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Usage of the Title Elohim

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Pictured here is the word elohim *as it would appear in the Hebrew Bible.* (Image courtesy of Photos5.com)

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Since the word *elohim* never occurs in any of our English Latter-day Saint scriptures [1] (though it appears more than twenty-six hundred times in the Hebrew text), it may seem unusual that Latter-day Saints use the term *elohim* at all. Yet use it we do.

For nearly one hundred years now, Latter-day Saints have understood and more or less used *elohim* as "the name-title of God the Eternal Father." [2] Yet historically they have not always used the term in this strict sense. In the nineteenth century, Latter-day Saint literature employed *elohim* in a wider range of meanings than today, some of which might seem foreign to contemporary ears. Even more remarkable is that early Latter-day Saint usage of the

term mirrors in many respects its usage in the Hebrew Bible. In this essay we explore how *elohim* is used in the Hebrew Bible and sample how the early Latter-day Saints used the term.

In 1916 the First Presidency, in an essay entitled "The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve," issued a statement concerning the nature of the Godhead. The statement, published in the *Improvement Era*, set forth the official position of the Church on the Father and the Son. "God the Eternal Father, whom we designate by the exalted name-title 'Elohim,' is the literal Parent of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and of the spirits of the human race." [3] The statement also made it clear that "Christ in His preexistent, antemortal, or unembodied state . . . was known as Jehovah." [4] This is how Latter-day Saints use these terms in the Church today.

With this statement, a clear distinction was made between the titles *elohim* and Jehovah as they apply to members of the Godhead. Today *elohim* and Jehovah are often used to differentiate for the listener or reader whether the reference is to the Father or to the Son. This unique separation of terms (which also separates the Latter-day Saints from all other groups who accept the Bible as scripture) does not find its roots in the Hebrew Bible or its English translations, because the biblical evidence is at best ambiguous and at worst nonexistent. After all, Latter-day Saint usage of these and other theological terms stems from the words of latter-day prophets, not the Bible. Therefore, we now turn to a brief summary of what can be determined about how the term *elohim* is used in the Hebrew Bible.

Hebrew Bible Usage of *Elohim*

Because English translations of the Old Testament are of little use, [5] clarity about the biblical use of the term *elohim* can be found only in the Hebrew Bible. Like most languages, Hebrew has several words that can be translated as "god" or "gods." For instance, in addition to *elohim*, Hebrew uses various words, all of which can be and are translated as "God," "god," or "gods," such as *el*, a singular with its plural form, *elim*, and *eloah*, usually taken as the singular of *elohim*. [6] Even the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, usually translated as "Lord," but in four verses as "Jehovah" (Exodus 6:3; Psalm 83:18; Isaiah 12:2; 26:4), can be rendered as "God" (see, for example, Exodus 23:17). Of the more than 3,300 occurrences of *god* or *gods* in the English text of the King James Version of the Old Testament (hereafter KJV), it is impossible to know without checking the Hebrew text which instances represent the approximately 2,600 occurrences of *elohim*.

A close look at how *elohim* is used in Hebrew will help to make clear its range of meanings. In form, *elohim* looks like a Hebrew plural and can be translated as a plural. For example, Joshua 24:15 reads, "And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord [*yhwh* = Jehovah], choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods [*elohim*] which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods [*elohim*] of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord [*yhwh*]." [7]

When the plural form is intended, which usually happens when *elohim* is used for a non-Israelite deity, it can be coupled with plural forms. For instance, in 2 Chronicles 25:15 not only is a plural verb used with *elohim* but also a plural pronoun: "Wherefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Amaziah, and he sent unto him a prophet, which said unto him, Why hast thou sought after the gods [*elohim*] of the people, which could not deliver [plural] their [plural] own people out of thine hand?"

Though plural in form, *elohim* can take a singular verb and other singular attributives. Note this usage in Genesis 28:4, where *elohim* refers to the "God" of Abraham: "thou mayest inherit the land wherein thou art a stranger, which God [*elohim*] gave [singular] unto Abraham." [8] Other passages also use the singular, especially in reference to the God of Israel. Throughout Genesis 1, whenever *elohim* governs a verb, the verb is invariably a third

person singular form. Furthermore, Exodus 6:2 states, "And God [*elohim*] spake [singular] unto Moses, and said unto him, I *am* the Lord [*yhwh*]." In this verse, *elohim*, besides taking a singular verb in Hebrew, *spake*, also takes the singular pronoun *I*. Thus, in the Hebrew Bible in general, when *elohim* was thought to refer to the God of Israel, the verb and attributives are usually singular; and when *elohim* seems to refer to a non-Israelite deity, the verb or attributives or both are usually plural.

But there are enough exceptions to the usual Hebrew practice that no hard-and-fast rule can be formulated regarding singular or plural and Israelite or non-Israelite usage. Occasionally, when *elohim* refers to the God of Israel, plural attributives and verbs can be used. These instances are most often explained as being conditioned by their international context. [9] For example, when the Philistines hear that Israel is coming to battle against them, they exclaim, "Woe unto us! who shall deliver us out of the hand of these [plural] mighty [plural] Gods [*elohim*]? these *are* the Gods [*elohim*] that smote [plural] the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness" (1 Samuel 4:8). Here the Philistines, who are likely polytheistic, impose perhaps their own views of deity upon Israel's deity.

Another example comes from Genesis 20:13. In speaking with Abimelech, Abraham uses the term *elohim*, but with a plural verb. This is usually translated as "God caused me to wander from my father's house." However, in the Hebrew it literally says that "Gods [*elohim*] caused [plural] me to wander from my father's house." Again, this plural usage can be explained by an international polytheistic setting in which *elohim* may have had a different meaning for Abimelech than it did for Abraham.

Because *elohim* can be used for Israelite and non-Israelite deities, and because the general rule about its usage (that Israelite *elohim* is singular and non-Israelite *elohim* is plural) is not consistent, the conclusion can be drawn that *elohim* is a generic term for any deity, whether Israelite or not, whether singular or plural. Recently Joel S. Burnett has convincingly shown that there are direct analogs to the generic use in Hebrew of *elohim*, both as a term and as a singular and a plural noun. His evidence comes from Semitic languages closely related to Hebrew, namely, in the Late Bronze Age Babylonian dialect of the El Amarna tablets, in Iron Age Phoenician, and first-millennium Akkadian. [10] In his view, the Hebrew Iron Age usage of *elohim* as a singular and as a plural was simply a continuation of a Late Bronze Age Northwest Semitic grammatical convention or practice. Thus, whether the writers of the Hebrew Bible used *elohim* as a generic term for the God of Israel or for a non-Israelite deity, they were simply following the contemporary Semitic literary conventions of their day. [11]

Since *elohim* is a generic term for any deity, it should not be surprising that on occasion, contrary to the general rule, non-Israelite *elohim* can take singular verbs and attributives. The Hebrew Bible has the Philistines using the term to refer to Dagon, the main god they worshipped. The Philistines' leaders came together to offer "a great sacrifice unto Dagon their god [*elohim*], and to rejoice: for they said, Our god [*elohim*] hath delivered [singular] Samson our enemy into our hand" (Judges 16:23).

Conversely, if *elohim* is a generic term for any deity, it might be expected that when *elohim* refers to the God of Israel, it might on occasion govern plural forms. This seems to be the case in Exodus 32:4–5. When Aaron had produced the golden calf, the people exclaimed, "These [plural] be thy gods [*elohim*], O Israel, which brought [plural] thee up out of the land of Egypt." But lest anyone think the calf was anything other than a symbol of the God of Israel, the writers of the Hebrew Bible make it clear through Aaron's words that the calf symbolized none other than Jehovah, "And when Aaron saw [the calf], he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, To morrow is a feast to the Lord [*yhwh*]." [12] Similar wording can be found in 1Kings 12:28, where the first king of the northern kingdom, Jeroboam, erected golden calves for Israelite worship. [13]

According to Burnett, because *elohim* was used as a title for Jehovah in the northern kingdom, the northern prophets were concerned that Israel understand that their *elohim*, their deity, was Jehovah. [14] For example, in the

days of Elijah some people in the northern kingdom were beginning to assume that Baal was the *elohim* of Israel. This can be seen in Elijah's imperative, "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord [*yhwh*] be God [*elohim*], follow him: but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). Translated another way, "How long are you going to have two views? If Jehovah is *elohim*, follow him: but if Baal [is *elohim*], follow him." Elijah then devised a contest to determine the identity of the real *elohim* of Israel. He challenged the people, "Call ye on the name of your gods [*elohim*], and I will call on the name of Jehovah: and the God [*elohim*] that answereth [singular] by fire, let him be God [*elohim*]. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken" (1Kings 18:24; our translation). When the story finishes with Elijah calling down fire from heaven, the people exclaim, "Jehovah, he is the God [the *elohim*]; Jehovah, he is the God [the *elohim*]" (1 Kings 18:39; our translation).

Besides governing both singular and plural forms, *elohim* has another usage in the Hebrew Bible which is also analogous to general ancient Semitic usage. It has long been suggested that *elohim* is used as an abstract noun for the divine. [15] In other words, *elohim may be translated as "godhead,"* "godhood," or "divinity." This usage falls under a well-defined category of Hebrew words that, when placed in a plural form, can have an abstract meaning. [16] For example, in Hebrew the plural of "young man" or "young woman" can mean "youth," the plural of "old man" can mean "old age," and the plural of "virgin" can mean "virginity." [17] The abstract meaning for *elohim* is found multiple times in the book of Exodus, and elsewhere, in reference to Jehovah. For example, Exodus 3:18 reads, "Ye shall say unto him, The Lord [*yhwh*] God [*elohim*] of the Hebrews hath met with us." Here, the Hebrew word *elohim* is used as a modifier for Jehovah, and the phrase could be translated, among other possibilities, as "Jehovah, the God [the *elohim*] of the Hebrews," or as "the deity Jehovah of the Hebrews."

Moreover, because *elohim* can function as an abstract noun in Hebrew, it has a wider range of meanings than the other Hebrew terms for deity. [18] This is why *elohim* is sometimes used as we would use an adjective in English to indicate that the noun it modifies has divine qualities. [19] For example, the phrase "the angel of God" in Judges 6:20 reads literally from the Hebrew, "the angel of the *elohim*." The translation "divine messenger" would be equally as acceptable as the King James Version "angels of God." Genesis 32:1–2 reads literally in Hebrew, "And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God [literally, "messengers of *elohim*," or "divine messengers"] met him. And when Jacob saw them, he said, [20] This is God's host [literally, "the camp of *elohim*," or "the divine host"]: and he called the name of that place Mahanaim." Also, in Genesis 1:2 the Hebrew reads, "And the spirit/wind of *elohim* brooded [feminine singular, with reference to spirit or wind] upon the waters." The Septuagint translators understood this meaning of *elohim* in this verse to be the attributive use of the genitive and omitted the definite article before *theos*, prompting the translation "a divine wind was being carried along over the water." [21]

Additionally, though masculine plural in form, *elohim* can refer to either male or female deities in the singular. 1 Kings 11:33 reads, "Because that they have forsaken me, and have worshipped Ashtoreth the goddess [*elohim*] of the Zidonians, Chemosh the god [*elohim*] of the Moabites, and Milcom the god [*elohim*] of the children of Ammon, and have not walked in my ways, to do that which is right in mine eyes, and to keep my statutes and my judgments, as did David his father." In each instance the Hebrew word for "god" and "goddess" in this verse is *elohim*. Because Ashtoreth is singular (as are the other non-Israelite gods mentioned) and female, this verse demonstrates that *elohim* can be used for non-Israelite gods of either gender.

As the above discussion has shown, the uses and functions of the word *elohim* are manifold in the Hebrew Bible. The word can be translated as "god," "gods," "God," "divinity," "divine," "godhood," and "godhead." It can govern both plural and singular verbs and attributives, as well as being a singular abstract noun that takes a singular verb. It can denote both masculine and feminine gods. The Hebrew Bible also does not distinguish in person or being between this *elohim* and Jehovah, and therefore, *elohim* was used as the name or title that was given to Jehovah, the *elohim* of Israel.

With this broad range of usage of *elohim* in the Hebrew Bible in mind, we can now turn to beginnings of the usage of *elohim* in Latter-day Saint literature and to examples of the range of its usage among early Latter-day Saints.

Nineteenth-Century Latter-day Saint Usage

Because early Latter-day Saints did not suddenly become *tabulae rasae* when they joined the Church, they brought with them vocabulary and traditions that were familiar to them from their previous religious training. Indicative of general American usage, Noah Webster's 1828 edition of *An American Dictionary of the English Language* gives insight into the vernacular of the early nineteenth century American religious discourse. The entry for "Jehovah" reads, "The Scripture name of the Supreme Being," [22] that is, Jehovah is the scriptural name for God. The entry under "God" explains, "The Supreme Being; Jehovah; the eternal and infinite spirit, the creator, and the sovereign of the universe." [23] This view fits squarely within the Trinitarian views of God held by most Christians in early America. It seems likely that this early American usage influenced early Latter-day Saint usage of divine names. Indeed, American usage may explain Erastus Snow and Benjamin Winchester's 1841 statement in the *Times and Seasons*: "We believe in God the Father, who is the great Jehovah and head of all things, and that Christ is the Son of God." [24]

Webster's 1828 dictionary lacks an entry for *elohim*, suggesting that *elohim* was not at all in common usage in America. The paucity of entrees for *elohim* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* would also suggest that *elohim* was not a regular part of British religious discourse either. It would seem then that any use of *elohim* in American English might be conditioned by its meaning and usage in the Hebrew Bible, rather than any longstanding English tradition. In other words, Jehovah and God were the common names in America for deity, and *elohim* was relatively unknown. It would not be surprising, then, if whatever usage was made of *elohim*, it would have been synonymous with the general American usage of Jehovah and God. Therefore, even though the topic of this paper is *elohim*, we will necessarily point out that *elohim* and Jehovah are often interchangeable in early Latter-day Saint usage, in direct analogy to their use in the Hebrew Bible.

The range of early Latter-day Saint usage of *elohim* showed remarkable variety. There is no better place to begin a selective citation of these usages than with the Prophet Joseph Smith, who appears to have been the first to introduce the term to the Church. On November 20, 1835, he received from Oliver Cowdery "a Hebrew bible, lexicon & grammar" in anticipation of the formal Hebrew instruction he would eventually receive under Joshua Seixas. [25] Joseph devoted much time to studying Hebrew even before Seixas arrived. He often recorded in his journal that he had "spent the day in reading Hebrew." [26] Along with other Church members, he received about two months of formal instruction under Professor Seixas. [27] It seems likely that in Seixas's class Joseph first encountered the Hebrew word *elohim*. [28] Yet it was not until a few years later that he began using the word in his writings and sermons. Latter-day Saints who are familiar with contemporary Latter-day Saint usage may find his use of the term somewhat surprising.

The Prophet, after the manner of the Hebrew Bible, employed on occasion the terms *elohim* and Jehovah interchangeably for the God of Israel. For example, in a letter to Major General Law dated August 14, 1842, and in keeping with common American usage, he used the title Jehovah for God the Father, but also equated Jehovah with *elohim*: "Let us plead the justice of our cause; trusting in the arm of Jehovah, the Eloheim, who sits enthroned in the heavens." [29] Here we have exactly analogous usage as in the Hebrew Bible: "Jehovah, the *elohim* of the Hebrews." Just over a week later, Joseph, in supplicating God in prayer, equated Jehovah and *elohim* again: "O, thou who seeth and knoweth the hearts of all men; thou eternal, omnipotent, omnicient, and omnipresent Jehovah, God; thou Eloheem, that sitteth, as saith the psalmist; enthroned in heaven; look down upon thy servant Joseph, at this time; and let faith on the name of thy Son Jesus Christ, to a greater degree than thy servant ever yet has enjoyed,

be conferred upon him." [30] It is clear that the Prophet, by equating *elohim* with Jehovah, used the terms differently than Latter-day Saints do today.

Joseph's first semipublic use of *elohim* suggests, but does not force, the conclusion that he knew of its plural sense. On May 4,1842, in a meeting with several of the brethren, he set forth the order pertaining to "all those plans and principles by which any one is enabled to secure the fullness of those blessings which have been prepared for the Church of the First Born, and come up and abide in the presence of the Eloheim in the eternal worlds." [31] The use of the definite article *the* might suggest that the Prophet intended a plural meaning for *elohim*, in which case the Prophet was probably referring to the Gods of eternity. If he had meant the singular exclusively, the definite article would not have been necessary.

In subsequent discourses Joseph Smith explicitly drew attention to the plural meaning of *elohim*. In April of that same year, the Prophet gave his famous King Follett discourse. Though he does not mention *elohim*, in speaking of the creation process he drew on the term's plural sense to explain Genesis 1:1: "The head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods. . . . Thus the head God brought forth the Gods in the grand council." [32] Two months later, on June 16, 1844, Joseph again translated this verse: "In the beginning the head of the Gods brought forth the Gods. . . . In the beginning the heads of the Gods organized the heavens and the earth." [33] The word that is translated as "Gods" corresponds with *elohim* in the Hebrew Bible. In the same speech the Prophet continued by calling attention to the plural meaning of *elohim* to establish the doctrine of a plurality of Gods, declaring, "In the very beginning the Bible shows there is a plurality of Gods beyond the power of refutation. . . . The word Eloheim ought to be in the plural all the way through—Gods," [34] meaning that *elohim* ought to be rendered as plural at least in the Creation account, if not also in other biblical passages.

Even though he referred to Jehovah as *elohim* and used Jehovah as a term for God the Father in many instances, at some point Joseph Smith made a clear distinction between *elohim* and Jehovah. For purposes unrelated to Hebrew Bible usage, Joseph Smith must have thought it important to distinguish between God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. In a late reminiscence, Edward Stevenson remarked in his journal that "Joseph Smith was the first, whome I ever herd proclaim a plurality of Gods, he said that there was Elohiem God, and Jehovah God, and Michial God." [35] He also remembered that "Joseph the Seer, said, in the grand Council of Heaven, The Great Ɇelohȼiåm, directed Jehovah and Michaiel[?], for the Gods Counciled in the beginning of the Creation of This Earth." [36] A remark by Brigham Young in 1852 would seem to corroborate Edward Stevenson's later recollection: "It is true that the earth was organized by three distinct characters, namely, Eloheim, Yahovah, and Michael." [37] Here the delineation is clearly set forth in terminology that is similar to the usage that prevails in the Church today.

Nevertheless, despite the clear separation that the Prophet and Brigham Young made between *elohim* and Jehovah on occasion, the two terms continued to be used inconsistently. For example, Joseph Smith used a variety of names to refer to God the Father. In the dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple, for example, he seems to have addressed God the Father as "God of Israel" (D&C 109:1), "Holy Father" (vv. 4, 10, 14, 22, 24, 29, and 47), and "Jehovah" (v. 34). [38] Yet only a week later Joseph stated that he heard "the voice of Jehovah" (that is, Christ) speak to him when he appeared to him and Oliver in the Kirtland Temple (D&C 110:3). Thus in the first instance, D&C 109, Jehovah was used as it commonly was in America at that time, namely, as a name for the God of Israel. However, in the second instance, D&C 110, Joseph seems to have departed from contemporary usage by identifying Christ as Jehovah.

Other Church leaders also used *elohim* and Jehovah in a variety of ways. John Taylor in 1845 mirrored the language of Joseph in an editorial in the *Times and Seasons*. In translating Genesis 1:1, he stated, in language that would appear to be dependent on Joseph Smith's King Follett discourse: "In simple English, the Head brought forth the Gods, with the heavens and with the earth. The 'Head' must have meant the 'living God,' or Head God: Christ is our

head." [39] In this interpretation John Taylor seems to equate Christ with the "Head God" who brought forth the other "Gods" (*elohim*). Normally, Latter-days Saints would equate the "Head God" with *elohim* (i.e., God the Father), not with Jehovah (Christ).

Brigham Young on occasion associated *elohim* with God the Father. For example, he stated, "I want to tell you, each and every one of you, that you are well acquainted with God our heavenly Father, or the great Eloheim." [40] As explained above, Brigham's clear application of this term to God the Father seems to be the exception rather than the rule in the early days of the Church. Often it was still used as a generic term for deity without any specific designation. For example, Brigham Young himself ten years later in 1867 used Jehovah and *elohim* synonymously when he said, "To secure His blessings the Lord requires the strict obedience of His people. This is our duty. We obey the Lord, Him who is called Jehovah, the Great I AM, I am a man of war, Eloheim, etc. We are under many obligations to obey Him." [41]

Heber C. Kimball in 1863 distinguished between Jehovah and *elohim* when he said, "We have been taught that our Father and God, from whom we sprang, called and appointed his servants to go and organize an earth, and, among the rest, he said to Adam, 'You go along also and help all you can; you are going to inhabit it when it is organized, therefore go and assist in the good work.' It reads in the Scriptures that the Lord did it, but the true rendering is, that the Almighty sent Jehovah and Michael to do the work." [42] This clear differentiation between God the Father and Jehovah goes along with President Young's statement that "Elohim, Yahovah, and Michael" were the three distinct beings who organized the earth. In all the examples we have provided so far, the distinction between *elohim* (God the Father) and Jehovah (God the Son) occurs in the context of the Creation, which is the context in which Joseph first emphasized the plurality of Gods.

John Taylor, however, seems to have used these terms without worrying about specific attribution. In 1872 he stated, "Who has controlled and managed the affairs of the world from its creation until the present time? The Great I am [a title of Jehovah], the Great Eloheim, the Great God who is our Father. We bow before him. Is it a hardship to reverence the Lord our God?" [43] Here he equates *elohim* with "the Great I am," an epithet that refers to Jehovah and comes out of Exodus 3:14. He also used the phrase "the Lord our God," which is usually the translation of the Hebrew "Jehovah our *elohim*." However, in 1882 in *The Mediation and Atonement*, John Taylor clearly identified Christ as Jehovah when he wrote, "He is not only called the Son of God, the First Begotten of the Father, the Well Beloved, the Head, and Ruler, and Dictator of all things, Jehovah, the I Am, the Alpha and Omega, but He is also called the Very Eternal Father." [44]

John Taylor apparently did not always confine himself to a single narrow definition of Jehovah. In the words to a song first published in 1840 in Manchester, England, and that was later ascribed to John Taylor, the author had penned the following:

> As in the heavens they all agree,
>
> The record's given there by three . . .
>
> Jehovah, God the Father's one;
>
> Another, God's Eternal Son;
>
> The Spirit does with them agree,—
>
> The witnesses in heaven are three. [45]

Here Jehovah is used to refer to God the Father, according to the general American vernacular of the day. After going through numerous editions, this hymnal was replaced with the 1927 *Latter-day Saint Hymns*. No doubt because the 1916 First Presidency statement had changed Latter-day Saint theological discourse, the words to this hymn were also changed. The line that read, "Jehovah, God the Father's one" was changed to read, "Our God, the Father, is the One." [46]

If John Taylor did write the words to the 1840 hymn that confused God the Father and "Jehovah," then by at least 1884 he allowed a distinction between "Jehovah" and *elohim*. He spoke of how the Saints needed the support of "the Great Jehovah" and "were dependent upon Him." He then went on to say that the "work in which [the Saints] are engaged is one that has been introduced by the Great Eloheim." [47] Though President Taylor does not overtly distinguish between *elohim* as God the Father and Jehovah as God the Son, the context allows the reader to make the distinction.

Also in that same year, 1884, John Taylor remarked, "I have heard [Joseph] quote from the Hebrew Bible in support of a plurality of Gods, showing that the suffix 'mem' in the word Eloheim or God, ought to be rendered in the plural. . . . If, as stated, Jesus was with the Father in the beginning, there certainly was more than one God—God the Father, and God the Son." [48] President Taylor's point seems to be that the plurality of Gods demonstrated by the Hebrew word *elohim* comprises both the Father and the Son, which would be a usage similar to the Hebrew abstract meaning.

A few years after the turn of the century, Orson F. Whitney published a collection of poems, *Elias: An Epic of the Ages*. In the revised and annotated edition published in 1914, a footnote was added to explain *elohim*. The note reads: "The Hebrew plural for God. To the modern Jew it means the plural of majesty, not of number; but to the Latter-day Saint it signifies both. As here used it stands for 'The Council of the Gods.'" [49] The last part of the footnote may be an example of the Hebrew abstract meaning of *elohim*.

On the other hand, Franklin D. Richards clearly set forth that Jehovah is Christ. In 1885 he told the Saints that Jesus Christ's "name when He was a spiritual being, during the first half of the existence of the earth, before He was made flesh and blood, was Jehovah." [50] Despite this fact, just four months earlier, using the vernacular of the day he seems to have associated Jehovah with God the Father when he said, "The Savior said He could call to His help more than twelve legions of angels; more than the Roman hosts; but He knowing the great purposes of Jehovah could go like a lamb to the slaughter." [51] Here we see the name Jehovah being coupled with established American patterns. Both the adjective "great" and the phrase "purposes of" are coupled with Jehovah and may represent a more generic usage of the term than we would use today.

Elohim was consistently used by President Wilford Woodruff in dedicatory prayers of the St. George and Salt Lake Temples in 1877 and 1893, respectively. Both of these prayers, like many dedicatory prayers today, were addressed to "Our Father in Heaven." The Salt Lake Temple dedicatory prayer continues, "We thank thee, O thou Great Elohim," clearly a reference to God the Father. At one point the Father is addressed as "O thou God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," a title that some would reserve for Jehovah. But Jehovah-Messiah-Christ-Son is never addressed or appealed to in the prayer, though the Son is mentioned several times. Throughout the prayer, it is the Father who is addressed. [52]

Earlier, in 1881, Elder Wilford Woodruff had published *Leaves from My Journal*, wherein he explained that "the Father and Son were revealed unto [Joseph], and the voice of the great Eloheim unto him was: 'This is my beloved Son, hear ye Him,'" with an obvious reference to the Father as *elohim*. [53]

The above quotations are not meant to suggest that nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint usage of *elohim* and Jehovah was clearly defined. In fact, most usages of these terms are ambiguous, denoting simply "God." Because

they are often used in similar phrases and usually appear in contexts that often do not specify identity, it seems likely they were often used as generic names for deity without consistent specificity. This may explain why different denotations for Jehovah were used simultaneously, and why both the plural and singular meanings of *elohim* were used.

Such interchangeability of terms no doubt led to questions among Church members. In the April 1895 General Conference, President Woodruff counseled the elders of the Church, "Cease troubling yourselves about who God is; who Adam is, who Christ is, who Jehovah is. For heaven's sake, let these things alone. Why trouble yourselves about these things? . . . God is God. Christ is Christ. The Holy Ghost is the Holy Ghost. That should be enough for you and me to know. . . . I say this because we are troubled every little while with inquiries from Elders anxious to know who God is, who Christ is, and who Adam is." [54]

The matter began to be laid to rest in the early 1900s when the meanings of the terms *elohim* and Jehovah as they are known within the Church today were clearly set forth. Charles W. Penrose was adamant that Church members understand and use these terms differentially. In September 1902, two years before his ordination to the apostleship, he wrote an *Improvement Era* article entitled "Our Father Adam." In it he explained that "Elohim, Jehovah and Michael were associated in that mighty work. When God spake 'in the beginning,' he gave direction to other divine persons and said, 'Let US do thus and so,' and they obeyed him and acted in harmony with Him. The Eternal Elohim directed both Michael and Jehovah, and the heavenly hosts obeyed them. When Adam was formed 'out of the dust of the earth,' he worshiped the great Elohim, the Eternal Father of us all." [55] The statement by the future Apostle made it clear that *elohim* was a name or title for God the Father, separate and distinct from Jehovah, and he made the point in the context of the Creation.

Only two months later in the November issue of the *Improvement Era*, W. H. Chamberlin, a teacher at Brigham Young College in Logan, Utah, wrote an article entitled "Use of the Word Elohim," in which he clearly stated that "Jehovah was a personal name applied to the Being who guided Israel, and afterwards lived on the earth as Jesus Christ." [56]

Several years later, Charles W. Penrose, this time as an Apostle and member of the First Presidency, spoke in the October 1914 General Conference of "the great Elohim, the God of gods, the Father of our spirits, the Mighty and Eternal One [is the One] to whom today we address our praises and our prayers." [57] Clearly, Elder Penrose wanted to emphasize for the Saints that *elohim* should be applied to God the Father.

To the growing amount of Church material clarifying the matter was added *Jesus the Christ*, by James E. Talmage. This work, commissioned by the First Presidency and published in 1915, was foundational in establishing practice. In it Elder Talmage explained, "*Elohim*, as understood and used in the restored Church of Jesus Christ, is the name-title of God the Eternal Father, whose firstborn Son in the spirit is *Jehovah*—the Only Begotten in the flesh, Jesus Christ." [58] The clarity and precision articulated so well here by Elder Talmage, and which helped set the course for our contemporary usage, must have been refreshing to many Church members.

These statements continued to build when President Penrose again clearly separated the terms *elohim* and Jehovah for members of the Church. In the April 1916 general conference, he declared:

> Now, who is this person, this Jesus Christ? Is He Adam or a son of Adam? Not at all. . . . Well, was Jesus Jehovah? Yes. . . . We are told by revelation that in the creation of the earth there were three individuals, personally engaged. This is more particularly for the Temple of God, but sufficient of it has been published over and over again to permit me to refer to it. Elohim,—not Eloheim, as we spell it sometimes—that is a plural word meaning the gods, but it is attached to the individual who is the Father of all, the person whom we look to

> as the great Eternal Father. Elohim, Jehovah and Michael, were engaged in the construction of this globe. Jehovah, commanded by Elohim, went down to where there was space. [59]

President Penrose in this rare instance referred to the temple for the source of the definition that we today take for granted. He then identified very clearly the three persons as God, Jesus Christ, and Adam. This distinction in terms seems to have most often been associated with the creation of the earth, and it seems that was in this isolated instance where these names were separated.

An additional authoritative statement appears to have been necessary. It came in the form, mentioned above, of an official statement of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve dated June 30, 1916: "God the Eternal Father, whom we designate by the exalted name-title 'Elohim,' is the literal Parent of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and of the spirits of the human race. . . . Christ in His preexistent, antemortal, or unembodied state . . . was known as Jehovah." [60] This was a clear and official delineation of terms for the benefit of the Church members.

In 1924 Elder Talmage made additions to his book *The Articles of Faith* in order to reflect this distinction. At the end of chapter 2, he added, "Note that distinction is not always indicated here [in this book] between the Eternal Father or Elohim and the Son who is Jehovah or Jesus Christ." [61] Further, where Genesis 11:5 is quoted, a parenthetical insertion next to "Lord" states, "i.e., Jehovah, the Son." [62] Elder Talmage also included the First Presidency statement in an appendix with a preface stating, "That Jesus Christ or Jehovah is designated in certain scriptures as the Father in no wise justifies an assumption of identity between Him and His Father, Elohim. This matter has been explained by the presiding authorities of the Church in a special publication." [63] Thus even after 1916 a conscious effort was made to emphasize the clarity that the First Presidency had brought to the definitions.

Summary and Conclusion

As detailed above, Church members prior to the authoritative clarifications of the early twentieth century often used *elohim* and Jehovah interchangeably and inconsistently, much the same way they are used in the Hebrew Bible. Like much of the Christian world of the nineteenth century, Latter-day Saints did not always distinguish between Jehovah, God the Father, the God of Israel, *elohim,* or simply God. However, the flexibility of use and at times the ambiguous phrasing of the nineteenth century that reflected general American usage and served the general Christian world well, fell short of the precision that the restoration of the gospel brought to Latter-day Saint understanding of the Godhead.

It is remarkable that early Latter-day Saints used the name Jehovah in reference to both God the Father and to his Son. Equally interesting is that *elohim* seems to have been used by Latter-day Saints for both God and gods, exactly as it is used in the Hebrew Bible, that is, as both a singular and a plural noun, a proper name and a common noun. Officially, this practice ended in 1916.

And finally, a word of caution here is appropriate. Since the modern Latter-day Saint usage of Jehovah and Elohim was not taken from the Hebrew Bible, it can create misunderstandings if imposed upon the Hebrew scriptural account. Thus if we try to exclusively assign actions to different members of the Godhead based on which divine name is used in the Hebrew Bible, the result, in many instances, will be chaos. Additionally, D&C 20:28 states that "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God" (see also 2 Nephi 31:21; Alma 11:44; 3 Nephi 11:27, 36; Mormon 7:7). In this same vein, Elder Bruce R. McConkie once said that "most scriptures that speak of God or of the Lord do not even bother to distinguish the Father from the Son, simply because it doesn't make any difference which God is involved. They are one. The words or deeds of either of them would be the same words and deeds of the other in the same circumstance." [64] Therefore, the issue of which name or title is assigned to which member of the

Godhead is not one that Latter-day Saints should be overly concerned with. But it is helpful to know that the meaning of a word such as *elohim* is not always the same in all times and in all places.

Notes

[1] Some search programs will turn up Mark 15:34 if *elohim* is typed in as the search word, but the word used in Mark, *eloi,* is hardly *elohim*. Mark 15:34 is a quote from Psalm 22:1, where the word in Hebrew is *eli,* "my God." Additionally, the quote in Mark is in Aramaic, not Hebrew.

[2] James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1915), 38.

[3] Dated June 30, 1916, and published as "The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve," *Improvement Era*, August 1916, 934.

[4] "The Father and the Son," 939–40.

[5] The only help that the KJV translators offered is tangential. When they thought that any Hebrew term for deity referred to the God of Israel, they opted to capitalize the word (e.g., *God*), but they lowercased it whenever they thought the term in question referred to a non-Israelite deity.

[6] In addition to these four etymologically related words for deity, there are numerous other titles and epithets for the God of Israel, including "the most High" (*el elion*), "Lord," "Jehovah," and "Lord of Hosts." There are even instances where the term *elim* is not translated as "god(s)" but as some other term. See Psalm 29:1, where the Hebrew "sons of *elim*" is translated as "ye mighty." See also Psalm 89:6, where the Hebrew "sons of the *elim*" is translated as "sons of the mighty"; and Isaiah 57:5, where the Hebrew *elim* is translated as "idols."

[7] These passages also illustrate the aforementioned King James convention of capitalizing *God* if thought to refer to Israel's deity but lowercasing it in reference to a non-Israelite deity.

[8] Note though that *God* in the preceding verse is the translation of *el*, a singular form.

[9] *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), §124, g (hereafter cited as GKC), §145, i.

[10] Joel S. Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2001), 1–53.

[11] Burnett, *Biblical Elohim*, 79–119.

[12] See Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Aaron's Golden Calf," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 1 (2006): 375–87.

[13] It is irrelevant which passage is dependent on the other, 1 Kings 12:28 or Exodus 32:4–5. The point is that *elohim* governing the plural forms could be used for Israelite deity.

[14] Burnett, *Biblical Elohim*, 107–19.

[15] GKC §124, g.

[16] GKC §124, d.

[17] בָּחוּר *young man* > בַּחוּרִים and בְּחוּרוֹת *youth*; זָקֵן *old one* > זְקֵנִים *old age*; בְּתוּלָה *virgin* > בְּתוּלִים *virginity*; see GKC §124, d.

[18] Burnett, *Biblical Elohim*, 57–60.

[19] Sometimes nouns used as genitives take on adjectival qualities. GKC §128, p–u, examples include "man of words" to mean "eloquent man," "man of wrath" to mean "wrathful man," and "possession of eternity" to mean

"*everlasting possession.*"

[20] The words in the King James translation host and mahanaim are the same word in Hebrew, the former in the singular the latter in the dual, מחנים ,מחנה. It is possible that the dual is used because God's camp is one and Jacob's camp is another. Later Jacob splits his camp into two parts, mirroring the dual in this verse.

[21] Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

[22] Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Converse, 1828), s.v. "Jehovah."

[23] Webster, *American Dictionary*, s.v. "God."

[24] Erastus Snow and Benjamin Winchester, "An Address to the Citizens of Salem (Mass.) and Vicinity," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 1 (November 1841): 578.

[25] Joseph Smith, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 91.

[26] Smith, *Personal Writings*, 93, 98, 104, 120.

[27] Included among this group were Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball. The duration of the course was January 26–March 29, 1836. D. Kelly Ogden, "The Kirtland Hebrew School (1835–36)," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History, Ohio*, ed. Milton V. Backman Jr. (Provo, UT: Dept. of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1990), 63–87.

[28] In the grammar written by Joshua Seixas and probably used by Joseph Smith, this entry occurs as a definition for *elohim*: "God;* a sing. noun with a *plur. form.*" Joshua Seixas, *A Manual Hebrew Grammar for the Use of Beginners* (Andover, MA: Gould and Newman, 1834), 85.

[29] *History of the Church*, 5:94.

[30] Smith, *Personal Writings*, 536. The prayer was written on August 23,1842.

[31] *History of the Church*, 5:2. The transcription of Willard Richard's diary that he kept for Joseph Smith, from which this account is taken, reads, "All those plans & principles by which any one is enabled to secure the fullness of those blessings which has been prepared for the church of the first born, and come up ~~into~~ and abide in the presence of ~~God~~ the Eloheim in the eternal worlds." See Andrew F. Ehat, "'Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord?' Sesquicentennial Reflections of a Sacred Day: 4May 1842," in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 51.

[32] *History of the Church*, 6:307.

[33] *History of the Church*, 6:475.

[34] *History of the Church*, 6:476.

[35] *Autobiography of Edward Stevenson, 1820–1870*, ed. Joseph Grant Stevenson (Provo, UT: Stevenson's Genealogical Center, 1986), 64; original spelling and conventions retained.

[36] *Autobiography of Edward Stevenson*, 64.

[37] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 1:51.

[38] This is of course based on the assumption that the Deity addressed is God the Father. At this early stage of Latter-day Saint vocabulary usage, the Lord, through the Prophet, may have used these terms the way Americans

https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-14-no-1-2013/usage-title-elohim

in general used them, according to "the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding" (D&C 1:24).

[39] John Taylor, "The Living God," *Times and Seasons*, February 1845, 809.

[40] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:216.

[41] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:99.

[42] Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:235.

[43] John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:217.

[44] John Taylor, *An Examination into and an Elucidation of the Great Principle of the Mediation and Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1882), 138. This is also made clear about the same time in Franklin D. Richards and James A. Little, eds., *A Compendium of the Doctrines of the Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1886), 12, and in James A. Little, "Jesus Christ—His Character and Attributes," *Juvenile Instructor*, October 15, 1881, 237.

[45] *A Collection of Sacred Hymns for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in Europe* (Manchester: W. R. Thomas, 1840), hymn no. 254, pp. 295–96. Apparently, the wording was changed from "God's Eternal Son" to "His Eternal Son" by the thirteenth edition published in 1869 and remained so as late as 1890 in the twentieth edition.

[46] The twentieth edition of this Latter-day Saint hymnal published in 1890, still in Liverpool, contains the same unaltered text as the 1840.

[47] John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 25:305.

[48] John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 25:213–14 (June 29,1884).

[49] Orson F. Whitney, *Elias: An Epic of the Ages* (Salt Lake City: Whitney, 1914), 118. The original edition was published by Knickerbocker Press in New York, 1904.

[50] Franklin D. Richards, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26:300.

[51] Franklin D. Richards, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26:172. This and the preceding passage were pointed out by Barry Bickmore in his essay "Of Simplicity, Oversimplification, and Monotheism," a review of Paul Owen's *Monotheism, Mormonism, and the New Testament Witness*, *FARMS Review* 15, no. 1 (2003): 215–58.

[52] The dedicatory prayer offered on January 1, 1877, to dedicate portions of the St. George Temple is found in Matthias F. Cowley, ed., *Wilford Woodruff: History of His Life and Labors as Recorded in His Daily Journals* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 161–71. The dedicatory prayer for the Salt Lake Temple, offered on April 6, 1893, is found in James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord: A Study of Holy Sanctuaries, Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1912), 134. See also the reprint, James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord: A Study of Holy Sanctuaries, Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 94–102. The quotes above are from the reprint, pp. 94b, 95a, and 97a, respectively.

[53] Wilford Woodruff, *Leaves from My Journal*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), 86.

[54] Although the address was given on April 7, 1895, this portion was recorded in "Discourse by President Wilford Woodruff," *Millennial Star*, June 6, 1895, 355–56.

[55] Charles W. Penrose, "Our Father Adam," *Improvement Era*, May 1902, 876–77.

[56] W. H. Chamberlin, "Use of the Word Elohim," *Improvement Era*, November 1902, 26.

[57] Charles W. Penrose, in Conference Report, October 1914, 38.

[58] Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 38.

[59] Charles W. Penrose, in Conference Report, April 1916, 18.

[60] "The Father and the Son," 934, 939–40 (see nn. 3–4 in the present paper).

[61] James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith, Being a Consideration of the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 12th ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1924), 49.

[62] Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 43.

[63] Talmage, *Articles of Faith,* 465.

[64] Bruce R. McConkie, "Our Relationship with the Lord," in *BYU 1981–82 Fireside and Devotional Speeches* (Provo, UT: University Publications, 1982), 101b.

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