

# God, Humankind, and Eternal Progression

## Brigham Young and Church Doctrine

THOMAS G. ALEXANDER

To understand Brigham Young's views of the doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is important to recognize that he spread his ideas to the Latter-day Saint people and the world at large through sermons rather than through writing.<sup>1</sup> The written versions of his sermons available now are transcriptions of his talks that were either taken in shorthand as he spoke or written as notes by those who heard the sermons. Clerks transcribed the shorthand versions, often changing

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1. Four biographies of Brigham Young include Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Newell G. Bringhurst, *Brigham Young and the Expanding American Frontier* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986); John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012); and Thomas G. Alexander, *Brigham Young and the Expansion of the Mormon Faith* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019).

Young's words. The written notes were converted to printed form by editors.<sup>2</sup>

In his talks, Brigham Young often told stories about either past events or doctrinal discussions. Scholars often use the term *myth* to refer to such stories.<sup>3</sup> Scholars view the term as a description of something that people believe and that motivates them, and so for scholars, a myth is not fiction but rather a story by which a community charts its life. A major problem with using the term is that popular usage has freighted it with such negative connotations that when average folks hear it, they immediately believe it is a synonym for *falsehood* or *fiction*. I would argue that a better term than *myth* is *story*. Moreover, I prefer to use the word *story* in the sense of the German word *Geschichte*, which means both “history” and “story.”

## ADAM AND EVE, CREATION, AND BECOMING GODS AND GODDESSES

Young told stories through which the Saints patterned their lives and beliefs. He told the story of Adam and Eve as historical characters. As Young told the story, God commissioned Adam under the name Michael to assist Christ, the Jehovah of the Hebrew Bible, to shape preexisting matter into the earth. As an immortal being, a god, according to Young, Adam brought his goddess wife, Eve, from another planet to become the father and mother of the race of humans who were to cover the earth. Acting in a protean capacity, by eating the food of the earth Adam and Eve became mortal again. As mortals, Adam and Eve could produce mortal children. If Adam, Eve, and their descendants remained faithful, they

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2. Recently, LaJean Purcell Carruth, who has made an extensive study of nineteenth-century shorthand forms such as Pitman, has returned to the original shorthand and retranscribed the talks in order to determine what Young actually said. See Lindsay Williams, “What Did Brigham Young Actually Say? Church History Series Examines Shorthand Discrepancies,” LDSLiving, August 19, 2020, <https://ldsliving.com/what-did-brigham-young-actually-say-church-history-series-examines-shorthand-discrepancies/s/93256>.
  3. See a discussion of several scholars' views on the meaning of *myth* in J. Chase Kirkham, “‘Tempered for Glory’: Brigham Young’s Cosmological Theodicy,” *Journal of Mormon History* 42, no. 1 (2016): 146–47.

could again become gods. Young taught that Adam and Eve had already reached godhood, and Adam had become the god of this earth. Young also said that Adam was the father of Jesus Christ, a doctrine that other Church leaders consider heretical.<sup>4</sup>

Young preached that millions of worlds in addition to the earth and other presently existing planets remained to be created from unorganized matter. Those members who kept their temple covenants could become the creators and founding parents of those worlds. Moreover, this process had gone on forever. He said, “There never was a time when there were not Gods and worlds, and when men were not passing through the same ordeals that we are now passing through. That course has been from all eternity, and it is and will be to all eternity.”<sup>5</sup> The temple ceremonies gave Saints the keys that provided knowledge about this future. In the temple men and women participated in endowments and sealings that prepared them, if they remained faithful, to reach this eternal goal. Young preached that the purpose of all of humankind was to become gods: “The Lord created you and me for the purpose of becoming Gods like Himself; when we have been proved in our present capacity, and been faithful with all things He puts into our possession. . . . The Lord has organized mankind for the express purpose of increasing in that intelligence and truth, which is with God, until he [a human] is capable of creating worlds on worlds, and becoming Gods, even the sons of God.”<sup>6</sup>

## BLOOD ATONEMENT

Although Young believed that human beings could eventually become gods and goddesses, he also believed that some people could never arrive

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4. Brigham Young, sermon, October 8, 1854, in *The Complete Discourses of Brigham Young*, edited by Richard S. Van Wagoner, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2009), 2:848–52 (hereinafter Young, sermon, date, in *Complete Discourses*); Kirkham, “Brigham Young’s Cosmological Theodicy,” 138–42, 147–48. (I have adopted the term *protean* from Kirkham’s essay.) For a discussion of the Adam-God doctrine, see David John Buerger, “The Adam-God Doctrine,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 (1982):14–58.
  5. Quoted in Kirkham, “Brigham Young’s Cosmological Theodicy,” 147–48.
  6. Young, sermon, August 8, 1852, in *Complete Discourses*, 1:559.

at that status. During the Mormon Reformation of 1856–57, he preached blood atonement. In a sermon on March 16, 1856, Young preached that “there is not a man or woman, who violates the covenants made with their God, that will not be required to pay the debt. The blood of Christ will never wipe that out, your own blood must atone for it; and the judgments of the Almighty will come, sooner or later, and every man and woman will have to atone for breaking their covenants.”<sup>7</sup>

Late in the 1850s, Young continued to preach doctrines that denied the cleansing effect of Christ’s Atonement. In a sermon to an elders’ conference on November 14, 1858, he condemned those who sinned with their “eyes wide open.” Members should “forsake that you know to be wrong.”

If the bosom of the Almighty was not filled with compassion and mercy this people would have been consumed before this. . . . I am ready to forgive a man or woman seventy seven times a day who sin ignorantly in the integrity of their hearts, but when men whose hearts are full of understanding give way to iniquity, run greedily after wickedness can I forgive them? Yes if the Lord will, but he cannot forgive, such offenders, the law and mercy of God are such that they who wilfully transgress must pay the debt, they, cannot be forgiven if they can, then the doctrine held by universalists are true, that the blood of Christ cleanses away unconditionally all sin, and we shall all go to heaven together. The eternal law of Jehovah is such that an angel who falls or rebels against the order of heaven, and his superior cannot be forgiven but must suffer the wrath of that superior.<sup>8</sup>

The text seems somewhat garbled, but Young contrasted the doctrine of the universalists with what he perceived as the truth that those who sin wilfully must pay the debt themselves.

By 1859, however, Young mellowed in his view. He began preaching the need for peace, and he deplored bloodshed and criminal acts. In a sermon on May 22, 1859, Young said that he recognized that his influence over the Saints was limited, but nevertheless, he reminded the members that God teaches us “to love God and our fellow creatures—to be compassionate,

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7. Young, sermon, March 16, 1856, in *Complete Discourses*, 2:1064.

8. Young, sermon, November 14, 1858, in *Complete Discourses*, 3:1450–51.

full of mercy, long-suffering, and patient to the froward and to those who are ignorant.”<sup>9</sup> He continued in his sermon by admonishing his hearers to be kind and considerate to all people and to try to help those who were discontented and prone to wayward acts.<sup>10</sup> Building on similar sentiments, he said on June 3, 1860: “I speak of those who have been in the habit of doing wrong, and thereby have lost confidence—pursue a course that will convince your brethren that you have reformed.”<sup>11</sup>

## SALVATION AND RESURRECTION

In addition to speaking on the need to reform, Young preached on the Latter-day Saint conception of salvation. Instead of believing that God relegates the dead either to heaven or hell as some Christians do or that God sends some mortals to purgatory to cleanse themselves of sin as Catholics believe, Latter-day Saints believe, Young insisted, that salvation is virtually universal. All except the select few sons of perdition will be saved in some heavenly mansion or one of the three degrees of glory. On October 29, 1855, Young said, “I know their [*sic*] is not any man who is not a son of perdition but what will eventually be redeemed and come forth from the grave and will receive a glory, and a far greater glory than they have conceived of in their hearts. They will have a glory as far as their capacity are capable of receiving, but the Sons of perdition will suffer the wrath of God while they exist, for they [blank] and seek to dethrone the Almighty and to overthrow and destroy his Kingdom.”<sup>12</sup>

Although he spoke differently on occasion, he also said that the sons of perdition would “decrease and decompose” into native elements. The revelation to Joseph Smith canonized as section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants promised a degree of glory to all, even the most wicked, except those who received a personal revelation of the Holy Ghost and “denied the Holy Spirit after having received it.” These must have the knowledge to deny “the Only Begotten Son of the Father, having crucified him unto

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9. Young, sermon, May 22, 1859, in *Complete Discourses*, 3:1459.

10. Young, sermon, May 22, 1859, in *Complete Discourses*, 3:1459–64.

11. Young, sermon, June 3, 1860, in *Complete Discourses*, 3:1585.

12. Young, funeral sermon, October 29, 1855, in *Complete Discourses*, 2:1022.

themselves and put him to an open shame” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:35; see 31–38).

If Saints faithfully kept Christ’s commandments, obtained their temple endowments and sealings, and obeyed Christ’s teachings to the end of their mortal lives, Young said they would be resurrected with bodies of spiritual matter like God’s and Christ’s. In those bodies, they would supersede the laws of the physical universe, and the refined matter of their celestial bodies would cease changing physically. Instead, he said, their celestial bodies would increase in intelligence throughout eternity. As exalted beings they would give birth to spirit children and use their power and priesthood like God and Christ to organize preexisting elements into planets. In fact, Young believed that this process began while the Saints were in mortality. If they were faithful on the earth, they could begin the process of achieving godhood here.<sup>13</sup>

## **PROGRESSION AFTER THIS LIFE, COMPOSITION AND DECOMPOSITION**

Latter-day Saint theologians and scholars have promoted various positions on whether people who have died can move from a lower degree of glory (what non-Latter-day Saints might call salvation) to a higher one and eventually reach exaltation and become gods.<sup>14</sup> Young came down solidly on the side of believing that humans can progress from one glory to a higher glory. In a sermon in October 1859, Young preached that those prepared to progress could continue their progression after death.

It is by a steady, unwavering course of daily progression that we can be prepared to enjoy the glories of the celestial kingdom with God our Father. . . . a person [who is baptized and] dies in a short time . . . is not prepared at once to enjoy a fulness of the glory promised to the faithful in the Gospel; for he must be schooled, while in the spirit, in

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13. Alexander, *Expansion of the Mormon Faith*, 209.

14. For an excellent discussion of the various points of view on this question together with bibliographical information on the topic, see Terryl L. Givens, “How Limited Is Postmortal Progression?,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 127–38.

the other departments of the house of God, passing on from truth to truth, from intelligence to intelligence, until he is prepared to again receive his body and to enter into the presence of the Father and the Son. We cannot enter into celestial glory in our present state of ignorance and mental darkness. . . . On the other hand, if we are striving with all the powers and faculties God has given us to improve upon our talents, to prepare ourselves to dwell in eternal life, and the grave receives our bodies while we are thus engaged, with what disposition will our spirits enter their next state? They will be still striving to do the things of God, only in a much greater degree—learning, increasing, growing in grace and in the knowledge of the truth.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Young believed that humans who had not prepared themselves completely on earth for the highest degree of glory—exaltation in the celestial kingdom—could progress after death in the spirit world until in the resurrection they could ascend to the highest kingdom and live eternally with the Father and the Son.

Applying his concept of composing and decomposing, Young recommended that the Saints construct the Salt Lake Temple from adobe rather than stone because he believed that stone had reached its peak of development and would decompose but that the adobe would continue to compose. He feared that stone, in the process of decomposition, would not last through the Millennium. Fortunately, the builders did not heed his counsel.<sup>16</sup>

## COSMOLOGY

In elaborating his cosmology, Young rejected the idea that scripture and revelation were the only sources of truth. He believed instead that truth might currently be located anywhere gods or humans might find it, including in other religions, science, experience, and opposites such as good and evil. He preached that if human beings expected to progress eternally, they had an obligation to search everywhere for truth.<sup>17</sup>

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15. Young, sermon, October 8, 1859, in *Complete Discourses*, 3:1512.

16. Young, sermon, October 9, 1852, in *Complete Discourses*, 1:604–5.

17. Alexander, *Expansion of the Mormon Faith*, 215.

In connection with cosmology, Young spoke on the Creation of the earth and the Fall of Adam and Eve. His beliefs were closer to those of Alfred North Whitehead and the process theologians than to such Christian fathers as Augustine and traditional Catholics and Protestants. As the Book of Mormon does, Young rejected the concept espoused by Augustine that the curse from the sin of Adam and Eve for eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil passed to all human beings as original sin.<sup>18</sup>

Young's teachings were also close to, but not precisely like, those of the earliest Christian fathers: Irenaeus (died 202 CE), Clement of Alexandria (circa 150–215 CE), and Basil the Great (330–379 CE). Believing that Adam and Eve's Fall was a progressive act that presupposed Christ's Atonement, Irenaeus wrote that Jesus Christ "did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be what He is Himself." Clement of Alexandria said, "The Word of God became man, that thou mayest learn from man how man may become God." Basil the Great insisted that humans were not just "being made like to God" but "highest of the being made God."<sup>19</sup> After drafting these thoughts in my biography of Brigham Young, I have found that Fiona and Terryl Givens had arrived independently to a similar view, and they also cited some of the earliest Christian fathers.<sup>20</sup>

Young's beliefs were similar to two biblical passages. The psalmist wrote in 82:6, "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High." Jesus cited the psalmist's phrase to defend himself as his opponents accused him of blasphemy: "Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?" (John 10:34).

Young preached that although eating the forbidden fruit might have been a minor lapse by Adam and Eve, it was also a progressive act that made possible the bearing of children and the fulfilling of the greater commandment to create physical bodies for God's spirit children. Unlike many other Christians, Latter-day Saints believe that each individual person was

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18. Kirkham, "Brigham Young's Cosmological Theodicy," 141. Alexander, *Expansion of the Mormon Faith*, 215–16.

19. As quoted in Alexander, *Expansion of the Mormon Faith*, 216.

20. See Fiona Givens and Terryl Givens, *The Christ Who Heals: How God Restored the Truth That Saves Us* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017).



a unique personality who has existed as such eternally. At some point in our eternal existence, we each became a spirit child of God destined to come to earth as a mortal being born to mortal parents. Producing mortal children was impossible for Adam and Eve in their immortal state in the Garden of Eden.

## **CONTROVERSIAL TEACHINGS AND AGENCY AND EVIL**

To understand how immortals like Adam and Eve could become mortal and have mortal children, it is necessary to understand that the motivating force in Young's preaching originated in his reinterpretation of Joseph Smith's teachings. With the possible exception of the doctrine of blood atonement, which Young essentially abandoned after 1858 and which the Church's leadership repudiated, the Adam-God theory was arguably Young's most controversial teaching. As Chase Kirkham has noted, the Adam-God theory was really the Adam-Eve-God story of a protean or changeable Adam and Eve. Joseph Smith and, after him, Brigham Young solved to the satisfaction of faithful Saints a problem that plagued traditional Christianity: How could a loving and sovereign God who made everything create the evil that had pervaded the world throughout history? The book of Job offers one solution in the Hebrew Bible: humankind simply did not know enough to understand God's purposes.

Answering the question differently, Young said God didn't create evil. Like Joseph Smith, Brigham Young believed that God was not the creator of the universe or of human spirits in the sense that traditional Christianity believed He was. He did not create the world *ex nihilo*—from nothing. He directed Christ as Jehovah and Adam—the first man—as Michael to fashion the earth from preexisting unorganized matter. Most important, He gave His creations agency, generally called free agency by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Latter-day Saints. Some continue to use the term today. Everyone could act for themselves. This agency allowed Satan—Lucifer, the devil, the adversary—and those spirits who followed

him to rebel. It also allowed humans to choose between the good offered by Christ and the evil offered by Satan.<sup>21</sup>

For the faithful, such a creation and agency allowed men and women the possibility of achieving godhood like Adam and Eve. In a statement later attributed to Lorenzo Snow but first spoken by Brigham Young while the Twelve served their mission in England, Young told Snow, “As God was, so are we now; as he now is so shall we be. Our Father,” he preached, “was once born of parents, having a father and mother the same as we have.”<sup>22</sup> Eliza R. Snow, Lorenzo’s sister and a wife to both Smith and Young, echoed this teaching for women when she wrote a poem of a Mother in Heaven, which was later set to music in “O My Father.”<sup>23</sup>

## LATTER-DAY SAINT TEMPLES

Young linked the origins of Latter-day Saint temples to the Masonic tradition of the construction of Solomon’s temple.<sup>24</sup> Young had been a Master Mason, so he understood the relationship between Church doctrine, temple rituals, and Freemasonry. In a sermon, Young taught that “in the days of Solomon, in the Temple that he built in the land of Jerusalem, there was confusion and bickering and strife, even to murder, and the very man [Hiram Abiff] that they looked to to give them the keys of life and salvation, they killed because he refused to administer the ordinances to them when they requested it; and whether they got any of them or not, this history does not say anything about.”<sup>25</sup>

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21. Kirkham, “Brigham Young’s Cosmological Theodicy,” 147–49; Alexander, *Expansion of the Mormon Faith*, 216–17.

22. Young, sermon, February 16, 1849, in *Complete Discourses*, 1:321.

23. Eliza R. Snow, “O My Father,” *Hymns*, no. 292; see verses 3–4.

24. For a scholarly discussion on the relationship between the Latter-day Saints and Masonry, see Michael W. Homer, “‘Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry’: The Relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 3 (1994): 1–113.

25. Alexander, *Expansion of the Mormon Faith*, 219. The traditional story of Hiram Abiff is different from the one Young told. The traditional story goes as follows. “The tale of Hiram Abiff as passed down in Masonic Lodges underpins the third degree. It starts with his arrival in Jerusalem, and his appointment

## PROGRESSION OF GOD

In June 1873 Young made quite explicit his views that God continued to learn and progress. In the sermon, he compared God's continued learning with his own. "I expect," he said, "to keep on learning for ever and ever, going on from exaltation to exaltation, glory to glory, power to power, ever pressing forward to greater and higher attainments, as the Gods do."<sup>26</sup>

Not all of Young's contemporary Latter-day Saint apostles agreed with his views. For instance, Young's views of a God who progressively gained knowledge conflicted with Orson Pratt's views of an omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, and unchanging God. Young told Pratt in no uncertain terms that he did not preach sound doctrine. Pratt promised Young not to teach his views, but Pratt said he had a perfect right to believe them. Nevertheless, the two engaged in numerous disputes over doctrine until Young died in 1877. After hearing one of Pratt's discourses, Young said, Pratt "drowns himself in his own philosophy. . . . [His philosophies] make me think 'O dear, granny, what a long tail our puss has got!'" Some associates recommended that Young discipline Pratt, but he refused to do so, insisting that if Pratt were chopped into pieces, "each piece would cry out, Mormonism is true."<sup>27</sup>

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by Solomon as chief architect and master of works at the construction of his temple. As the temple is nearing completion, three fellowcraft masons from the workforce ambush him as he leaves the building, demanding the secrets of a master mason. Hiram is challenged by each in turn and, at each refusal to divulge the information, his assailant strikes him with a mason's tool (differing between jurisdictions). He is injured by the first two assailants, and struck dead by the last.

"His murderers hide his body under a pile of rubble, returning at night to move the body outside the city, where they bury it in a shallow grave marked with a sprig of acacia. As the Master is missed the next day, Solomon sends out a group of fellowcraft masons to search for him. The loose acacia is accidentally discovered, and the body exhumed to be given a decent burial. The hiding place of the 'three ruffians' is also discovered, and they are brought to justice. Solomon informs his workforce that the secret word of a master mason is now lost. He replaces it with a substitute word." Wikipedia, s.v. "Hiram Abiff," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hiram\\_Abiff](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hiram_Abiff).

26. Young, sermon, June 8, 1873, in *Complete Discourses*, 5:2973.

27. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet*, 333.

Young's theology of a God who progresses in knowledge has much to recommend it, particularly against atheism. He offers a plausible alternative to such atheists as Richard Dawkins, who argued in favor of natural selection and against irreducible complexity.<sup>28</sup> As far as I know, Young never lectured on natural selection. Nevertheless, instead of contradicting natural selection, Young's conception of God who continues to learn makes completely plausible a being who uses natural selection as a means of creating species.<sup>29</sup> Such a God might learn to use natural selection in the creation process to progress from the rudimentary eye of a flatworm to the binocular eye of a human being or the complex eye of an insect.

Some atheists argue against the existence of God by pointing out that the creation and development of the earth has been extremely messy. Given the history of the earth, they cannot believe that an omniscient God could have created such a mess as natural history reveals. After all, scientists estimate that of more than five billion species, perhaps 99 percent of those that ever lived on the earth have become extinct. If, as Young believed, God gained knowledge progressively, His lack of previous knowledge offers a theological explanation for these extinctions, including such messiness as the mass extinction of the dinosaurs.<sup>30</sup>

## THE VALUE OF SCIENCE, THE SUBSTANCE OF DEATH, AND THE UNIVERSE

In May 1871 Young discoursed extensively on the earth and science. He questioned the accuracy of the Creation story in Genesis. Moreover, unlike some Latter-day Saints even today, he thought that the age of the earth was indeterminate and that it could be "millions of years" old. He said that Moses "obtained the history and traditions of the fathers, and from these picked out what he considered necessary." It does not matter, he said, "whether it is correct or not, . . . or whether he made it in six days

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28. See Richard Dawkins, *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution* (London: Bantam Press, 2009). See also Dawkins's attack on those who believe in God: Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006).

29. See Young, sermon, June 8, 1873, in *Complete Discourses*, 5:2973.

30. Daniel Simberloff, "Roundtable: A Modern Mass Extinction?," PBS, [https://pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/extinction/massex/statement\\_03.html](https://pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/extinction/massex/statement_03.html).

or in as many millions of years, [this] is and will remain a matter of speculation in the minds of men unless he gives revelation on the subject.” He said, “We differ very much with Christendom in regard to the sciences of religion. Our religion embraces all truth and every fact in existence, no matter whether in heaven, earth, or hell. A fact is a fact, all truth issues forth from the Fountain of truth, and the sciences are facts as far as men have proved them.” Young, in addressing a gentleman, said, “The Lord is one of the most scientific men that ever lived; you have no idea of the knowledge that he has with regard to the sciences.”<sup>31</sup>

As part of his cosmology, Young preached that death was a part of life and that it simply consisted of the separation of body matter from spirit matter. In his view, after the spirit leaves the body the life processes in the body cause it to decay. The body decomposes into the elements of which it was made, but as in his environmental theology, Young preached that like all elements, these still have life in them. To resolve the separation of spirit and body matter, through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, the body’s elements will rejoin each other, and the spirit will reunite with the body.<sup>32</sup>

Young also preached that our earth was not unique. Each planet, he said, had its own Adam, Eve, and Savior. Millions upon millions of planets either existed or would be built by their Adam and Savior from preexisting but unorganized matter.<sup>33</sup>

## PRIESTHOOD RESTRICTIONS

Young also preached one doctrine that plagued Latter-day Saints from 1852 when he first announced it until a revelation to President Spencer W. Kimball in 1978 opened blessings of the priesthood and the temple to all worthy members of the Church. In a speech to the Utah Territorial Legislature on January 23, 1852, Young said,

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31. Young, sermon, May 14, 1871, in *Complete Discourses*, 5:2835–36.

32. See Young, funeral sermon, December 10, 1868, in *Complete Discourses*, 5:2607–8.

33. On related topics of eternity and death, see Young, sermon, July 10, 1870, in *Complete Discourses*, 5:2760; Young, sermon, July 10, 1853, in *Complete Discourses*, 2:684–87; Young, sermon, March 23, 1856, in *Complete Discourses*, 2:1071–77 .

The African enjoys the right of receiving the first principles of the Gospel, this liberty is held out to all these servants, they enjoy the liberty of being baptized for the remission of sins, and of receiving the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands; they enjoy the privilege of living humbly before the Lord their great master, so as to enjoy the spirit of the Lord continually; in short, as far as the common comforts of life, salvation, light, truth, enjoyment, and understanding is concerned, the black African has precisely the same privilege as the white man. But they cannot hold the Priesthood, and inasmuch as they cannot bear any share in the Priesthood, they cannot bear rule, they cannot bear rule in any place until the curse is removed from them, they are a “servant of servants.”<sup>34</sup>

How Young arrived at this conclusion is unclear since a number of African Americans had held the priesthood during Joseph Smith’s time. Young thought differently in 1847 when he said race “had no bearing on an individual’s standing in the church.” By 1849, however, Young linked African Americans to the curse of Cain.<sup>35</sup>

In spite of Young’s insistence that people of African descent could not hold the priesthood, we can document at least three—Elijah Abel, Joseph T. Ball, and Q. Walker Lewis—and possibly an additional two whom Church officials ordained to the priesthood during Joseph Smith’s ministry. Joseph Ball actually served as president of the Boston branch of the Church. At present, Professor W. Paul Reeve of the University of Utah and his associates have documented an extensive number of Church members of African descent baptized between 1830 and 1930 in a project called “A Century of Black Mormons.”<sup>36</sup>

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34. Young, sermon, January 23, 1852, in *Complete Discourses*, 1:473–74; see also Lester E. Bush Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (1973): 11–68.

35. See Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 11–68; and Lester E. Bush, “Looking Back, Looking Forward: ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine’ Forty-Five Years Later,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 3 (2018): 1–27.

36. Alexander, *Expansion of the Mormon Faith*, 213; A Century of Black Mormons (website), J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, <https://exhibits.lib.utah.edu/s/century-of-black-mormons/page/welcome>.

## PURPOSE OF SUFFERING

In addition to preaching about the condition of Black Saints and talking about the creation and peopling the earth, central to Young's perspective of eternal progress was the need for suffering.<sup>37</sup> He believed that suffering on the earth helped to prepare human beings for greater lives here and in the hereafter by giving them the knowledge and experience to live in an exalted state with the gods after living a faithful mortal life. The experience gained from suffering, Young preached, adds "knowledge, understanding, power, and glory, and prepare him [a human being] to receive crowns, kingdoms, thrones, and principalities, and to be crowned in the glory with the Gods of eternity." With such knowledge and exaltation, resurrected beings would gain the power to, in Kirkham's words, "control matter" and "create planets."<sup>38</sup> Young insisted that God had previously gone through a similar experience and that this experience had prepared Him for godhood. Young thought such teaching consoled faithful members with the promise that if they endured their stressful lives on earth, they would receive exaltation and godhood in the hereafter with all its responsibilities and blessings. In these teachings he understood and elaborated Joseph Smith's teachings about the future expectations of the exaltation of faithful Latter-day Saints.<sup>39</sup>

In effect, Young had turned the suffering of the Saints on its head. Instead of being a curse, he said, enduring suffering prepared the Saints for exaltation and godhood. "Do I acknowledge the hand of the Lord in persecution?" Brigham asked rhetorically. "Yes, I do. It is one of the greatest blessings that could be conferred upon the people of God." Such suffering taught the essence of good and evil to those Saints who persevered. Suffering prepared them to become gods and goddesses who could create and rule new worlds. Through suffering, Christ descended below everything as we must. The difference between Christ's suffering and ours, Young

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37. On an extended discussion of God's concern for human suffering, see Terryl L. Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* ([Salt Lake City]: Ensign Peak, 2012).

38. Kirkham, "Brigham Young's Cosmological Theodicy," 144.

39. Alexander, *Expansion of the Mormon Faith*, 222.

taught, was that Christ's suffering atoned for the sins of all human beings. Christ was already a God, and our suffering prepares us for godhood.<sup>40</sup>

Drawing teachings from the Book of Mormon, Young said that men and women learn from opposites: good and evil, virtue and vice, faith and faithlessness. Young's belief in the value of suffering and his belief in radical free agency offered the Saints reasons to believe in a benevolent and loving God who could allow such widespread suffering through war, famine, and genocide. If suffering prepared men and women for godhood, they benefited if they endured such trials.<sup>41</sup>

Young understood and could preach on the blessings of trials and persecution, in large part, from his own experience. He had organized and participated in the winter exodus from Missouri while Joseph Smith remained imprisoned under wretched conditions in Liberty, Missouri. After the murders of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Young had contended with violence authored by Illinois militias and had led in organizing the exodus of the Saints from Nauvoo. He had directed the movement of the Saints while he brought his own families across Iowa to Winter Quarters. He had sent wagons and supplies for the poor who had insufficient means to evacuate and move. He had led the pioneer company to Utah and had worked beside the Saints to erect a settlement in Salt Lake Valley. "Time and time again," he preached, "have I left handsome property to be inherited by our enemies." Acknowledging the hand of the Lord in persecution, he called that persecution "a blessing."<sup>42</sup>

Young and the Saints endured suffering beyond the understanding of their twenty-first-century descendants. The Harvard scholar Noah Feldman wrote that the Saints "suffered greater religious persecution in its history than any other religious group in American history," and historian Gordon Wood argued that the Latter-day Saints survived as the most "persecuted religion . . . [in] American history," as Chase Kirkham has pointed out.<sup>43</sup>

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40. Alexander, *Expansion of the Mormon Faith*, 222.

41. Alexander, *Expansion of the Mormon Faith*, 222–23.

42. Alexander, *Expansion of the Mormon Faith*, 223.

43. Kirkham, "Brigham Young's Cosmological Theodicy," 142.



## BRIGHAM YOUNG’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO CHURCH DOCTRINES

In recent years a number of people have criticized Young for mistakes he made, and some have criticized him for supposedly making mistakes he did not make, such as ordering the Mountain Meadows Massacre. In a sermon in 2013, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf rightly said, “To be perfectly frank, there have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine.”<sup>44</sup> Young’s preaching of the Adam-God and blood atonement doctrines were mistakes.

On the other hand, Young taught much for which we should be grateful. He encouraged the Saints by teaching them that if they were faithful they could become gods and goddesses and create worlds from preexisting matter as our God did. He offered one way to defend a belief in God against atheism. He rejected the belief of some that the earth was only six thousand years old, and he preached that it could be millions of years old. He urged the Saints to listen to science and to accept truth wherever they found it. He told them that if they did not achieve everything necessary to reach the highest degree of the celestial kingdom here on earth, they could do so after death. Some Church members consider this doctrine heresy. I, as a fallible human being, hope that he was right. He helped members to understand the value of suffering. On both the religious and secular side, most members followed his directions, and in doing so they founded nearly 350 settlements in Utah and surrounding states during Young’s lifetime.

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44. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” *Ensign*, November 2013, 22.

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***Thomas G. Alexander** is Lemuel Hardison Redd Jr. Professor Emeritus of Western American History at Brigham Young University and author or editor of twenty-seven books and monographs and more than one hundred fifty articles. He has served as president of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association, the Mormon History Association, and the National Society of the Sons of Utah Pioneers. His honors include the Evans Biography Award, Fellow of the Utah State Historical Society, the Western History Association Honorary Life Membership, and BYU's Karl G. Maeser Distinguished Faculty Lecturer Award.*

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