sober biblical interpretation, sound theological formulation, and careful use of reason and logic in rebutting false teaching.

Some Mormon examination of early Christian writings is competent and untainted by sweeping apologetic conclusions. This is true even at times when the *motives* for examination are sectarian and apologetic. Mormon scholar S. Kent Brown, for example, presents an informative study that summarizes Coptic and Greek inscriptions from ancient patristic-era Egypt.<sup>9</sup> These inscriptions range from funerary to ornamental to liturgical and illustrate how Christians uniquely lived and believed in that time and place.

Mormon scholar Wilford Griggs, likewise, has studied Egyptian Coptic Christianity of the same period and up to AD 451, showing that it was able to grow and flourish apart from Catholicism. Egyptian Coptic Christianity was never bound to Roman authority, nor did it have a formal doctrinal structure—characteristics deemed as essential especially to Western-based Catholicism. Griggs's implicit point, or "hidden agenda," according to fellow Mormon reviewer Keith Norman, was that there were places and contexts where Christianity could and did flourish apart from Eastern or Western Catholicism.<sup>10</sup> This supports and expands the thesis presented by the Protestant scholar Walter Bauer in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, that Catholicism was not necessarily the earliest form of orthodoxy. Catholics, rather, in the beginning were just one of many groups that claimed the name "Christian." Those groups later labeled as "heretical" had just as much *initial* claim to authentic Christianity as did Catholicism.<sup>11</sup> As Western Catholicism gained political power, however, these heretical groups were marginalized and excluded by the Catholicism that was *gradually becoming* orthodoxy. Griggs's implicit argument is that if Coptic Christianity can be considered authentically "Christian" despite its distant relationship with Catholicism, then so can Mormonism be considered Christian despite its lack of relationship with other Christian denominations. Griggs's study of Coptic Christianity is an example of reasonable scholarship, despite the forced apologetic bias that drove his study.

Perhaps Protestants could also benefit from his implicit conclusions in validating Mormonism. If Protestantism seeks to justify its authenticity, its reason for existence, apart from Catholicism, then early historical examples of other groups doing the same can prove helpful. This does not guarantee the validity and truthfulness of the teachings of any given Protestant denomination any more than it does for Mormonism, but it can prove to be illuminating and support the concept of authentic Christianity existing apart from the Catholic tradition.

## DETRACTIONS FROM FRUITFUL PATRISTIC STUDY

One topic on which Mormonism seriously has misrepresented patristic thought is the theological concept of *deification*. Some early writers who were professing Christians made questionable statements that at first may appear to support the Mormon concept of human progression to the status of gods. Justin Martyr in the mid-second century, for example, said in his interpretation of Psalm 82 that humans could "become worthy to turn into Gods."<sup>12</sup> This statement appears to be similar to the Mormon concept of human exaltation to divinity. In the immediate context, however, Justin explains his meaning, saying that these persons have power "to become sons of the highest." In other places in the same work, Justin makes it clear there is only one God, which is in striking contrast to the Mormon doctrine of human progression: "Neither will there be another God...nor was there [another God] from the beginning...besides the one making (creating) and arranging everything. Neither is [there] another God reckoned for us and another for [the Jews], but [only] that one [who] led your fathers out of Egypt."<sup>13</sup>

Justin also states that "above God there is no other."<sup>14</sup> On one hand he says that humans can turn into Gods; on the other he says there is but one God. Giving Justin the benefit of the doubt that he did not

contradict himself, it is unlikely that his phrase “turn into Gods” meant “to become Gods in the same sense as the biblical God,” as is assumed by Mormon authors. It is likely, rather, that he meant a human becomes a “son of God” in the sense of becoming one of God’s people, keeping God’s commands.<sup>15</sup> In this view, a human remains human and yet becomes a son of God—ontologically distinct from the one true God—by turning from error and following the ways of the one true God.<sup>16</sup> This interpretation accords well with Justin’s overall theology and does not make him contradict himself in terms of how many actual Gods exist, as the Mormon interpretation does.<sup>17</sup>

Other early Christian writers used deification terminology; however, most of these writers were careful to safeguard the unity of God, abundantly affirming that there is only one true God. They, therefore, could not have been using deification language in the sense of a human becoming another God in addition to the God presented in Scripture. In other words, they did not mean (as Mormons have continually misrepresented them) that humans become gods *by nature* (i.e., in actual being) to join a group of gods that includes the “Heavenly Father” God of Christianity.<sup>18</sup> The church historian and Eastern Orthodox scholar Jaroslav Pelikan shows that the patristic term *deification* (or *divinization*) is synonymous with the patristic term *salvation*.<sup>19</sup> Modern Eastern Catholic theologians have defined deification in the same essential way their patristic forebears did, using it to refer to salvation as *participation* in the *communicable* attributes of God’s nature (i.e., those attributes of God’s nature that can be communicated to or possessed by a human, such as holiness, power, and glory) without violating that singular divine nature.<sup>20</sup> Eastern Orthodox writer Kallistos Ware makes this clear: “The union between God and the human beings that he has created is a union neither according to [divine] essence nor according to [person], it remains thirdly that it should be a union *according to energy*. The saints do not become God by essence nor one person with God, but they participate in the energies of God, that is to say, in His life, power, grace, and glory.”<sup>21</sup>

Eastern Catholic writer Vladimir Lossky concurs, saying in his interpretation of deification, “If we [humans] were able at any given moment to be united to the very essence of God...we should not at the moment be what we are, we should [,rather,] be God by nature. God would then no longer be Trinity.”<sup>22</sup> In this case there would be many divine persons beyond the three persons of the Trinity, a notion Lossky rejects as unbiblical. The Mormon doctrine of deification results not only in multiple divine persons beyond the three in the Trinity, as Lossky demonstrates, but also in multiple divine beings beyond the one true God, which is polytheism. Mormons, moreover, not only believe this, but they assume it to have been the theology of the ancients.

Most introductory logic textbooks list a logical fallacy called *equivocation* that occurs when “some word or group of words is used either implicitly or explicitly in two different senses”<sup>23</sup>; that is, one word is used to mean two different things. An elephant’s *trunk* is not a clothes *trunk*; likewise, patristic and Eastern Orthodox *deification* is not Mormon *deification*, despite the fact that Mormon authors would like to think so.<sup>24</sup> A classic example of equivocation is when Mormon authors argue that since the Christian community has considered the patristic writers and Eastern Orthodoxy to be Christian, despite having taught deification, so too should Mormons be accorded the title “Christian” despite teaching deification. Mormon deification, however, means attaining godhood within the same basic god-man nature or *species* as the Mormon “Heavenly Father” God. This pagan notion of deification is sharply divergent from the patristic notion of deification (or salvation), in which a human participates in the presence of God while remaining a distinctly different kind of being.<sup>25</sup> In the latter, there remains a sharp qualitative difference between divine and human nature.<sup>26</sup> The two natures, divine and human, have been joined only in Jesus.

## RELATING MOTIVES TO PROCEDURES AND RESULTS

Certain conclusions of Mormon scholars concerning the patristic period are accurate and helpful. Their sectarian motive of trying to justify the belief that the Mormon Church is the true church, however, has led them to examine the field in an incomplete, patchwork manner. Further, in order to support their theology, Mormons sometimes have interpreted patristic works in ways that force meanings onto the texts that the authors never intended and distort the authors’ intended meanings. In such circumstances, these Mormons are predisposed to drawing faulty conclusions.

## NOTES

1. The Latin *pater* means “father.” The *Fathers* are the first Christians who wrote after the period of the New Testament. *Patristics* is the study of these earliest, post-New Testament writings.
2. Kent P. Jackson, “Watch and Remember: The New Testament and the Great Apostasy,” in *By Study and Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley on the Occasion of His 80th Birthday*, ed. J. M. Lundquist and S. D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1990), 81.
3. B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Van Der Donckt Discussion* (1903; repr., ed. D. L. Paulsen [Salt Lake City: Signature, 1998]), 180.
4. The Mormon Church historically has been disinterested in serious biblical *exegesis*, or interpretation of the Bible based on the original languages. The Church, instead, despite possessing many scholars (but no official leaders—apostles or prophets) who are competent in biblical languages, holds to a four-hundred-year-old English translation (KJV). It primarily “proof-texts” passages that agree with its existing theology—the same thing it does with patristic passages. Likewise, the Utah Mormon sect has shown little interest in serious systematic or biblical theology based on original language work.
5. Paulsen wrote his dissertation (University of Michigan, 1975) defending the Mormon concept of a limited God.
6. See, e.g., Paulsen’s “Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses,” *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990): 105–16; “The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives,” *BYU Studies* 35, 4 (1995–96): 7–94; (with Carl Griffin) “Augustine and the Corporeality of God,” *Harvard Theological Review* 95 (2002): 97–118.
7. Hugh Nibley, “Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, ed. T. Compton and S. Ricks, vol. 4, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1987), 100–167.
8. Origen claimed that John the Baptist went to a spirit prison type of place (similar to Mormon belief) and baptized persons in anticipation of Jesus’ imminent arrival.
9. S. Kent Brown, “Coptic and Greek Inscriptions from Christian Egypt: A Brief Review,” *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. B. Pearson et al. (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1986), 26–41.
10. This was Griggs’s doctoral dissertation at UC Berkeley. C. W. Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 C.E.*, no. 2, Coptic Studies Series (New York: E. J. Brill, 1990). Reviewed by K. Norman, *BYU Studies* 31 (Spring 1991): 183–87.
11. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (1934; 2nd ed. repr., ed. R. Kraft and G. Krodel [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971]).
12. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 124. Author’s translations here and subsequently.
13. *Ibid.*, 11.
14. *Ibid.*, 56.
15. *Ibid.*, 123–24.
16. *Ibid.*, 95.
17. See Justin, *1 Apology* 6, 9, 41 “all the gods of the nations are devil-idols”; *Dialogue*, 55, 73, 123–24.
18. See especially Keith Norman, “Deification: The Content of Athanasian Soteriology.” Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1980. Norman (a Mormon) incredibly argues that deification by nature is exactly what Athanasius meant in using this terminology and concept. Athanasius, however, like the rest of the patristic writers who use deification terminology, was very careful to safeguard the unity of the divine nature, in contrast to the creation.
19. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 155, 266, 345. Deification has been retained by the Eastern Catholics but redefined by the Western Catholics.
20. Mormon scholars are divided on this point. Stephen Robinson, for example, assumes current Eastern Orthodox conceptions of deification to be essentially the same as patristic notions, whereas Daniel Peterson thinks Eastern Orthodoxy has deviated from the earliest patristic notions. See, e.g., Robinson’s use in *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 61–63. This is in contrast to Peterson, “‘Ye are Gods’: Ps. 82 and Jn. 10 as Witnesses to the Divine Nature of Humankind,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. S. Ricks, D. Parry, and A. Hedges (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 552–53; so also Daniel Peterson, Stephen Ricks: “We suspect, in fact, that even relatively late statements on *theosis* [i.e., deification] represent the Hellenization of an earlier doctrine—one that was perhaps much closer to Mormon belief” (*Offenders for a Word* [Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992], 92).
21. Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1979), 168.
22. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (1944; repr. Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1998), 69–70.
23. Patrick Hurley, *A Concise Introduction to Logic*, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), 681.
24. Contrary to most patristic scholars, Mormon scholar Keith Norman argues at length in his “Deification: The Content of Athanasian Soteriology” that this is what Athanasius meant. He then goes on to assert a contradictory tension between Athanasius’s desire to safeguard the single divine nature and his teaching of human deification.
25. Many ancient Greek and Roman pagans believed that the gods had once been mortal humans who had become gods upon death—in a qualitative fashion very similar to the Mormon belief. Put simply, the gods were just bigger, better, “promoted” humans. This is ironic in light of the Mormon charge that Christian orthodoxy was corrupted by Greek and Roman pagan influence.
26. Jordan Vajda, formerly a Dominican Roman Catholic priest but now a Mormon, delineates this difference in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: A Comparative Analysis of the Patristic and Mormon Doctrines of Divinization*. (Published as *Occasional Paper No. 3*. [Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002], and in his M.A. Thesis [Graduate Theological Union, University of California, Berkeley, 1998]).