

An Honest Appraisal
of the
Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith
in light of
Genesis 1:1

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In April of 1844, Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church, delivered a funeral sermon for Elder King Follett, which has come to be known as his “King Follett Discourse.” In it, Smith said: “It is necessary for us to have an understanding of God himself in the beginning.”¹ Smith’s words in this message concerning “the character and being of God”² reveal the importance he placed on this subject, as well as his beliefs on the subject of God. I therefore include an extended quote here of his very words. The subject heading and the words in italic print are as they were printed in the Mormon publication, the *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*.

God An Exalted Man

I will go back to the beginning before the world was, to show what kind of being God is. What sort of a being was God in the beginning? Open your ears and hear, all ye ends of the earth, for I am going to prove it to you by the Bible, and to tell you the designs of God in relation to the human race, and why He interferes with the affairs of man.

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible,--I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form--like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked and conversed with him, as one man talks and communes with another.

In order to understand the subject of the dead, for consolation of those who mourn for the loss of their friends, it is necessary we should understand the character and being of God and how he came to be so; for I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see.³

¹ Smith, Joseph Fielding (Compiler), *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. p. 343.

² *Teachings*, p. 345.

³ *ibid.*

This quote clearly portrays the doctrine of Joseph Smith as being different than, even contrary to, the historic Christian understanding of God. Whereas Christians for millennia have understood God to be an uncreated Deity Who is Himself the creator of all things, Joseph Smith's view is that "God [is] an exalted man," as the subject heading on page 345 of *Teachings* says. "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!" Smith then proposes to tell his audience "how God came to be God."

The fact that his doctrine is radically different is something that Joseph Smith admits, and he considered the orthodox understanding a doctrine to be refuted. As he says, "We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see."

For the sake of those unfamiliar with what Joseph Smith, Jr. taught (and what by extension the Mormon Church believes today), I have quoted Smith at length, in context. And what's more, I am accurately representing what Smith believed and proclaimed from the earliest days of Mormonism to the end of his life. As I have already pointed out, Joseph Smith delivered this sermon on April 6, 1844, which was just a couple of months before his death. So this message by Smith most definitely represents the doctrine of God that he held toward the end of his life. Just two months later, in fact, Joseph Smith preached another sermon, stating outright the subject of his sermon in his introduction: "I will preach on the plurality of Gods." This one was delivered on June 16, 1844, just eleven days before his death. As he introduced his topic, Smith made the following claim.

I wish to declare I have always and in all congregations when I have preached on the subject of the Deity, it has been the plurality of Gods. It has been preached by the Elders for fifteen years.⁴

Joseph Smith therefore espoused this doctrine of God at the very end of his life. Indeed, he claimed that he had always believed in the concept of a plurality of Gods, that he had always preached on this subject. And these sermons are recorded in an official Mormon publication, the *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. This book was a compilation of Joseph Smith's "sermons and writings...selected and arranged by the [Mormon Church] Historian, Joseph Fielding Smith" (grand nephew of Joseph Smith, Jr.). As their historian points out, the impetus for this compilation came about because members of the Mormon Church wanted such a compilation of the sermons and writings of Joseph Smith, Jr., "for they look upon his utterances as coming through divine inspiration."⁵

Another work that Mormons also regard as Scriptural revelation is the *Pearl of Great Price*. The title page of this work bills it as "A selection from the revelations, translations, and narrations of Joseph Smith..." One of the books in this *PGP* is called "The Book of Abraham," which is divided into five chapters with a total of 136 verses. It was first

⁴ *Teachings*, p. 370.

⁵ *Teachings*, p. 3 (in the "Introduction" by Joseph Fielding Smith).

published serially in a Mormon periodical entitled *Times and Seasons*, March 1, 1842.⁶ Chapter four, verse one of this book says the following:

AND then the Lord said,: Let us go down. And they went down at the beginning, and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth.

Yet another work that Mormons consider Scriptural revelation is the *Doctrine and Covenants*. In its “Explanatory Introduction,” the *D&C* is described as “a collection of divine revelations and inspired declarations given for the establishment and regulation of the kingdom of God on the earth in the last days.” The *D&C* is divided into 138 “Sections,” with two “Official Declarations” following Section 138. Each section contains a word of introduction that gives the historical background (dates, places, etc.) of the alleged revelation given in that section. On July 12, 1843, Section 132 was recorded.⁷ The following verses from this Section speak of the Mormon doctrine of the exaltation of man to Godhood. (The bold print portions in the quotes below are added by me to highlight the specific portions of these long quotes pertaining to the Mormon doctrine of the exaltation of man to Godhood.)

19 And again, verily I say unto you, if a man marry a wife by my word, which is my law, and by the new and everlasting covenant, and it is sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise, by him who is anointed, unto whom I have appointed this power and the keys of this priesthood; and it shall be said unto them—Ye shall come forth in the first resurrection; and if it be after the first resurrection, in the next resurrection; and shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths—then shall it be written in the Lamb’s Book of Life, that he shall commit no murder whereby to shed innocent blood, and if ye abide in my covenant, and commit no murder whereby to shed innocent blood, it shall be done unto them in all things whatsoever my servant hath put upon them, in time, and through all eternity; and shall be of full force when they are out of the world; and **they shall pass by** the angels, and **the gods**, which are set there, **to their exaltation and glory in all things**, as hath been sealed upon their heads, which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever.

20 **Then shall they be gods**, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. **Then shall they be gods, because they have all power**, and the angels are subject to them.

⁶ See “Introductory Note” of the *Pearl of Great Price*.

⁷ See section heading of Section 132, p. 266.

29 Abraham received all things, whatsoever he received, by revelation and commandment, by my word, saith the Lord, and **hath entered into his exaltation** and sitteth upon his throne.

37 Abraham received concubines, and they bore him children; and it was accounted unto him for righteousness, because they were given unto him, and he abode in my law; as Isaac also and Jacob did none other things than that which they were commanded; and because they did none other things than that which they were commanded, **they have entered into their exaltation**, according to the promises, and sit upon thrones, **and are not angels but gods.**

In addition to the works that Mormons revere as their scriptures, there are other Mormon publications by Mormon leaders that have articulated these Mormon doctrines of exaltation and a plurality of Gods. I will quote from just one of them. A man by the name of Bruce McConkie was revered as an apostle in the Mormon Church. In 1958 (with a second edition appearing 1966), he authored an encyclopedic work on the doctrines of the Mormon Church, aptly entitled *Mormon Doctrine*. Consider the following quotes of McConkie's elucidation of the Mormon doctrine of exaltation and plurality of Gods.

God the Father is a glorified and perfected Man, a Personage of flesh and bones (D. & C. 130:22), in which tangible body an eternal spirit is housed. It is in this sense that God is a Spirit.⁸

That exaltation which the saints of all ages have so devoutly sought is *godhood* itself. Godhood is to have the character, possess the attributes, and enjoy the perfections which the Father has. It is to do what he does, have the powers resident in him, and live as he lives, having eternal increase. (D. & C. 132:17-20, 37.) It is to know him in the full and complete sense, and no one can fully know God except another exalted personage who is like him in all respects.⁹

But in addition [*to the Father, Son and Spirit, LGO*] there is an infinite number of holy personages, drawn from worlds without number, who have passed on to exaltation and are thus gods...Indeed, this doctrine of plurality of Gods is so comprehensive and glorious that it reaches out and embraces every exalted personage. Those who attain exaltation are gods.¹⁰

So, there you have it. On this subject of the plurality of Gods, and of God the Father being an exalted and glorified man, I have quoted Joseph Smith, Jr., verbatim. I have quoted him at length, supplying extended quotes so that the context may be clearly seen. I have quoted from official Mormon sources, showing the authoritative weight the "man+exaltation=god" doctrine is given today by the Mormon Church. In light of all

⁸ McConkie, Bruce R., *Mormon Doctrine*, p. 319.

⁹ McConkie, p. 321.

¹⁰ McConkie, p. 577.

these things, therefore, I have accurately represented both the teachings of Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism and the current doctrine of the Mormon Church.

Joseph Smith & Genesis 1:1

So then, I have accurately reported the fact that Joseph Smith believed and taught that “God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man.” Smith taught that, instead of orthodox Judeo-Christian view that “God was God from all eternity”, God in essence evolved, or in Smith’s words, “God came to be God.” In the quote from the *Teachings*, Smith told his audience that he would explain his unorthodox doctrine, and would do so using the Bible.

“I will go back to the beginning before the world was, to show what kind of being God is...Open your ears and hear, all ye ends of the earth, for I am going to prove it to you by the Bible...”¹¹

I will now quote and evaluate the “Biblical proof” that Joseph Smith appealed to in his “King Follett Discourse.” Smith based the foundation of his argument on Genesis 1:1. Once again, I am providing an extended quote here of his very words, and the subject heading and the words in italic print are as they were printed in the *Teachings*.

Meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures

I shall comment on the very first Hebrew word in the Bible; I will make a comment on the very first sentence of the history of creation in the Bible--*Berosheit*. I want to analyze the word. *Baith*--in, by, through, and everything else. *Rosh*--the head. *Sheit*--grammatical termination. When the inspired man wrote it, he did not put the *baith* there. An old Jew without any authority added the word; he thought it too bad to begin to talk about the head! It read first, “The head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods.” That is the true meaning of the words. *Baurau* signifies to bring forth. If you do not believe it, you do not believe the learned man of God. Learned men can teach you no more than what I have told you. *Thus the head God brought forth the Gods in the grand council.*¹²

In the above quote, the founder of Mormonism challenges everything about Genesis 1:1 as we know it. The subject heading on the page reads “Meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures.” Smith claims, “It read first, ‘The head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods.’ That is the true meaning of the words.” So Smith presents himself as the one to set right the meaning of this crucially important verse of Scripture, a verse that (according to Smith) before his time had been transmitted and translated incorrectly.

¹¹ *Teachings*, p. 345.

¹² *Teachings*, p. 348.

This is a serious charge. Though Joseph Smith did not specifically name the perpetrator of this alleged Scripture tampering, his accusation is leveled against the scribes of old that transmitted the Hebrew text, and the translators that have for centuries rendered it into English and other languages of the world. If Smith is right, then everyone else has been wrong, horribly wrong, for many centuries. Given the gravity of the charges made, one would expect Joseph Smith to back up his claim. We could then take his documentation and compare it to the documentary evidence available for the Hebrew Bible and assess the validity of this claim.

However, before we examine the documentary evidence for or against the validity of the current reading of the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1, we should start by looking at the Hebrew text as it is found in the standard editions of today. What follows is the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1. For those not familiar with the Hebrew language, it differs greatly from English (not to mention other Indo-European languages). The line consists of consonants, and the “dots and dashes” below the line are the vowels (commonly referred to as “vowel points”). To further complicate matters (from our perspective, that is), Hebrew is read from right to left, as opposed to left to right, as we read English.

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

Now, since the Hebrew characters do not even remotely resemble the characters of our English alphabet, I follow this Hebrew text with a transliteration from Hebrew to English characters. In this case, for the sake of ease of reading, I present this transliteration as reading from left to right, as is customary for us. I do not use capital letters in my transliteration, for the simple reason that the Hebrew text does not have capital letters. Beneath the transliteration is a translation into English.

b^erē'shūth *bārā' 'elōhīm 'ēth hashāmayim w^e'ēth hā'ārets*
 In *the* beginning created God the heavens and the earth.

That translation beneath the transliteration conforms to the rendering in the King James Version and most other English versions. But is it right? Is it accurate? Joseph Smith, Jr. has alleged that it is not. We turn now to an examination of Smith’s claims concerning the wording of Genesis 1:1.

b^erē'shūth

His claim is that the text in its present form has been altered by “...an old Jew without any authority...”¹³ Thus the text utilized the world over is wrong, which means that it has also been translated and interpreted incorrectly as well. Joseph Smith claims that this prefixed preposition was not originally a part of the word, that it was not written by “the inspired man” (I assume Smith was referring to Moses here). In fact, there is no documentary evidence to support that claim.

¹³ *Teachings*, p. 348.

Without going into too much detail on the structure of Hebrew grammar, prepositions are often prefixed. In other words, prepositions in Hebrew are often represented by a prefix on a word, usually by a consonant and a vowel point. In the case of *b^erē'shūth* [בְּרֵאשִׁית], the prefixed preposition is the *b^e*, the consonant *bēth* [ב] with the vowel point called *shewa* [ְ]. This *b^e* is the preposition “in”¹⁴ we find in the phrase “In the beginning...”

Joseph Smith claimed that this prefixed preposition (“the *baith*”, as he calls it) was not originally a part of the word found in the inspired text of Genesis 1:1. “When the inspired man wrote it, he did not put the *baith* there.”¹⁵ His contention was that the word originally written in the text was *rosheit*, which he rendered into English as “The head one...”¹⁶ Smith argued further that the existence of the reading *b^erē'shūth* came about because some unnamed “old Jew without any authority added the word.”¹⁷

Joseph Smith offered no documentary evidence to support his claim. He merely claimed that his contention was indeed the truth of what the Bible originally contained, and then followed his claim with the accusation, “If you do not believe it, you do not believe the learned man of God.”¹⁸ A little later in his discourse, Smith would say,

But I am learned, and know more than all the world put together. The Holy Ghost does, anyhow, and He is within me, and comprehends more than the whole world: and I will associate myself with Him.¹⁹

Clearly, then, the only evidence that Joseph Smith offered as proof of his claims was his own alleged knowledge and his claim to be a prophet. Before I move on to discuss the documentary evidence of the reading *b^erē'shūth* in the Hebrew manuscripts of Genesis 1:1, I want to address the issue of Smith’s alleged knowledge and authority here. Joseph Smith, Jr. claimed to be a prophet of God. He claimed to be a spokesman for God in his time. And for the one that has already decided to follow Joseph Smith, I suppose that that is enough.

However, for the person seeking evidence that what Smith said was true, “taking his word for it” is just not good enough. Nor should it be. Seeking the truth by means of weighing the evidence is not a sign of hardness of heart or ungodly skepticism. On the contrary: the Bible tells us to take such a path. And when the Bereans of old took this approach, they were commended by the Holy Spirit as being “more noble” for doing so.

¹⁴ Brown, Francis, Driver, S.R. & Briggs, Charles A. *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon (BDB)*, p. 88 (I-5).

¹⁵ *Teachings*, p. 348.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *Teachings*, p. 350.

These were more noble then those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readinesse of minde, and searched the Scriptures dayly, whether those things were so. Acts 17:11, KJV 1611²⁰

Prove all things: hold fast that which is good. 1 Thessalonians 5:21, KJV 1611

Beloued, beleue not euery spirit, but trie the spirits, whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. I John 4:1, KJV 1611

So to the Mormon reading these words, I would say two things. First, since you hold that the Bible is one of your “standard works”, you should not be afraid to take to heart the Scriptural admonitions and commands just mentioned. Secondly, if a doctrine or a word claimed to be prophetic is true, then it will stand the test of scrutiny. When you “prove” that word, or “try” that word, as the passages mentioned above tell you to do, then whatever is true will pass the test. Whatever does not pass the test is not true, and you should want to know that.

Now, all that having been said, let’s return to the matter of seeking documentary evidence to support Joseph Smith’s claim. Smith said that Genesis 1:1 originally read *rosheit*, “The head one...” The truth of the matter is, Smith offered no documentary evidence to support his claim. He did not present any documentary evidence to support his claim because there is no evidence to support his claim. No such manuscript evidence exists.

The *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (*BHS*) is an edition of the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph, both of the Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft (“German Bible Society”). It contains the reading *b^re^r’shūh*. Furthermore, it lists neither Smith’s claimed variant *rosheit* nor any other variant reading of the Hebrew text.²¹

The *BHS* does list in its critical apparatus, not a variant reading, but a transliteration from Origen’s *Hexapla*. Around the year 240 AD, the Alexandrian theologian Origen compiled a massive (some 6,500 pages) comparative Bible. In six parallel columns Origen set forth

²⁰ The quotations of Scripture in this essay noted “KJV 1611” are taken from *The Holy Bible, 1611 Edition, King James Version*, a word-for-word reprint published by Thomas Nelson Publishers. This reprint of a 392-year-old translation preserves the orthographic peculiarities of the early Modern English. I have also chosen to reproduce the gothic black letter font that was originally used. I have made this choice because the Mormon Church is a King James Only religion. They revere other (Mormon) works as being on a par with (or, to be truthful, greater than) the Bible, but they do refer to the Bible as well. And when they do, they use the KJV to the exclusion of all other English versions. With advocates of a King James Only doctrine, I typically refer to the 1611 first edition. If one advocates the exclusive use of the KJV, he should be consistent and refer to the original edition of that version, which differs from its modern counterpart in many details.

²¹ Elliger, Karl and Wilhelm Rudolph, Wilhelm (Editors), *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (*BHS*), p. 1.

the Hebrew text (the first column), a transliteration of the Hebrew words into Greek characters (column two) and four editions of the Bible in Greek (including Origen's own revision of the Septuagint text in column five).²² Origen's Greek transliteration of *b^erē'shūth* [בְּרֵאשִׁית] in Genesis 1:1 is *brēsith* [βρησιθ].²³ This transliteration is quite accurate. It captures the essence of the Hebrew consonants and vowel points quite well. Without going into those details,²⁴ this transliteration does corroborate the reading *b^erē'shūth* found in the Masoretic text.

So there is no manuscript evidence supporting Joseph Smith's claim that Genesis 1:1 originally read *rosheit*. The verifiably correct reading in this verse is *b^erē'shūth*. And as I have already pointed out, the *b^e* of *b^erē'shūth* is a prefixed preposition, meaning "in." The word *rē'shūth* is found twenty-eight times in the Hebrew Scriptures (*b^erē'shūth* is found five times). And *rē'shūth* has the primary meaning of "first or beginning of a series";²⁵ "first phase, step, or element in course of events."²⁶ It is derived from the root word *ro'sh* [רִשׁ], the primary meaning of which is "head." However, since the reading in Genesis 1:1 is *b^erē'shūth* and not *ro'sh*, it is rightfully translated "In the beginning..."

Furthermore, the testimony of ancient versions of Genesis 1:1 supports the reading *b^erē'shūth* and the translation "In *the* beginning..." The ancient translation of this verse from Hebrew to Greek (commonly known as the Septuagint) is *En archē* [Ἐν ἀρχῇ], which in English is nothing other than "In the beginning..."²⁷ This is also the exact way that the Gospel of John begins: *En archē*, "In *the* beginning..."

Other ancient versions also support the reading *b^erē'shūth* and the translation "In *the* beginning..." The Samaritan Pentateuch has the reading *bârâshūth*.²⁸ And the wording of the Syriac translation of the Bible known as the Peshitta also supports the reading in the Hebrew *b^erē'shūth*. George Lamsa's translation into English of Genesis 1:1 from the Peshitta is "God created the heavens and the earth in the very beginning."²⁹

Jerome's Latin Vulgate reads "*In principio...*" Translated into English, that is "In *the* beginning..." And closely related to the Latin is the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Spanish. For the last four hundred years, Spanish translations of this verse have read

²² Brotzman, Ellis R. *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction*, pgs. 76-77; Würthwein, Ernst (translated by Erroll F. Rhodes), *The Text of the Old Testament*, p. 55.

²³ *BHS*, p. 1.

²⁴ If you are interested in an analytical comparison of the Hebrew word בְּרֵאשִׁית (*b^erē'shūth*) and Origen's Greek transliteration βρησιθ (*brēsith*), see the "Appendix" for this analysis.

²⁵ See William White's article in the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (*TWOT*, edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr. & Bruce K. Waltke), Vol. II, p. 826.

²⁶ *BDB*, p. 912.

²⁷ Brenton, Sir Lancelot C. L. *The Septuagint Version: Greek and English*, p. 1.

²⁸ *BHS*, p. 1.

²⁹ Lamsa, George M. *The Holy Bible from Ancient Esatern Manuscripts, Containing the Old and New Testaments translated from the Peshitta, The Authorized Bible of the Church in the East*.

much like their Latin forebear: “*En el principio...*” Of course, the translation of this into English is, not surprisingly, “In the beginning...”

In addition to ancient versions, I checked to see if there has ever been an English version of the Bible that rendered the first Hebrew word of Genesis 1:1 as “The head one...” instead of “In the beginning...” The testimony of English translations through the last four centuries is significant, particularly in light of how these translations were made. In most cases, a team of scholars, experts in Biblical languages, worked together on a translation committee. Therefore, to read and compare translations is to avail oneself of the combined scholarship of many men for the past four and a half centuries.

So, in my research, I consulted forty-five translations of Genesis 1:1, ranging in dates from 1537 (Matthew’s Bible) to 2003 (World English Bible). Forty of these translations I have in my library; the other five I accessed via the Internet.³⁰

Four of those translations rendered *b^erē’shūth* into English as “When God began...” One of the forty-five rendered it “At the first...” The rest were unanimous in their testimony: *b^erē’shūth* is to be translated as “In the beginning...” All forty-five of these English versions have one thing in common: not one of them agreed with Joseph Smith, Jr. that the correct rendering of *b^erē’shūth* is “The head one...” No English translator in the last four and a half centuries has agreed with Joseph Smith’s version of Genesis 1:1.

In light of all these facts concerning the first word of the first verse of the Bible, Joseph Smith’s rendering “The head one...” is just plain wrong. It has no basis in fact. The correct reading of the Hebrew text is *b^erē’shūth*, and the correct translation of that Hebrew word is “In *the* beginning...”

bārā’

The next word in the verse in Hebrew is *bārā’* [אָרָא]. Here again, Joseph Smith contends that the Hebrew word means something different than is usually understood. He claims that “*Baurau* signifies to bring forth.” I won’t make an issue of his unusual transliteration of אָרָא (*bārā’*) as “*Baurau*.”³¹ The important issue here is its meaning, which he contends is “to bring forth.” Smith goes on to say,

Now, the word create came from the word *baurau* [sic] which does not mean to create out of nothing; it means to organize; the same as a man would organize materials and build a ship.³²

In this one sermon, Joseph Smith gave two different definitions for the Hebrew term *bārā’*. On the one hand, he claimed that it means, “to bring forth.” And, then, just a few minutes later, he claimed that *bārā’* means, “to organize.” However, we know that Smith

³⁰ See the Bibliography for the listing of these forty-five translations of the Bible in English.

³¹ *Teachings*, p. 348.

³² *Teachings*, p. 350.

preferred his own suggested meaning of “brought forth” in his own personal rendering of Genesis 1:1 (i.e., “The head one of the Gods **brought forth...**”).³³

We have already established that his rendering of *b^erē’shūh* as “The head one...” is woefully inaccurate. As I considered the translation of the next word in the Hebrew verse (*bārā’*), I wondered if there has ever been a translation of the English Bible that rendered Genesis 1:1 *bārā’* as “brought forth...”

So I turned again to the forty-five translations of Genesis 1:1 that I had consulted earlier. Forty of those translations rendered *bārā’* into English as “create” or “created.” Three chose the word “made”, one chose “formed”, and one decided upon “In the beginning of God’s **preparing...**” However, they all have one thing in common: not one out of the forty-five chose either the rendering “brought forth” or “organized.” Once again, the international scholarship of the last four centuries testifies against the accuracy of Joseph Smith’s renderings. No one in the last four centuries has agreed with Joseph Smith’s version of Genesis 1:1.

Of course, that last statement would be more accurate if I said “No one in the last four centuries *outside of the Mormon Church* has agreed with Joseph Smith’s version of Genesis 1:1.” The conclusion is obvious. An analysis of the Biblical facts pertaining to the first verse of the Bible does not lead you to the opinion that Smith’s contention is correct: blind faith in his religion does.

Furthermore, not only do English translations not follow Joseph Smith’s rendering, but there is yet more evidence against his position. Standard lexicons do not support Smith’s preferred definitions of “brought forth” or “organized.” In my search for the definition of the Hebrew word *bārā’*, I consulted the following lexicons: *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (the Tregelles translation); *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon (BDB)*; and the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT)*. These three lexicons have represented a high standard of scholarship in lexical research in Hebrew and Aramaic for the last century and a half. And not one of them lists either of Smith’s preferred definitions.

The closest any one of the three lexicons gets to either one of Joseph Smith’s so-called definitions is found in Thomas E. McComiskey’s article on this Hebrew verb found in the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT)*. In this lexicon, McComiskey states that

The word also possesses the meaning of “bringing into existence” in several passages (Isa 43:1; Ezek 21:30 [H 35]; Ezek 28:13, 15).³⁴

The fact that this word *bārā’* can have the meaning of “bringing into existence” in the passages cited by McComiskey is not a corroboration of Joseph Smith’s proposed definition “bring forth.” The phrase “bringing into existence” is to be taken in the same

³³ *Teachings*, p. 348.

³⁴ *TWOT*, Vol. I, p. 127.

sense as “created,” as is evidenced by the Scripture references McComiskey cited (Isaiah 43:1, et. al.).

Smith’s application of his own professed definition of “bring forth” is “The head one of the Gods **brought forth** the Gods.” He elaborates on that rendering just moments later in his sermon by saying “In the beginning, the head of the **Gods called a council** of the Gods; and **they came together**...” (Emphasis mine.)³⁵

In addition to this, Joseph Smith made similar statements in the sermon he preached just two months later (“The Plurality of Gods” June 16, 1844). “*Baurau* [sic; *bārā*] signifies to bring forth...It read first, ‘In the beginning the head of the Gods brought forth the Gods,’ or, as others have translated it, ‘The head of the Gods called the Gods together.’”³⁶

It is interesting that in both of his sermons Smith employs both the rendering “In the beginning” and “the head” in his proposed translation of Genesis 1:1. One minute he says that the rendering “In the beginning” was inaccurate, and the next minute he is using the phrase as part of his proposed translation. Obviously, Joseph Smith preached some inconsistencies here. However, we are now dealing with his rendering of *bārā*, and his contention that the word means to “bring forth” or call together, as in a council. And as I have said, the Hebrew lexicons just don’t support such a definition.

So how do these lexicons define the Hebrew word *bārā*? All three are unanimous in giving the primary meaning of this root word in the Qal verbal stem as “to create.”³⁷ For more detail on this word, let’s consult McComiskey once again.

The root *bārā*’ has the basic meaning “to create.” It differs from *yāšar* “to fashion” in that the latter primarily emphasizes the shaping of an object while *bārā*’ emphasizes the initiation of the object...

The word is used in the Qal only of God’s activity and is thus a purely theological term. This distinctive use of the word is especially appropriate to the concept of creation by divine fiat.

The root *bārā*’ denotes the concept of “initiating something new” in a number of passages. In Isa 41:20 it is used of the changes that will take place in the Restoration when God effects that which is new and different. It is used of the creation of new things (*ḥādāshôt*) in Isa 48:6-7 and the creation of the new heavens and the new earth (Isa 65:17). Marvels never seen before are described by this word (Exo 34:10), and Jeremiah uses the term of a fundamental change that will take place in the natural order (Jer 31:22). The Psalmist prayed that God would create in him a clean heart

³⁵ *Teachings*, p. 349.

³⁶ *Teachings*, p. 371.

³⁷ Gesenius, H.W.F. *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*. Translated by Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, p. 138; *BDB*, p. 135; See Thomas E. McComiskey’s article in the *TWOT*, Vol. I, p. 127.

(Psa 51:10 [H 12]) and coupled this with the petition that God would put a new spirit within him (See also Num 16:30; Isa 4:5; Isa 65:18)...

The limitation of this word to divine activity indicates that the area of meaning delineated by the root falls outside the sphere of human ability. Since the word never occurs with the object of the material, and since the primary emphasis of the word is on the newness of the created object, the word lends itself well to the concept of creation *ex nihilo*, although that concept is not necessarily inherent within the meaning of the word.³⁸

All right, let's review. All three of the lexicons cited emphasize the fact that *bārā'* is used in the Qal verbal stem to refer to God's creative activity. Indeed, in this verbal stem it is limited to divine activity. The root *bārā'* has the basic meaning "to create." It emphasizes, not the shaping of an object, but the initiation of the object. And while this word is not limited to Biblical applications of creation *ex nihilo* (Latin for "out of nothing"), this word more than any other used in the Hebrew Scriptures lends itself to the concept of God creating out of nothing.

This is significant. There are three other words that the Spirit of God could have inspired Moses to write if the concept of creating was not what He wanted to convey. If God had meant for Genesis 1:1 to emphasize what He had made or done, then He would have inspired Moses to write the Hebrew word *'āsāh* [עָשָׂה].³⁹ If He had intended to stress the concept of His forming or fashioning existing matter into a shape (much as would a potter), then God would have inspired the use of the word *yātsar* [צָרַךְ]. (In fact, in the form of a participle, *yātsar* is often translated "potter.")⁴⁰ If Yahweh God had intended to communicate in Genesis 1:1 the image of Himself as the architect of the created order, as the sovereign master builder, He would have directed Moses to use the word *bānāh* [בָּנָה], "to build."⁴¹

The obvious conclusion here is that God meant for the written record of His revelation of Himself to man to communicate that He created out of nothing all that exists. The time frame of this creation is specified in the sentence by the prepositional phrase "In *the* beginning..." The first two words of Genesis 1:1 in the Hebrew speaks of the beginning of the created order, the initiation of all creation. And this fact contradicts Joseph Smith's claim about the meaning of the Hebrew word *bārā'*. Joseph Smith, Jr. is wrong again. So far, he is 0 for 2.

'elōhīm

The next word in this Hebrew sentence is *'elōhīm* [אֱלֹהִים]. The King James Version (as well as the other forty-four of the forty-five translations I consulted) render this Hebrew

³⁸ *TWOT*, Vol. I, p. 127.

³⁹ *TWOT*, Vol. II, pgs. 701f.

⁴⁰ *TWOT*, Vol. I, p. 396.

⁴¹ *TWOT*, Vol. I, p. 116.

noun into English as “God.” Joseph Smith contends that it should be rendered “Gods.” In order to document Smith’s position, I will quote from his “Plurality of Gods” sermon. He actually spent more time discussing this word *’elōhīm* in this later sermon than he did in his “King Follett Discourse.” As I have done in past quotations from Smith’s sermons, words in italic print (plus one bracketed word) are given here as they were recorded in the Mormon book *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*.

Eloheim is from the word *Eloi*, God, in the singular number; and by adding the word *heim*, it renders it Gods...In the very beginning the Bible shows there is a plurality of Gods beyond the power of refutation. It is a great subject I am dwelling on. The word *Eloheim* ought to be in the plural all the way through—Gods. The heads of the Gods appointed one God for us; and when you take [that] view of the subject, it sets one free to see all the beauty, holiness and perfection of the Gods...Many men say there is one God; the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are only one God. I say that is a strange God anyhow—three in one, and one in three!⁴²

The transliteration Joseph Smith proposes (*Eloheim*) is not correct. The Hebrew word אֱלֹהִים is correctly transliterated *’elōhīm*. Furthermore, *’elōhīm* is not the plural form of “*Eloi*,” as Joseph Smith claims. There has been a long running scholarly debate as to whether *’elōhīm* is derived either from *’el* [אֵל] or *’elōah* [אֱלֹהַ].

The view that the three Hebrew terms [*’el*, *’elōah*, *’elōhīm*] come from one root is much disputed and a final verdict is lacking. Some hold that the two are distinct, deriving *’el* from the root *’wl* (strong). Others see *’elōhīm* derived from the root *’lh*, together with *’elōah*, that root meaning “fear.” Still others hold that both *’el* and *’elōhīm* come from *’elōah*.

More probable is the view that *’elōhīm* comes from *’elōah* as a unique development of the Hebrew Scriptures and represents chiefly the plurality of persons in the Trinity of the godhead (see *’elōhīm*).⁴³

Joseph Smith, Jr. claimed that *’elōhīm* is formed “by adding the word *heim*” to the word “*Eloi*.” In fact, the singular term is not *Eloi*, as Smith claimed. As the above quote from the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* shows, *’elōhīm* is in all probability derived from the singular noun *’elōah*. And the ending that forms the plural is not “*heim*”, and it is not a word, as Smith contends, but a suffix, an ending that identifies the gender and number. Most masculine Hebrew nouns have plurals that end in *īm* (the full vowel *hireq-yod* [יְ] and the consonant *mem* [מ]).⁴⁴

⁴² *Teachings*, pgs. 371-372.

⁴³ *TWOT*, Vol. I, p. 41.

⁴⁴ See Kautzsch, E. (Editor) & Cowley, A. E. (Revision of second English edition), *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, p. 241; Harrison, R. K. *Biblical Hebrew*, p. 53; Kelley, Page H. *Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Grammar*, p. 38.

So the Hebrew term *'elōhīm* is plural: it can, and does, refer to “gods.” One example of this is found in the first of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3, KJV 1611):

Thou shalt have no other gods [Hebrew, *'elōhīm*] before me.

When the term *'elōhīm* is employed in this way in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is referring to the “gods” of idolatry, as the following passage (Leviticus 19:4, KJV 1611) makes clear.

Turn ye not unto idols, nor make to your selves molten gods [Hebrew, *'elōhīm*]: I am the LORD your God.

However, this is not the only way in which the term *'elōhīm* is used in the Bible. “The term occurs in the general sense of deity some 2,570 times in Scripture.”⁴⁵ It is used as a designation or title for the one true God throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, in the verse just mentioned, Leviticus 19:4, *'elōhīm* occurs not once but twice. The first time is in reference to the “molten gods”, as I have already pointed out. However, the second time *'elōhīm* occurs is in the last phrase of the verse: “I am the LORD your **God**.” The Hebrew text of this phrase reads *'anī Yahweh 'elōhēykem* [אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם], “I am Yahweh your God.” The word *'elōhēykem* is *'elōhīm* with a suffix indicating second person masculine plural, i.e., “your God.”

This use of *'elōhīm* as a designation for Yahweh, the one true God, occurs much more frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures than the singular forms *'el* or *'elōah*. For example, *'elōhīm* is the Hebrew word consistently translated “God” in the first nine chapters of Genesis. From Genesis 1:1 through chapter 9:27, the word “God” appears in the KJV 85 times. And in all but one instance,⁴⁶ the Hebrew word translated “God” is *'elōhīm*. The first time a Hebrew word for God that is singular in number appears in Genesis is in chapter 14:18.

And Melchizedek King of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the Priest of the most high God [Hebrew, *'el*].

I have no doubt that if Joseph Smith, Jr. was alive today and preaching his plurality of Gods/exaltation theory, he would insist that “*Eloheim*” refers to a plurality of Gods. Indeed, that is just what he said 158 years ago.

In the very beginning the Bible shows there is a plurality of Gods beyond the power of refutation. It is a great subject I am dwelling on. The word *Eloheim* ought to be in the plural all the way through—Gods. The heads of the Gods appointed one God for us; and when you take [that] view of the subject, it sets one free to see all the beauty, holiness and perfection of the

⁴⁵ TWOT, Vol. I, p. 44; see also Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Jewishness and the Trinity*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Genesis 6:5, where the word translated “God” is actually *Yahweh* [יהוה].

Gods...Many men say there is one God; the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are only one God. I say that is a strange God anyhow—three in one, and one in three!⁴⁷

In his sermons, Joseph Smith offered two arguments for his position, one lexical and the other theological. He argued that the meaning of the word *'elōhīm* should be understood polytheistically, i.e., as indicating a plurality of Gods. He also argued theologically (one could even say *theoretically*) that “the heads of the Gods appointed one God for us...” In a moment, I will address this theoretical hypothesis of a council of Gods appointing one God over us. For now, I will address Smith’s lexical argument, the meaning and application of the plural term for deity, *'elōhīm*.

In his article in the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Jack B. Scott lists as the basic meaning of *'elōhīm* as “gods, God.” After indicating that this term applies to “gods” in a polytheistic, idolatrous sense, Scott goes on to address the unique use of the plural form *'elōhīm* as applying to Yahweh, the one true God.

More probable is the view that *'ēlōhîm* comes from *'ēlōah* as a unique development of the Hebrew Scriptures and represents chiefly the plurality of persons in the Trinity of the godhead (see *'ēlōhîm*).⁴⁸

A Mormon might reply, “That definition is more theological than lexical. A word is defined by its usage, and not simply by a gloss or definition given in some lexicon or dictionary.” I would basically agree with such a statement, but I would also point out that professor Scott’s definition is based upon the way *'elōhīm* is used in the Hebrew Scriptures. It may be demonstrated in a number of ways from the Scriptures that the word *'elōhīm* most often refers to the one true God, Yahweh.

'Elōhīm, as I pointed out earlier, is a masculine plural noun. However, it is not considered a true plural when used of God. This is evident from the fact that it is consistently used in the Hebrew Scriptures with singular pronouns and adjectives, even with verbs that are singular in number. The Hebrew language employs inflected forms of verbs that indicate both number and gender, and so we can speak of the number (whether singular or plural) of the verb used with this plural noun. Professor Scott discusses this phenomenon in his article in the *TWOT*.

The plural ending is usually described as a plural of majesty and not intended as a true plural when used of God. This is seen in the fact that the noun *'ēlōhîm* is consistently used with singular verb forms and with adjectives and pronouns in the singular.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *Teachings*, p. 372.

⁴⁸ *TWOT*, Vol. I, p. 41.

⁴⁹ *TWOT*, Vol. I, p. 44.

This is exactly the case with the verse we have been considering, Genesis 1:1. The verb *bārā'* in this verse is a third person masculine singular (in the Qal verbal stem), and yet its subject (*'elōhīm*) is plural. And so the translation of this verse could legitimately be rendered as “In *the* beginning He created, God, the heavens and the earth.” If this verse was supposed to be understood to refer to a plurality of gods doing the work of creating, then we would expect the verb to be plural, i.e., “they created, *the* gods...” But that is not the case with Genesis 1:1. Obviously, the singular verb used with this plural noun does not support the idea of *'elōhīm* being translated “gods.”

To this point, I have addressed Joseph Smith’s argument about the meaning of the term *'elōhīm*, and his contention that it should be translated “Gods.” However, Smith also proposed a theological argument, the notion that “the heads of the Gods appointed one God for us...”⁵⁰ At another point in his sermon, Smith addressed the issue of one God as spoken of in Scripture. He then explained his understanding the Bible’s reference to one God, even partially quoting a passage of Scripture in the process.

Paul says there are Gods many and Lords many. I want to set it forth in a plain and simple manner; but to us there is but one God—that is *pertaining to us*; and he is in all and through all.⁵¹

The phrases “gods many and lords many” and “but to us there is but one God” are indeed Biblical quotes, and quotes of Paul, as Smith said. From these words as well as his references to Genesis 1, Joseph Smith, Jr. came up with his theoretical hypothesis of a council of Gods appointing one God over us.

It is important to note that Smith limited his quotation of Paul to two short phrases out of an overall context of six verses. And what’s more, he did not cite the reference: he never told his listeners where the quote was from. And once a person goes to the reference and reads the passage for himself, it’s easy to see why Smith did not quote more of the passage or give the location of the verses in question. The two phrases Joseph Smith used are taken from 1 Corinthians 8:1-6. They are provided here in full, once again using the 1611 edition of the KJV.

1 Now as touching things offered unto idoles, wee know that wee all haue knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up: but Charitie edifieth.

2 And if any man thinke that hee knoweth any thing, hee knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.

3 But if any man loue God, the same is knowen of him.

4 As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idoles, wee know that an idole is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one.

⁵⁰ *Teachings*, p. 372.

⁵¹ *Teachings*, p. 370.

5 For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many:)

6 But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him. [1 Corinthians 8:1-6, KJV 1611]

Before taking a close look at what Paul actually said in these verses, let's consider more of what Joseph Smith, Jr. had to say about his use of these words.

Some say I do not interpret the Scripture the same way as they do. They say it means the heathen's gods. Paul says there are Gods many and Lords many; and that makes a plurality of Gods, in spite of the whims of all men. Without a revelation, I am not going to give them the knowledge of the God of heaven. You know and I testify that Paul had no allusion to the heathen gods. I have it from God, and get over it if you can. I have a witness of the Holy Ghost, and a testimony that Paul had no allusion to the heathen gods in the text.⁵²

Obviously, Smith would have contradicted his own position had he revealed the source of his quotations of Paul, or quoted him fully. Verse one identifies the topic under discussion: "things offered unto idols." Then, after contrasting love and knowledge in verses two and three, Paul goes on in verse four to address once again the issue of idols, or, to use Smith's turn of phrase, "the heathen gods." As such, it is worth quoting again Paul's words in this particular verse.

4 As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one.

Clearly, then, the issue is about idolatrous "gods," Smith's "heathen gods." Paul plainly says that an idol is nothing, following that statement with one of stark contrast: "there is none other God but one." He then follows that statement by saying in verse five that there are those "that are called gods," and it is in this context that Paul says "there be gods many, and lords many." So to the unbelievers, to the "heathen," there are many so-called "gods." But for the Christian, by way of contrast,

6 But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.

Notice, too, that Paul said nothing about one God "pertaining to us" or about "the head of the Gods appoint[ing] one God for us." Those phrases were added by Joseph Smith to make it seem like Paul's words were in support of his doctrine of a plurality of Gods. However, when Paul wrote by the inspiration of the Spirit, he said no such thing.

⁵² *Teachings*, p. 371.

So then, unless a person is hopelessly prejudiced against the plain sense of these verses (as Joseph Smith clearly was), it is impossible to miss the inference of Paul's statements of contrast to the Corinthians. Paul's reference to idols is one and the same thing as a reference to other "gods" (Smith's "heathen gods"), and, in contrast to these false gods, there is but one true God.

'ēth hashāmayim w'ēth hā'ārets

After Joseph Smith made the statements quoted above about "gods many" in 1 Corinthians 8, he turned his attention once again to Genesis 1:1. "I will show from the Hebrew Bible that I am correct, and the first word shows a plurality of Gods; and I want the apostates and learned men to come here and prove to the contrary, if they can."⁵³ He then gave his version of Genesis 1:1. "In the beginning the head of the Gods brought forth the Gods." So I turn my attention now to the last portion of the pivotally important first verse of the Bible.

The 1611 edition of the KJV renders the last part of Genesis 1:1 as "...the Heauen, and the Earth." This is a rendering of the Hebrew phrase, **'ēth hashāmayim w'ēth hā'ārets** [אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ]. In my own translation of this Hebrew phrase, I propose the literal translation to be the better rendering: "...the heavens and the earth."

The Hebrew word **'ēth** is an untranslated particle, defined as a "sign of the definite direct object, not translated in English but generally preceding and indicating the accusative."⁵⁴

The following word in Hebrew is **hashāmayim**, which is properly translated "the heavens." The **ha** portion of the word is a prefixed definite article ("the"). The word **shāmayim** is the masculine plural noun for *heaven*, or more literally, *heavens*. It is derived from "the unused singular **shāmay** [שָׁמַי]...from the root **shāmāh** [שָׁמַח]."⁵⁵

This word is sometimes used in the sense of the heavens as in "the firmament" (KJV) or "the expanse" (Hebrew, **rāqīa'** [רָקִיעַ]) of the sky, possibly "the atmosphere." For example, in Genesis 1:8, the verse begins by saying "And called God the expanse, 'Heavens'..." (**wayyiq'rā' 'elōhīm lārāqīa' shāmayim** [וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לָרָקִיעַ שָׁמַיִם]). Or, as the KJV 1611 renders it, "And God called the firmament, Heauen: and the evening and the morning were the second day."

However, it is clear that in verse one of the first chapter of Genesis, the word **hashāmayim** does not have a meaning that is limited to the atmospheric "heavens." The "heavens" in that sense were not created until the second day (see verse 8 again), after the creation spoken of in the first verse. The "heavens" mentioned in chapter 1:1 are to be

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Wigram, George V. *Englishman's Hebrew-English Concordance* (electronic edition); see also *TWOT*, Vol. I, p. 83.

⁵⁵ *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, p. 834; see also *BDB*, pgs. 1029f.; *TWOT*, Vol. II, pgs. 935f.

taken in a much more “expansive” (pun intended) sense. The meaning intended would encompass: the physical heavens, all that is above the earth (the atmosphere, the solar system, the galaxy); and would further extend “to the heavens as the very abode of God.”⁵⁶

The next word in the Hebrew Bible is *w^e’eth*. This word is a combination of two Hebrew particles. One is a prefix (*w^e*) indicating a coordinating conjunction (called in Hebrew lexicons and grammars a “waw conjunctive,” an inseparable prefix, the fundamental use of which is connecting words as the simple conjunction “and”).⁵⁷ The second word in this compound *w^e’eth* is the Hebrew word *’eth*, which, as I have already pointed out, is a particle generally not translated into English, for it merely serves as a grammatical device to mark or indicate an accusative or the definite direct object.

The last Hebrew word in Genesis 1:1 is *hā’ārets*. As I have pointed out before, the *hā* portion is the definite article “the.” As for the word *’ārets*, it is the Hebrew word for “the land, the earth.” It can refer to the whole of the earth, as opposed to a part of it; to the inhabitants of the earth; to land in the generic sense of a country or territory; or to a specific country or territory, as in “the land of Canaan” or the land of Israel (*’erets Yis^era’el* [אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל]).⁵⁸

The last phrase, “the heavens and the earth” (*’eth hashāmayim w^e’eth hā’ārets*), is a way of saying that Yahweh God created the universe. The Jews had no single word for “universe,” and so that concept was communicated by this expression.⁵⁹ This type of idiomatic expression could be viewed as being an example of either a hendiadys (an idea expressed by two nouns connected by “and”) or of a merism (a means of expressing totality through two contrasting parts).⁶⁰ In support of this understanding of the phrase “the heavens and the earth” referring to the totality of the universe is the statement by Hermann J. Austel in his article on *shāmayim* (see above): “Heaven and earth together constitute the universe (Gen 1:1).”⁶¹

The correct translation of this last phrase of Genesis 1:1 is completely different than what Joseph Smith claimed it should be. He preached in his sermons (“King Follett Discourse” & “Plurality of Gods”) that the correct rendering of this last phrase from Hebrew into

⁵⁶ *TWOT*, Vol. II, p. 935.

⁵⁷ Gesenius’ *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, p. 233; see also *BDB*, pgs. 251f.; *TWOT*, Vol. I, pgs. 229f. See Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar*, pgs. 306f.; Harrison, *Biblical Hebrew*, p. 50; Kelley, *Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Grammar*, p. 31.

⁵⁸ *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, p. 81; see also *BDB*, pgs. 75f.; *TWOT*, Vol. I, pgs. 74f.

⁵⁹ There are several instances of the Hebrew word *’ōlām* [עוֹלָם] being translated “world” in the KJV (Psalm 73:12; Ecclesiastes 3:11; Isaiah 64:3). In his article in the *TWOT*, Allan MacRae refers to this translation “world” as “suggesting the beginning of a usage that developed greatly in postbiblical times.” See *TWOT*, Vol. II, p. 672.

⁶⁰ Hamilton, Victor P. *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*, in the series *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, p. 103, n2.

⁶¹ *TWOT*, Vol. II, p. 935.

English should be either “The head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods”⁶² or “The head of the Gods called the Gods together.”⁶³ As we have seen, the meaning of the Hebrew words in this last phrase, “the heavens and the earth” (*’ēth hashāmayim w^e’ēth hā’ārets*), do not mean what Joseph Smith, Jr. said they mean. He wasn’t even close. Joseph Smith was wrong yet again about Genesis 1:1.

Conclusion

If you have read through the whole of this essay, I want to say, “Bravo!” You have shown great determination. I realize this is anything but light reading. I obviously believed in the importance of this material enough to devote the time to research and to write this detailed a piece. If you have read up to this point, then you most likely believe as I do that this issue is indeed important. In fact, it is of vital importance to Mormons in dealing with their concept of (and therefore their relationship to) God.

Joseph Smith, Jr. claimed that the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1 supported his “eternal progression” doctrine, his teaching of a “plurality of Gods.” As we have seen, the seven Hebrew words found in the first verse of Genesis read as follows.

b^erē’shīth bārā’ ’elōhīm ’ēth hashāmayim w^e’ēth hā’ārets
 In *the* beginning created God the heavens and the earth.

Joseph Smith, Jr., the founder of the Mormon religion, did not get one of these Hebrew words right. He was unorthodox (at best) in his transliterations of these Hebrew words, and his proposed definitions and translations were completely in error. He advocated the exact opposite of the actual meaning of the verse. Genesis 1:1 has been correctly understood and translated for many centuries. It speaks of the beginning of the creation of the universe, a work of creation done by Yahweh, the one true God, who already was in existence (indeed, who was and is self-existent) “in the beginning.”

And this one verse, as important as it is to a correct understanding of God and creation, is by no means the only verse of Scripture to teach these foundational truths. One could select verses from just about any book of the Bible that reveal the same truths. The following list of passages is just a small sampling of verses that affirm the tri-unity of our creator God and His creation of all things.

These are the generations of the heavens, & of the earth, when they were created; in the day that the LORD God made the earth, and the heavens. [Genesis 2:4, KJV 1611]

1 And God spake all these words, saying, 2 I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage: 3 Thou shalt have no other Gods before me. [Exodus 20:1-3, KJV 1611]

⁶² *Teachings*, p. 348.

⁶³ *Teachings*, p. 371.

For in sixe dayes the LORD made heauen and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seuenth day: wherefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day, and halowed it. [Exodus 20:11, KJV 1611]

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD. [Deuteronomy 6:4, KJV 1611]

10 Ye are my witnesse, saith the LORD, and my seruant whom I haue chosen: that ye may know and beleue me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. 11 I, euen I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no Sauiour. [Isaiah 43:10-11, KJV 1611]

6 Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel and his redeemer the LORD of hostes, I am the first, and I am the last; and besides me there is no God. 7 And who, as I, shall call, and shall declare it, and set it in order for me, since I appointed the ancient people? and the things that are comming, and shall come? let them shew unto them. 8 Feare yee not, neither be afraid: haue not I told thee from that time, and haue declared it? ye are euen my witnesse. Is there a God besides me? yea, there is no God, I know not any. [Isaiah 44:6-8, KJV 1611]

I haue made the earth, and created man upon it: I, euen my handes, haue stretched out the heauens, and all their hoste haue I commanded. [KJV Isaiah 45:12]

For thus saith the LORD that created the heauens, God himselfe that formed the earth and made it, hee hath established it, he created it not in vaine, he formed it to be inhabited, I am the LORD; and there is none else. [Isaiah 45:18, KJV 1611]

1 In the beginning was the Word, & the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 The same was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made by him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. [John 1:1-3, KJV 1611]

God that made the world, and all things therein, seeing that hee is Lord of heauen and earth, dwelleth not in Temples made with hands: [Acts 17:24, KJV 1611]

15 Who is the image of the inuisible God, the first borne of euery creature: 16 For by him were all things created that are in heauen, and that are in earth, visible and inuisible, whether they be thrones, or

dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: 17 And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. [Colossians 1:15-17, KJV 1611]

The passages above point clearly to the fact that there is, according to Biblical revelation, but one God, who is eternal and self-existing, and who created all that exists. And from those same Scriptures it is clear that this one God is not a singular, solitary person: the Bible reveals to us one God comprised of a plurality of persons, a tri-unity.

And so I say again: Joseph Smith, Jr. was completely in error as to his understanding of God in general, and as to his understanding (and his proposed translation of) Genesis 1:1 in particular. I will take that accusation a step further. Joseph Smith, Jr. was not only a false teacher; he was a false prophet.

I realize that this conclusion will be objectionable to Mormons. However, I have not made the above statement lightly; I have not hastily come to this conclusion. I believe that the Holy Spirit has given discernment in this matter. After diligently and painstakingly searching the matter out, and documenting it in these pages, I am fully convinced that Smith was a false teacher and a false prophet.

This essay has clearly demonstrated that Joseph Smith's teachings on this subject were in error. It is therefore clear that he taught false doctrine. However, Joseph Smith himself claimed a higher level of authority than simply teaching God's Word. He claimed that he was revealing long lost truths, that he was correcting the errors that millions had been guilty of for thousands of years. Smith claimed that the Holy Spirit gave him his doctrine to communicate to others. In making such a claim, the founder of Mormonism opened himself up to a greater level of judgment.

It would have been bad enough had Smith said, "I have studied this matter to the best of my abilities, and I have concluded that God was not always God, and that he is not the only God. And what's more, we can become gods ourselves."

However, Joseph Smith himself took it a step further. While he claimed that he was expounding upon the Scriptures, he also claimed to be doing much more than that. Indeed, he portrayed himself as communicating his doctrine by revelation, as though his teachings were divinely revealed to him, and he in turn was imparting them prophetically. This fact is evident from the quotations from Joseph Smith's sermons that I have given in this essay. To recap his claims:

Smith referred to his exaltation-to-godhood doctrine as "the great secret", and flatly stated that in his refuting the "idea" that "God was God from all eternity" he would "take away the veil, so that you may see."⁶⁴

⁶⁴ *Teachings*, p. 345.

He claimed that the “Holy Ghost” was the source of his “knowledge.”⁶⁵ Smith also claimed that he had “a witness of the Holy Ghost, and a testimony”⁶⁶ to the doctrine he was preaching.

He also said of his doctrine, “I have it from God, and get over it if you can.”⁶⁷

There is no question, then: Joseph Smith, Jr. claimed to be speaking prophetically when he preached his unbiblical concept of God. He claimed in no uncertain terms that he “had it from God”. He claimed to be a prophet. He claimed to be speaking God’s words to man, and yet he was completely wrong about his understanding and translation of Genesis 1:1. As I said before, he advocated the exact opposite of the actual meaning of the verse.

Therefore, Joseph Smith, Jr. was not only a false teacher; he was a false prophet. And there is a standard of judgment for those professing to speak forth directly from God. Their words must come to pass 100% of the time. But more than that, their alleged revelations must be in agreement with the words that the Holy Spirit has already spoken in the inspired Word of God.

Joseph Smith failed as a prophet. Concerning the first test of a prophet, it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the track record of his predictive claims to see if his words always came to pass. It is clear, however, that Smith failed, and failed miserably, the second test of a prophet. The words of Yahweh God spoken to the Israelites through the true prophet Moses apply in the case of Joseph Smith, Jr. Here is Deuteronomy 13:1-5.

1 If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreames, and giueth thee a signe, or a wonder:

2 And the signe or the wonder come to passe, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods (which thou hast not knowen) and let us serue them:

3 Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreames: for the LORD your God proueth you, to know whether you loue the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soule.

4 He shall walke after the LORD your God, and feare him, and keepe his commandements, and obey his voyce, and you shall serue him, and cleaue unto him.

5 And that prophet or that dreamer of dreames shall be put to death (because hee hath spoken to turne you away from the LORD your

⁶⁵ *Teachings*, p. 349.

⁶⁶ *Teachings*, p. 371.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to thrust thee out of the way which the LORD thy God commanded thee to walke in) So shalt thou put the euill away from the midst of thee. [Deuteronomy 13:1-5, KJV 1611]

If Joseph Smith had lived in the days of Moses and Joshua, and had preached that God was not always God, but “is an exalted man”, and that man could learn to become a god, he would have been brought before the judges and elders. He would have been tried and convicted of blasphemy, “because he has spoken in order to turn you away from Yahweh your God.” Smith would have been executed for blasphemy. He would have been taken outside of the city and stoned to death for proclaiming his “exaltation” doctrine.

Joseph Smith, Jr. did not know Yahweh, the true and living God of the Scriptures. He had no relationship with Him. Indeed, Smith rejected God’s revelation of Himself to mankind. He chose instead to recast God in an image more suited to his own tastes. Following Smith’s words, therefore, will not lead you to God. On the contrary, following Joseph Smith’s Mormonism will lead you away from, not to, the true God who has revealed Himself in the Scriptures.

I have written this essay with both Mormons and Christians in mind. I want to close this paper now with some specific words of admonition to those in each category.

To the Christians reading these words, I truly hope that this essay will be helpful to you. It is important for Christians to understand what Mormons believe. Mormons may refer to God, and to “the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.” On the surface of it, this may sound like they share our belief in the Trinity. As this essay points out, however, they do not share the same concept of God. Mormons use much of the same vocabulary, but it is as though they have a different dictionary. Understanding Joseph Smith’s teachings about God (and by extension the Mormon Church’s doctrine of God) is therefore crucial to beneficial discussion and effective witness.

To the Mormon reading these words, I appeal to you: examine your beliefs. To examine one’s belief system is a wise thing to do. And what’s more, it’s Biblical. As Paul said to the Corinthians,

Examine your selues, whether ye be in the faith: proue your owne selues. Know yee not your owne selues, how that Iesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? [2 Corinthians 13:5, KJV 1611]

When Paul exhorts the Corinthians to “examine” themselves, he uses a term (*peirazō* [πειράζω]) that signifies “to try to learn the nature or character of someone or something by submitting such to thorough and extensive testing.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Louw, J. P. & Nida, E. A. (Editors), *Louw-Nida Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd Edition. Electronic edition.

So what Paul asked the Corinthians of old to do, I am challenging you to do. Learn the nature or character of your religious belief system by examining it, by submitting it to a thorough and extensive testing. I pray that this material I have presented to you will be useful to that end.

Love God enough to obey this admonition. Love truth enough to follow Solomon's wise counsel: "**Buy the truth, and sell it not.**" (Proverbs 23:23, KJV 1611) Facing the prospect of being wrong can be frightening, particularly when your error is about something so fundamental as the nature and person of God. But it is also liberating. In the final analysis, a search for truth leads to freedom.

31 Then said Jesus to those Jews which beleued on him, If ye continue in my word, then are yee my disciples indeed.

32 And ye shall know the Trueth, and the Trueth shall make you free. [John 8:31-32 KJV, 1611]

Appendix: Origen's Transliteration of *b^erē'shūth*

On page 9 of this essay, I made reference to Origen's transliteration⁶⁹ of בְּרֵאשִׁית (*b^erē'shūth*), the first Hebrew word in Genesis 1:1, into Greek characters. As I said on that page, this transliteration occurs in the *Hexapla*, a massive six-column comparative Bible by this third century theologian from Alexandria, Egypt. The second column was Origen's own transliteration (into Greek characters) of the Hebrew Bible.

Concerning Origen's transliteration of the Hebrew word *b^erē'shūth* with the Greek letters βρῆσιθ (*brēsith*), the analytical comparison is as follows.

The Hebrew consonant *bēth* and the vowel point *shewa* (*b^e* [בְּ]) are represented in Origen's transliteration by the Greek letter *beta* [β], with no Greek vowel corresponding to the Hebrew vowel point *shewa* [.]. Since there is no equivalent to this Hebrew half vowel (which has an abbreviated or short sound, pronounced something like the initial *e* in *severe*) in the Greek alphabet, this omission of a vowel is an accurate transliteration of a vocal *shewa*.

The next combination of Hebrew consonant and vowel point is the *rēsh* and the *sere* [רְ]. The *rēsh* is transliterated by the corresponding Greek *rho* [ρ]. The following long vowel point *sere* [.] is represented in Greek by the long vowel *ēta* [η].

The next Hebrew consonant is an *aleph* [א]. Like the *shewa*, the aleph has no real equivalent in Greek, and so it is not represented in Origen's transliteration.

Next comes the Hebrew letter *shin* [שׁ], the closest equivalent in Greek being the Greek letter *sigma* [σ].

The Hebrew vowel following the *shin* is the *hireq-yod* [יְ], represented by the Greek letter *iota* [ι].

And finally, the Hebrew letter *tau* [ת] is not marked with a *dagesh lene*, a small dot in the middle of the letter [תּ]. This feature would make the pronunciation of this consonant a hard *t*, as in *tank*. Since it lacks this mark, the Hebrew pronunciation is *th* as in *thank*. This *th* sound is represented in Origen's transliteration by the Greek letter *theta* [θ].

⁶⁹ In this case, the letters of the Hebrew word *b^erē'shūth* were rendered into Greek (*brēsith*), almost letter for letter (i.e., *transliterated*). To *transliterate*, according to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, is "to represent or spell in the characters of another alphabet." See "transliterate." *Merriam-Webster OnLine: Collegiate Dictionary*. 2000. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary.htm> (14 August 2003).

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