

NOTES AND COMMENTS

GREY MATTERS

GARY JAMES BERGERA

LAST FALL a new publication appeared at Brigham Young University, "an independent student weekly," *The Seventh East Press*. Its first stated reason for going into business was that "[t]here is no publication that puts in print issues that should be discussed among students." The efforts of *Seventh East Press* to fill this void have been quite remarkable. In addition to articles relating solely to BYU, the first few issues carried other thoughtful pieces on the involvement of Mormons on both sides of the Central American conflicts, the Mormon history "underground," Fundamentalism, the development of garments and the abandonment of the proposed new church hymnal. Lengthy excerpts have been carried from B. H. Roberts' unpublished *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, as well as a detailed listing of changes in the latest edition of the *Book of Mormon*. The first in-depth reporting on Apostle Packer's assault on the "new Mormon history" appeared in *The Seventh East Press*, as well as the only detailed coverage of historian Michael Quinn's address in response. Other talks of particular interest to students have been highlighted, and interviews are carried in most issues.

Among the regular features, the *Press* has carried a column initially by Gary Bergera called "Grey Matters." This column looks at "official doctrine" in some controversial areas. Among the subjects discussed: sex education, human sexuality, the Adam-God doctrine, evolution and eternal progression. Two of Bergera's columns are reprinted below.

GARY BERGERA will graduate this August from BYU in Public Administration. He will enter the University of Utah in September to begin a master's program in history.

The following articles are reprinted with the permission of *The Seventh East Press*, Box 7223, University Station, Provo, Utah 84602. These columns appeared in the 3 November 1981 and 28 October 1981 editions.

Does God Progress in Knowledge?

Sometime try asking a group of otherwise sedate Mormons the following two seemingly contradictory questions: Does God know everything that can be known? and Does God continue to progress in knowledge? The often ensuing confusion and occasionally heated disagreement attest to the unsettled status of our understanding of the nature of the Lord's "omniscience." There are those members today who passionately embrace Orson Pratt's belief of 130 years ago that the "Father and the Son do not progress in knowledge and wisdom, because they already know all things past, present, and to come" (*The Seer*, p. 117, par. 96). Others, with equal force and feeling, find faith in Brigham Young's declaration, "According to (some men's) theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power, but the God I serve is progressing eternally, and so are his children" (*Journal of Discourses* 11:286).

Scriptural literalists point to various references throughout the Standard Works in support of their contention that, in the words of Elder Joseph Fielding Smith, "I believe that *God knows all things and that his understanding is perfect, not 'relative'*" (*Doctrines of Salvation* 1:8, emphasis in original). They note, for example, 1 Nephi 9:20 ("he knoweth all things, and there is not anything save he knows it") and D & C 38:1-2 ("the same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes"). The writer of these and related verses, they believe, is to be taken at his word: that whatever is capable of being known, is known absolutely by God; that there is nothing he does not know.

Four factors, however, prevent the unqualified acceptance of the literalists' absolutist interpretations. First, while these and other scriptural references would seem to indicate that God has ceased to progress in knowledge, the exact nature of this knowledge possessed is unclear. He has "received a fulness of truth, yea, even of all truth" (D & C 93:26), but truth in what sense? Truth, meaning a "knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come" (D & C 93:24)? Truth, meaning "light" and "intelligence"

(D & C 93:36)? Or truth, meaning an absolute foreknowledge of all acts past, present, and future (D & C 130:7)? And a fulness in what sense? A sequential acquisition, line upon line? Or an innate characteristic of God as testator and revelator of truth? “[H]e has all power, all wisdom, and all understanding” (Alma 26:35) because “He comprehendeth all things,” that is, that “all things are before him, and all things are round about him; and he is above all things, and in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things, and all things are by him, and of him, even God, for ever and ever” (D & C 88:41). Thus, it appears that the Lord knows, or comprehends (i.e., encompasses), all things by virtue of his attendant glory, or light, which “preceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space—the light which is in all things . . . by which all things are governed, even the power of God” (D & C 88:12–13). But as to whether or not he continues to progress in knowledge, that is, to advance from one principle of perfection to another, discovering perhaps in the process things which he did not “know” previously, the Standard Works are mute.

Second, the Church institutionally has declared that the notion that God’s infinite knowledge precludes him from progressing further in knowledge is not simply a doctrine or teaching of the Church, but it is false. In 1860, the First Presidency, then composed of Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Daniel H. Wells, publicly took issue with several teachings and doctrinal theories being advanced by Elder Orson Pratt. Prominent among Pratt’s questionable ideas was his above mentioned belief that the Father and the Son do not progress in knowledge. Specifically citing this and other points, the First Presidency officially observed, “‘It is not true’” (*Messages of the First Presidency* II:222–223). Their statement has never been modified by ensuing First Presidency declarations.

Third, the prevailing view of the majority of Church authorities until very recently has been that eternal progression, in its fullest expression, entails, among other things, eternal progression in and of knowledge. Though admittedly equivocal, the Prophet Joseph seemed to be implying that God’s progression includes the eternal acquisition of knowledge when he announced, “All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement and improvement. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge” (King Follett Sermon). Reference to Brigham Young’s strong feelings has already been made. Elder Wilford Woodruff believed, “God himself is still increasing and progressing in knowledge, power and dominion, and will do so, worlds without end. It is just so with us” (*Journal of Discourses* 6:120).

In this century, President Lorenzo Snow taught, “Whatever changes may arise, whatever worlds may be made or pass away, our identity will always remain the same; and we will continue on improving, advancing and increasing in wisdom, intelligence, power and dominion, worlds without end” (*Conference Reports*, April 1901, p. 2). President B. H. Roberts asked, “[I]s it too bold a thought, that with this progress, even for the Mightiest, new thoughts and new vistas may appear, inviting to new adventures and enter-

prises that will yield new experiences, advancement and enlargement even for the Most High" (*Seventy's Course in Theology*, "Atonement," pp. 69–70). "Throughout eternal life," Elder John A. Widtsoe wrote, "increasing knowledge is attained, and with increasing knowledge comes greater adaptation to law, and in the end an increasingly greater joy" (*A Rational Theology*, 1915, pps. 30–31). Finally, Elder Hugh B. Brown noted, "[T]he time will not come when I or any other man will arrive at a point in knowledge, experience or understanding beyond which we cannot go" (*Continuing the Quest*, p. 4).

Fourth, a belief in the absolute omniscience of God is one of the fundamental underpinnings in the adoration of a Deity foreign to latter-day theology. In other words, and without entering into a detailed exposition of mainstream Catholic and Protestant philosophy, infinite and absolute omniscience necessitates a being with which the vast majority of members would experience considerable discomfort.

The issue of God's progression in knowledge is far from resolved in either the Standard Works or in the writings and sermons of latter-day prophets and apostles. Not surprisingly, then, the two questions posed at the beginning of this column will likely continue to elicit differences of opinion mixed with uncertainty as to the nature of divine omniscience. Perhaps the very fact that the issue is open to such discussion attests to, at least, our own progression in knowledge.

Is There Progression Among the Eternal Kingdoms?

The Standard Works offer uncertain insight as to whether or not eternal progression will be possible as it is applied to passage from one degree of glory to another. While Doctrine and Covenants 76:112 does seem to suggest that for those of the telestial kingdom, at least, eventual communion with the Father and the Son will not be possible, "worlds without end," such a conclusion may be challenged. For example, there is no explicit provision that inhabitants of the telestial kingdom will not, at some point, have access to the blessings of either the terrestrial or even some part of the celestial kingdoms. Additionally, one of Joseph Smith's earliest revelations, D & C 19, received March 1830, one month before the formal organization of the Church, clearly redefines the terms "endless" and "eternal." They are no longer descriptions of time, but rather are synonyms for the noun "God." Taken in conjunction with Joseph's revision of Genesis, the Father declares his work and glory to be that of bringing to pass the immortality and eternal (i.e., God's) life of man" (Moses 1:39). Thus, the indication is that the Father's plan might extend to all his children the distinct possibility of eventually attaining the life he has come to enjoy.

Whatever the outcome, the Church officially embraces no position as to progression from one kingdom of glory to another. In 1952 and, again, in 1965, the First Presidency authorized their secretary to respond to such a question in virtually identical language: "The Brethren direct me to say that

the Church has never announced a definite doctrine upon this point. Some of the Brethren have held the view that it was possible in the course of progression to advance from one glory to another, invoking the principle of eternal progression; others of the Brethren have taken the opposite view. But as stated, the Church has never announced a definite doctrine on this point."

That differences of opinion exist among several of the general authorities on this topic is evident from a cursory overview of their statements. Brigham Young held, for example, that "none would inherit this Earth when it became celestial and translated into the presence of God but those who would be crowned as Gods . . . all others would have to inherit another kingdom . . . [yet] they would eventually have the privilege of proving themselves worthy and advancing to a celestial kingdom but it would be a slow process" (Wilford Woodruff Journal, 5 August 1855.) Wilford Woodruff believed, "If there was a point where man in his progression could not proceed any further, the very idea would throw a gloom over every intelligent creature" (*Journal of Discourses*, 6:120).

In late 1910, President Joseph F. Smith apparently sanctioned the view that at least some form of progression would be possible: "[O]nce a person enters these glories there will be eternal progress in the line of each of these particular glories, but . . . the privilege of passing from one to another (*though this may be possible for especially gifted and faithful characters*) is not provided for" (*Improvement Era* 14) [November 1910]:87, emphasis added). Apostle Melvin J. Ballard, however, disagreed. "Those whose lives have entitled them to terrestrial glory," he maintained, "can never gain celestial glory. One who gains possession of the lowest degree of the telestial glory may ultimately arise to the highest degree of that glory, but no provision has been made for promotion from one glory to another" ("Three Degrees of Glory," discourse delivered in the Ogden Tabernacle, 22 September 1922). Elder Ballard's feelings were later shared and echoed by Elders Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie. "It has been asked if it is possible for one who inherits the telestial glory to advance in time to the celestial glory?" Elder Smith posited. "The answer to this question," he continued, "is, *No!*" (*Doctrines of Salvation* II:31, emphasis in original). Elder McConkie forcefully remarked, "There are those who say that there is progression from one kingdom to another in the eternal world. Or if not that, lower kingdoms eventually progress to where higher kingdoms once were. This is worse than false. It is an evil and pernicious doctrine" ("Seven Deadly Heresies", 1 June 1980, unedited).

Yet these are not the only views espoused by ranking Church authorities. Reference to the First Presidency's disclaimers has already been made. In early 1960, President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., admitted, "I am not a strict constructionalist, believing that we seal our eternal progress by what we do here. It is my belief that God will save all of His children that he can; and while, if we live unrighteously here, we shall not go to the other side in the same status, so to speak, as those who lived righteously; nevertheless, the unrighteous will have their chance, and in the eons of the eternities that are to follow, they, too, may climb to the destinies to which they who are righteous

and serve God, have climbed to those eternities that are to come" (*Church News*, week ending 23 April 1960, p. 3).

The Church's determined reluctance to endorse either view is evidenced by the changes in wording that appeared in successive editions of James E. Talmage's *The Articles of Faith*. Originally, Talmage had written,

It is reasonable to believe, in the absence of direct revelation by which alone absolute knowledge of the matter could be acquired, that in accordance with God's plan of eternal progression, advancement from grade to grade within any kingdom, and from kingdom to kingdom, will be provided for. But if the recipients of a lower glory be enabled to advance, surely the intelligences of higher rank will not be stopped in their progress; and thus we may conclude, that degrees and grades will ever characterize the kingdoms of our God. Eternity is progressive; perfection is relative; the essential feature of God's living purpose is its associated power of eternal increase. (1899 edition, pps. 420-421).

In 1917, the words "within any kingdom, and from kingdom to kingdom," were replaced by the words "within each of the three specified kingdoms." Finally, in 1924, this paragraph was changed even further. The words "from grade to grade" and "But if the recipients of a lower glory be enabled to advance, surely the intelligences of higher rank shall not be stopped in their progress; and" were entirely deleted. In place of the second set the following was added: "though as to possible progress from one kingdom to another the scriptures make no positive affirmation. Eternal advancement along different lines is conceivable." The most recent edition of *The Articles of Faith* reads identically to the 1924 edition. No mention of the changes incorporated into the text, however, is offered.

Neither explicitly treated in the Standard Works nor discussed by the First Presidency, except to disavow any position as being that accepted by the Church, the notion of progression among the kingdoms is an open question. Opinions expressed, either in favor of or against, should no more be used to determine orthodoxy than does the colors of one's clothes.