

DALE CHAMBERLAIN



❧ THAT YOU MAY ❧

KNOW

WHAT YOU WORSHIP

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## CHAPTER 1

# The Case for Understanding the Attributes of God

On April 7, 1844, a mere two months before his death, Joseph Smith gave a significant sermon at the funeral of King Follett, a young elder who had been crushed to death in a well when rocks fell on him. Joseph set the stage for the sermon with the following statement:

In the first place I wish to go back to the beginning to the morn of creation. There is the starting point for us to look to in order to understand and be fully acquainted with the mind, purposes, decrees of the great Elohim who sits in yonder heavens as he did at the creation of the world. . . . If we start right, it is easy to go right all the time; but if we start wrong, we may go wrong, and it will be a hard matter to get right. . . . If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves. My first object is to go back and find out the character of the only wise and true God and what kind of a being He is.<sup>1</sup>

For Joseph Smith, to “start right” in the search for faith and a relationship with God was to find out the character of God. If our starting point regarding the character of God is wrong, it will be difficult to get anything else right.

## Faith Sufficient to Save Requires a Correct Understanding of the Attributes of God

During the winter of 1834–1835, on the upper floor of the Newel K. Whitney store in Kirtland, Ohio, the First Presidency of the Church sponsored a session of the School of Elders, which offered instruction in sacred and secular subjects. Church leadership introduced, as the sacred portion of the curriculum, seven “theological lectures,” now known as the *Lectures on Faith*.<sup>2</sup>

The authorship of these lectures has been the subject of scholarship. Many have wanted to attribute the authorship of these lectures to Joseph Smith (then twenty-nine years old) or to his supervision. Others see in the lectures evidence of the more polished writing style of the older Sidney Rigdon, then a member of the First Presidency of the Church. Whether Joseph was the author, co-author, or editor of the lectures, it is clear that he approved the content of the lectures.

The *Lectures on Faith* were part of the Doctrine and Covenants from 1835 until 1921. Although they were never recognized as canonical, they have nevertheless greatly influenced the Church.

The thrust of the instruction in the lectures is that faith is the first principle of revealed religion and the moving cause of all actions of intelligent beings. Human salvation comes only through the power generated by the exercise of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8–9).<sup>3</sup> The Third Lecture teaches that three things are necessary for any rational being to exercise faith in God unto life and salvation. “First, the idea that [God] actually exists. Secondly, a correct idea of his character, perfections, and attributes. Thirdly, an actual knowledge that the course of life which he is pursuing is in accordance with [God’s] will. For without an acquaintance of these three important facts the faith of every rational being must be imperfect and unproductive.”<sup>4</sup>

“The God of heaven, understanding most perfectly the constitution of human nature and the weakness of men, knew what was necessary to be revealed, and what ideas needed to be planted in their minds in order that they might be enabled to exercise faith in him unto eternal life.”<sup>5</sup> Without

understanding the essential attributes of God, men and women would be unable to “center on him” for fear that there should be a greater being than God, who could thwart God’s plans and promises. As a consequence, “constant doubt” would replace or weaken faith.<sup>6</sup> In short, without a correct understanding of the character of God, women and men can never develop sufficient faith for salvation.

More recently, Elder Quentin L. Cook has written:

Among the first principles lost in the Apostasy was an understanding of God the Father. It is not surprising, then, that among the first principles revealed in the Restoration was an understanding of God the Father. By priority, the first declaration of faith by Latter-day Saints is “We believe in God, the Eternal Father” (Articles of Faith 1:1).

Among all doctrines, beliefs, and principles revealed to His children, the truths related to His being and nature should stand as the preeminent focus. We acknowledge His existence and true nature in order to join with ancient believers and prophets in true worship (see Mosiah 4:9).<sup>7</sup>

Christian philosopher C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) taught that God wants His creatures to love Him:

To love Him we must know Him: and if we know Him, we shall in fact fall on our faces. If we do not, that only shows that what we are trying to love is nearest approximation to God which our thought and fantasy can attain. Yet the call is not only to prostration and awe; it is to a reflection of the Divine life, a creaturely participation in the Divine attributes which is far beyond our present desires. We are bidden to put on Christ, to become like God.<sup>8</sup>

For Lewis, to love God is to participate in the divine attributes.

## Without Revelation, a Human Will Make a God that Acts like Himself/Herself

Most of us will have at least some vague notion of what God is like. These concepts of God are often, half-baked, hard to articulate, incompatible with each other, and not based on scriptural authority. There will, nevertheless, not be a void. Humans will come up with a concept of God.

In 1831 in the revelation given as the preface to the 1833 Book of Commandments (later the Doctrine and Covenants), the Lord gave a solemn warning unto the “ends of the earth” (all people). Those who would not hear the voice of the Lord, nor the voice of His servants, would walk in their own way, “after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:11, 14, 16). Without guidance from God, there would potentially be as many gods worshipped as there are people.

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) delivered perhaps the most famous sermon ever given in America, entitled “Sinners in the hands of an angry God.” Professor R. C. Sproul (1939–2017) recast this title for the modern age as “God in the Hands of Angry Sinners.”<sup>9</sup> If believers do not develop a coherent concept of God and His attributes based on revelation, the tendency for humans is to create a god to worship that looks strangely similar to themselves, although with a few more positive attributes. Worshipping a God whose character includes false attributes or does not include essential attributes is a form of idolatry, although there may be no graven image involved. For the character of this “God,” we often replace difficult and demanding attributes, such as justice or holiness, with softer “feel good” attributes like openness, acceptance, tolerance, or an undemanding sort of love. The God, whom the current popular culture demands that all worship or be shamed, is characterized by selective malleability as it relates to the injunction to keep commandments. C. S. Lewis famously wrote that many Christians “want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, ‘liked to see young people enjoying themselves,’ and whose plan

for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, ‘a good time was had by all.’”<sup>10</sup>

## Which Attributes Should Be Included in the Correct Concept of God?

The purpose of this volume is to identify and discuss certain divine attributes that are critical for humans to understand to allow the development of saving faith. But which of all the potential characteristics must be found in their perfection in a being that can rightly be worshipped as God?

When speaking of Deity, character traits are not created equal. Some are essential. An attribute is said to be essential to a being “if and only if the loss of that property entails [requires] that that being ceases to exist. A divine attribute is a property which God could not lose and continue to be God.”<sup>11</sup> An example of such an attribute is found in the Book of Mormon. The prophet Mormon states that God is an “unchangeable being” (immutability is discussed in chapter 9), for if He could change, He would “cease to be God” (Mormon 9:19). Thus, being unchangeable is essential to the concept of God without which He cannot be God.

West Semitic peoples, including Israelites, did not develop metaphysical systems like the Greeks to describe the nature of God. Rather, their writings discuss the nature and character of God naturally in stories and poetry about Him.<sup>12</sup> Ancient prophets made no effort to create any comprehensive list of essential divine attributes or any systematic discussion of the concept of God. Theologians and philosophers have felt the need to fill this gap. They have generated lists and detailed treatments of their choices for essential divine attributes. Augustine (Algeria, 354–430 CE) included omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, incorporeality, and sovereignty as essential divine attributes. Thomas Aquinas (Italy, 1225–1274 CE) included the additional attributes of simplicity, transcendence, justice, goodness, and infinity.<sup>13</sup>

The Fourth Lateran Council (1215 CE) promulgated a statement of belief which identifies certain divine attributes:

The Holy Catholic Apostolic Roman Church believes and professes that there is one living and true God, Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, *omnipotent, eternal, immense, incomprehensible, infinite* in intellect and will and in all perfection who, being *One*, singular absolutely *simple* and *unchangeable spiritual substance*. (emphasis added)<sup>14</sup>

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not have any official theology or systematic set of propositions or explanations of its fundamental beliefs about the concept of God. The Church has been described as “atheological” in that sense. This is partly because the doctrine of continuing revelation would soon make any official theology obsolete.<sup>15</sup>

While understanding the attributes of God should involve both heart and mind, too much emphasis on theology risks displacing the critical need for experience with God and guidance of the Spirit with mere reasoning. Some preachers and theologians emphasize theology and reasoning over experience. A. W. Tozer, for example, has said, “The purpose of doctrine is to lead you to see and know God experientially, to know God for himself, for yourself. But until we know God theologically, we’re not likely to know God very well experientially.”<sup>16</sup> Joseph Smith may well have argued that until we know God experientially, we are likely to be hopelessly confused by theology. Experience should inform theology, not the reverse.

Consistent with an atheological approach, the Church has not published any official comprehensive list of divine attributes or an authoritative statement on what constitutes the concept of God. As described above, the nineteenth-century *Lectures on Faith* are as close as the Church has come to such a list. That work mentions the classical Christian attributes of omnipotence and omniscience but also briefly includes the additional attributes of justice and mercy, no respecter of persons, truth, and love.<sup>17</sup>

Twenty-eight attributes described below have all been suggested by commentators, scholars, or organizations as essential divine attributes. Clearly, there are some overlapping and contradictory concepts among

these. The brevity of the following descriptions can hide very complex ideas:

- Omnipotent—having all power
- Omniscient—having all knowledge
- Omnipresent—everywhere present at all times
- Omnibenevolent—author and possessor of all goodness, love, and grace
- Immutable—unchangeable
- Impassible—without passions or emotions
- Sovereign—absolute control and authority over the universe
- Incorporeal—without a body
- Corporeal—embodied
- Eternal—without beginning in time or end in time; timeless
- Everlasting—extending backward and forward in time for an indeterminate period
- Infinite—self-existent, without origin, immense
- Actus Purus—actuality unmixed with potentiality
- Self-sufficient—has no needs and uniquely independent
- Simple—identical to his attributes and has no component parts
- Transcendent—above, apart from, and independent of all creations
- Immanent—dwells in and is intimate with his creations
- Personal—can be related to as a person by humans
- Impersonal—does not intervene in the creation or relate to humans like a person
- Holy—absolute standard of integrity, ethical purity, and moral excellence
- Truth—cannot lie; the absolute standard of trust
- Just—absolute moral standard of doing and setting right
- Merciful—compassionate or forgiving when it is also right to exact punishment
- No respecter of persons—is not partial to any person
- Wise—absolute standard of moral and practical use of intelligence
- Social—exists in a society of other beings and loves them

- Aseity—self-existence not caused by anything, but the cause of everything but himself
- *Hesed*—lovingkindness, covenantal love

This work will briefly discuss and analyze omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, incorporeality, sovereignty, simplicity, immutability, impassability, eternal, holy, and social as candidates for essential divine attributes and certain problems associated with each. Others are mentioned in connection with these eleven. I have chosen these eleven because they are the interrelated core attributes around which Christian theologians have built their concepts of God. Many of these are said to rise or fall together. Theologian Clark Pinnock wrote, “The conventional package of attributes is tightly woven. You cannot deny one, such as impassability, without casting doubt on others, like immutability. It’s like pulling on a thread and unraveling a sweater.”<sup>18</sup>

### Relationships Between and Among Divine Attributes

To intelligently discuss an attribute of God, a declarative sentence must be made about God and that attribute. A declarative sentence states a proposition about how things are, were, or will be. It suggests a true state of affairs. For example, “God knows all things.” The word “knows” indicates that a truth is being stated about a present state of affairs in this world and other possible worlds.

Declarative statements or propositions about God must be logically coherent to be true. Jacob Neusner (1932–2016), a renowned scholar of Judaism, writes: “Integrity characterizes truth, when all things hang together and cohere. Thought, well crafted, flows like music, well conducted; compelling and inexorable from note to note. Then the connection between one thing and the next bears the aspect of self-evidence that governs throughout. In a well-ordered world, matters cohere so that all things say the same thing, and nothing disrupts to say the opposite.”<sup>19</sup>

A proposition about God is coherent and logically possible if, and only if, it does not involve a contradiction. For example, if the propositions “two plus two equals four” and “God knows all truth” are true, then the

proposition that “God knows that four minus two is two” is coherent. There is no contradiction between the three propositions. Similarly, a proposition is incoherent and thus logically impossible if, and only if, in some way, it states a contradiction.<sup>20</sup> For example, if the statements “Noah married Rachel on August 16, 2014” and “God knows all truth” are true, then the further proposition “God does not know that Noah married Rachel on August 16, 2014” is contradictory and thus incoherent.

As we look at the proposed attributes of God, we will examine whether the proposition is coherent. If an attribute is incoherent, we have to reevaluate the way we have defined that attribute, adjust the propositions about it, potentially jettison the attribute altogether, or wait for more revelation on the subject.

Since the concept of God consists of more than one essential attribute, the attributes must not contradict one another when existing in the same being. The entire package of attributes must be logically consistent.<sup>21</sup>

One divine attribute may entail (require, or necessarily involve) another. An example of this is Alma’s discussion of the attribute of justice. He seems to suggest that justice entails mercy: “Do you suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you Nay; not one whit. If so, God would cease to be God” (Alma 42:21–26). The loss of either of these attributes (justice or mercy) destroys the other.

The divine attributes have been categorized and classified in various ways. For example, divine attributes are said to be positive or negative. Positive attributes state affirmatively something that God is. The chief positive attributes include goodness (omnibenevolence), omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and truth. Negative attributes state what God is not. Some thinkers have argued that because of God’s transcendence (beyond what humans can perceive), we cannot know or say anything that he is, only what he is not.<sup>22</sup> Only by analogy with humans can we negatively say what he is not. Negative attributes include immutability (God cannot change), simplicity (God has no parts, is not composite), and timelessness (God is not a temporal being; he is not in time). C. S. Lewis wrote, “Proofs of a negative are hard to come by.”<sup>23</sup> An intriguing question is whether it is reasonable or prudent to build doctrines on negative divine

attributes—what God is not. Can faith and a relationship of oneness with God be built upon what He is not?

God's attributes can also be categorized as communicable or incommunicable. Communicable attributes can exist in God perfectly and in humans imperfectly. Such attributes include justice, mercy, goodness, and intelligence. Many Christian theologians posit that incommunicable attributes are those that can be found in God only, such as self-existence, eternity, omnipotence, and omniscience.<sup>24</sup> Consider when Christ said, "What manner of men ought ye to be. Verily I say unto you, even as I am" (3 Nephi 27:27). Which attributes did he intend to leave out because they were not communicable to you?

### The Necessary Role of Scripture in the Investigation

Job said no man "by searching" can find out God (Job 11:7–9). While rational thought and scientific observation should aid in and deepen our inquiry into the attributes of God, this kind of searching alone will not reveal the true concept of God. In 1909 the First Presidency stated, "The Lord must reveal Himself or remain unrevealed."<sup>25</sup> Searching for God must include both reasoning, and revelation.

This view contrasts with Roman Catholic teaching, which accepts the position of Thomas Aquinas that through man's faculties and reason alone, humans are capable of attaining a knowledge of God without revelation.<sup>26</sup> "Our holy mother, the church teaches that God, the first principle and last end of all things can be known with certainty from the created world by the natural light of human reason." According to Aquinas, only "a few" can come to the knowledge of God aided by philosophical science. Therefore, revelation is important for most of humanity because, according to the catechism, "there are many obstacles which prevent reason from the effective and fruitful use of this inborn faculty."<sup>27</sup>

Alma confirmed that reasoning and observations in the natural world, including the movement of the earth and the planets, "denote" or provide a sign (evidence) that there is a God. This sort of evidence has the power to cause humans to investigate further the existence and character of God

through the spirit of God, but there is no suggestion that by reason alone humans can fully understand God (Alma 30:44; Doctrine and Covenants 88:42–47; Job 12:7–10).

The Latter-day Saint view that obtaining an understanding of God comes necessarily through the revelation of God is supported by Genesis. Prior to the Fall, God revealed himself to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1:28–30; 2:16–17; 3:7–24; Moses 2:28–30; Moses 3:16–17; Moses 4:13–31). While it is clear that Eve used her substantial reasoning ability to sort out what she learned in the garden, she was not left to figure out God by reason alone. After eviction from the garden, Adam and Eve received further intelligence from God directly (Moses 5:4–5), from angelic interviews (Moses 5:6–8), and from the Holy Ghost (Moses 5:9). It appears that God considered that humans, by reason alone, could not fully understand him.

The following review and investigation of each putative divine attribute will include a critical review of some scriptural proof texts used to support the attribute. Scriptural support is necessary for correct understanding. Absent convincing scriptural support, the best theories of theologians, philosophers, and this author are speculations at best and should always be held tentatively.

## The Wildcard of Continuing Revelation

The ninth Article of Faith states that God will yet reveal many important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God. God continues to reveal himself to individuals and living prophets (Amos 3:7). The Latter-day Saint canon is not complete. We leave open the possibility that God will reveal many things about his perfections, and attributes that may require revision of our earlier conclusions. Thus, for believing members of the Church, we need to stand ready to reevaluate and modify our views and opinions in the light of additional revelation.

There are many questions about the attributes of God upon which there are no authoritative Latter-day Saint answers and no settled doctrine. Ultimately this means that there may be no adequate revelatory intelligence to enable acceptance or rejection of some propositions discussed herein.

Nevertheless, there is great value in the faithful exploration of unanswered questions, as the Prophet Joseph showed us. One benefit is a more compassionate view of fellow searchers. As we recognize gaps in revealed truth, we should become less definitive, less certain about uncertain matters, and more understanding of others.

In this chapter, I have tried to establish that the best reason to seek a grasp of the attributes of God is not informational. A primary purpose of understanding the nature of God is to develop individual faith in God that is sufficiently strong to lead us to exaltation.

Perhaps equally important, studying God's attributes will help us formulate a conception of what a personal relationship with God should be like, which will be a catalyst for deepening our desire for such a relationship. While exaltation is the destination (where we end up after this life), exaltation is also relational (with whom we end up). Because I hope to spend the eternities in a relationship with deity, I am motivated to understand and get very comfortable with what God will really be like in that relationship.

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