

JOSEPH SMITH
SABELLIANISM
and
MORMON BELIEF

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(See Bibliography for details)

FOREWORD

"Sabellianism" is a big word for a simple concept. It refers to the theological proposition that God the Father and Jesus Christ are identical in person. In other words, that Jesus Christ is the Father incarnate. This particular concept has deep roots in the history of Christianity. (I explain this briefly on pp.8-9 of this paper.)

Much evidence proves that Joseph Smith believed in a Sabellian-type theology throughout the early years of his career, and that this Sabellian belief system permeates the Book of Mormon.

Mormons refuse to recognize this fact. They will dispute this point and refute the allegation. Today they believe that Father and Son are distinctly separate individuals.....what most Mormons don't realize is; this was not always the case.

The avowed purpose of this paper is to show "How Joseph Smith's early theological beliefs as expressed in the Book of Mormon contradict and undermine the credibility of his First-Vision story." In order for me to do that, I must first prove to a skeptical Mormon audience that Joseph Smith's early beliefs were in fact.... and without any question..... Sabellian in nature. That is the reason I have devoted the first eleven pages of text to citing many instances of Joseph's early Sabellian belief.

Once these facts are established, I am then able to proceed and present the essence of my argument. Under the heading of "The Crux of the Matter"(p.17), I demonstrate how and why Joseph Smith's account of the First-Vision story as told in 1838 cannot possibly be a true story. Then once again, at p.19, I give yet a second reason why that First-Vision story must be regarded as a falsehood and a fabrication.

The rest of this paper concerns itself with the fact that, subsequent to Joseph's death, and throughout the 19th Century, some Mormons, (serious thinkers and scholars within the church), continued to be troubled by the discrepancy between those Sabellian-type statements in the Book of Mormon and the vivid depictions of Father and Son as two separate persons in the First-Vision. This nagging discomfort among the upper echelons of the church did not really come to a head until the early years of the Twentieth Century, when it resulted in a colossal "fix" involving the introduction of a whole new Supreme Being into the Cosmos.

This figure, whom church fathers elected to designate by the Hebrew name-title "Elohim", became the new "God the Father". This higher-yet God, they must have felt, would at last explain the identity of the Father figure in the first vision, while at the same time provide a situation in which Jehovah and Jesus could be one and the same as stipulated by the Book of Mormon. (One can read about all this, beginning with p. 25.)

On p.28 I include a segment entitled: "The Elohim of the Bible as Universally Understood Among Non-Mormon Scholars", which some readers might find of interest.

On p. 31 is an Addendum entitled: "Sabellianism in the Book of Mormon Leads to a Remarkable and Appalling Absurdity." I think Non-Mormons will find that story of a cataclysm in the New World immediately preceding the visitation Jesus Christ to the Americas to be highly surreal, and I suspect many Mormons will be shocked to realize what the text really says.

A note to Mormon intellectuals and apologists: The "Comments" section at the end of this paper is an open invitation to anyone who disagrees with me to voice a protest or mount a rebuttal. Any serious effort to refute the assertions made in this paper will be of interest and will be posted.

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INCONSISTENTLY WITH MODERN-DAY MORMON BELIEF, THE BOOK OF MORMON TEACHES THAT THE GODHEAD CONSISTS OF ONE PERSON ONLY.

The title page to the Book of Mormon states the following:

".....and to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God."

This statement sums up in one phrase, the basic theological premise of the Book of Mormon: Jesus Christ is the one-and-only God.....Jesus Christ is God himself.

Mosiah 15:1-5

"And now Abinadi said unto them: I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in the flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son--The Father because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and the Son--And they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and earth."

The person who "comes down" obviously has to be Jehovah, and so, if Jehovah and Jesus Christ are one and the same, it is Jehovah/Jesus Christ who is "God himself".

The trouble with this for modern-day Mormons is that such statements in the Book of Mormon, (and there are many), appear to be utterly oblivious to the existence of any higher-yet God such as the Mormon Elohim; a figure whom Mormons today regard as the true Supreme Being; The name of Elohim does not appear in the Book of Mormon, and the superlatives which are accorded to Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon are so absolute that they quash all possibility of the existence of any higher deity. (For example, could there be any higher God than "God Himself"?)

The Book of Mormon leaves no room for any higher-yet deity such as the Mormon "Elohim". As further proof of this we need only look to Alma 11:29-31:

When the skeptic Zeezrom asks the prophet Amulek: Is there more than one God? Amulek answers, "No".(v. 29)

When Zeezrom asks Amulek where he got this information, Amulek tells him he got it from an angel. (v.30, 31)

So: The title page tells us that Jesus Christ is "the Eternal God", Mosiah 15:1-5 tells us that Jesus Christ is "God himself", and Alma 11:29-31 tells us that there is no other God.

Here are two more passages delivering the same message:

Ether 3:14

".....Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally....."

Ether 4:12

"He that will not believe me will not believe the Father who sent me. For behold, I am the Father."

Some Mormons have attempted to explain that these references to Jesus Christ as "the Father" are to be understood in a limited sense. They tell us that just because Jesus is called the Father, that does not necessarily mean he is the ultimate deity. They try to explain that this designation is merely an honorific owing to his closeness to God and his supposed role as the agent by which all things were created....and therefore these expressions need not signify that he himself is "God the Father."

I reply that such an interpretation is not justifiable. There is no hint in the text that Jesus Christ might be regarded as anything less than the one-and-only God. The very stridency of tone, and the unequivocal nature of these statements, shows that they were intentionally designed to preclude all possibility of any ambiguity of that kind. If Joseph Smith had expressly set out to exclude all possibility of the existence of any god higher than Jesus Christ, he could hardly have done a better job of it! Since the Book of Mormon contains no hint there might be any other god in the Cosmos, one is forced to conclude that these expressions were intended to emphasize that Jesus Christ is the one and only God.....the Supreme Being.

THE SON IS THE FATHER

Mosiah 15:1-5 makes it clear that the Father referred to is "God himself", and when God himself comes to earth to dwell in a body of flesh, he then abruptly becomes "the Son". This situation is analogous to an actor who puts on a costume...in this case, a costume of flesh. Only one person is involved here. When "God himself" comes to earth, he manifests himself in the role of Jesus Christ. In this situation, "Father" and "Son" are really just one-and-the-same person.

*(Theologically speaking, the term "person" means a "center of consciousness")

By definition, any theology which says that "the Son is the Father", or otherwise asserts that Father and Son are but one person, is classifiable as Sabellianism. (Sabellianism is also known as Modalism.)

Sabellianism was one of the theological systems which were in contention for supremacy at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. Trinitarianism ultimately prevailed, and Sabellianism was declared to be a heresy.

Sabellianism is different from Trinitarianism. Trinitarianism specifies that "God consists of three persons, who, being of one substance, constitute one God." A Trinitarian might say, "The Son is God", but he would not say "the Son is the Father", because Trinitarianism specifies that the persons within God are not to be confounded.

A Sabellian, on the other hand, would not hesitate to say, "The Son is the Father", because to him, Father and Son are but one-and-the-same person.

St. Augustine, writing a few years after the Council of Nicea, gave a very succinct definition of Sabellianism. This is from his theological work "The City of God".

"Thus when we speak about God, we do not talk about two or three "principles" any more than we are allowed to speak of two or three gods, although in talking of each person, whether the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit, we acknowledge that each of them is God. But we do not, like the Sabellian heretics, identify the Father with the Son, and the Holy Spirit with both Father and Son."

("Augustine", 1984, p.404)

When the Book of Mormon says, as it does at Alma 11:38-40, that the Son of God is the very Eternal Father (see below), that statement encapsulates the essence of Book of Mormon theology. The original Book of Mormon contained at least 16 such Sabellian-type statements; four of which were changed in the second printing in 1837, thus leaving 12 unchanged to this day. In fact, Sabellian theology permeates the Book of Mormon. Whenever the Book of Mormon stops to explain the nature of the Deity, it does so in Sabellian terms.

Below is a list of a number of additional Sabellian-type expressions which still exist in the Book of Mormon to this day:

Mosiah 3:5

"For behold the time cometh and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent, who reigneth, who was, and is from eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay....."

Mosiah 7:27

"And because he said unto them thatGod should come down among the children of men, and take upon him flesh and blood, and go forth upon the face of the earth.....they did put him to death....."

Mormon 9:11-12

"But behold I will show you a God of Miracles.....and because of the fall of man came Jesus Christ, even the Father and the Son....."

Mosiah 16:15

"Teach them that redemption cometh through Christ the Lord who is the very Eternal Father."

1 Nephi 19:10

"And the God of our fathers.....yielded himself, according to the words of the angel, as a man unto the hands of wicked men to be lifted up.....and to be crucified.... and to be buried in a sepulchre"

2 Nephi 9:5

".....for it behooveth the great Creator that he suffereth himself to become subject to men in the flesh, and die for all men, that all men might become subject unto him.

3 Nephi 1:12-14

".....the voice of the Lord came unto him, saying:

"Behold, I come unto my own to fulfill all things which I have made known to the children of men from the foundation of the world, and to do the will of both the Father and the Son--the Father because of me, and the Son because of my flesh."

Alma 11:38-40

"Now Zeezrom saith again unto him: Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father?

An Amulek said unto him: "Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of Heaven and Earth, and all things which in them are. He is the beginning and the end, the first and the last....."

It should be noted here that these Sabellian-type statements in the Book of Mormon are unique in their unqualified explicitness. The New Testament never, ever, says that the Father is the Son, or that the Son is the Father.

WHAT ABOUT INSTANCES IN THE BOOK OF MORMON IN WHICH FATHER AND SON ARE DEPICTED AS TWO SEPARATE PERSONS?

In creating the Book of Mormon Joseph had at least two separate and opposing motives . On the one hand he needed his new book to have new elements, and appear to restore a number of long-lost "plain and precious" truths. On the other hand, he wanted it to sound as much like the Bible as possible.

When creating the Book of Mormon, Joseph borrowed from the Bible liberally, using the same King James English, the same terminologies, the same references, the same expressions, and the same relationships between the Father and the Son as those in the Bible. Accordingly, if the Bible has Jesus praying to the Father, so does Joseph. If the Bible has Jesus saying, "thy will, not mine be done", so does Joseph. It would have been a monumental task to revise every single exchange between Father and Son so as to reflect

Joseph's new Sabellian-type theology, and there is little evidence he ever tried to do so.

Certain inconsistencies exist, and cannot be explained except to say that Joseph Smith was often inconsistent.

The Book of 3rd Nephi covers that portion of the Book of Mormon in which Jesus appears to the inhabitants of Ancient America. Inasmuch as the Book of Mormon is billed as a second witness to Christ, it is here where Joseph Smith is most keen to make his "Jesus" look as much like the Jesus of the Bible as possible. Accordingly, many of the sayings of Jesus in 3rd Nephi are extracted almost verbatim from New Testament scripture. Here is an example, taken from 3 Nephi 19:23

"And now Father I pray unto thee for them and also for those who shall believe in their words, that I may be in them as thou Father art in me, that we may be one."

Compare that to John 17:21. Other examples to the same effect might be 3 Nephi 9:15 (out of John 1-1-3), and 3 Nephi 28:10 (out of John 10:30), etc.

Modern day Mormon defenders of the faith claim that such examples prove that the "one-ness" of God and Jesus in the Book of Mormon should be understood in metaphorical terms only, as a one-ness of heart and mind, and that there never was any intent in the Book of Mormon to make Father and Son identical in person. Such an argument is, of course, willfully blind to the many Sabellian-type statements which I have already noted, and for which there is really no adequate answer.

Although such quotes as those referred to in 3 Nephi, may seem to moderate and soften the effects of some Book of Mormon Sabellianisms, it must be remembered that these passages are largely derived from an outside source (the Bible) and have been introduced mainly to make the Book of Mormon seem like a worthy companion to the Bible.

In spite of the fact that the Book of Mormon may sometimes seem to depict Father and Son as two separate persons, the fact remains that whenever the Book of Mormon painstakingly explains the nature of the Deity, it does so in Sabellian terms.....this Sabellian-type message was reiterated at least sixteen times in the original edition.

Melodie Moench Charles has illuminated the nature of this paradox: "Sabellius's modalism....explained how one God could be in heaven and on earth at the same time, and also explained who governed the universe when the Godhead appeared as the Son. According to Sabellius, the one God who could appear in different roles could appear in them simultaneously: the Father is like the sun which "has three manifestations, light, heat, and the orb itself....the Son was at one time emitted, like a ray of light; he accomplished in the world all that pertained to the dispensation of the Gospel and man's salvation, and was then taken back into heaven." Therefore when, in 3 Nephi

Christ is God on earth acknowledging his father as God in heaven, the Nephites, like the Sabellians, could, [conceivably], still have thought of them as one God."

(Book of Mormon Christology, Melodie Moench Charles
www.signaturebookslibrary.org/book/chapter 4.)

Although 3rd Nephi may contain such moderating statements as those mentioned, it must also be pointed out that it also contains the most egregious example of Sabellian irrationality in the entire Book of Mormon. Could Jesus Christ, even as he is being crucified in Jerusalem, also be over here in the Americas slaying thousands? Only under the umbrella of Sabellian doctrine could such a physical and moral contradiction be conceivable. (Read the full account of this as it is presented in the Addendum, p.31.)

2. THE INFLUENCE OF SWEDENBORGIAN THEOLOGY UPON THE BELIEFS OF JOSEPH SMITH.

Integral to Joseph's creation of the Book of Mormon was the intent to "restore" Christianity to its original state of simplicity and purity, and get rid of the errors, corruptions and sophistications which supposedly had been introduced over the centuries. One of those corruptions would have been Trinitarian doctrine, a concept of the nature of God which was almost universal among the sects of his day. For Joseph to establish his credentials as a radical reformer, Trinitarianism would have to go. In all probability, Joseph had never even heard the term Sabellianism. No matter; it actually takes very little to transform Trinitarianism to something simpler and more primitive. Maintaining a strict distinction between the persons of the Godhead is integral to Trinitarian belief. If and when those distinctions are relaxed, Trinitarianism veers abruptly toward Sabellianism.

Joseph may have been helped along in this simple maneuver by his acquaintance with Swedenborgianism. Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) was a Swedish theologian whose ideas were not unknown in New England at that time. His ideas were essentially Sabellian in nature, and were espoused in particular by a sect known as the New Church. The New Church catechism reads in part:

“I believe that Jehovah God, the creator of heaven and earth is one in essence and in person, in whom there is a divine Trinity, consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is that God.”

The Swedenborgian magazine containing this catechism also bemoaned the fact that; “Some know not whether they should worship the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit, sometimes addressing one and then the other, as distinct beings or persons.

“Had they been better informed, they would have known that ‘the Lord Jesus is the one glorified divine person in whom dwells the fullness of the godhead bodily...”

Direct evidence exists indicating that Joseph Smith and his family were familiar with Swedenborgianism. Not only were the Smith Family's occult magical parchments copied from a book which also contained an extended summary of Swedenborg's teaching, but a popular reference work that was housed in the Manchester, New York library at roughly the time Joseph Smith was living nearby would have been accessible. It explained the Swedenborgian position this way:

".....This trinity consisteth not of three distinct persons, but is united as body, soul, and operation in man; in the one man Jesus Christ, who therefore is the God of heaven, and alone to be worshiped: being Creator from Eternity, Redeemer in time, and Regenerator to eternity."

Swedenborg, himself, wrote in his book "The True Christian Religion" (1771)

"When it is said that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three essentials of one God, like the soul, body, and operation in man, it appears to the human mind as if those three essentials were three persons, which is not possible."

These Swedenborgian ideas are perfectly echoed in the 16 or so Sabellianisms in the original Book of Mormon. Thus, the influence of Swedenborgian theology upon Joseph Smith is not only conceivable, it is entirely probable.

(ref: Joseph Smith's Modalism: Sabellian Sequentialism or Swedenborgian Expansionism? Ronald V. Huggins, Salt Lake Theological Seminary. on the web at Mormons In Transition-Joseph Smith)

THE SENSELESS NATURE OF SABELLIAN THEOLOGY

Consider the conversation in the Book of Mormon between the skeptic Zeezrom and the prophet Amulek at Alma 11: 38-40. Zeezrom asks:

"Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father?" and Amulek replies,

"Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of heaven and earth, and all things which in them are: he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last....."

Here Amulek is trying to get Zeezrom to buy into a senseless paradox. Any statement saying that one person is both Father and Son is irrational because it is tantamount to saying one person is two persons. Under the auspices of such a premise, the words "Father" and "Son" remain nothing but words; they do not refer to any actual existing persons. The "Father" in this situation is not father to the "Son", and the "Son" is not son to the "Father". There can never be any father-son relationship because a

relationship requires the existence of two actual persons. Under the auspices of this situation, it is completely inappropriate to employ a father-son metaphor; to do so is to be completely out of touch with reality. In such a case, why speak in terms of Father and Son at all?

Poor Zeezrom; one cannot help but sympathize with him. The author appears to be impatient with his unwillingness to "believe", and with his over-all stubborn intransigence. All Zeezrom probably wants, though, is to understand this seemingly contradictory proposition. When Alma tells Zeezrom: "Yea, [the Son] is the very Eternal Father of heaven and earth and all things which in them are, he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last", it would not be hard to imagine Zeezrom's befuddlement. Any sensible person in his place would probably be asking himself...."hmmm....I wonder....could it be that there are two gods involved here?" And that is exactly what Zeezrom does ask; at v.28 he asks, "Is there more than one God?"

Amulek's answer, when it comes, is altogether explicit, he simply replies, "No." (v. 29)

Then Amulek proceeds to tell Zeezrom he has this information directly from an angel. (v. 30,31) So, in essence he seems to be telling Zeezrom: "Sense or no sense, I have it straight from God. Like it or not; there it is..... take it or leave it!"

JOSEPH SMITH'S TRANSLATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT. (1830-1831) LUKE 10:22

This evidence confirms that Joseph Smith's own personal beliefs were Sabellian in nature during this early period. In 1830, right after the Book of Mormon came out, he began to selectively "re-translate" portions of the New Testament, and as he did he went out of his way to emphasize his Sabellian consciousness. Here is a comparison between a scriptural excerpt from the Book of Luke in the King James Bible, and Joseph Smith's own "translation" of the same passage.

Luke 10:22 King James Version

"All things are delivered to me of my Father: and no man knoweth who the Son is but the Father; and who the Father is but the Son. and he to whom the Father will reveal it.

Luke 10:22 Joseph Smith

"All things are delivered to me of my Father, and no man knoweth that the Son is the Father and the Father is the Son, but him to whom the Father will reveal it."

(emphasis mine.) (See "The Complete Joseph Smith Translation of the New Testament, a side-by-side comparison with the King James Version" Thomas A. Wayment, Deseret Books, 2005)

Nothing could demonstrate Joseph Smith's Sabellian beliefs at this point in time any more clearly than this revision of an otherwise unremarkable passage of New Testament Scripture.

If Joseph's suggestion were to prevail, it would deprive the New Testament of all common sense. Under the auspices of such a situation, the Father cannot love the Son, and the Son cannot be obedient to the Father. It is hardly any wonder that the early church fathers at the council of Nicea rejected Sabellian theology as heresy. For the same reasons, Joseph Smith's suggested revision of Luke 10:22 is similarly untenable.

JOSEPH SMITH'S EARLY REVELATIONS SHOW SABELLIAN BELIEF

Between the years 1827 and 1833, Joseph received and recorded a number of revelations. In none of them is it possible to tell the difference between the voice of God and the voice of Jesus Christ. In each of them, these two figures seem to be one-and-the-same individual; they are not distinguishable. Consider the following passages as excerpted from the Doctrine and Covenants:

Doctrine and Covenants, Section 29 As this revelation begins, (v. 1-45), the speaker is clearly Jesus Christ:

"Listen to the voice of Jesus Christ your redeemer, the great I Am, whose arm of mercy hath atoned for your sins.....it hath gone forth by a firm decree, by the will of the Father that mine apostles, the twelve which were with me in my ministry at Jerusalem, shall stand at my right hand.....etc."

But suddenly at verse 46, the identity of the speaker abruptly changes; suddenly it is the Father who is the speaker:

"But behold, I say unto you that little children are redeemed from the foundation of the world through mine only Begotten;....."

Clearly, as far as Joseph Smith was concerned during this early Sabellian period, Father and Son were perfectly interchangeable with one another.

Here is another example:

Doctrine and Covenants 35:1-2

"Listen to the voice of the Lord your God, even Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, whose course is one eternal round, the same today as yesterday, and forever. I am Jesus Christ the Son of God, who was crucified for the sins of the world....."

Here, and in many other such passages, Jesus Christ the Son of God, refers to himself as "the Lord your God", and otherwise speaks as though he, himself, is the Supreme Being.

Once again,

Doctrine and Covenants 39:1-4

"Hearken and listen to the voice of him who is from eternity to all eternity, the Great I Am, even Jesus Christ...." ".....But to as many as received me, gave I power to become my sons, and even so will I give unto as many as receive me power to become my sons."

By referring to those who accept him as his "sons", Jesus assumes the role of Father in a way that the Biblical Jesus would not do.

Here is yet another example:

Doctrine and Covenants 34:1-3

"My son Orson, hearken and hear and behold what I, the Lord God, shall say unto you, even Jesus Christ your redeemer, the light and life of the world, a light which shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not; who so loved the world that he gave his own life, that as many as would believe might become the sons of God. Wherefore you are my son."

Here, once again, Jesus calls himself the Lord God, and takes upon himself the role of the Father by referring to Orson as his son. Moreover, the "Lord God" tells us that he sacrificed his own life so that believers might be saved. The peculiar use of the term "his own life" shows clear intent to convey the message that the Father sacrificed his own life..... a Sabellian-type theological message.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is never referred to as "the Father". On the contrary, Jesus' message was that he was the Son of God, and that ordinary mortals might also aspire to become the sons of God. St. Paul tells us that Jesus is the "first-born of many brethren", (Rom.8:29). He also tells us that Jesus Christ is "stationed at the right hand of God, and there makes intercession for us", (Rom.8:34). John the Revelator says that Jesus Christ is a "priest forever" unto his God and Father. (Rev. 1:6). And Paul says "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ." (Tim.2:5)

Joseph Smith's revelations give no indication that the Jesus who speaks is, in any way, acting as a mediator. This Jesus offers no acknowledgement of any God above him. He has no reason to be deferential of course, because according to this view, he himself is God Almighty. These early revelations constitute yet another example of Joseph Smith's Sabellian orientation during the early years.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE THREE WITNESSES

The testimony of the Three Witnesses which prefaces the Book of Mormon has descended to us unchanged since its first printing in 1830. Hiding in plain sight within its text, is vestigial evidence of Joseph Smith's original Sabellian belief. Although this statement was undersigned by the witnesses, the text was almost certainly composed by Joseph Smith himself. The last sentence reads as follows:

"And honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God."

This sentence would, at first blush, seem to contain a grammatical error. If the subject of the sentence is thought to be plural, "is" would be wrong, and "are" would be correct. However, when seen from a Sabellian perspective, in which Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are thought to be merely one and the same person, the subject of the sentence is singular. In such a case, the verb-form "is", is perfectly apt and perfectly correct. Joseph's choice of the verb-form "is", was therefore, almost certainly no accident.

Thus, this early document provides one more corroboration of Joseph Smith's early Sabellian belief during the 1830 time period.

THE CRUX OF THE MATTER--JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRST VISION

Joseph Smith's first vision supposedly occurred in the year 1820 when Joseph was a boy of fourteen. This story is a Mormon icon....along with the Book of Mormon it is one of the foundational cornerstones of the Mormon faith; every child knows it by heart. According to the story, Joseph goes into the woods to pray, whereupon God the Father and Jesus Christ appear to him in radiant but distinctly human form. The one figure says, "This is my beloved Son, hear him." At that point Jesus begins to speak, and tells Joseph many things, (many of which are not recorded.)

The most striking feature of this visitation is that God and Jesus appear in human form as two persons. Their bodily manifestation shows them to be two separate individuals, and the fact that the Father introduces the Son underscores the fact that two separate persons are involved.

So here is the question: if, in 1820, Joseph had really and truly seen for himself that Father and Son were two separate individual persons, how could he then, between 1827 and 1830, turn around and produce a work which repeatedly declares, (and with great fervor and certitude), that Father and Son are but one-and-the-same person?

It is simply inconceivable that Joseph Smith could have proclaimed these Sabellian-type doctrines time and again in the Book of Mormon if, all the while, he knew from personal experience that the Father and Son were actually two separate individuals! It is impossible to imagine he could have embraced such beliefs had he previously seen for himself that the real truth was otherwise.

The only possible explanation for this curious discrepancy is that the now-classic First Vision story, as told in 1838, with its description of the Father standing alongside the Son is not a true story.....it never happened. It never happened as told in 1838 anyway; that story is a fantasy and a fabrication.

That particular event could not have happened the way Joseph described it in 1838, because if it had, he never would have made all those unqualified Sabellian-type doctrinal pronouncements in the Book of Mormon as he did. All the available evidence points to the fact that no memory of such an experience could have, or did, exist in the mind of Joseph Smith at the time he was writing the Book of Mormon. (Even if he were merely "translating", as Mormons claim, there is no hint in the historical record that Joseph ever raised a question over what should have appeared to him as an obvious, and jarring, incongruity.)

Entirely relevant to this issue is the fact that there is, in the historical record, an earlier version of this same First-Vision which was written in 1832. It was written as a part of an autobiography Joseph was composing at the time. We know this earlier document is genuine, for it was written in Joseph Smith's own hand. (It still exists, and is presently housed in church archives; facsimiles are available) Significantly, that document says absolutely nothing about the appearance of two figures. Here is an excerpt:

".....and while [I was] in the attitude of calling upon the Lord, in the 15th year of my age, a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noonday came down from above and rested upon me, and I was filled with the Spirit of God, and the Lord opened the heavens upon me, and I saw the Lord, and he spake to me, saying, Joseph my son, thy sins are forgiven thee.....Behold I am the Lord of Glory, I was crucified for the whole world.....etc."

Here, there is no mention of the appearance of Father and Son. Here, Joseph specifically tells us that he saw one person, not two. Inasmuch as only one figure, Jesus Christ, appears in this version of the story, it is substantially different from the later 1838 version. This early account was never published, and there is no evidence that Joseph Smith ever told this story publicly

*(It will be noted that this account is wholly compatible with Joseph's 1832 theology, and constitutes further evidence of his Sabellian type views)

It is unavoidable that one should conclude, therefore, that years later, in 1838, Joseph may have decided to dust off this earlier account, and re-craft it so as to add a dramatic new element: the part where Father and Son appear to him simultaneously in tangible bodily form. He probably felt that by doing this he could not only promote his very latest ideas about the separateness of Father and Son.....and the anthropomorphic nature of the deity.... but also create the impression he had believed these things continuously for years and years; ever since he was a boy! He could also, by this means, downplay and cast into shadow many of his former Sabellian-type teachings.

Although the now-classic First-Vision story is unquestionably moving and effective, the available evidence shows that it was almost surely not invented until many years after the fact.....that is, at least eighteen years after the original incident supposedly occurred.

YET ANOTHER REASON TO SEE THE FIRST-VISION AS A FABRICATION

In 1835 Joseph Smith gave a series of lectures to a group of Elders in the Kirtland (Ohio) temple. These "Lectures on Faith" were subsequently published in the first edition of, what was to become, an LDS standard work: the "Doctrine and Covenants". The fifth lecture has this to say concerning the nature of the Father and the Son:

“.....the Father, being a personage of spirit, glory, and power: possessing all perfection and fullness; the Son, who was in the bosom of the Father, a personage of tabernacle, made or fashioned like unto a man, or being in the form and likeness of a man.” (Doctrine and Covenants 1835 edition, p.59)

Implicit within this declaration is the suggestion that, whereas the Son is a personage of tabernacle, the Father is not; in other words, the Son is made or fashioned like unto a man, but the Father, being a personage of spirit, is not so fashioned. This statement strongly suggests that when Joseph Smith codified this doctrine, he had no memory whatsoever of once having seen with this own eyes that both the Father and the Son, alike, were equally endowed with physical bodies.

Some may be inclined to question as to whether Joseph Smith himself was responsible for having written this doctrine, but that cannot be. In the preface to this 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants he wrote and signed the following:

"The first part of the book will be found to contain a series of Lectures as delivered before a theological class in this place, [Kirtland, Ohio], and in consequence of their containing the important doctrine of salvation, we have arranged them into the following work."

Moreover, here's what Joseph Fielding Smith, fifth president and prophet of the LDS Church, had to say on the matter:

"Now the Prophet did know about these Lectures on Faith, because he helped to prepare them, and he helped also to revise these lectures before they were published [in the Doctrine and Covenants].

(Doctrines of Salvation, vol.3, p.195)

* (The Lectures on Faith were de-canonized in 1921. Problems with the fifth lecture were probably the reason.) (Huggins on Sabellianism p.14 of 24)

CHANGES WHICH JOSEPH SMITH MADE TO THE 1837 EDITION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

The 1838 version of the first-vision was but the last in a series of steps moving away from his early Sabellian position.

Joseph Smith was a creative personality. Change was endemic to his nature. Throughout the early years he was probably often engaged in conversations with new converts and others. Although Joseph was a dynamic and influential force, it is not impossible that others may have influenced him as well. (As has been pointed out, Sabellian theology is really quite indefensible in the light of reason, and some of his co-religionists might have persuaded him of this.) Whatever the cause, the fact is that not too long after founding his new church. Joseph's views began imperceptibly to change. Research has shown that after May of 1833 he never again referred to Jesus Christ as the Father. (Boyd Kirkland, Sunstone 9.2 p.2)

It may be impossible to trace every factor involved in Joseph Smith's evolution, but changes he made to the second edition of the Book of Mormon in 1837 constitute clear evidence he had become dissatisfied with his earlier Sabellian beliefs.

Whatever his reasons, he clearly felt it was imperative that he change at least a few passages in the Book of Mormon so as to revoke their Sabellian implications. In each of the following expressions, the words "the Son of the", or "the Son of" were inserted at the spot indicated by an asterisk, (*).

I Nephi 13:40

"And the angel spake unto me, saying: These "last records (of the Nephites), which thou hast seen among the Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them; and shall make known unto all kindreds tongues and people, that the Lamb of God is the *Eternal Father, and the savior of the world; and that all men must come unto him, or they cannot be saved."

1 Nephi 11:18

"And he said unto me, Behold, the virgin which thou seest, is the mother of * God after the manner of the flesh."

1 Nephi 11:32

"And I looked and beheld the Lamb of God, that he was taken by the people, yea the * Everlasting God was judged of the world..."

1 Nephi 11:21

"And the angel said unto me, behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the * Eternal Father."

(1837 Changes to the Book of Mormon,
www.2think.org/hundred_sheep/bom1830/changes.shtml)

One might reasonably ask why only these four were changed, and not the many others which remained? One can only guess, but he may have feared that to change more might have been more easily noticed and called into question.

The fact that each of these alterations had to do with one identical point of doctrine eliminates all possibility that these changes were occasioned by typographical errors. Clearly they indicate a shift in Joseph Smith's most fundamental belief about the nature of the Deity, and indicate a repudiation of his earlier Sabellian views!

It was, of course, extremely important to Joseph Smith that, as a prophet of God, he should not be seen to waffle in these matters. One cannot help but wonder if anyone ever challenged him upon the subject.....this is not known.... but we do have a statement from Joseph Smith which sounds suspiciously like an answer to such a challenge; In 1844 he stated:

"I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and that these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.

(Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Joseph Fielding Smith, Deseret Book Co. 1938, p. 370)

The evidence I have presented shows that this statement is patently and demonstrably false. What this statement does do, is confirm that over time Joseph Smith's beliefs had undergone a complete one-hundred-and-eighty-degree reversal. The message conveyed in this statement is just the opposite of the one which he delivered in the Book of Mormon during his Sabellian period.

JOSEPH SMITH WAS NOT THE FOUNDER OF MODERN DAY MORMON BELIEF

In spite of the fact that Joseph Smith's views had undergone such a revolutionary reversal, even then, he did not understand the Godhead the way Mormons do today....Joseph Smith was not the founder of Modern-day Mormon theology.

Modern-day Mormons believe that "Elohim" is the highest God in all the Universe. They believe that Elohim is a God above Jehovah. In fact, they consider him to be the father of Jehovah. They believe that the term "God the Father" belongs exclusively to Elohim; not Jehovah. Elohim, (not Jehovah), is the father of all spirits; Elohim, (not Jehovah) is the father of Jesus Christ.

Even after he left his Sabellian period behind him, Joseph Smith never did understand the Godhead in that way. Up through 1842, when the Book of Abraham was published, Joseph Smith believed that Jehovah was the highest God in the Universe. Never in his life did he think of Elohim as being a distinctly separate individual who was higher-yet than Jehovah.

In his History of the Church, (1838), Joseph Smith wrote:

"...."Thou eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Jehovah--God--
Thou Elohim, that sittest, as saith the psalmist, "enthroned in heaven."
(vol. 5, ch. 6, p. 127)

".....let us plead the justice of our cause; trusting in the arm of Jehovah, the Elohim
who sits enthroned in the heavens; that peradventure He may give us the victory....."
(vol. 5, ch.5,) p.94)

In the Church periodical "The Times and Seasons" he endorsed the following:

"We believe in God the Father, who is the Great Jehovah, and head of all things, and
that Christ is the Son of God, co-eternal with the Father. (vol. 3, p. 358)

Consider this from the Book of Abraham which was published in 1842:

Here, Jehovah is portrayed as the highest God in the Cosmos. As Abraham is lifted
up into the great expanse of heaven, Jehovah speaks to him, proclaiming ,

(Abraham 2, v. 7-8),

"For I am thy God....."my name is Jehovah, and I know the end from the
beginning....."

(Abraham. 3:19)

"These two facts do exist, that there are two spirits, one being more intelligent
than the other: there shall be another more intelligent than they; I am the Lord
thy God, I am more intelligent than them all. "

(Abraham 3:21)

"I dwell in the midst of them all; I now, therefore have come down unto thee to declare unto thee the works which my hand have made, wherein my wisdom excelleth them all, for I rule in the heavens above, and in the earth beneath, in all wisdom and prudence over all the intelligences thine eyes have seen from the beginning. I came down in the beginning in the midst of all the intelligences thou hast seen."

Here we see that Jehovah is portrayed as the highest God in the Universe. There can be no one "more intelligent", or higher in the pantheon, than Jehovah. This scripture definitely rules out any God higher than Jehovah....no father of Jehovah, no Mormon Elohim is conceivable within this context.

By corollary, it may also be discomfiting to Mormons to notice that a few verses further on, (ch.3: 27), Jesus Christ is not identical to Jehovah as Mormons would have it today; he is a different person.....instead, he is someone who approaches Jehovah: "And the Lord, (Jehovah), said, Whom shall I send? And one answered like unto the Son of Man, "Here am I, send me.....". This figure would have to be the pre-mortal Jesus Christ. Since Jesus is the one who answers the question posed by Jehovah, he cannot be one-and-the-same as Jehovah, as Mormons would have it today.

In order to understand how Joseph Smith came by his (actually correct) understanding of the meaning of the word "Elohim", we need to go back to the year 1835. By 1835, the Mormon community was firmly established in Kirtland, Ohio. While there, Joseph had a chance encounter with a Jewish scholar who was passing through. His name was Joshua Seixas. Seixas, as it happened, was a college professor who was an expert in the Hebrew language....in fact, he had written a Hebrew lexicon.... a dictionary of the Hebrew language. Smith persuaded Seixas to tarry in Kirtland for a time, and teach some lessons in Hebrew, so that Smith and a few of his counselors might be able to read the scriptures in the original Hebrew language.

Seixas and his pupils, used the Hebrew text of the Book of Genesis as their study guide. It was here that Joseph first learned that, in Hebrew, the generic word for "God" is "Elohim". "Yahweh "(or Jehovah), on the other hand, is actually the proper name of God as it was first revealed to Moses (Ex. 6:2,3). Elohim is a title belonging exclusively to Jehovah. Thus, the term 'Lord God' as it appears in Genesis 2, was actually 'Yahweh Elohim' in the original Hebrew. (Clearly both words refer to one and the same person.)

It was from his study of this Hebraic text that Joseph formed a lifelong understanding that the word Elohim was entirely synonymous with Jehovah, and applicable only to him.

Joseph never departed from that understanding. He never in all his life thought of Elohim as a separate individual or a God above Jehovah as Mormons think of it today). As far as

Joseph Smith was concerned, Jehovah himself was Elohim; Jehovah was God the Father, and what is more, Jehovah was the father of Jesus Christ. This fact is virtually indisputable. Consider this from Joseph Smith's "Book of Moses" as found in the Pearl of Great Price. At Moses 1:6, Jehovah himself declares:

"There is no other God beside me",

Jehovah also declares that the Savior, (Jesus Christ), is his "only begotten [Son]".

These statements leave no room for the possible existence of any higher-yet God such as the later-invented Mormon Elohim.....and are quite explicit in telling the reader that it is Jehovah, not anyone else, who is the father of Jesus Christ.

In his History of the Church, (Vol. 4, ch.14, p. 256) Joseph wrote:

"The Lord Jehovah hath spoken through Isaiah (13:1), saying, 'Behold my servant whom I uphold--mine elect in whom my soul delighteth'.....evidently referring to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, chosen or elected by the Father." [end quote].

All of the above is a quote from Joseph Smith. In this excerpt, Joseph Smith is explaining the meaning of this scripture from the Book of Isaiah, In the scripture, Isaiah quotes Jehovah, in which Jehovah speaks of his "servant" and his "elect". In explaining this passage, Joseph Smith says that "evidently" we should understand this "servant" to be the "Lord Jesus Christ".

Therefore, as Joseph Smith explains it, in this situation the Lord Jesus Christ is Jehovah's servant: Jehovah is the God the Father, and Jesus Christ is his servant--(and Son). (Hence, Jehovah and Jesus cannot be one-and-the-same, as Mormons would have it today.)

Joseph also stated the following:

"We believe in God the Father who is the Great Jehovah and head of all things, and that Christ is the Son of God, co-eternal with the Father."
(The Times and Seasons, Vol.3, p.358 Nov. 15,1841)

During this post-Sabellian era, Joseph's belief in this matter aligned with that of the Bible, in that he too considered Jehovah to be the father of Jesus Christ. The New Testament position on this matter is clear. Take, for example this, from Heb. 1:1-2:

"God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken to us by his son....."

There can be no question that in every single incidence, the God who spoke to the prophets in the Old Testament was Jehovah, because the name of Yahweh was

specifically invoked there in every case, (see p.28). Thus we see that the above statement by Joseph Smith makes it clear that he too, at this time, regarded Jehovah to be God the Father, and likewise that he too regarded Jehovah to be the father of Jesus Christ.

This explanation of Jehovah as father to Jesus Christ, does not align well with what Mormons believe today, because Mormons today believe that Jehovah is the same as Jesus Christ, and that the father of Jesus, (Jesus/Jehovah), is a higher-yet God called Elohim.

MODERN-DAY MORMON THEOLOGY CAME INTO BEING BECAUSE OF A PROBLEM WHICH JOSEPH SMITH LEFT UNRESOLVED.

Modern-day Mormon theology did not originate with Joseph Smith; but it came into being expressly because of the fact that, after writing the Book of Mormon, he changed his theological beliefs, and never admitted to doing so. As we have seen, he essentially denied there had ever been any kind of problem, and swept any evidence of such a thing under the rug..... thus leaving a most vexing puzzle for future generations to solve.

In a nutshell, here is the conundrum which Joseph Smith left behind: If one goes by the Book of Mormon, the Father and the Son are one-and-the-same person. But, if one goes by the First-Vision, Father and Son are two different persons. In the First-Vision scenario, the Father who introduces Jesus cannot be Jehovah because the Book of Mormon specifically states that Jesus is Jehovah!

So who, exactly, is the Father in the First-Vision who introduces his Son, if it isn't Jehovah?

It was not until the twentieth century was approaching that Mormon authorities and thinkers tried to grapple with this question. In some ways they were more conscientious than Joseph Smith himself, because they felt obliged to somehow integrate Book of Mormon Sabellianisms into their cosmology. Jehovah and Jesus Christ had to be one and the same. So in order to identify this Father-person seen standing next to Jesus/Jehovah there simply had to be another God in the Cosmos, a God higher-yet than Jehovah.

As they wrestled with this knotty conundrum, it seems to have slowly dawned on these church fathers that if the enigmatic name "Elohim" were to signify, not Jehovah himself, but another divine personage altogether....well, that might just be the long-sought answer to their prayers! Elohim could then be that higher-yet God who was so sorely needed to explain the identity of the Father who introduces Jehovah/Jesus as his son in the First Vision!! It was thusly, out of necessity, that the concept of Elohim as God the Father was born.

Facilitating this great and daring leap of theological revisionism, was the fact that toward the end of his life Joseph Smith had actually begun to imagine a plurality of Gods; a host

of Gods. Most of the time these Gods seemed to be subordinate to the Head of the Gods, Jehovah, as described in the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham. However, at certain other points, Joseph had hinted at the existence of a host of Gods extending in Father-Son relationship out to infinity without any stop anywhere. (Under such a scenario there would be no ultimate God at all....but let that go.) In the end, it was probably loopholes such as these which Church leaders relied upon to justify their new and radical introduction of whole new Supreme Being into the Cosmos.

Ultimately, after more than a decade of mulling over this tempting scenario, it was one James E. Talmage a church writer and theologian who finally formulated and fashioned a suitable dissertation on the subject. On June 29, 1916, Talmage submitted a final draft of this dissertation to the First Presidency. It was accepted, and on the following day it was issued out as an official declaration to the church at large. Officially this paper was entitled: "The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve". Billed merely as a "clarification" of supposedly long-standing church doctrine, this paper was, in fact, the first time that "Elohim", a God above Jehovah, had been officially recognized as a separate, individual deity.. Now, Elohim alone was to be seen as "God the Father"; Father to Jehovah-Jesus Christ, as well as Father to the spirits of all mankind, he alone was to be worshiped as the true Supreme Being.

(ref. Boyd Kirkland, The Development of the Mormon Jehovah Doctrine Sunstone 9.2 <http://www.lds-mormon.com/jehovahsfather.shtml>)

(ref. The Articles of Faith The Father and the Son, a Doctrinal Exposition, James E. Talmage LDS church, 1890, 1949. pp. 466-7)

It will probably come as a great surprise to many Mormons that this belief in Elohim as God the Father came so late in the history of the Church. Probably many will doubt that it was not always church doctrine, but there is plenty of evidence to show that my assertion here is true. Throughout the Nineteenth Century, every prophet who succeeded Joseph Smith followed Smith's lead in believing Elohim to be merely another name for Jehovah. They did not believe that Elohim was a separate person at all.

Brigham Young used the words Jehovah and Elohim together or interchangeably:

"We Obey the Lord, Him who is called Jehovah, the Great I Am; I am a man of war, Elohim, etc." (Journal of Discourses, 9:286)

In a sermon, recorded in the Utah Historical Quarterly, August 4, 1867 (29:68) Brigham Young said the following:

"We may ask them the question, "Do you believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?.....Well that is the very God that we, the Latter Day Saints are serving. He is our Father, He is our God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whom the tribe of Judah discard, heaping ridicule upon his name, He is the Father of our Spirits, every one of us, Jew and Gentile, bond and free, white or black."

(Yahweh, (Jehovah), was unquestionably the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.)

John Taylor, the President who succeeded Brigham Young, also saw Jehovah as being the Father of Jesus Christ.

"As the Son of Man, He endured all that it was possible for flesh and blood to endure, and as the Son of God He triumphed over all, and forever ascended to the right hand of God, to further carry out the designs of Jehovah pertaining to the world....." (Journal of Discourses vol. 20 p.301-2 vol. 21 p.341-2)

Here are the words to a hymn which President John Taylor wrote:

"As in the heavens they all agree,
The record's given there by three,
Jehovah, God the Father's one,
Another, His Eternal Son,
The Spirit does with them agree,"

(Sacred Hymns and Spiritual Songs from the Church of
Jesus Christ of Latter Day saints)

Parley P. Pratt, One of the leading missionaries of the church, from: "Angel of the Prairies"

".....But it is a theocracy, where the great Elohim, Jehovah, holds the superior honor."

Orson Pratt, another leading church authority:

"If, then, this is one of the great attributes of Jehovah, if he is filled with love and compassion towards the children of men, if his son Jesus Christ so loved the world that he gave his life to redeem mankind from the effects of he fall, then certainly, God the Eternal Father must be in possession of this passion."

(Journal of Discourses vol.18, p.288)

The Doctrinal Exposition of 1916 changed all that. Mormon authorities, in order to sustain the Book of Mormon, had to hold to the notion that Jehovah and Jesus were the same. Conversely, though, the First Vision showed the Father to be a different person than Jesus. So, in order to identify the Father figure standing next to Jesus, another father, a higher-yet God, had to be postulated. The only available candidate was the enigmatic Elohim. Elohim was a word familiar to Mormons, but few, if any of them knew how it occurred in the Hebrew Bible.....or, for that matter, that it came from the Bible at all.

Just how knowingly....or naively....Mormon authorities chose to go against the Bible by making Elohim into a different person from Jehovah is not known; but one thing is fairly certain, they never tried to justify that action in Bible terms.

THE ELOHIM OF THE BIBLE, AS UNIVERSALLY UNDERSTOOD AMONG NON-MORMON BIBLE SCHOLARS

The word "Elohim" is a Hebrew word. It derives its meaning from its use in the Hebrew scriptures. Elohim is a plural form, nearly always with a singular meaning; it means "God of Gods" or "highest of all Gods". This use of a plural form with a singular meaning may be compared to use of the "royal we" in English, which, similarly, is a plural form with a singular meaning. In the King James Bible, the Hebrew word "Elohim" is translated simply as "God". The word "Elohim" occurs with great frequency in the original Hebrew scriptures; more than 2,700 times in fact!....and it occurs several times in just the first few verses of the book of Genesis:

Genesis 1:1-3

"In the beginning Elohim created heaven and earth. And the earth was without form and void. And darkness was upon the face of the waters. And Elohim said let there be light, and there was light."

The Hebrew word for Jehovah is Yahweh; (spelled "YHWH" since there are no vowels in Hebrew). The word "YHWH", (Jehovah) is the proper name of God as revealed to Moses. Curiously the word "YHWH" is translated straight across as "Jehovah" only about six times in the Bible...mostly in the book of Exodus where God reveals his proper name to Moses. Otherwise it is translated simply as "LORD", in capital letters.

Thus, the very high frequency of the use of the proper name of God in the Hebrew Old Testament is concealed from the average reader. The surprising truth is that the proper name of God, YHWH, is one of the most frequently occurring words in the original Hebrew scriptures, and it occurs there more than 6,700 times! Wherever one sees the word LORD in capital letters, that is where the proper name of God, YHWH, was, in the original Hebrew.

The word "Yahweh", or "Jehovah", occurs as early as the second chapter of Genesis, and when it does, it occurs in tandem with the word "Elohim".

(Genesis 2:4-7)

"These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God, (Yahweh Elohim), made the earth and the heavens.

"And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew: for the LORD God, (Yahweh Elohim), had not caused it

to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground. But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground.

"And the LORD God (Yahweh Elohim) formed a man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

The book of Genesis repeats the combination Yahweh Elohim no less than eleven times. Thus we see that in the Bible, the name-title Elohim is inexorably welded to the proper name of God, Yahweh. In the Bible, Jehovah is Elohim, and Elohim is Jehovah.

(Ref. Anchor Bible Dictionary, a six-volume standard reference work available in any of the larger libraries in the country.)

Mormons today have taken it upon themselves to re-define the word Elohim so as to mean "the Father of Jehovah". So be it..... but the Mormon Elohim is a different person from the Elohim of the Bible; and therefore, that Mormon God really ought to be clearly identified in any conversation as the "Mormon Elohim".

As to Joseph Smith's claim that the word Elohim should be interpreted in the plural throughout the Bible, (which he once did), this understanding is simply false. Of the thousands of scholars who have studied the Bible, none of them have arrived at such a conclusion. Plus there are plenty of textual impediments to any such notion. Nothing could be more explicit in the Old Testament than the imperative that God is but one person; he is a singularity. It is, after all, from that understanding that we get the term "monotheism"!

(Isaiah 43:10)

"Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD (Yahweh), and my servant whom I have chosen, (Isaiah), that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me."

(Isaiah 44:6)

"Thus saith the LORD (Yahweh), and King of Israel and his (its) redeemer, the Lord of Hosts: I am the first and the last, and beside me there is no God."

(Deut. 6:4-5)

"Hear O Israel, the LORD (Yahweh) our God (Elohim) is one LORD, and thou shalt love Yahweh Elohim with all thine heart....etc."

I would also point out that the prevalence of the word Yahweh, (Jehovah), which permeates the text of the Old Testament makes it virtually impossible to find any fissure in the narrative into which the "Mormon Elohim" might squeeze in to make an appearance. As far as the Bible is concerned, there can be no other God than Yahweh.....no higher God than Jehovah.

CONCLUSION

Mormon prophet Gordon B. Hinckley has stated:

"Our entire case as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rests on the validity of this glorious First Vision."

Ensign Magazine, Nov. 1998, pp70-71

Prophet Hinckley also stated:

"You and I are faced with the stark question of accepting the truth of the First Vision and that which followed it. On the question of its reality lies the very validity of this church. If it is the truth, and I testify that it is, then the work in which we are engaged is the most important work on earth."

Fall Conference Address, 2007

Contrariwise, if the arguments I have put forth in this paper are sound, and I believe they are sound, then the Joseph Smith's First Vision is primarily an invention and a fabrication.

The evidence examined plainly shows that the Prophet Joseph Smith did not lay a firm foundation for the faith which he established. He began by expounding a Sabellian-type theology in which the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are really just one and the same person, and wound up at the other end of the spectrum with a system of belief classifiable as Tritheism in which Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three separate Gods.

The Book of Mormon which promised to restore and clarify all the basic religious truths, did not even identify that exalted personage whom Mormons, today, regard as being "God the Father": namely, "Elohim". In fact, it precluded all possibility of the existence of any such higher-yet God. The Book of Mormon teaches that the Father and the Son are one and the same; but later on, when Joseph abandoned his Sabellian beliefs, he taught that Father and Son were separate persons, and that Jehovah was father to Jesus Christ. He never acknowledged these contradictions, and left these puzzles unresolved.

Subsequent Mormon thinkers in trying to determine the identity of the two persons depicted in the First Vision were caught on the horns of a dilemma. They felt bound by the strictures in the Book of Mormon which claimed that Jesus and Jehovah were one and the same; but if that were so, who was that other "Father" who introduces Jesus as his son? It could not be Jehovah, since Jesus was Jehovah; so who was it? Another, higher-yet God, was required to make sense of that vision. So, after a long period of striving to "understand" the situation, Church fathers finally decided that if "Elohim" and "Jehovah" were conceived of as two different individuals, "Elohim" might be that Higher-yet God..

It was almost certainly this radical change of understanding which altered Mormon belief forever, and made it into the rather bizarre and unusual theology which it is today. In my opinion, Joseph Smith changed his mind repeatedly, left many loose ends, and did not deliver the kind of solid reliable truth from the outset that one should rightly expect from one claiming to have a direct line to God.

ADDENDUM

SABELLIANISM IN THE BOOK OF MORMON LEADS TO A REMARKABLE AND APPALLING ABSURDITY

The Book of Mormon tells the story of a massive cataclysmic purge immediately preceding the visitation of Jesus Christ to the Americas. According to the account given in 3 Nephi it is abundantly clear that this cataclysm in the New World is supposed to have occurred at precisely the same time as Jesus was being crucified in Jerusalem, half a world away. The burnings, and drownings, and earthquakes described, are all said to have happened within the space of three hours (3 Nephi 8:19)...obviously, the same three hours in which Jesus was hanging on the cross! After this upheaval, a period of total darkness covers the land. It lasts for three days....obviously, again, the same period of time in which Jesus was interred in the tomb. (3 Nephi 8:19-25 describes all this.)

As chapter 9 starts out, the people are in the midst of this period of total darkness. Suddenly the voice of Jesus Christ rends the air: he says, (v.2), "Wo, wo, wo, unto the inhabitants of this land, except they shall repent..." Then, at verses 2-14, Jesus says, "Behold that great city of Zarahemla have I burned with fire, and the inhabitants thereof, the city of Moroni have I sunk into the sea, and Moronihah have I covered with earth! He then proceeds to itemize by name at least sixteen cities which he has destroyed in this way.....it is clear that thousands have been killed. At 3 Nephi 9:15 Jesus Christ expressly identifies himself as the perpetrator of this holocaust: "Behold, I am Jesus Christ.....", etc.

A number of observations must be made about this appalling and preposterous story

1-Jesus is shown here taking upon himself the role of Yahweh, the vindictive God of the Old Testament. When Jesus, the Son, takes on the role and persona of God the Father, one has a clear indication that Joseph Smith regards Father and Son to be one and the same individual. This is an obvious illustration of Sabellianism in action.

2-Jesus Christ is portrayed as being here on the American Continent vindictively slaying the wicked, while at the very same time he is over in Jerusalem dying on the cross! Only within the framework of magical, illogical Sabellian belief could Jesus Christ be in two different places at once, and behave in two different ways like this.

3-It is preposterous, not to say repugnant, to imagine Jesus slaying the wicked even as he is praying, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

4-It is equally preposterous, not to say repugnant to imagine Jesus Christ slaying the wicked at all. Would Jesus burn cities? Cities are invariably filled with children....would Jesus burn children? On the face of it, it is really quite insane. Would that Jesus who was mocked and whipped and scourged and who bore it all with quiet dignity, be the kind of person to would simultaneously inflict savage retribution on his enemies?

5-I believe that, partially owing to the mind-numbing effect that pious jargon can have on people, very few Mormons have ever noticed the contradictions I have pointed out here.

6-I think it is equally likely that Joseph Smith himself, caught up in the momentum of writing this lurid tale, quite possibly never noticed what a spot he was putting himself into either. Either way his Sabellian convictions would have allowed him to proceed undeterred.

7-Lastly, on another note, Joseph Smith lived in a time and place which still widely regarded lightning and thunder to be manifestations of God's wrath.. Earthquakes and floods were likewise considered to be evidence of his extreme displeasure. Hopefully, civilized people today have got beyond that primitive notion. Most of us today are aware that such events are nothing more nor less than natural disasters which, like the rain, fall impartially upon the just and the unjust alike; To entertain the notion that such catastrophes are caused by divine punishment is to perpetuate a superstition which is inimical to reason, and which, unless we are careful, can encourage some to lay blame for such events back upon the victims themselves.

REFLECTIONS

It is widely held, that the figure of Jesus Christ represents a kinder, more compassionate image of God than the one represented by the stern and wrathful God of the Old Testament. For this reason alone, it is virtually impossible to regard these two individuals as being one and the same person.

A story about two fathers illustrates the gulf between these two figures.

In the Book of Genesis, when God the Father discovers his children have misbehaved, he is filled with anger. He summarily boots Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, and dumps them into a harsh and desolate country. He curses the earth to make things harder for the man, and curses the woman with pain of childbirth. He then proceeds to put an angel with a flaming sword at the door to Eden, just in case they might ever want to come home.

That's the way Yahweh handled things.

In his story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus almost seems to want to revise that account as told in Genesis. He, too, tells a story about a father and a misbehaving child. This time it's about a son who asks his father to give him his inheritance early. The son takes the money, and goes to a far country, where he proceeds to squander it in riotous living. When the money runs out, he is destitute. At length, in desperation, he turns toward home, fearing only the worst. What happens? The father, "seeing him from afar" rushes out to enfold him in his arms. This father is ready to accept him back....even before the son has had a chance to beg for forgiveness.

Jehovah, with some exceptions, represents a formidable and inaccessible god of wrath. Jesus, generally, represents a God of tolerance, peace, and forgiveness. These two figures are quite unlike one another. They represent different epochs in the moral evolution of mankind. Jesus is the new wine, Jehovah is the old bottle. Everything about the message of Jesus is peaceable; "turn the other cheek", "do good to those who abuse you", and so on. The life and behavior of Jesus Christ are thought to embody and illustrate these virtues. When Mormons imagine that it is quite acceptable to conflate Jesus with Jehovah by making them into one-and-the-same person, it is clear to me that they are making a big mistake, because any number of very bad things can happen as a result. Joseph Smith's blood-thirsty tale is a prime example of that.

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According to Sabellius, the one God who could appear in different roles, could appear in them simultaneously. The Father was likened unto the Sun which has "three manifestations; light, heat, and the orb itself....." Turner 1954, p.36 Betterson 1943, 54-55

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In some 256 references to Elohim and Jehovah and the God of the Old Testament, in the Journal of Discourses (representing sermons of many of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve), the title Jehovah is only specifically applied to Jesus once. This occurred in 1885 when the new doctrine identifying Jesus as Jehovah was just beginning to be developed. -----Jehovah as Father, The Development of the Mormon Jehovah Doctrine. by Boyd Kirkland Sunstone 9.2

The reader should also keep in mind that in the KJV Bible, in every single instance in which the word LORD appears in capital letters, that is where the word Yahweh was in the original Hebrew. (ref. The Leningrad Codex). Spelled YHWH in Hebrew, the proper name of God occurs in the Hebrew Bible more than 6,700 times! ----Anchor Bible Dictionary, Names of God in the Old Testament

"The word "Eloheim" ought to be in the plural all the way through (the Bible)." -- Joseph Smith.
Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Joseph Fielding Smith, 1938 p.372

