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**Joseph Smith's tritheism: The prophet's theology  
in context, critiqued from a Nicene perspective**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Full Title
<i>ANE</i>	<i>Ancient Near East</i>
<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>Apol.</i>	<i>Apology</i>
<i>I Apol.</i>	<i>First Apology</i>
Col.	Colossians
<i>Conf.</i>	<i>Confessions</i>
I Cor.	I Corinthians
II Cor.	II Corinthians
<i>I Clem.</i>	<i>I Clement</i>
<i>Dem.</i>	<i>Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching</i>
Deut.	Deuteronomy
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>
<i>D&amp;C</i>	<i>Doctrine and Covenants</i>
Eph.	Ephesians
Ex.	Exodus
Ezek.	Ezekiel
<i>Fid.et.Symb.</i>	<i>On the Faith and the Creed</i>
Gal.	Galatians
Gen.	Genesis
<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Against Heresies</i>
Heb.	Hebrews
Isa.	Isaiah
Jm.	James
Jn.	John
I Jn.	I John
II Jn.	II John

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Full Title</b>
<i>Joh.</i>	<i>Commentary on the Gospel According to John</i>
Judg.	Judges
I Ki.	I Kings
Lev.	Leviticus
Lk.	Luke
<i>Mag.</i>	<i>Letter to the Magnesians</i>
Matt.	Matthew
<i>NICNT</i>	<i>New International Commentary on the New Testament</i>
<i>NPNF-1</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Series 1)</i>
<i>NPNF-2</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Series 2)</i>
Num.	Numbers
I Pet.	I Peter
II Pet.	II Peter
Phil.	Philippians
Phm.	Philemon
<i>Plea.</i>	<i>A Plea for the Christians</i>
<i>Prax.</i>	<i>Against Praxeas</i>
<i>Princ.</i>	<i>On First Principles</i>
Ps.	Psalms
Rev.	Revelation
Rom.	Romans
I Sam.	I Samuel
I Thess.	I Thessalonians
II Thess.	II Thessalonians
I Tim.	I Timothy

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Full Title</b>
II Tim.	II Timothy
<i>Tres dii.</i>	<i>On Not Three Gods</i>
<i>Trin.</i>	<i>On the Holy Trinity</i>

## ABSTRACT

Joseph Smith is one of the most enigmatic figures in American religious history. From the details of his life story to the eventual formation of his own church, much has been written on the legacy of Joseph Smith. However, there are still numerous areas of Smith's life and thought that demand further engagement, especially from a Nicene perspective.

The purpose of the present research is to substantively add to scholarly knowledge regarding Joseph Smith. In contradistinction to other Nicene treatments of Joseph Smith and his theology, the present project will integrate multiple disciplines for the purpose of producing a robust, Nicene assessment of Smith's life and tritheism.

The aim of this project is to establish the historical context and potential religious influences upon Joseph Smith's theological evolution. The process by which this information is ascertained requires a thorough and exegetical evaluation of the scriptural basis for Nicene orthodoxy. This data represents a theological foundation that must be built upon by recounting the development of Trinitarianism among the early Christians. Based upon this scriptural and historical background for Nicene orthodoxy, the historical focus then must turn to theological trends just prior to and during the life of Joseph Smith. The result of this process then leads to an assessment of Smith's life and tritheism, from a Nicene perspective that integrates multiple lines of data.

The findings of this research demonstrate, rather conclusively, that Nicene orthodoxy is rooted in the text of Christian Scripture. Further, Trinitarianism developed creedally, over time, among the early Christians but existed, in nascent form, from the close of the New Testament. Additionally, Nicene orthodoxy held sway among the colonies in America prior to the revolutionary era. The ideas and events leading up to the American Revolution gave occasion and platform to anti-Nicene ideologies that greatly influenced Joseph Smith's family. Moreover, Joseph Smith's own historical and religious context was littered with anti-Nicene and unorthodox teachers, movements and visionaries. These details lead to the conclusion that Joseph Smith was not a unique prophet but just one of many anti-Nicene religious leaders that arose to prominence

during this period. It is therefore argued that Smith's theology originated from his own theological musings. The resultant system is replete with doctrinal contradictions and philosophical absurdities. Thus, from the perspective of Nicene Christianity, Smith's tritheism must be deemed as a distinct and rival system intended to replace historic orthodoxy.

Key Words: Tritheism, Nicene, Orthodoxy, Trinitarianism, Trinity, Monotheism, Henotheism.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

For nearly 2,000 years, the doctrine of the Trinity has stood as the centre of theological orthodoxy. Based upon the text of enscripturated revelation, and in accordance with the rule of faith, Christians have historically recognised the triune nature of God (Kelly, 1960:95; cf. Matt. 28:19; II Cor. 13:14), while at the same time holding firm to Abrahamic monotheism (Deut. 6:4; cf. Horrell, 2007:45). In North America, this doctrine was firmly established in the beliefs of those who migrated to the New World in hopes of enjoying religious freedom. What developed, particularly in the North-eastern portion of the American Colonies, was a historically orthodox, theological stronghold (Noll, 2005:3-52). Doctrinally, a great deal of homogeny existed among the colonies. While there were certainly theological nuances from sect to sect, there was a general adherence to theological essentials that had historically defined the Christian faith, including the doctrine of the Trinity.

Mark Noll (2005:66) demonstrates that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a drift away from established orthodoxy began to occur, particularly in the Northeast of the American Colonies. Even though Noll provides a well-written and meticulously researched account of this theological drift, he does not adequately discuss the resulting unorthodox movements that arose due to theological innovation. This information is critical because it was during this time period that the orthodox denominations witnessed a significant falling away (Finke & Stark, 1993:54-59). The abandonment of traditional orthodoxy must be connected to the rise of anti-orthodox attitudes and the movements these sentiments birthed.

A number of the organised movements that departed from orthodoxy arose or settled near Palmyra, New York: the same town that gave rise to the North American tritheism known as Mormonism (Tucker, 2004:41). Ruth Tucker's historical survey of New Religions, particularly in North America, provides relevant data for understanding the rise of unorthodox movements, yet it does not go far enough in examining the varying influences and motives that led to the splitting away from orthodoxy. The general mood of the colonies in the Northeast was that of freedom in theological exploration and invention, an attitude somewhat resulting from the millennial fervour that had arisen around the time of the American Revolution (Hatch, 1995:87). Interest in millennial apocalyptic religion, regardless of its orthodoxy, had become *en vogue*. Surprisingly, this factor has yet to be considered as one of numerous influences leading to the eventual rise of North American tritheism. In the nearly two centuries since the time of Joseph Smith, Mormonism's adherents have remained true to its nuanced and seemingly ever-changing position on the nature of the Godhead. While undertaking clarifications over time, the central element of Smith's theology, tritheism, has remained intact (McConkie, 1979:319).

Two resources, in particular, stand out as excellent accounts of Joseph Smith's early life, as well as his prophetic career. First, from an evangelical perspective, *One Nation Under Gods* (2003) proves a valuable resource in understanding early Mormonism. Richard Abanes indicates the questionable character of Joseph Smith in both his business life and his role as a self-proclaimed prophet. However, *One Nation Under Gods* does fail to situate Smith's divergence from historical orthodoxy in its proper context. Little information is supplied to acquaint the reader with the theological climate of the Northeast during and just preceding Smith's lifetime. Historian and LDS adherent Richard Bushman's account of Smith's life, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (2007), has become the standard for a modern, LDS sympathetic recounting of Mormonism's founding prophet's life. While providing an exceptional portrait of the historical and cultural context in which Mormonism was born, Bushman unsuccessful in his effort to provide the reader with the necessary understanding of the theological context in which Smith began teaching his unique understanding of God.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Asserting that Smith restored true doctrine, LDS adherents fail to recognise that Smith was just one of many advocating a departure from Christian orthodoxy (Tucker, 2004:40). Joseph Smith proposed, contrary to Nicene orthodoxy, that there is not one God, but many gods. However, the gods that are to be worshipped are the three gods who act with one purpose (Smith, 2009:370). Rather than attempting a reformulation of historic, Trinitarian Christianity, Smith envisioned a theological system meant to replace historic Nicene Christianity (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:132; cf. Millet & McDermott 2007:78). Since the time of Joseph Smith, Mormonism has continued to contour itself to the historical context in which it exists. The doctrinal formulations found within early Mormonism have changed over decades, resulting in modern LDS doctrinal explanations which remain staunchly tritheistic (Peterson & Ricks, 1988:7). Modern LDS apologists continue to attack historic, Nicene orthodoxy as being unbiblical (Hopkins, 1994:51-108), insisting instead upon Smith's unique tritheistic understanding of God. Orthodox Christianity should respond by defining its parameters, rooted in an exegesis of the Scriptures, by what has been held as the rule of faith since the time of the early church.

Certainly, much has been written in response to Mormonism as a whole (e.g., Roberts & Roberts, 1998). However, little has been done to undertake a full, academic critique of Smith's tritheism, which would integrate an exegesis of pertinent Scripture, philosophy, and ancient church history, as well as eighteenth and nineteenth century church history. Instead, examinations have provided a critique of modern LDS theology in the form of a broad overview such as *The New Mormon Challenge* (Beckwith, Mosser, & Owen, 2002). While this resource is helpful in examining the philosophical ramifications of the Mormon worldview, does little to engage the theology of Mormonism's central figure, Joseph Smith. Richard Abanes interacts with both modern LDS tritheism as well as Joseph Smith's theology in his book, *Becoming Gods* (2004). Still, Abanes does not sufficiently examine the text of Scripture or the historical progression of early Trinitarianism. One notable contribution is titled, *Is the Mormon My Brother?* (White, 1997). This volume provides a clear explanation of the LDS doctrine of God by utilising LDS primary sources. However, it is a less than adequate

resource for situating the orthodox doctrine of God in its historical context nor can it fully account for Smith's own theological context.

Nicene Christians have written numerous titles purposing to discuss, describe (e.g., Ryken & LeFebvre, 2011) and defend (White, 1998) the doctrine of the Trinity, yet none have done so with a full appraisal of Smith's tritheism in mind. Furthermore, these titles do not provide the reader with a clear understanding of the Trinitarian conviction in the early church. Current theological writings on the doctrine of the Trinity have demonstrated the necessity of Trinitarian theology in recognising the biblical doctrine of salvation (Sanders, 2010). Nevertheless, authors such as Fred Sanders do not furnish a framework by which to respond to unorthodox positions on God. Further, although some have intended to highlight the Trinity in specific books of Scripture (e.g., Köstenberger, 2009), most systematic theology treatments of the Trinity provide little more than a brief survey of Trinitarian passages (Grudem, 1994:226-261). Even apologetically-driven volumes that provide superb philosophical arguments for the Trinity do not exegete Scripture in a substantive fashion (Geisler, 2003:269-312). John Frame's *The Doctrine of God* (2002:619-750) represents a well-rounded, biblical approach to the doctrine of the Trinity. Including both a thorough recounting of biblical themes and philosophical arguments, this volume's shortcomings are few, but they are substantive. Frame does not exegete key Trinitarian passages or integrate the teachings of church fathers, nor does he provide the reader with an approach by which to assess and critique unorthodox positions on the Godhead.

In regard to treatments of historical positions on heresy and orthodoxy, a few contributions are worth noting. Harold O.J. Brown has penned a modern standard for examining heresies in the history of the church (Brown, 2003). Tracing heresies relating the central doctrines of the Christian faith, Brown demonstrates the ebb and flow of unorthodox theology throughout history. While this survey is most useful in understanding the importance of orthodoxy, there is little interaction with relatively modern heresies, such as Mormonism. Brown's connecting of the basis for orthodoxy to the doctrines held in the early church is needed, but he makes no use of historical doctrine to confront contemporary errors. One recent title, *Heresies and How to Avoid Them* (Quash & Ward, eds., 2007), endeavours to relate the struggle for orthodoxy in

the early church to contemporary doctrinal issues. The various contributors do indeed use the backdrop of early doctrinal controversies as a means by which to establish the need to adhere to historic orthodoxy. Yet, there is no reference made to Mormonism, one of the largest unorthodox movements in the modern era. So, even though *Heresies and How to Avoid Them* is a meaningful text, there is no use of historic orthodoxy to counter a prominent modern heresy: tritheism.

The aforementioned titles exist for the purpose of bridging the gap between prominent works on doctrinal progression (e.g., Pelikan, 1975) and the contemporary theological landscape. Such a bridge is necessary because broad overviews of historical theology (Berkhof, 1996) provide necessary historical information, but no application for the upholding of historic orthodoxy in a contemporary setting. Even a classic work such as *Early Christian Doctrines* (Kelly, 1960) is a less than satisfactory in demonstrating the necessity of understanding and adhering to historic orthodoxy. In light of current literature relevant to the issue of historic, biblical orthodoxy, what is left to be accomplished is a thoroughly Trinitarian synthesising of church history, theology and exegesis by which one can engage LDS tritheism.

### **1.3 Central Research Question**

The central theoretical question of this work, therefore, is: What was the theological context in which Joseph Smith diverged from Nicene orthodoxy and, given his divergence, how should Nicene Trinitarian orthodoxy respond to and critique Joseph Smith's tritheism?

The questions that emerge from this problem include:

- What is the clear, systematic teaching of Scripture regarding the nature of God?
- What is the historical, orthodox position on the Trinity and how early was it established?
- How is the doctrine of the Trinity currently being addressed among orthodox theologians?
- What was the historical context in which Joseph Smith formulated his tritheism?

- In what manner did Joseph Smith's theological environment encourage theological innovation?
- How has Smith's doctrine of God been revised or clarified by LDS leadership over nearly two centuries into its modern expression?
- How should orthodox, Nicene Christianity approach and critique Smith's (and the modern LDS) doctrine of God?

## **1.4 The Aim & Objectives**

### **1.4.1 The Aim**

The aim of this research is to establish the historical context in which Joseph Smith formulated his tritheism, to examine innovations and clarifications of LDS tritheism and to provide an evaluation and critique of Smith's tritheism from the perspective of Nicene Christianity.

### **1.4.2 The Objectives**

The objectives of this study are seen in relationship to the aim. We will approach this subject from the following angles:

- i)** Identify the core elements of historic, creedal Trinitarianism rooted in the Canon of Scripture and upheld through the rule of faith;
- ii)** Engage with the text of Scripture, using sound rules of exegesis, to identify the biblical teaching on the doctrine of the Trinity;
- iii)** Recount the religious, historical context in which Joseph Smith developed his tritheism and its implications for theological departure from orthodoxy;
- iv)** Recount major innovations, clarification and expansions upon Joseph Smith's tritheism that have culminated in current LDS doctrine;
- v)** Utilise the core elements of creedal Trinitarianism, rooted in a correct exegesis of the Scriptures and upheld by the rule of faith, to evaluate and critique Smith's theology, as well as current LDS doctrine, regarding the nature of God.

## **1.5 Central Theoretical Argument**

The central theoretical argument of this research is that Joseph Smith was just one of many in his region and during his era who abandoned historic, Nicene Christianity; modern LDS formulations, as well as Smith's tritheism, should be evaluated and critiqued in light of historic, Nicene orthodoxy founded upon proper exegesis of Scripture.

## **1.6 Methodology**

This research will employ a careful consideration of relevant data necessary for the proper formulation of a conclusion. Data providing the theological context of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries will be examined using studies that engage with the broad spectrum of North American religious history (Sweet, 1973), works focused upon eighteenth century theology (Noll, 2005), as well as revivalism among early North American evangelicals (Wolffe, 2007). This approach is necessary to produce a clear, theological context in which to understand Joseph Smith's sense of doctrinal freedom. This inquiry further necessitates an interaction with LDS sources recounting the life of Joseph Smith (e.g., Bushman). Due to Smith's claim that his theology was a restoration of early Christian doctrine, a thorough study of early church Trinitarianism must be accomplished. This study will utilise modern works analysing early Christian beliefs including standard works such as *Early Christian Doctrines* (Kelly, 1960), *The Emergence of Catholic Tradition* (Pelikan, 1975) and *The History of Christian Doctrine* (Berkhof, 1996). Further, consideration ought to be afforded to specialised texts focusing upon the development of Nicene orthodoxy. These sources include *Nicaea and its Legacy* (Ayers, 2006) and *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Hanson, 2006). In terms of primary source texts from the early church fathers, ante-Nicene, Nicene and post-Nicene will be explored. This exploration must also engage with early church commentaries on Scripture.

Due to the rooting of Trinitarianism in the text of Scripture, adequate attention will be given to hermeneutical matters (Blomberg, Klein, & Hubbard, 1994 cf. Virkler, 2006), lexical issues (Silva, 1995) and exegetical approaches (Carson, 1996; Rogers & Rogers, 1998), resulting in biblical-theological definition of the Trinity (Verbrugge, 2003). By examining early church history and relying upon the proper interpretation of Scripture, resulting creedal (Schaff, 2007) and modern theological formulations (Coppedge, 2007 cf. Bray, 1993) will be used as the lens by which to critique Smith's tritheism.

Admittedly, this author approaches the data as a committed evangelical from the Reformed tradition. Therefore, the goal will be to utilise a variety of sources not written by those sharing the same theological tradition. While such sources will not be exclusively used, their argumentation will be carefully considered. The purpose of using sources from varying traditions is an attempt to disengage, as much as possible, from the aforementioned theological bias and to allow the data uncovered in this research to speak for itself.

In summary, purposing to adequately explore all perspectives and avenues of information in this research, the following methods will be employed:

- Primary source research as to what historically constituted orthodox, Christian doctrine as it relates to the nature of the Godhead. For the sake of being succinct, this research will be limited to the first four hundred years of church history;
- examine the historical progression of orthodoxy in North America and the eventual splintering of orthodoxy in sectarian groups within the Northeast colonies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries;
- undertake a thorough study of first-hand LDS and non-LDS sources that provide an account of Joseph Smith's life and thought;
- recount the expansions upon, clarifications of and innovations in restating Smith's tritheism through history into modern LDS doctrine by utilising LDS documents;
- examine Smith's theology (and modern LDS doctrine) in light of historic creedal Trinitarianism, a clear exegesis of the text of Scripture and the rule

of faith.

## **1.7 Content Overview**

Over the past 200 years, much has been written on Mormonism and its founding prophet, Joseph Smith. The research presented in this project will attempt to further engage Joseph Smith's theology (and by proxy, Mormonism as a whole) by delving into the historic content of biblical orthodoxy in contradistinction to the teachings of the LDS Church. Before charting the course that lies ahead, it would be prudent to disclose the limitations of this project.

First, some have ventured to systematise the content of LDS theology before engaging with the particulars. In order to accomplish the aim of this research, such a method will not be attempted. Second, when assessing the life and theology of Joseph Smith, there has been a tendency to focus upon the moral failures of the Smith family as a whole. While some of this material will certainly be broached in this work, there will be no attempt to explain or disclose every flaw in the unified character of the Smith family. Last, the current apologetic nuances of LDS scholarship will not be critiqued beyond what is necessary for this research.

The course that will be taken will be an integrated approach to key elements of historic orthodoxy. chapter two will be an assessment of contemporary literature addressing the life and theology of Joseph Smith. In chapter three, the case for Trinitarianism based upon the content of the Scriptures (*English Standard Version*, 2001) will be advanced. This will by no means be an exhaustive account of every element of biblical text pointing to the triunity of the Godhead. However, key Trinitarian texts will be considered both contextually and exegetically. Chapter four will trace the clarification of Trinitarian theology through its first few centuries of exposition. Given that the current trend in popular non-Christian works is to portray the doctrine of the Trinity as *ad hoc* theology conceived numerous centuries after the life of Christ, an exploration of early church fathers will prove monumentally useful in clarifying Trinitarian development. Moving from the early church proper, chapter five will centre on the early North American church. It will be demonstrated that the early church in North

America was both dynamic and yet largely orthodox. What began as an orthodox institution quickly began trending toward unorthodox theological exploration as the eighteenth century drew to a close. Further, Joseph Smith's theological development and influences will be evaluated. The data examined will establish that Joseph Smith's theology developed through an evolutionary process borne out of context and necessity. chapter six will seek to trace the clarifications and modern theological innovations in LDS tritheism from the time of Joseph Smith to the modern era. This information will be followed by an assessment of Smith's tritheism from a Nicene perspective. Finally, chapter seven will supply a cohesive conclusion to the content presented throughout this project. Additionally, areas of research necessitating further study will be noted.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **RELEVANT WORKS EXAMINING THE EARLY LIFE OF JOSEPH SMITH AND HIS HISTORICAL, RELIGIOUS CONTEXT**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

As previously mentioned, much has been written pertaining to the subject matter at hand. Therefore, good research procedures demand that a review of prominent literature be undertaken prior to pressing forward. Specifically, consideration will be given to prominent works that recount the early life and context of Joseph Smith, as well as the religious climate prior to and during Joseph Smith's lifetime. This endeavour will establish the ground on which one of the main objectives of this research will be accomplished: a detailing of the historical context in which Joseph Smith developed his tritheism and its implications for his theological departure from orthodoxy. Even though this objective will be met by the information presented in chapter five and chapter six, the foundation for these chapters will be laid in the present chapter.

#### **2.2 Joseph Smith's Early Life and Context**

Engaging and evaluating the context of Smith's early life, the varying religious influences upon his life, and the ensuing result in his thought is a somewhat difficult task. In considering how to analyse the early life and thought of Joseph Smith, a variety of sources should be examined. First, there are sources recounting Smith's life and context from a sceptical or negative perspective (Abanes, 2003; Tucker, 2004; Tucker, 1867). Second, there are assessments of Joseph Smith from a somewhat neutral approach (Brodie, 1995; Remini, 2002; Riley, 1902). Third, there exist a number of pro-LDS accounts of Smith's life and influences (Bushman, 2005; Smith, 1853; Caswall, 1843).

### 2.2.1 Ruth Tucker and *Another Gospel*

Orthodoxy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was coming against the rise of alternative religious movements (Tucker, 2004:31-48). Ruth Tucker's (2004:50) research led her to the conclusion that the ills and pains of the Smith family drove young Joseph Smith in a quest to elevate the societal standing of his family. Tucker's understanding that the Smith family's aversion to conventional, institutionalised religion had a great impact on Joseph Smith (Tucker, 2004:50), led Tucker (2004:49-51) to recognise Mormonism as just one of the many unorthodox religions that formed during this period of American history.

Tucker (2004:50-51) recounts that the Smith family had a pattern of visions and revelations prior to Joseph Smith's prophetic career. Tucker (2004:51) further takes interest in noting the family affinity with the occult and money digging. In the end, Ruth Tucker (2004:51-56) finds Smith's varying religious influences and compelling accusations of plagiarism to be clear evidence that Smith was not what he claimed himself to be.

The strength of Ruth Tucker's findings is largely based upon her acumen as both a historian and an expert in alternative religious movements. Such a combination of expertise is precisely what is needed in undertaking a thorough evaluation of Smith and his theology. Nevertheless, Ruth Tucker's interaction with the Smiths of history and theology is far too brief. *Another Gospel* represents a formidable and meaningful condensing of large amounts of material. Yet, the expansive and intricate nature of Smith's tritheism and theology as a whole requires a far more detailed response and evaluation. In short, Ruth Tucker's *Another Gospel* begins to travel the necessary path to evaluate Smith from historic orthodoxy, but its journey is cut short. Thus, research should follow Tucker's pattern but go well beyond her stopping point.

### 2.2.2 Richard Abanes and *One Nation Under Gods*

Richard Abanes (2003:5) sees Joseph Smith in the context of a century in the midst of religious experimentation. Abanes (2003:4) believes to be significant and worth noting that Joseph Smith lived in a time not just of religious experimentation, but of increasing innovation in theology and spiritual practices. In Abanes' (2003:5) estimation, even the influences of non-traditional groups advocating forms of polygamy may have played a role in the development of Joseph Smith's thought. Believing Smith to have been sharp-witted but uninterested in mundane tasks, Abanes (2003:7-10) proposes that Smith used his fertile imagination to conjure up some of the information undergirding Mormon doctrine and history. This process was aided by the Smith family's propensity for deception (Abanes, 2003:8-11, 48) and interactions young Joseph had with other purported visionaries (Abanes, 2003:19-22). In the end, Abanes comes to one conclusion: Smith was a cunning and calculating impostor.

The evidence uncovered by Richard Abanes is quite compelling and well researched. Similar to Ruth Tucker's *Another Gospel* (2004), Richard Abanes combines theological details with historical narrative. What sets Abanes' work apart from *Another Gospel* is the sheer length of *One Nation Under Gods*.

Much of what Abanes has uncovered will prove vital to this present research, but what is to come will resume where Abanes stopped. In writing a history of Joseph Smith and chronicling some of his theological influences, Abanes does not attempt to critically engage Smith's tritheism through the lens of Nicene orthodoxy. So, despite what Abanes does accomplish in *One Nation Under Gods*, he falls short of developing a genuine, theological critique of Joseph Smith based upon historic orthodoxy. Therefore, his work must be expanded and built upon by the research within this document.

### 2.2.3 Pomeroy Tucker and *Origin, Rise and Progress of Mormonism*

Perhaps the most influential anti-Mormon text of the mid-nineteenth century was written by Palmyra, New York native Pomeroy Tucker. A contemporary of Joseph Smith, Tucker (1867:13-16) remembers the Smith family as poor, lacking education, and generally lazy. Tucker (1867:16) describes Joseph Smith as an accomplished exaggerator and liar, willing to state any absurdity as fact. In his reading of the Bible, Tucker (1867:17) remembers Joseph Smith to have been considered blasphemous in his interpretations.

Smith's frequent dabbling in various denominations only to later mock their doctrines led Tucker (1867:18) to believe that Joseph and his family were, at their core, atheists. Tucker's (1867:18-27) negative feelings toward the Smith family's religion were only furthered by Joseph's use of occult practices and claims to have supernatural abilities in locating treasure. In brief, as someone who knew Joseph Smith personally, Tucker believed the proclaimed prophet to be a mere charlatan.

Tucker's contribution to the body of literature on Joseph Smith is unique because it is a firsthand account of Smith's life. Therefore, Tucker's insights are immensely valuable and confirm many details about Joseph Smith and his early years. However, it must be admitted that Tucker's work has numerous factual discrepancies including Joseph Smith's birth date (1867:11). Also, Pomeroy Tucker does not detail the theological errors of Joseph Smith at length nor does he begin to describe Smith's divergence from orthodoxy. However, throughout the text, Tucker routinely refers to Joseph Smith as the impostor (imposture). This frequently repeated designation reinforces Pomeroy Tucker's (1867:16) critical understanding of Joseph Smith and his family. Yet, simply calling Smith an impostor or accusing him of heresy is not the same thing as critically evaluating the theological innovations Joseph Smith introduced into North America. So, while very helpful in understanding the early Joseph Smith, Tucker's work does not provide an adequate response or analysis of Smith in light of church history and historic Christian orthodoxy.

#### 2.2.4 Fawn Brodie and *No Man Knows My History*

Perhaps the most well-known and widely-read account of Joseph Smith's life is Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*. Brodie initially undertook her research of the life of Joseph Smith as someone with LDS sympathetic leanings. However, by the time she concluded her study, she no longer considered herself an LDS adherent. Still, Brodie was not entirely negative in her conclusions regarding Joseph Smith. In fact, her estimation of Smith in his younger years was that he was a "likeable ne'er-do-well..." (Brodie, 1995:16).

To Brodie, it is worth recognising that both the Mack family (Joseph's mother's family) and the Smith family (his father's family) left the bounds of traditional Christian orthodoxy (1995:1-4). Further, numerous unorthodox sects existed in or around the area in which Smith's family had settled (Brodie, 1995:12-14, 22). In what Brodie understands as only complicating Joseph Smith's religious outlook, the Smith family engaged in various occult practices in the hopes of locating lost treasures hidden in the earth (1995:16-21). Similarly, the Smith family adhered to the now-debunked belief that Native Americans were the descendants of the ancient Israelites (Brodie, 1995:35-37). While this ill-fated belief was promoted by many during the nineteenth century, it would serve as the basis for Smith's new religion. In the end, for Fawn Brodie, Smith was a patchwork theologian drawing on a variety of sources and influences to form his new religion (1995:403).

Brodie's argumentation is quite valuable in tracing what she believes to have been an evolutionary process in Smith's thought and theology. Brodie (1995:412) masterfully outlines what she proposes to be signs of delusion and clear acts of fraud. Despite the charges of shoddy research and poor writing skills, Brodie's work has stood the test of time. Its strength is due to Brodie's known abilities as a careful and mindful historian and biographer. However, some weaknesses remain.

Brodie (1995:123) does not supply clear evidence of or even a satisfactory explanation for Smith's persistent religious charade. Certainly, Brodie sees this aspect of Smith's life as a mix between deception and fraud, but she fails to formulate a cohesive theory as to how these elements of Smith's *persona* tie into his theological development. It should also be noted that while Brodie can assemble a meaningful and reliable retelling of Smith's history and early context, her incipient secularism (post-research) and failure to meaningfully unpack Joseph Smith the theologian leaves a large hole in the outcome of her findings. It seems that her investigation leads Fawn Brodie to believe that Smith proclaimed something he initially knew to be largely false. Be that as it may, Brodie proposes that by the final years of his life, Smith began to understand himself as more than a good storyteller, but rather a truly "prophetic" figure. Even though this proposition is intriguing and well argued, it does not begin to respond to what a deceptive or deluded Smith actually asserted in terms of theology.

In the final analysis, Fawn Brodie's research should be used by any historian seeking to understand the life of Joseph Smith. Yet, for those seeking to engage with Smith as a theologian, *No Man Knows My History* leaves much to be desired. This shortcoming is not surprising given Brodie's aforementioned move from LDS sympathies to outright secularism. Building upon the work of Fawn Brodie as one who believes in the supernatural provides more of a credible footing among many LDS adherents. Therefore, a need exists for a thorough handling of Smith from both history and historic Christian orthodoxy.

### **2.2.5 Robert Vincent Remini and *Joseph Smith***

In his study of Joseph Smith, Robert Vincent Remini (2002:1-6) immediately recognises that Smith was born at a time of religious fervour. This became apparent and is seen in the Smith family by their attention to and interest in folk-magic (Remini, 2002:8). For Remini (2002:7-8), Smith was born into a setting ripe for the rise of prophets and new religious expressions. Additionally, Remini identifies Smith as one of many would-be visionaries in his bloodline. In short, Smith's family was somewhat preoccupied with visions and personal revelations (Remini, 2002:8-12). By the time Smith claimed to have had his First Vision, he had been well acquainted with the

unorthodox and more charismatic outpourings taking place during a period of revivalism (Remini, 2002:12-17).

In *Joseph Smith*, Remini (2002:78) utilises his expansive knowledge of Jacksonian-era America to argue that Smith was a product of Second Great Awakening revivalism. The weakness of this text and Remini's arguments as a whole do not result from poor writing or even deficient research. Instead, if there is a limitation to Remini's brief biography of Smith, it is his understanding of Mormonism as purely a product of revivalism. His arguments for Joseph Smith being caught in the flow of religious excitement are intriguing, but Remini never explores the manner in which Smith abandoned historic Christian orthodoxy. It almost appears as if Remini fails to make much of a distinction between Smith's religion and orthodox movements that would come out of the Second Great Awakening. This shortfall can be rectified by engaging historic orthodoxy in contradistinction to the theology that Joseph Smith developed.

#### **2.2.6 Woodbridge Riley and *The Founder of Mormonism***

In his 1902 study of Joseph Smith, Woodbridge Riley seeks to examine the psychological makeup of the self-proclaimed prophet. Riley (1902:12-14, 20-22, 27-30) positions Smith in a line of those who embellished stories and stretched the truth. Further, Riley (1902:15) proposes that Smith's grandfather, along with Joseph, exhibited signs of epilepsy. This medical condition, coupled with Joseph Smith's affinity for tall-tales, religious individuality, and the enthusiastic revivalism of the period, created the ideal situation for Smith to develop a new theology (Riley, 1902:37-50). Admittedly, Riley (1902:31-35) attempts to explain the supernatural experiences of the Smith family from an entirely naturalistic standpoint, he believes Joseph Smith to be simply a product of nature and environment. This explanation is symptomatic of *The Founder of Mormonism's* inadequacies.

Woodbridge Riley attempts a fairly early appraisal of the multitude of factors that led to the birth of Joseph Smith as a prophet. Although his findings have maintained their rather persuasive nature over the past century of scrutiny, they do little more than explain the cumulative effect of influences upon young Joseph Smith. What must be accomplished is an assimilation of this information into a critique of Smith as a theological thinker. Forging a path of naturalistic explanation, Riley makes no effort to assess Smith's theology (aside from those issues which dictate societal structures within the LDS community) based upon his understanding of varying influences upon Smith. This is as it should be, considering that the expertise of Woodbridge Riley is not historical theology or dogmatics. Therefore, Riley's work should be taken into account as part of a cumulative assessment of Smith that recognises social and psychological factors leading to Joseph Smith's eventual tritheism, but *The Founder of Mormonism* could never stand on its own as a critique of Smith the theologian.

### **2.2.7 Richard L. Bushman and *A Rough Stone Rolling***

Richard Bushman (2005:21) begins *A Rough Stone Rolling* by portraying Smith as a likeable man who never purported to be perfect and did not succumb to megalomaniac temptations. Bushman also portrays young Joseph Smith as a man deeply sensitive to the abundance of hypocrisy in the local church. In spite of this hypocrisy, Richard Bushman (2005:57-58) believes to be noble that Smith still attempted to find for himself a church home. Further, regardless of the varying religious influences and the much-reported family business of treasure hunting, Bushman (2005:68-76) perceives Smith as a young man who had experiences that led him to believe himself to be a true prophet. Ultimately, Bushman does not understand Smith as a product of his period or context but instead as a genuine, albeit flawed, prophet of God.

Bushman's conclusions are quite interesting. It would appear as if he is asking his readers to disconnect from searching for the Joseph Smith of history. While Bushman writes a history of Smith's life, he does so with an approach that separates the testability of Joseph as a prophet from historical inquiry. He encourages his readers to consider the prophethood of Joseph Smith not based on any evidence in favour of Smith's claims; rather Smith is to be believed for more existential reasons. The growth

of Mormonism is but one proof that Bushman presents as evidence that Smith was something entirely unique.

What *A Rough Stone Rolling* accomplishes is a fair and relatively balanced retelling of Joseph Smith's life. Nevertheless, Bushman's attempt to promote the faith Smith founded apart from serious scrutiny and theological critique seems less than defensible. In the end, Bushman has penned what could at best be described as a sympathetic portrait of Smith, while remaining largely historically accurate, but fails to engage with the theology of the self-proclaimed prophet. What is worse is that Bushman ends up approaching Smith from what seems to be two contradictory angles. On the one hand, he believes Smith to be a true prophet, while on the other remaining sceptical toward some of Smith's claims, at some points even acknowledging his moral failures, such as lying (Bushman, 2005:491). Further, Bushman (2005:451) even concedes that Smith would borrow from religious sources outside of divine inspiration, including Freemasonry.

It must be stated that, despite its shortcomings, *A Rough Stone Rolling* is the most balanced pro-LDS biography of Smith to date. Therefore, details of Smith's early life can and will be ascertained from Bushman's research. However, Bushman's conclusions must be interacted with in the context of historical inquiry from the perspective of orthodoxy, rather than disengaging from the Smith of history and anti-orthodoxy. Why? Because the only Smith that can be known is precisely the Smith of history, and the theology that originated from his teachings challenged historic orthodoxy.

### **2.2.8 Lucy Smith and *History of the Prophet Joseph Smith***

Perhaps the most interesting retelling of Joseph Smith's life comes from his own mother, Lucy Mack Smith. Throughout her biography of Joseph, Lucy Smith (1853:1-59) narrates her family troubles and the difficult background into which Joseph Smith was born. Positioning Joseph in a line of visionaries, Lucy Mack Smith (1853:56-58) describes her husband's (Joseph's father) own visions with great clarity. As Smith (1853:73) communicates her history of Joseph, she says that he was

influenced by these visions from his father and his family aversion to sectarian dissension. Further, Lucy Smith (1853:91-92) does not deny that Joseph was involved with treasure hunting ventures, but merely portrays him as a reluctant participant in these less than honourable activities. In the end, Joseph's mother believed him to be a true prophet, a man seeking to restore unity in Christianity and she professed her account of his life to be true and open to investigation (Smith, 1853:281).

Few mothers have ever written detailed biographies of their sons. This is even more true of a mother who had a self-proclaimed prophet for a son. A critical engagement of Lucy Mack Smith's book produces some expected results. Namely, Lucy presents her son in an incredibly positive light despite hard evidence that would seem to discredit Joseph Smith. Yet, in the midst of describing her family members as proverbial lifelong victims of injustice, Lucy Mack Smith admits to their engagement in some practices that were less than respected. By no means, she gives every detail of their indiscretions, nor does she outright apologise for how the Smith family lived. However, in the references previously cited, Lucy Mack Smith confirms information fundamental to the negative reports regarding Joseph Smith. So, while the biography she penned regarding her son is a prime example of propaganda masquerading as biography, Lucy Mack Smith furnishes details about the life of her son that are pertinent to establishing the context and influences upon his life and theology. Further, her closing affirmation to critically investigate her story demands that her testimony be used in researching the life, context, and thought of Joseph Smith.

### **2.2.9 Henry Caswall and *The Prophet of the Nineteenth Century***

In what appears to be the first biography of any Mormon, Henry Caswall paints a fascinating portrait of the Smith family. The author candidly admits that Joseph Smith served as a phenomenon of what orthodox Christians considered to be heresy (Caswall, 1843:26). Caswall (1843:27) readily recognises the religious enthusiasm of the age in which Joseph was raised. Further, the Smith family is demonstrated to have been a confusingly religious brood that participated in the revival fervour of the day but remained markedly disengaged from historic Christianity (Caswall, 1843:28). In summation, Caswall (1843:33-35) argues that Smith was a true prophet who used the

indiscretions of his family and his treasure hunting activities as a test by which to sift through those who would not believe his story.

The value of *The Prophet of the Nineteenth Century* is similar to that of Lucy Mack Smith's biography of Joseph Smith: confirmation of critical details from decidedly pro-LDS sources. Further, due to its early appearance, Caswall's text is a necessary reading for those seeking to research the life and theology of Joseph Smith. Such an early source is rarely available for historical inquiry.

The problems with Henry Caswall's account are fairly obvious: he is writing a biography meant to vindicate or defend the legacy of Joseph Smith in spite of historical evidence. So, what must be done is to utilise Caswall's findings as a means by which to flesh out some of the data coming from relatively neutral and even anti-LDS sources. Such a method will result in the establishment of undeniable facts regarding Smith and his context. These facts will serve as an undisputed foundation for critiquing Smith's theology.

#### **2.2.10 Summary**

The relevant literature regarding Joseph Smith's life is both varied in approach and conclusions. For some researchers, Smith was clearly an impostor. For others, Joseph Smith was a man with flaws who established a return of the true church. However, among the great biographies of Smith examined thus far, few give much attention to the early life of Joseph Smith. Still, in the midst of conflicting conclusions, the material presented enables researchers to establish a few central facts. First, Smith was born into a religiously confused family. Second, the Smith family engaged in practices historically condemned by orthodox Christianity. Third, the residents of Palmyra, New York held relatively negative feelings toward the Smith clan. Fourth, Joseph was known for being a charismatic story-teller. Last, the eventual prophet was bent on elevating his family status in society.

## 2.3 History Literature

Germane to this study are the numerous treatments of American religious history. In particular, it is important to analyse the theological landscape just prior to and during the early life of Joseph Smith. For this purpose, classic treatments of American religious history will be engaged (Sweet, 1973; Ahlstrom, 1972; Gaustad, 1990), as well as contemporary forays into eighteenth and nineteenth century theology (Noll, 1992, 2005, 2010; Wolffe, 2007).

### 2.3.1 Sydney E. Ahlstrom and *A Religious History of the American People*

In his seminal work, *A Religious History of the American People*, Sydney Ahlstrom (1972: 503) dismisses the need to validate Smith's First Vision. Instead, Ahlstrom (1972:474, 503) believes it to be clear that Smith and his family had been influenced by revivalist preaching and various doctrinal disputes challenging long-held orthodoxy. For Ahlstrom (1972:503), the unorthodox theological interests of Smith's parents are striking, considering Smith's eventual anti-orthodox status. Similarly, Smith's religious context proved to be highly speculative and viscously anti-establishment (Ahlstrom, 1972:360-454, 504). Ultimately, regardless of Smith's legitimacy as a prophet, Ahlstrom (1972:388-454, 472-509) demonstrates that Smith's family life and religious context provided a perfect storm scenario in which one could or would deviate from orthodoxy.

Ahlstrom's detailing of American religious history is a necessary point of attention for good, balanced research of North American church history. Further, Ahlstrom supplies valuable information regarding the Smith family and the early LDS movement. This will prove most useful in formulating a historical narrative by which to assess Joseph Smith's context. Nevertheless, Ahlstrom (1972:503) makes no attempt to detail the theological confusion or innovation of Joseph Smith, nor his prophetic utterances. Certainly, Ahlstrom does mention that Smith (among others) differed from the standard orthodoxy of the day; however, as a historian Ahlstrom does not critique or interact with Smith as a religious figure. Instead, Ahlstrom leaves this aspect of research for the work of those in the field of historical theology and dogmatics. So, even though

Ahlstrom's research is useful in terms of historical facts, it does not fill the need of critiquing Smith the theologian.

### **2.3.2 William Sweet and *The Story of Religion in America***

In his classic work, *The Story of Religion in America*, William Sweet (1973:5) argues that religion in early America lacked organisation. The influence of established religious institutions led to a glut of unchurched, religious people during the early eighteenth century (Sweet, 1973:5). In Sweet's estimation (1973:5-6), the first unified religious movement is that of revivalism. It is through revivalism that many individuals began to embrace "warped" understandings of Christianity (Sweet, 1973:6, 230). Sweet sees this environment as being coupled with the effects of politically charged anti-establishment ideology. There was a sense that what came from the Old World, both political and religious, was being rejected (Sweet, 1973:6, 240-242).

William Sweet does not shy away from discussing (in broad terms) the benefits and drawbacks of revivalism and theological innovation. Still, he does so in a manner that accomplishes little more than a survey of religious divergence from the norm. *The Story of Religion in America* is an important work by which to gain a birds-eye view of orthodoxy and alternative movements in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, for the purpose of deeply understanding an unorthodox movement such as Mormonism (and its founding prophet), the information given in Sweet's work does not attain a tight enough perspective on specific religious movements and their theology. If the particulars provided by Sweet in *The Story of Religion in America* could be integrated into the backdrop of a careful assessment of Joseph Smith, then it would prove to be a valuable resource. Even so, the importance of Sweet's work is in its function a reference for detailing background information rather than direct interaction with the theology of Joseph Smith.

### 2.3.3 Mark Noll and *America's God, A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada, The Rise of Evangelicalism*

More than any other contemporary voice, Mark Noll has established himself as a leading historian in the quest to tell the story of religion in America. Therefore, prudent research demands a synoptical review of his three relevant works: *America's God* (2005), *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (1992) and *The Rise of Evangelicalism* (2010). For Noll (2005:62; 2010: 37-38), the period prior to the American Revolution was marked by religious voices from the established churches in the Old World. This atmosphere changed in a post-war America, where dissenters and new leaders could attain positions of religious prominence (Noll, 1992:197; 2005:61; 2010:37-38). While certain anti-orthodox sentiments already existed (such as Unitarianism), they would not come to full fruition until after the American Revolution (Noll, 2005:153; 2010:41). In fact, Noll (2005:4) describes these divergences from orthodoxy and the resultant theological debates as having raged quite intensely from approximately 1730 through the close of the Civil War. Nevertheless, the primary influencing system in the colonies, theologically speaking, was that of Old World Puritanism (Noll, 2005:19; 114-115).

The strength of Noll's writings can be most clearly seen in two critical facets. First, Noll gives his readers a vivid explanation as to how religion and culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries shaped one another (especially in *America's God* and *The Rise of Evangelicalism*). Recognising that political, cultural, theological, and philosophical concepts all tended to blur into one system, Noll masterfully outlines the manner in which the synthesising of these distinct lines of thought shaped American religion.

Second, Noll's (1992) efforts are valuable in understanding the theological trends in eighteenth and nineteenth century America based upon regional issues. On occasion, historians tend to refer to this period of American religious history with generic language that seems to assume a level of consistency throughout the nation which did not exist. Noll (2005) goes to great lengths to point out theological consistency where it

existed, while also demonstrating the theological freedom that was felt post-Revolutionary War.

While Noll's research will be utilised often in the present research, its shortcomings in theological history are significant. Mark Noll is an accomplished New World historian. However, interaction with historic orthodoxy in his works is virtually non-existent. This is not to say that he is ignorant of historic, Christian essentials. The issue with Noll's research is that he never attempts to trace the core of Christian orthodoxy through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in distinction from unorthodox movements. Again, Noll does describe alternative religious movements and some of their influences, but he falls short of engaging their theology as it relates to historic Nicene Christianity. This is why his writings will prove helpful for the present project but still must be augmented by further investigation so as to be useful in examining the tritheism of Joseph Smith.

#### **2.3.4 John Wolffe and *The Expansion of Evangelicalism***

John Wolffe (2007:45-46) characterises the period of 1790 to 1820 as a time of unique spirituality embodied in revivalism. As Wolffe has observed (2007:56-57), revivalism was critical in religiously engaging the younger members of the American population, which by the turn of the nineteenth century composed over half of the population. Yet these young people, prior to the emergence of revivalism, were largely absent from church membership (Wolffe, 2007:57). As Wolffe (2007:64) relays, many during this period saw the emotionalism attached to the outbreak of revivalism as a sign that the millennial reign of Christ was being ushered into inauguration. While identifying the concern of some that revivalism was leading to theological confusion during this period, Wolffe ultimately depicts this historical era as a time of true evangelical expansion rather than theological innovation.

It should be admitted that *The Expansion of Evangelicalism* is an excellent resource for understanding the spread of evangelicalism throughout the world and especially North America during the eighteenth century. Even so, Wolffe's work is not without its drawbacks. Perhaps the most notable issue with Wolffe's research is that he does little to distinguish evangelical theological trends during the eighteenth century from the

theological innovation that led to the expansion of unorthodox movements. Although a historian of Wolffe's stature is not uninformed of such movements, he does not supply a distinguishing paradigm by which to understand evangelical theological societies and movements from those on the fringe of or opposed to historic orthodoxy.

The lack of specificity in Wolffe's work may be due in part to his adoption of David Bebbington's (2005 & 1989) broad definition of evangelicalism. Bebbington's analysis of what constitutes evangelicalism would cause the blurring of lines between orthodoxy and groups such as the Latter Day Saints. This is not to say that Wolffe (or Bebbington, for that matter) considers Joseph Smith and his church to be evangelical. Rather, such a broad approach to defining evangelicalism leads Wolffe away from furnishing a thorough distinction between the growth of orthodox churches and those outside of orthodoxy, such as the LDS church. Consequently, while Wolffe has penned an excellent source for understanding the spread of evangelicalism, his work does little in furthering an appreciation of the spread and growth of unorthodox movements.

### **2.3.5 Edwin Scott Gaustad and *A Religious History of America***

Edwin Gaustad (1990:70-71) sees the Northern colonies as having reached a point of great religious variety by the early eighteenth century. He goes so far as to describe this religious variety as pluralism, especially in New York, New Jersey, and Delaware (Gaustad, 1990:81). By the time of the American Revolution, New Yorkers had come to see the established, Old World Church of England in a negative light (Gaustad, 1990:88-89). In place of Anglicanism, New Yorkers began to embrace a wide spectrum of religious institutions (Gaustad, 1990:88-89). Gaustad contends (1990:115-127) that by the war's end, American religious sentiments saw the freedom declared through independence from England as freedom not just from political tyrants, but also religious authorities (by proxy also orthodoxy). It appears as if, in the end, Gaustad perceives Mormonism as a product of its time period and religious context. However, Gaustad (1990:158-161) clearly believes the Latter Day Saints to be the most effective non-orthodox proponents of utopian ideas.

*A Religious History of America* is an interesting text precisely because of its presuppositions and its starting point. Unlike other historians, Gaustad does not appear to give New England Puritan thought preeminence in early American religion. Instead, his work approaches the issue of North American religion by first espousing its non-Christian, pluralistic roots (Gaustad, 1990:3). It would seem that Gaustad even envisions religious freedom (an issue he equates with the separation of church and state) to be freedom from orthodoxy.

Engaging a text with the aforementioned presuppositions and assumptions provides us with a valuable resource by which to assess Joseph Smith and his context. Gaustad's data is an avenue by which to gain a non-evangelical analysis of Joseph Smith's religious context. This assessment assumes the virtues of pluralism and therefore does not embrace anti-supernatural ideas. Nevertheless, Gaustad's research cannot begin to adequately engage with men like Joseph Smith and his theology, precisely because of its pluralistic assumptions. Thus, Gaustad's *A Religious History of America* can be utilised as a somewhat unbiased source (if such a thing can be said to exist) for understanding and critiquing Smith's theological context and influences.

### **2.3.6 Summary**

While the historians reviewed come to varying conclusions regarding the religious landscape of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century America, there is quite a bit of continuity in their findings. First, the authors all agree that even though traditional Christian orthodoxy dominated, the folk-level appreciation for these beliefs was mixed. Second, many of the leading philosophies in America that encouraged revolution disengaged from traditional Christian thinking regarding the nature of man and the influence of God. Last, the socio-religious milieu in the northern states provided a fertile breeding ground for unorthodox teaching. In spite of the aforementioned facts, the sources reviewed do not adequately critique or interact with Smith's theology from the perspective of Nicene Christianity.

## 2.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this analysis has been to establish what the current content of scholarly data does or does not achieve in its examination of Joseph Smith, his theology, and context. Thankfully, as this literature review has demonstrated, the information from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries necessary to undertake this research is bountiful. What has been observed in reviewing scholarly literature is that a number of fine researchers have discussed Smith and his context, but few have engaged with his theology and life in the manner this present research seeks to do.

History and alternative religion experts such as Ruth Tucker (2004) and Richard Abanes (2003) have written excellent accounts of Smith and his theological context; however, they have not critiqued him from the perspective of Nicene orthodoxy. Biographies of Joseph Smith have been written to achieve different goals. Fawn Brodie's work, *No Man Knows My History* (1995) has done more to detail Smith's life than any other biographical volume. Still, issues remain based upon her commitment to secularism. Richard Bushman (2007) has penned a satisfying biography of Joseph Smith from the perspective of a genuine believer. While the information he details confirms specific elements of Fawn Brodie's findings, Bushman's research is marred by his LDS commitments and seemingly contradictory conclusions. However, based upon the wide praise for his book among LDS scholars, the findings presented in *A Rough Stone Rolling* must be integrated into material contained within this project.

Among the historians surveyed, a few items are worth noting. First, even renowned historians such as Mark Noll do not scrutinise Smith in a manner that proves useful for defending Nicene orthodoxy. Still, the historical information uncovered by Noll is absolutely essential for establishing a well-rounded understanding of Smith's historical and theological context. Sydney Ahlstrom and William Sweet corroborate much of the material presented by Mark Noll, but their writings are not as focused as what Noll has produced. Despite their less detailed approach to historical material fundamental to this study, Ahlstrom (1972) and Sweet (1973) will be utilised in formulating the historical narrative in chapter six. Gaustad's (1990) approach is distinct enough to be worth repeating. As a religious historian who espouses the value of pluralism, Gaustad is a

unique voice. His findings furnish an interesting perspective when discussing orthodoxy, religious freedom, and church history. Therefore, Gaustad will serve as a scholarly contrast to Mark Noll and John Wolffe (2007).

Scholars from various perspectives and with differing approaches all confirm essential facts relevant to understanding Joseph Smith and his theology. What is left to be done is to integrate this data into a cohesive narrative that provides strong indicators for how and why Joseph Smith developed his tritheism. These findings must then result in a critique of Smith's theology from Nicene orthodoxy. The data uncovered here will be expanded upon in chapters five and six. Thus, the literature reviewed in this chapter establishes some of what represents scholarly consensus regarding Joseph Smith in his context. These findings meet the aim and objectives of this research project by being the first of a two-step process by which Joseph Smith is examined in light of history and religious influences.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE TRINITY IN THE SCRIPTURES

#### 3.1 Introduction

Nicene orthodoxy is Trinitarianism and Trinitarianism is Nicene orthodoxy. Such a statement immediately brings to mind a critical question: What is the basis of Nicene orthodoxy? Is it, as some LDS apologists claim, pagan philosophy (Oaks, 1995:84)? The answer to such a question should come in two parts.

First, philosophical categories utilised by pagan philosophers have been employed to express the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet, this usage does not make the doctrine any less true. To discount the value of certain descriptive linguistic categories due to their usage by pagan peoples would render virtually all language unusable. Further, even LDS scholar Robert Millet (1996:48) admits that pagan language and philosophical concepts are employed in the bounds of Mormon theology.

The second step in answering the above question requires the attention of this chapter. Even if pagan philosophical categories have been utilised in describing the doctrine of the Trinity, this does not make the doctrine invalid if the basis for the doctrine is grounded in God's self-revelation. Provided that the foundation for Nicene orthodoxy can be found within the text of enscripturated revelation, the goal of the expositor of Scripture is to accurately describe what is represented in God's self-revelation, regardless of the heritage of linguistic categories necessary to convey what is taught in Scripture.

Therefore, the purpose of this chapter will be to examine the grounding of Nicene orthodoxy: the Scriptures. This is necessary to answer one of the secondary research questions central to the purpose of this project. That secondary question is simply this: What is the clear, systematic teaching of Scripture regarding the doctrine of the Trinity? A mere sampling of two or three key Trinitarian passages will not suffice in establishing a case for Trinitarian teaching within the text of Scripture. From the Nicene

perspective, the Trinity is revealed in the pervasive and consistent manner in which the persons of the Godhead are mentioned throughout the entirety of Scripture (McGrath, 2011:248). What must be seen is the overall arc of Trinitarian theology demonstrated in Scripture as a whole.

The course taken through this chapter will first necessitate the establishment of monotheism as foundational to Nicene Trinitarianism. However, merely listing or engaging with texts that indicate monotheism in the Old Testament will not adequately detail the theological background for Nicene Trinitarianism, given the contemporary trend to interpret early Israelite monotheism as henotheism. Therefore, a fair amount of attention will be dedicated to the issues of monotheism versus henotheism in the Old Testament. Moving forward, allusions to the Trinity within the text of the Old Testament will receive consideration. This will provide the reader with the traditional, Nicene interpretation of plurality allusions within the Old Testament. However, the bulk of the research in this chapter will centre upon the Trinitarian data revealed in the scriptural portrayal of Father, Son and Spirit as all divine persons. The chapter will then conclude with a summary of Triadic formulations found throughout the text of the New Testament.

### **3.2 The Basis of the Trinity: Monotheism**

The most important Old Testament text regarding the uniqueness of God is found within the confession of Hebrew monotheism, the *Shema*. The passage from which the *Shema* is taken, Deuteronomy 6:4, reads “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” The Hebrew word used in this text for “one” is *'echad*. Even though the word is accurately translated as “one,” it does not imply a position of isolation (Mounce, 2006:485). Instead, *'echad* stresses the uniqueness, as well as the unity, of *Yahweh* (Sailhamer, 1992:439). In John Sailhamer’s opinion (1992:439), the intent of the passage is to provide a clear distinction between the monotheism of Israel and the polytheism of the surrounding nations. William Dyrness concurs with Sailhamer’s argument. Although Dyrness (1979:48) believes that the early Old Testament data demonstrates a commitment by the patriarchs to monolatry rather than monotheism, he sees the *Shema* as a statement of absolute monotheism. Regardless of the somewhat

debatable nature of patriarch theology, the *Shema* does appear to teach that there is but one being that can be qualitatively described as God.

Despite taking a rather critical approach of the text of Deuteronomy, Alexander Rofe (2002:19) concludes that the context of this passage has to be understood in light of the Ancient Near Eastern (henceforth referred to as ANE) belief in regional gods. Yet, as Rofe argues (2002:19), the *Shema* must be acknowledged as a condemnation of other gods for not being gods at all. This approach seems to provide a balanced and canonical understanding of the Old Testament assertions that *Yahweh* alone is God, but men serve “strange” gods. Approaching the issue from the opposite end of the theological spectrum, Todd Miles comes to a similar conclusion regarding the *Shema* when he writes:

Fundamental to Old Testament monotheism is not merely the explicit denial of other “gods,” though such denials are there...Rather, the Israelite people were to worship the Lord God who is essentially and categorically different from any other being, whether real or imagined, natural or supernatural, who was worshipped as “god” by the surrounding peoples (Miles, 2010:51-52).

In the end, both Rofe and Miles conclude that the *Shema* teaches that there is not just one true God of Israel, but also of the entire universe (Rofe, 2002:19; cf. Miles, 2010:59-62). The distinction made between the God of Israel and the gods of other ANE people has less to do with the interpretation of the worshipers and more to do with the nature of the being who is worshipped. The remainder of this section will serve to fortify the conclusions of Miles and Rofe.

The content of Deuteronomy is largely related to and focused upon the Law given to Moses in the Exodus account. Interestingly enough, as mentioned above, the words of the *Shema* declare that *Yahweh* alone exists as God (Walton, 2009:456). Such a contention is problematic for those who seek to redefine the first commandment in the Decalogue. Some propose that the first commandment in the Law of Moses is an acknowledgment that other gods exist but that the Hebrews ought to worship *Yahweh* alone (Mills & Wilson, 1995:147; cf. Matthews, 2005:77). However, given that Deuteronomy functions as a commentary or restatement via application of the Law of Moses, it is untenable to hold to a henotheistic interpretation of Exodus 20:3 (Walton,

2009:230). Oswald Allis makes a similar proposition but expands it beyond the immediate context of Deuteronomy. For Allis (1951:74), the very fact that the author of Genesis and Exodus refers to the God of Israel as the sole Creator of the universe necessitates a monotheistic interpretation of this commandment. A distinction that seems to naturally flow from the data, then, is that theological propositions differ from religious commands. While the author of the texts in question may be theologically affirming monotheism, he is not ignoring the fact that some Israelites hold to a less than monotheistic view of the world around them. So, the content of the religious command should not be seen as a disavowal pertaining to the objective reality of monotheism, but as an acknowledgment of subjective henotheistic practices among the Hebrew people.

Even more damning to the notion that henotheism is represented in the first commandment is John Sailhamer's observation (1992:285) that "other gods" is a reference to dead, wooden idols. He substantiates this claim by noting Deuteronomy 28:36, which states: "The LORD will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone." The crux of Sailhamer's argument, then, is not that the author of the Pentateuch denies that men worship false gods, but that these gods (as represented in idols) are not qualitatively deity. Furthermore, if one is to assume a consistency in authorship and worldview within the Pentateuch, it would mean that the author presumably applies the *Shema* concept of monotheism throughout the text. Therefore, based upon Sailhamer's argument, it appears proper to interpret statements pertaining to deity, within the Pentateuch at-large, through the lens of *Shema* monotheism.

Returning specifically to the *Shema*, John Frame (2002:622) makes the following observation: "God is one being (quantitatively) because there is only one Lord (qualitatively)." This nuanced understanding of qualitative deity is most helpful and will be referenced throughout the course of this chapter. For Frame (2002:622-623), just as those authors previously mentioned, the *Shema* must be understood in the greater context of Deuteronomy, in which frequent monotheistic affirmations occur. For instance, in Deuteronomy 4:32-39, the author states twice that there is no other God beside *Yahweh*. In verse 4:35 the author states, "Know that the LORD is God; there is

no other besides him.” Again in 4:39 an equivalent statement is made, “...The LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.” Compare these affirmations to what is stated in Deuteronomy 32:39 when the author writes, “...there is no god beside me...” Such a series of pronouncements seems to lay the matter to rest. Yet, statements such as these do little to convince Bernard Anderson and Steven Bishop.

These authors believe that references such as those mentioned only make sense in the context of poetic literature that refers to *Yahweh* as superior to other gods (Anderson & Bishop, 1999:64). Anderson and Bishop (1999:66) propose that not until the latter portion of Isaiah could one say that Israel takes upon itself explicit monotheism. For Anderson and Bishop (1999:66), all early monotheistic statements are more in line with expressed allegiance to a national God rather than a belief in only one God. Still, given the material presented thus far, the position taken by Anderson and Bishop does not seem to best explain the data. For proof of their position, one need only look in one of the books they routinely cite: Deuteronomy.

Taking into account what has been seen thus far in the *Shema* and other texts in Deuteronomy, the data presented makes the most consistent sense by assuming monotheism. This is especially true when one considers that the author of Deuteronomy records an insistence that the worship of other “gods” through sacrifice is actually the worship of demons (Deut. 32:17). Thus, while not the only way to interpret the data, the most consistent interpretation of the information in Deuteronomy is to assume monotheism.

### **3.3 The Basis of the Trinity: Monotheism and Henotheism in the Old Testament**

The issue of monotheism in the Old Testament can be rather complex, depending upon one’s approach to this topic. As K.L. Noll (2001:132) observed, the distinctions necessary to differentiate monotheism and henotheism are often subtle. Due to the lofty language utilised by henotheists to speak of their god as opposed to other gods, one could easily misunderstand their verbiage for that of a confused monotheist (K.L. Noll,

2001:132). Moreover, one could just as easily read the words of a committed monotheist and come to the conclusion that they are a henotheist (K.L. Noll, 2001:132; cf. Bright, 2000:145). The subtle difference is often that the henotheist acknowledges multiple beings who are, by their very nature, gods. In contrast, the monotheist readily makes reference to and believes in the existence of created spiritual beings entirely different from God, but who could nevertheless be mistaken as gods.

Horst Dietrich Preuss (1996:7) begins addressing the issue of early Israelite religion by discussing the problematic “God of our ancestors” passages. In assessing the patriarchal data regarding Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Preuss seems to believe that these three central figures adhere to a common ANE ancestral deity understanding of *Yahweh*. While *Yahweh* was different from all other gods, His distinction was in that He called Abram and became the God of His people (Preuss, 1996:8-10). Preuss (1996:8) then perceives a progress occurring at the time of Moses in which there is a distinct move from being a people who adhere to tribal adoration of deities, to becoming solely dedicated to *Yahweh*. Still, one can see an amalgamation of theological concepts, according to Preuss (1996:8-10), by the usage of *El* designations in conjunction with *Yahweh*.

Walther Eichrodt comes to conclusions similar to those of Preuss. For Eichrodt (1967:220), it is beyond question that the early Israelites believed in many gods. He argues that the majority of the “early” Old Testament assumes the existence of many gods (Eichrodt, 1967:220-221). In noting this proposed assumption, Eichrodt (1967:220) chides those who use monotheistic theology as the test for the truth of a given religious system. Pressing the issue further, Eichrodt (1967:221-222) cites numerous passages which he recognises as teaching that there are many gods in existence, rather than *Yahweh* alone. Walther Zimmerli comes to the same conclusion as Eichrodt. After citing the same or similar passages as Eichrodt (2000:42), he states, “Yahwism did not simply eliminate the notion of alien deities, however much it considered *Yahweh* alone the only divinity for Israel. Israel knows nothing of any theoretical monotheism.”

Even a cursory interaction with the propositions laid forth by Preuss and Eichrodt (and Zimmerli, for that matter) reveals a number of tenuous assumptions and questionable reasoning. First, Preuss predicates his entire argument on the assumption that the Pentateuch is a document comprised of information from many different authors. Although some scholars ardently contend for this position, this contention is debatable at best (see Archer, 1994:89-189). Additionally, Preuss sees support for his assumptions in the fact that he believes much of the Old Testament and its theology originate in the seventh century before Christ. Therefore, if the multiple authors with multiple motivations theory of Pentateuch composition is demonstrated to be false, the arguments presented by Preuss lose their strength.

In the case of Eichrodt, he too assumes a very late dating for the composition and content of the Old Testament books and theology. Moreover, many of the passages he uses to support his contention for a belief in many gods fall far short of demonstrating his assertion (most of these are addressed throughout the course of this chapter). Special attention will be given to the three texts purported to support Eichrodt's position. The first text in which he sees henotheistic tendencies is Judges 11:23-24. Because Jephthah states that his God gives Him land and Chemosh gives the Moabites their territory, Eichrodt assumes that the text is teaching that there are many gods. Yet, can such an assumption be justified? Would it not be more probable that the author of Judges is merely describing the conversation that occurred, rather than using the narrative to prescribe a belief in many gods? Likewise, it is highly debatable whether Jephthah was affirming the existence of the god Chemosh. Given the Moabite belief in Chemosh, it would not serve Jephthah well to ignore the Moabite belief that a god named Chemosh gave them their territory when Jephthah is arguing that *Yahweh* gave the Hebrews their land. Thus, it could be argued that this text is more of a description of a conversation than a statement of theology.

Eichrodt also cites II King 3:27 as clear evidence that the Israelites believed in territorial gods. Yet, the text itself only states that the king of Moab sacrifices his son as a burnt offering during a battle with the king of Edom. The text then states that a great wrath falls upon the warriors of Israel and so they return to their land. While on the surface, Eichrodt's contention seems to have some validity, his argument loses strength

when one considers what the text does *not* say. There is no mention of wrath coming from Chemosh. There is also no mention of gods being engaged in the battle. Further, the deity routinely referenced in the narrative is the God of Israel. So, although there is a burnt offering by the king of Moab and wrath falls upon Israel, the text does not say where the wrath originated, and nowhere does the author imply that the trouble comes from a territorial god.

The last text set apart for consideration by Eichrodt is I Samuel 26:19. The author of this passage records an exchange between David and King Saul. During the course of their dialogue David states that the Lord intends to drive out of Israel the evil men inciting the conflict between himself and Saul, and declaring that they should serve other gods. Again, superficially Eichrodt appears to have a point. However, given the context of the Old Testament texts mentioned thus far in support of Hebrew monotheism, Eichrodt seems to be ignoring the obvious to assume that this reference is intended to convey henotheism. Unless Eichrodt's seventh century composition theory is correct, the uniform teaching regarding other gods in the early Old Testament (that they are no gods at all) remains true. Therefore, to tell someone they must go serve other gods is to tell them to serve dumb and deaf idols. Further, it needs to once again be pointed out that this text is descriptive of a conversational exchange and not prescriptive regarding the content of theology.

Interestingly enough, critical scholarship has begun to make a shift in approaching the problem of monotheism versus henotheism in the Old Testament. R.W.L. Moberly's essay in *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (Stuckenbruck & North, 2004) combines a revealing admission along with critical presuppositions. Moberly states, "First, although the Bible presents a picture that is apparently monotheistic from the outset, monotheism...only emerged relatively late in Israel's history during the biblical period..." (Stuckenbruck & North, 2004:216). While Moberly's statement implies that monotheism is the initial theological framework of ancient Israel, his assumptions regarding the date of the New Testament come into play. Moberly can concede that conservative scholarship is correct in asserting that the entire Old Testament is monotheistic, because he believes that much of the content of the Old Testament was either written in the sixth century before Christ or was edited and altered during this

same period (cf. Smith, 2010:187-215). So, in avoiding the conclusions of this data, Moberly needs only to adhere to his late dating of the Old Testament.

Although not the focus of this research, it should be noted that documentary models and late-dating arguments for the Old Testament are fiercely debated in scholarly circles. Some of the concerns raised against this approach to the Old Testament text are worth mentioning. First, on the part of critical scholars, there is an assumption that the Old Testament is a product of literary development and has little to no divine revelation as its basis (Archer, 1994:113). This assumption posits the conclusion that the Old Testament is a purely literary product, prior to the examination of the data. The end result then is that the data must be interpreted through the lens of an already assumed conclusion. Second, due to the assumed conclusion, all references throughout the Old Testament that point toward authorship consistency are easily dismissed as later revisions (Archer, 1994:114). Again, in this scenario the conclusion drives the research rather than the research resulting in the conclusion. Third, those holding a naturalistic approach to the Old Testament assume that ancient authors could not nuance their writings in such a way as to write differently based upon audience, stage of life and intended purpose for writing (Archer, 1994:114). Even though modern authors are generally praised for being able to tailor their writings (even within a single volume) to multiple audiences for a variety of purposes, ancient authors are not afforded such ability. Therefore, all changes in grammar, tone, and purpose are assumed to be a result of revision or additions to the text rather than being the product of a skilled author. Yet, the entire issue of dating the book of Deuteronomy (or the entire Old Testament, for that matter) and any potential revision of the Old Testament is a moot point for the LDS adherent. In appealing to LDS authoritative texts, Joseph Smith believed the book of Deuteronomy to have been penned long before any proposed exilic revisions (I Nephi 5:11; III Nephi 20:23). While the dating of the Old Testament and proposed revisions to its text are worth debating, the issue itself is related to but not directly important for the data examined within the present research.

Carl Henry (1999:187) contends that while some scholars have demonstrated an evolutionary progression from ANE recognition of a god named *El* to the Israelite acknowledgment of *Elohim* as God, this connection proves little regarding early Israelite monotheism. In contradistinction, Bernard Anderson and Steven Bishop have argued that the *El* forms present throughout the Old Testament indicate that the worship of *Yahweh* undertook an evolution of sorts from Canaanite religion into the faith of Israel (Anderson & Bishop, 1999:63). As proof of this adoption, Anderson and Bishop (1999:64) cite the interaction between Abraham and Melchizedek. The Melchizedek example is superficially quite persuasive. However, there is an equally and perhaps canonically more viable proposal brought forth by Carl Henry. Henry (who ascribes to the original monotheism theory) proposes that if the text of Scripture is to be believed, then one must assume its clear teaching that monotheism preceded polytheism.

One text that could be levied in support of this proposition, outside of the Adam and Eve narrative, is Genesis 4:26. This passage discusses antediluvian peoples (or pre-history peoples) calling upon *Yahweh* as God. Still, Meindert Dijkstra sees the implication of this passage as being complicated by what *Yahweh* is recorded as telling Moses in Exodus 6:3 (Becking, 2001:81). According to this passage, *Yahweh* does not reveal Himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *Yahweh*, but as *El Shaddai*. Thus, for Dijkstra, Exodus 6:3 undermines the implications of Genesis 4:26. However, even a superficial reading of each passage contradicts Dijkstra's conclusions. If people prior to the deluge called upon *Yahweh*, in no way does this contradict the fact that *Yahweh* did not reveal Himself as *Yahweh* to Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. In short, Dijkstra seems to make an issue out of texts referring to two different groups at two different times and being revealed different aspects of the same being.

Returning specifically to the topic of original monotheism, Winfried Corduan (2002:41-42) argues in a similar fashion to Carl Henry when, after noting monotheistic religions among preliterate tribes, he writes:

Since there is good reason to believe in the common descent of all human beings from the original pair, both on revelatory and scientific grounds, it is logical that the monotheistic religions practiced by preliterate tribes do, in fact, derive from the same monotheistic beliefs

and practices attributed to the earliest humans in special revelation.

Therefore, in Corduan and Henry's estimation, the Israelite adoption of monotheism is not something new but rather a restoration of the old (Henry, 1999:187). This approach, although compelling, does face a number of drawbacks. First, the issue of origins is viewed less as something to be explored via historical data and more through the lens of metaphysical thought (Kitagawa, 1987:23). Second, there is now a nearly universal approach to the origin of religion which assumes naturalism. So, in proving the original monotheism model for religious development, one must demonstrate that it is not just a metaphysical issue, but grounded in concrete data. This could be problematic due to the naturalistic assumptions underlying most research, precisely because it precludes the idea of enscriptured revelation as a basis for data. Thus, for those who do not assume the existence or reliability of revealed texts, original monotheism (along with all other models for religious development) can only be understood as one possible theory. Yet, regardless of whether or not the original monotheism theory can be substantiated, one fact remains that is assumed by both Christian and LDS adherents: the first persons were solely devoted in worship to the Creator God. So, while important, the positions being contrasted in this research (Nicene Orthodoxy and LDS tritheism) both assume the viability of revealed texts.

Going further, Carl Henry (1999:188) believes that the consistent Old Testament teaching that *Elohim* is the only true God (qualitatively) negates the possibility that what is being taught in the Old Testament is a move from polytheism to henotheism. Outside of the Old Testament, *Elohim* has no monotheistic parallel in terms of usage. Instead, *El* is always coupled with the names of gods inherent to the polytheistic milieu surrounding the early Israelites (Henry, 1999:189). Thus, Henry concludes that even though some Israelites may have lapsed into polytheism or henotheism, the theological content of early Israelite religion was uniformly monotheistic. This proposal tends to be viewed in scholarly circles as somewhat defensible, because most experts in ANE religion see the early Israelites as practical or ethical monotheists (see Smith, 2010). So, although Carl Henry's assumption regarding monotheism may go beyond that of many others in the field, there is still some form of monotheism recognised as undergirding early Israelite orthodoxy, or at least orthopraxy.

John Walton (2006:87-91) contends that one significant distinction between *Yahweh* and the gods of the ANE is that, while the ANE gods had origins, the God of Israel was without beginning and distinct from the created order. One aspect of the evolutionary model of religion that Walton (2006:94) sees in the Old Testament is the ANE concept of a divine council. However, the council in the Old Testament differs from that seen elsewhere in the ANE. The Old Testament text implies that, instead of the council being composed of gods, it is made up of created beings (Walton, 2006:95; cf. Korpel, 1990:314). Furthermore, the council is never explicitly acknowledged by Old Testament authors but instead appears to be more of a background concept that has been understood through the lens of monotheism (Ps. 82:1-6, cf. Walton, 2006:95). In Walton's view, the Old Testament does not contain the common ANE tiered understanding of divine beings consisting of a high god, lesser gods, and intermediate beings. Instead, there is *Yahweh* and the created heavenly beings. Although there are certainly distinguishing nuances that could be explored regarding ANE divine council concepts and those found in the Old Testament, the main argument is simply this: the council concept in the Old Testament is substantially different than the ANE conception. Therefore, the Old Testament council should not be assumed as evidence for the worship of a High God but rather as making sense of the ANE notion of a divine council/assembly in light of Israelite, revelational monotheism.

John Oswalt (2009:23) goes beyond the proposals of Walton by not only stating that the Israelites viewed reality differently than the ANE, but that they were radically different *because of* their monothestic convictions. While recognising that some passages within the Old Testament seem to allow for the existence of beings described as gods, Oswalt (2009:64) proposes that they are of an entirely different category than *Yahweh*. In fact, Oswalt (2009:64) classifies the Old Testament approach to other "god" beings as "vehemently and continuously" resolute that *Yahweh* alone is not just Israel's God, but that He alone is qualitatively God. Following this same line of argumentation, Richard Bauckham (1998:15) interprets much of the early Old Testament as not denying the existence of beings worshipped as gods but as denying them being qualitatively deity in the same sense as *Yahweh*. Admittedly, Bauckham does classify this more as monolatry rather than monotheism, but his point still resounds: the early Israelites did not just

view *Yahweh* as uniquely their God, but as the unique God who is entirely different from any other lesser divinities (Bauckham, 1998:15).

Todd Miles (2010:59-60) follows a comparable line of reasoning, believing that, although Scripture recognises the existence of beings worshipped as gods, they are created beings who are subjectively designated as gods by those worshipping them. Citing numerous Scripture passages that connect the worship of idols with the worship of demons (Deut. 32:17; Lev. 17:7; Isa. 34:14; Ps. 106:37-38), Miles (2010:60-66) surmises that all instances of affirming “gods” in the Old Testament are nothing more than allusions to the demonic activity behind the idols being venerated. Such an interpretation is consistent with the Apostle Paul’s understanding of idols as representations of demons as stated in Galatians 4:8 and I Corinthians 10:20.

Beyond what is mentioned in Deuteronomy, the Old Testament is replete with references to there being but one God. In Isaiah 44:6-8 and Isaiah 45:5-22, the prophet Isaiah frequently declares that there is but one God. In Isaiah 44:6-8, the prophet records, “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god...Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.” This language is consistent with the terminology used in Isaiah 45:5-22:

I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God...there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other...I am the LORD, and there is no other...And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me...For I am God, and there is no other.

In the very next chapter, Isaiah records God as stating that He alone exists as God. As if to make a statement regarding his qualitative nature, Isaiah records *Yahweh* as stating, “there is none like me” (Isa. 46:9). In his commentary on Isaiah, John Oswalt (1998:215-227) proposes that the repetitive statements that there is no other God does not question the allegiance of some to idols, nor does it imply that there are no spiritual beings acting as gods. Instead, the God of Israel is the only being that could rightly be described as God because of His attributes, nature, and accomplishments. Therefore, *Yahweh* alone could be qualitatively described as God. To worship any other is to worship a being that is not qualitatively deity, but rather weak and powerless, especially in comparison to the sovereign Lord, *Yahweh* (Wolf, 1985:197-199).

Similar statements are made elsewhere in the Old Testament. II Samuel 7:22 states, “...For there is none like you, and there is no God besides you...” Compare this with I Kings 8:60 which records, “That all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other.” How should these affirmations of monotheism be understood in relation to passages that speak of other “gods” (i.e. Ex. 15:11; cf. Ps. 82:1)? Should these texts be interpreted as implying that Scripture actually teaches henotheism rather than monotheism? Based upon the following consideration, the answer can only be no.

While Scripture may refer to beings other than *Yahweh* as gods, it never does so with clarity as to whether they actually exist as deity. Even when mentioned in Scripture, these gods are portrayed as existing in the minds of their worshippers but are never affirmed as actual beings with whom *Yahweh* must contend. An example of such a scenario can be seen in Elijah’s exchange with the priests of Baal (I Ki. 18). The Apostle Paul also declares that any being masquerading as a god is not by its nature a true god (Gal. 4). The text of Scripture reveals that those worshipping false gods believe them to be real, but this worship is a far cry from the authors of Scripture claiming that other gods actually exist as gods.

Interestingly, in delving deeper into what the Apostle Paul writes regarding this issue, the content of the *Shema* is applied to the issue of polytheism. In I Corinthians 8:4-6, Paul writes of idols and gods as merely “so-called gods.” He then launches into an application of the *Shema* to the issue of idols. For Paul, there are clearly idols or even beings that some call gods, but they are not truly gods. Why? Because, in Paul’s view, the *Shema* passage precludes the possibility that beings who are truly deities exist outside of *Yahweh*. Therefore, rather than being tempted by the numerous opportunities for pagan worship among the polytheistic Corinthians, Paul declares that there is but one being who is truly God and worthy of Christian worship (Ryken & LeFebvre, 2011:62-63). Likewise, in his book *The New Testament and the People of God* (1996), N.T. Wright has argued that Hebrew monotheism could never be confused with henotheism. In Wright’s evaluation, the creational nature of Israel’s monotheism rules out the possibility of henotheism precisely because it demands that there be only one creative being. If there is but one creative being, only He could be considered God in an ontological sense (Wright, 1996:249).

In the final analysis, to embrace the proposition that the Israelites were henotheists runs counter to Old Testament evidence. Moreover, by accepting a henotheistic framework, one must also concur with the evolutionary theory regarding Israel's monotheism. Even though one may see some evolutionary elements in the Old Testament text, to believe that the foundation of Israelite religion is a move from animism to polytheism and then henotheism is to ascribe to an anti-supernatural position (see Harrison, 1969:381-395). It is precisely because the Old Testament proposes that God has revealed monotheism that it should be seen as normative for revelationally-derived Hebrew theology. If the authors of the Old Testament were developing their theology *ad-hoc*, it would make more sense for them to insist that the patriarchs discover monotheism and then have their belief confirmed by *Yahweh*. Instead, *Yahweh* acts and imparts knowledge to Abraham. This stands in contradistinction to the polytheistic or henotheistic beliefs of the people surrounding Israel (Johnston, 2004:29). Therefore, the proposal that early Israelite monotheism is actually henotheism is far from an established fact.

### **3.4 The Trinity in the Old Testament**

When discussing plurality within unity implied in the Old Testament, much is made of Genesis 1:26, a text utilising the Hebrew word *Elohim*. This passage, Genesis 1:26, clearly portrays *Elohim* as an example of plural-unity. The passage reads: "Then God said, Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness..." The significance of this text is in the fact that God refers to Himself as plural while declaring there is but a single image in which man is to be made.

Some anti-trinitarians could object to this use by noting that Psalm 82:6 translates *Elohim* as "gods." Therefore, *Elohim* should be seen as supporting a plurality of "gods" rather than a single God. It is true that *Elohim* is accurately translated as "gods" in Psalm 82:6; however, when *Elohim* is used as a name for God it is ontologically in the singular sense (Geisler, 2003:277). Still, it is a matter of undisputed fact that *Elohim* is a plural form; it is the singular *El* with the plural suffix *im*. Allis (1951:9) notes that although *Elohim* is a plural form, it is used in a singular sense throughout the Old Testament when referencing the true God of Israel. Further, given the Old Testament preoccupation with denouncing the pagan polytheism of Gentiles, it makes little sense

to understand the usage of *Elohim* as having any hint of a polytheistic conceptual framework. The Hebrew conception of God is entirely unique among the ANE religions and therefore cannot be merely dismissed as a variant form of polytheism or monolatry (Walton, 2006:110; Walton, Matthews, Chavalas, 2000:177).

There are others who believe that the “Us” and “Our” statements could not be representative of the Trinity, instead believing that this plural terminology is “plural of majesty” construct (Theissen, 1990:90). Simply speaking, this means that a person in a position of royalty in an ancient culture would, on occasion, speak of himself in the plural form (e.g., I Maccabees 10:19;11:31). Therefore, Genesis 1:26 should be seen as nothing more than a regal pronouncement. In fact, Old Testament scholar Horst Preuss (1995:147) believes that this reference is most likely an instance of plural majesty. A major weakness in Preuss’ plural majesty assertion is that there are no examples of an Old Testament king using plural majesty language when referring to himself (Grudem, 1994:227).

German scholar Claus Westermann (1994:145) believes that there is no evidence for plural majesty usage in ancient Hebrew, and therefore interpreting this literary device into the text of the Old Testament should be abandoned. Thus, to merely dismiss the “Us” and “Our” designations as plural majesty is to root one’s understanding in a concept foreign to ancient Hebrew. This is not to say that plural forms that could be interpreted as majestic plurality do not appear in the Old Testament, because they certainly do (see Ezra 4:18). However, plural majesty is a less than viable approach to the “Us” and “Our” statements in Genesis 1:26. This approach should be abandoned because royal, and plural majesty have no support among the Hebrew kings, nor are there many parallels to such a concept in the verbs and pronouns making up the Old Testament (see Clines, 1998:460). The absence of such language, coupled with the plural and singular interchange in the text, cause the plural majesty argument to lose strength.

John Sailhamer contends that Genesis 1:26 is an allusion to the triune nature of God. His conclusion is based upon the fact that God created a plurality of genders in His image, which is but a single image. This reference casts the image of God as a plural unity vaguely analogous to the human male-female relationship in creation (Sailhamer, 1992:95-96; cf. Matthews, 1996:162-163; Vanhoozer, 2002:67). Based upon the data, the historic Nicene interpretation of Genesis 1:26 is that *Elohim* is not a plurality of gods, but a reference to a single God: a single God who is plurality within unity. This is made apparent by the fact that a plurality of persons (male and female) coming together as one flesh is the ultimate expression of the image of *Elohim*. An example of unity is located in Genesis 2:24, when Adam and Eve are described as becoming “one (*'echad*) flesh.” One should note that, while they become “one,” Adam and Eve do not lose their distinctive personhood.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament, triadic repetitions regarding the name of the Lord seem to have a Trinitarian connection. In Numbers 6:24-26, the author writes “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” The mention of the LORD in triplicate leads John Frame (2002:635) to see a connection between this passage and the apostolic benediction contained in II Corinthians 13:14. Given the Apostle Paul’s repeated use of such benedictions, Frame’s application is quite plausible. Similarly, twice in the book of Isaiah a triadic designation is given to the name or person of God. In Isaiah 6:3, God is called “holy” three times. In Isaiah 33:2, the prophet uses the name LORD three times, along with three different descriptions of the LORD as judge, lawgiver, and king. Although these references do not prove the doctrine of the Trinity nor demonstrate it clearly, the use of terms and various designations in triplicate does lend credence to the Nicene reading of these Old Testament texts.

It is also significant that a multiplicity of divine persons are mentioned in various Old Testament passages. The use of “He” (the Father) and “His Holy Spirit” in Isaiah 63:9-10 could be interpreted as allusions to the first and third persons of the Godhead. John Frame connects the Isaiah passage to what he believes to be an explicitly Trinitarian passage, Haggai 2:5-7. For Frame (2002:637), it would seem that the

reference to “My Spirit” is to the Holy Spirit, “the LORD” is the Father and “the treasures of all nations” is a reference to God the Son as the Messiah. While not overly technical in his approach to the references given, Frame stands in line with historic Nicene hermeneutical approaches to these texts.

In light of this material, it is interesting that the possibility of plurality existing in a monotheistic Godhead is an active topic in pre-Christian Jewish theology (see Hurtado, 1996). A text that inspires much of this debate is found within Daniel’s book of prophecy. In Daniel 7:9, a plurality of thrones exists in heaven, all of which, the text proposes, belong to *Yahweh*. Daniel writes, “I kept looking until the thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days took His seat...” In the passage there are multiple seats of power (thrones), yet a single being of power (the king). N.T. Wright (1996:259), commenting on pre-Christian Judaism, points out that, “Within the most fiercely monotheistic of Jewish circles...there is no suggestion that ‘monotheism’ or praying the *Shema*, had anything to do with the numerical analysis of the inner being of Israel’s God Himself.” Wright’s assertion may be true, but it must be admitted that it makes little sense for the *Shema* to function as an analysis of *Yahweh*’s inner being. While it has been argued that the Old Testament uniformly teaches monotheism, there are certainly no didactic passages providing theological details as to the nature of *Yahweh* in His essence. Given that the Old Testament narratives also address issues pertinent to their intended audience, it would be less than productive to provide an exposition regarding *Yahweh*’s nature. Why? To state it simply, the Israelites struggled greatly with breaking away from the polytheism of their neighbours; holding fast to conceptual monotheism was difficult enough, let alone Trinitarian monotheism. The latter monotheism only arises in the New Testament after Second Temple Judaism had firmly established monotheism as its theological foundation. This foundation was built upon after direct experience with the Messiah provided the avenue by which to understand the nature of *Yahweh* experientially prior to formulating theological, Trinitarian conceptions.

In summary, allusions to unity within plurality clearly exist within the Old Testament. While not stated as explicitly as in the New Testament or resulting creeds, the prospect of a pre-Christian Trinitarian theology is presented by terminology and grammar utilised throughout the Old Testament. From the perspective of historic Nicene orthodoxy, the most natural reading of the Old Testament is in fact a Trinitarian reading (Warfield, 1981: 141-142; cf. Calvin, 2008:77).

### **3.5 Hebrew Monotheism at the Birth of Christianity**

Given the background of Old Testament monotheism presented thus far, it would be beneficial to investigate the major monotheistic themes present in Israelite theology at the time of Jesus' life and ministry. Certainly, the Old Testament Scripture surveyed constitutes the scriptural background for the monotheism undergirding Trinitarianism. However, it is pertinent to the direction of this research to establish, in broad terms, the general understanding of monotheism just prior to the birth of Christianity.

From the time of the exodus event until the birth of Christ, the Israelites experienced numerous socio-political changes. Further, from the sixth-century B.C. forward, the Hebrew people had fallen under the captivity or rule of foreign peoples. The exposure of the Israelites to pagan cultures and religious systems instilled in the Israelites a greater level of disdain for idolatry and polytheistic religious systems (Scott, 2006:267-268; cf. Neusner, 2002:3; Lohse, 1988:144). Although this may not have been the normative, folk-level result for all Israelites, these monotheistic sentiments held true on a national level. Additionally, interaction with Hellenism led to an approach among the Israelites to not just view *Yahweh* as uniquely God, but as wholly other, even to the point of avoiding speaking His name (Scott, 2006:268-269). Moreover, as Larry Hurtado (2003:30) has observed, Israelite religion in the intertestamental period took on a staunchly exclusivistic flavour. Considering the manner in which many Israelites adopted the social practices of pagans and Hellenists, it is quite noteworthy that their religious convictions grew all the more (Hurtado, 2002:29). Even though the level to which early-Israelites adhere to monotheism at the folk-level is debated, the monotheistic practices of the Roman era are rather pronounced and undeniable (Hurtado, 2003:29). Still, some scholars have proposed that

the recognition of intermediary heavenly beings represents a problem for absolute, intertestamental monotheism (Davilla, Newman & Lewis, 1999:21-23). However, as Larry Hurtado has argued, there is no evidence of a *cultus* to any intermediary being practiced during this period. Even though existence of intermediary beings was acknowledged, worship was reserved for *Yahweh* alone (Hurtado, 2002:34-35). What this means for the issue-at-hand is simply this: Israelite monotheism became quite robust in the intertestamental and Roman era, but it did not deny the existence of intermediary beings. Thus, although monotheism was the dominant view, it was not such a rigid monotheism that one could exclude the possibility of God revealing Himself as a plurality of persons. What comes next will be a recounting of the scriptural witness as to how this understanding of monotheism was shaped by the experiential interaction with *Yahweh*'s tri-personal revelation in the history.

### **3.6 The Persons of the Trinity**

The monotheistic background of the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism was stretched or expanded based upon the experience of early Christians with three distinct persons who are all referred to as deity. The persons seen throughout the text of Scripture are revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Passages pertinent to establishing the deity of the three divine persons revealed through the Scriptures will now be examined. The course taken follows that of the presentation in creedal Trinitarian theology. Namely, that the first person of the Trinity is the Father, the second person is the Son, and the third person is the Spirit. Therefore, the deity of each person will be examined in the aforementioned order.

#### **3.6.1 The Persons of the Trinity: The Father is God**

Throughout Scripture, the Father is acknowledged as full deity. In the Old Testament the Fatherhood of God is established very early in the Pentateuch. In Exodus 4:22-23, Israel is referred to as God's child. While not explicitly calling Himself "Father," the implication of this quality is undeniable. In Deuteronomy 8:5 and 14:2, the fatherhood of God is again implied by a reference to the Israelites as His children. This is similar to the implication in Isaiah 1:1-2.

God is explicitly referred to as Father for the first time in Deuteronomy 32:6b. As a lyric in the Song of Moses, the author writes, “Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?” The remainder of the chapter contains multiple references to God as Father (Deut. 32:8-9, 18-20). Throughout the Psalms, the Psalmist refers to God as Father. He is called the “Father of the fatherless...” (Ps. 68:5), David’s Father (Ps. 89:26), and a Father who pities His children (Ps. 103:13). The prophet Isaiah also calls God Father. Multiple times in the text of Isaiah, the prophet calls God “our Father” (Isa. 63:16; 64:8).

While the Old Testament contains at least twenty references to God as Father, the New Testament designation of God as Father increases exponentially and with great levels of specificity. Most of the New Testament references to God as Father are seen in His relationship to God the Son, Jesus (Cooper, 1998:108). In fact, all but three New Testament letters make reference to God as Father in direct relationship to Jesus as God the Son (Coppedge, 2007:24). The manner in which the relating of the Son to the Father elucidates the personhood of God the Father can be seen by the number of times God is called Father in the gospel accounts. In John’s Gospel alone, God the Father is mentioned 137 times. Although, this designation is found mostly in the discourse occurring within the narrative and mostly from the mouth of Jesus (Köstenberger, 2009:370-371). Further in the Synoptics, God is called Father 138 times (Morris, 1990:248). Thus, in the gospels accounts alone, the deity of God the Father is affirmed a total of 275 times.

John Cooper (1998:109) speaks to the New Testament concept of Father by stating, “Thus, the God of Scripture is not merely the universal *Father*, an idea found in other religions. He is the Father of Jesus Christ, the Son. This is what distinguishes the New Testament faith from all other religions.” Cooper (1998:109) also believes that it is this robust Father-to-Son relationship revealed fully in the New Testament that provides grounding for recognising an undeniable distinction in the persons of the Godhead. It would seem then that the transition from the use of Father to generically speak of God in the Old Testament, to the New Testament specificity among divine persons, is critical in understanding the biblical doctrine of the Trinity.

The New Testament references to God the Father are numerous in the Pauline writings and the Gospels. For instance, in Romans 1:7 Paul greets the church at Rome by referencing the grace and peace of God the Father and the Lord Jesus. Notably, Paul makes a distinction between the Son and the Father, yet recognises the deity of both by the manner in which he links the two persons. Likewise, in his letter to the Galatians, he writes of being an Apostle of Jesus sent by God the Father (Gal. 1:1). Paul once again links Jesus and the Father in such a way as to make clear their distinctiveness but to imply their qualitative sameness.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus calls God, “the Father” (Jn. 6:27). Again, in John 6:46, Jesus identifies the Father as God, while also proclaiming His own deity, stating: “Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father.” In John 20:17, Jesus tells Mary that He is ascending to the Father who is God. In the Synoptics (Matt. 6:9; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 1-:21) Jesus prays to the Father and refers to Him as *Abba*. This Aramaic term denotes a personal, Father-to-Son relationship. Such a personal, intimate prayer to God as Father is utterly unique among the Hebrews of Jesus’ day (Jeremias,1989:57). Interestingly, the Apostle Paul goes on to explain that those in Christ can call on God by also addressing Him as *Abba* (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). Even as Jesus is dying on the cross He speaks to God as Father, commending His spirit into the hands of the Father (Lk. 23:34,46). However, regardless of the New Testament emphasis upon God the Father as the Father of God the Son, there is still a consistent, New Covenant theme regarding the Fatherhood of God to all believers. Jesus even emphasises this point when in Matthew 6:9. He begins His model of prayer for the disciples by referring to God as “Our Father” (Lightner, 1978:145). Undoubtedly, the Fatherhood of God is assumed throughout Scripture.

### **3.6.2 The Persons of the Trinity: The Son is God**

Though Jesus never says, “I am God,” He does use other language which inescapably leads to the conclusion that Christ acknowledges that He is God in the flesh. This is important because it is the coming of the Son in the flesh that reveals the triune nature of God. Thus, more attention will be directed to establishing the deity of the Son than either the deity of the Father or the Spirit. The rationale for this is as follows: First, the

deity of the Father is assumed within the text of Scripture. Second, the deity of the Spirit is directly connected to the deity of the Son. The manner in which the Spirit's ministry is connected to that of the incarnate Son produces something of a domino effect. If the Son is God, then based upon the sending of the Spirit from the Father and the Son, the Spirit is God. To state it another way, Thomas Forsyth Torrance (1996:49) writes, "...The central focus of the Gospel upon the Deity of Christ is the door that opens the way to the understanding of God's triune self-revelation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Therefore, what follows is an interaction with pertinent passages establishing the deity of Jesus Christ.

### **3.6.3 The Persons of the Trinity: The Son as God in John's Gospel**

The Prologue to the Gospel of John immediately asserts the deity of Jesus. In John 1:1-3, John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." In John 1:1, God (*theos*) by definition is understood to be deity. However, John goes further and stretches the bounds of monotheistic theology by referring to the Word as *theos*. For John, it is a matter of importance to begin his narrative by applying an affirmation of deity to the incarnate Son. According to John 1:14, the "Word" referenced is the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. John's assertion that the Word becomes flesh and dwells among the people calls to mind the idea of the tabernacle in the Old Testament (Blomberg, 2001:74; cf. Bowman & Komoszewski, 2007:138-139). Therefore, Jesus is God tabernacling among His people.

Returning to John 1:1-3, John is arguing that God the Son existed before the created order and was with God (*pros ton theon*). John begins his account of the life of Jesus by establishing the distinction between Christ and the created order. Moreover, John equates the nature of the Word (the Son) with God (the Father). Thus, John sets out to establish the deity of Christ from the first line of his account (Thielman, 2005:154).

In the fifth chapter of John's account, Jesus makes a series of claims that place Him on the same level as the Father. John 5:18 reads, "For this reason therefore, the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God." While some have argued that this text does not imply total equality in every respect, it still brings forth the idea of qualitative or essential equality with God the Father (Blomberg, 2001:110-112). In the same passage, Jesus raises people from the dead and claims to be the giver of life (Jn. 5:21), an attribute the Old Testament attributes solely to God (Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6; Ezek. 37:12-14).

Christ claims to share the glory of the Father in John 17:5. He says, "Now, Father, glorify me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was." Jesus is referencing Isaiah 42:8: "I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another..." If *Yahweh* does not share His glory, and Christ claims to share *Yahweh*'s glory, then Jesus is equating Himself with the Father.

#### **3.6.4 The Persons of the Trinity: The Son as God in the Synoptics**

During His trial, Christ is asked, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus responds by saying, "I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:61-62). In short, Jesus claims to be the promised Messiah. According to the prophet Isaiah, the Messiah would be God. Isaiah writes that, "His name will be called Wonderful counsellor, Mighty God (*el' gibbor*), Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). Some scholars allege that Isaiah was teaching that the Messiah would be a god-like hero, not God in the flesh. While the word *el'* in a plural form can refer to a mortal man, Isaiah only uses this word as a designation for God (Young, 1997:336). In the context of the passage, the reader is supplied with a contrast between the Messiah's humanity as a child (*yeled*) and His deity as the heroic God (*el' gibbor*), the Messiah of His people (Young, 1997:337). Therefore, based upon the context, this Being is not a god-like hero but is in actuality the hero-God.

Additionally, in Christ's response at His trial, He calls Himself "The Son of Man." This title refers to an Old Testament prophecy found in Daniel regarding the coming Messiah. Daniel 7:13-14 reads:

Behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him, His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.

The designation Ancient of Days is previously used in Daniel 7:9-13 for God the Father. Thus, according to the prophet Daniel, the Messiah (Son of Man) is distinct from the Ancient of Days, yet fully shares his deity and attributes.

In Matthew 8:23-27 Jesus is recorded as calming a storm by merely speaking to it. Elsewhere, Jesus exercises His power over nature and the sea by walking on water (Matt. 14:25; Mark 6:48; cf. Jn. 6:19). Yet, the Old Testament states that it is God alone who has power over the sea (Psalm 107:23-32; cf. Isaiah 43:16). In fact, in the book of Job, it is said of God: "Who [God] alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea" (Job 9:8). What is revealed then is that Jesus possesses power over nature that God alone holds. Therefore, the picture painted in the Synoptics is one of the Messiah, Jesus, sharing in the attributes and actions of *Yahweh*.

### **3.6.5 The Persons of the Trinity: The Son as God in the Apostolic Witness**

Outside of the gospel accounts, the New Testament contains numerous references to, and declarations of, the deity of Christ. In Colossians 1:15, Jesus is described as the visible manifestation of God. The passage begins by referring to Christ as, "...The image of the invisible God..." (*eikōn tou theou tou aoratou*). Linguistically, the text is calling the reader to understand Christ as the exact likeness of the invisible God. Based upon the scriptural teaching that the Father cannot be seen and is in fact a Spirit (Jn. 1:18; 4:12), this likeness then does not refer to physical form but rather to His divine nature.

Perhaps the most explicit reference that demonstrates the deity of Christ outside of the Gospel accounts is in Philippians 2:6-11. Paul begins by describing the crux of the Trinitarian doctrine: the incarnation. He says of Christ, “Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Phil. 2:6). When Paul writes that Jesus was in the “form” (*morphē*) of God, he is making an assertion regarding the nature of Christ. Georg Strecker (2000:72) believes that this statement is meant to convey that Jesus is *essentially* equal to God the Father. Yet, Strecker’s belief that Paul is stressing essential equality appears to be contrary to the plain meaning of *morphē*. Commenting on this passage, Moises Silva writes (2008:100; cf. Rogers & Rogers, 1998:451), “If we stress the classical usage of this term, the technical sense of Aristotelian philosophy suggests itself: *morphē*, although not equivalent to *ousia* (being, essence), speaks or characteristic attributes...” . In confirmation of Silva’s analysis, Verbrugge (2000:377) comments on Paul’s usage of *morphē* stating “...that the essential nature of Christ is defined as a divine nature, which is thought of as existing ‘in’ divine substance and power.” It is reasonable then to interpret “form” as a sphere of existence based upon the nature of Jesus’ being (see O’Brien, 1991:210-214). Further, Jesus does not use His equality with God the Father as something to be exploited (*harpagmos*) or used to His advantage (Oakes, 2001:193). It would seem that Strecker’s cautious position of “essential equality” is too weak, given the strength and weight of Paul’s language.

Paul’s use of this passage in reference to Jesus is significant because of the text to which it refers, Isaiah 45:18-25. This text is one of the strongest affirmations of monotheism and the uniqueness of *Yahweh* found within the entire Old Testament. Paul’s intention here is clear; rather than a transgression of Old Testament monotheism, the recognition of Christ as God is a fulfilment of Hebrew monotheism (Carson & Beale, 2007:837-838). Such an application to Christ is astounding because, as E.J. Young (1997:210-215; cf. Kaiser, 2008:183) has noted, Isaiah 45:18-21 indicates that there is but one God and He alone is the Creator. So, in Paul’s theology, Christ is not just a god but the very God who is the only God. Given the fact that even those adhering to evolutionary understandings of Old Testament monotheism recognise Isaiah 45:18-25 as a distinctively monotheistic statement (see Anderson & Bishop, 2000: 63-68), Philippians 2:6-11 is an application of monotheism to the recognition of Jesus

Christ as deity. From the Nicene perspective, the only manner by which to consistently understand this application is through creedal Trinitarianism.

### **3.6.6 The Persons of the Trinity: The Son of God as the Son of the Father?**

Some older English translations of the Bible utilise the most unhelpful formulation “only begotten.” The phrase translated in the King James Version as “only begotten Son” is *monogenēs huios* (μονογενής υἱός). However, contrary to LDS contentions (McConkie, 179:546-547), one should not take this in a literal, physically paternal sense.

For instance, *huios* (son) has been used metaphorically throughout the New Testament. In Mark 3:17, James and John are referred to as “Sons (*huios*) of Thunder.” Furthermore, in Galatians 3:26 Paul writes that all believers are “Sons (*huios*) of God.” These references are clearly intended to be figurative. The translation of *monogenēs* as “only begotten” is a result of the King James translators retaining Jerome’s Latin translation of the term *ūnigenitus*, meaning “only begotten.” However, the Latin text existing prior to Jerome’s translation does not use the Latin *ūnigenitus* when describing God the Son; instead, it utilizes the term *ūnicus*, meaning “only” (Moody, 1953:214).

In order for the Greek manuscript to warrant the translation “only begotten,” the Greek term being translated would need to be *monogennetos*. To translate *monogenēs* as “only begotten” is less than precise. Commenting on this mistranslation, James White (1998:201-202) notes that:

The key element to remember in deriving the meaning of *monogenēs* is this: it is a compound term, combining *monos*, meaning only, with a second term. Often it is assumed that the second term is *gennasthai/gennaō*, to give birth, to beget. But note that this family of terms has two nu’s, *vv*, rather than a single nu, *v*, found in *monogenēs*. This indicates that the second term is not *gennasthai* but *gignesthai/ginomai*, and the noun form, *genos*.

The term *genos* means “kind,” or “race” (Carson, 1996:30). When the two terms *monos* and *genos* are combined, the reference is intended to convey that Christ is unique and the only one of His kind (Rogers & Rogers, 1998: 185). Frank Thielman (2005:154)

makes a similar argument when he states that, "...*monogenēs* means 'one of a kind,' rather than *ūnigenitus* (Vulgate) or 'only begotten' (KJV)." Additionally, William Mounce (2006:1214) explains that *monogenēs* can only be understood as stressing the unique nature of Christ; it cannot and should not be understood to imply any type of biological siring.

This metaphorical understanding of sonship is demonstrated in the book of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews (11:17) refers to Isaac as Abraham's "only begotten son." Making use of the same term found in John 3:16 to describe the Father-to-Son relationship (*monogenēs*), the author of Hebrews notes the unique nature of Isaac as the promised child from God. The LDS reader will readily admit that Abraham had multiple children; therefore, the intent of the text is to stress that Isaac is Abraham's unique son, not his only son (Carson, 1996:31).

Craig Keener (1993:270-271) believes the use of the term *monogenēs* in John 3:16 is intended to call to mind the traditional Hebrew understanding of Isaac. Just as Abraham gives Isaac, God the Father has not given merely a son but the unique, beloved Son with whom there is no comparison. Given the fact that it is through Isaac's bloodline that Jesus, as the Christ, has come, Keener's application of *monogenēs* makes sense of the consistent teaching of both the Old and New Testaments regarding the Messiah's relationship to Abraham's son.

In the same manner, Christ should be understood as the unique, one-of-a-kind, "Son of God." Christ's Hebrew contemporaries understood His claim to be the Son of God as an equation with God rather than a statement of biological origin. The Gospel of John records (Jn. 19:7) that when Jesus stands before Pilate, the Jewish authorities charge, "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God." Thus, His sonship should be understood as implying deity, not a biological origination.

The text of Scripture further demonstrates that the LDS notion of the New Testament portraying Christ as the biological Son of God is something foreign to historic Christian doctrine. The birth narrative in Luke's Gospel makes no mention of natural conception resulting from a sexual union. After Gabriel informs Mary that she will carry a Son, she asks how this can be, because she has yet to be with a man (Lk. 1:34). Gabriel replies, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God" (Lk. 1:3; cf. Matt. 1:18-24). The narrative is completely devoid of any sexual interaction between God the Father and Mary; rather, the reader is informed that it is through the working of the Holy Spirit that the virgin conceives. What is more, all three persons of the Trinity are mentioned with the Father, being referred to as "the Most High." Thus, the text of both John's and Luke's Gospels depict Christ as uniquely, rather than biologically, the Son of God. Further, Christ is the Son of God not because of conception, but because of His economic relationship to the Father.

### **3.6.7 The Persons of the Trinity: The Spirit is God**

The biblical text not only accords full deity to the Father and Christ, but to the Holy Spirit as well. In fact, the scriptural assertion that God is Spirit nearly makes the deity of the Holy Spirit an underlying assumption. Yet, because of the distinctions made between the persons of the Trinity, the deity of the Holy Spirit cannot be assumed to be equal to the Father and the Son. Therefore, it is vitally important to note instances in which the Holy Spirit is recognised as deity in the same sense as the Father and the Son. For instance, in Matthew 28:19, the role of the Spirit in baptism is identical with that of the Father and Son. In Mark 3:28-29, Jesus speaks of those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit. Yet, throughout the text of Scripture, blasphemy is a sin committed against God alone (see Frame, 2002:686).

In Acts 5:3-4, Peter equates Ananias' lie to the Holy Spirit as being a lie to God. While Ananias certainly lies to the community of faith, the issue according to Peter is that Ananias attempts to deceive God by lying to the Holy Spirit. In Romans 15:30, all three persons of the Trinity are represented as equals. Paul appeals to the Christians in Rome by the power of Jesus Christ and the Spirit in the love of God. Thus, Paul's

appeal assumes a triunity among the persons of the Godhead. I Corinthians 2:10-11 depicts the Spirit as having the same omniscience as God the Father. Paul states that the Spirit searches all things, including God, and that there is nothing hidden from Him, including thoughts. This attribute of God is also seen in the Old Testament writings of the Psalmist. The Psalms declare that the Spirit shares the omniscience, as well as the omnipresence, of God the Father (Ps. 139). The Spirit is said to know all things and to be in all places.

In the book of Jeremiah, God declares the coming of a New Covenant. The author of Hebrews then applies this text to the Holy Spirit in Hebrews 10:15-17. Elsewhere in Hebrews 3:7-11, the author states that the words spoken by God in Psalm 95:7-11 are spoken by the Spirit. This presentation naturally leads one to believe that the author of this letter understands the words spoken to the prophet Jeremiah as being spoken by the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the text of the New Testament, the close relationship of the Spirit to the Father and the Son is discussed in passing or is assumed in various narratives. As John Walvoord observed, the Holy Spirit is often associated with the Father and the Son in a manner that implies His deity. Notice the chart below which represents a summary of relationship passages (cf. Walvoord, 1991:10).

Relational Association	Description and Reference
<b>The Father</b>	1. Spirit of God (Gen. 1:2; Rom. 8:9); 2. The Spirit of the Lord (Lk.4:18); 3. The Spirit of our God (I Cor. 6:11); 4. His Spirit (Num. 11:29); 5. The Spirit of Jehovah (Judg. 3:10); 6. You Spirit (Ps. 139:7); 7. Spirit of the Lord God (Isa. 61:1); 8. Spirit of your Father (Matt. 10:20); 9. Spirit of the Living God (II Cor. 3:3); 10. My Spirit (Gen. 6:3); 11. Spirit of Him (Rom. 8:11); 12. The Spirit of Truth from the Father (Jn. 14:17; 15:26)

Relational Association	Description and Reference
<b>The Son</b>	1. The Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9); 2. Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19); 3. Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7); 4. Spirit of His Son (Gal. 4:6); 5. The Spirit of the Lord (Acts 5:9).

The way in which the New Testament authors attribute the Spirit’s relationship to both the Father and the Son speaks volumes to understanding the deity of the Holy Spirit.

In John Calvin’s (2008:76) estimation, passages such as Isaiah 48:16 demonstrate that the Holy Spirit shares in the sovereign control of the Father in sending forth the prophets. Further, in looking into the New Testament, Calvin sees the significance of Paul’s teaching that God will choose for Himself a temple because of the Spirit’s indwelling presence. Calvin (2008:76) writes, “Now it ought not to be slightly overlooked, that all the promises which God makes of choosing us to himself as a temple, receive their only fulfilment by his Spirit dwelling in us.” For Calvin, the deity of the Spirit is undeniable precisely because of His actions as God among the people of God.

In the final analysis, in terms of scriptural presentation, the Holy Spirit is afforded identical divine attributes and activities as the Father and the Son. Still, it must be admitted that the deity of the Holy Spirit is not referenced as often as either the Father (whose deity is assumed throughout Scripture) or the Son. Nevertheless, as James White (1998:139-140) points out, this understated approach to the deity of the Spirit is not due to any inferiority, but precisely because the role of the Spirit is to point men to Christ. In the economy of salvation, the Spirit’s work is less explicit but still demonstrates His deity. As a result, He should be acknowledged as full deity.

### **3.6.8 The Trinity in the New Testament**

Throughout the New Testament the three persons of the Trinity are mentioned together. At the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:16-17), the Father, Son, and Spirit are all described as being present and distinct from one another. Also in Matthew's Gospel, in the Great Commission passage, disciples are commanded to baptise converts in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit (Matt. 28:19). What this text illustrates, as D.A. Carson has observed, is that the missionary endeavours of the Christian faith have always been Trinitarian in nature (Carson, 1984:598). Commenting on this very issue of Gospel proclamation, Fred Sanders (2010:10) writes "...the gospel is Trinitarian, and the Trinity is the gospel. Christian salvation comes from the Trinity, happens through the Trinity, and brings us home to the Trinity." For Sanders, from the Great Commission forward, the entire New Testament witness to the gospel is Trinitarian. But is Sanders overstating the Trinitarian nature of the gospel message of salvation? In briefly examining two specific references, Sanders' assertion is affirmed. For instance, in Ephesians 1:4-13, the Apostle Paul speaks of the Father predestining believers in Jesus (the Son) for salvation, which is sealed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In Titus 3:4-6 God the Father is referred to as "our Saviour" who has saved believers by His mercy, having renewed them by the Holy Spirit who was poured out through Jesus Christ. At the very least, in these two references which speak explicitly of salvation, Sanders seems to be accurate in his proposal.

Outside of the gospel accounts, the apostles refer to the Godhead in triadic form. In I Corinthians 12:4-6, the variety of spiritual gifts are contrasted with the plural unity of the Spirit, Lord, and God. II Corinthians 13:14 contains a similar reference in which Paul uses a familiar benediction mentioning the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship or unity of the Holy Spirit (cf. Eph 2:8). In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul speaks of one Spirit, one Lord, and one God (Eph. 4:4-6). Other apostles mention the three persons in their letters. In I Peter 1:1-2, the apostle Peter greets his readers by noting that it is God the Father who has elected them and the Holy Spirit who has sanctified them because of Jesus' shed blood. Jude, the half-brother of Jesus writes of praying in the Holy Spirit, remaining in the love of God, and looking toward the mercy of Jesus Christ (Jude 20-21). In John 15:26 the promise of the Spirit's

coming includes the Son speaking about the Father and the Spirit as distinct persons. Jesus says “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.” Elsewhere Paul uses an equivalent formula in mentioning the coming of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes this is because the Spirit of the Son has been sent by the Father so that believers can cry out “Abba! Father” (Gal. 4:6).

Returning to the Trinitarian nature of the missionary endeavour given in the Great Commission, the New Testament declaration that salvation is provided for sinners is rooted in Trinitarian theology. In the book of Hebrews, the author twice connects salvation to the triune God. In Hebrews 9:14 the author writes, “How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (cf. Heb. 10:12-18; 29-31; Eph. 1:3). Thus, the very centre of enscripturated revelation, the redemption of sinners in Christ, is grounded in the triune nature of God.

Allan Coppedge has argued that the New Testament data which references the persons of the Trinity is compelling when one understands its frequency. He has demonstrated that numerous passages identify at least two persons of the Godhead, and in some cases, all three. The following represents a reworking and adaption of his findings in chart form (Coppedge, 2007:34-35).

Two persons mentioned	Three persons mentioned
1. Matt. 1:20-23; 28:19 2. Lk. 1:35; 24:49 3. Jn. 1:32-34; 20:21-22 4. Acts 1:3-5, 7-8; 28:23, 25 5. Rom. 1:1-4, 7; 15:30 6. I Cor. 1:3 7. II Cor. 1:2, 21-22; 13:14 8. I Thess. 1:3-5; 5:18-19 9. Gal. 1:3 10. Phil. 1:2 11. Jm. 1:1 12. Rev. 1:4-6; 22:17-18.	1. Mk. 1:10-11; 16:19 2. I Cor. 2:1-4; 15:57 3. I Pet. 1:2; 5:10 4. Jude 1; 20-21 5. Gal. 1:3; 6:7-8, 16-17 6. Eph. 1:3; 6:23 7. Phil. 1:2; 4:19-20 8. Col. 1:2; 4:12 9. II Thess. 1:2; 3:5 10. I Tim. 1:2; 6:14-14 11. II Tim. 1:2; 4:1 12. Titus 1:4; 3:4-6 13. Heb. 1:1-2; 13:20 14. I Jn. 1:3; 5:20 15. II Jn. 3, 9 16. Phm. 1:3 17. Jm 1:1 18. II Pet. 1:2

When considered as a whole, the abundance of references to the multiplicity of persons in the Godhead is quite compelling.

The entirety of the New Testament abounds with references to three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Spirit, who are all God. As one reads the content of the New Testament in particular, it would almost appear to assume that a Trinitarian hermeneutic will be applied to its content (Warfield, 1981:143). John Frame (2002:639) believes that the manner in which the doctrine of the Trinity is woven within the fabric of Scripture (i.e. the doctrine's truthfulness is assumed and not explicitly stated) demonstrates that it is not an item of doctrinal debate. The New Testament information presented in this chapter does provide some support for Frame's contention. However, given the creedal evolution that occurs in the early church immediately following the era of the apostles, it seems that Frame may be overstating his case. B.B Warfield (1981:143), on the other hand, follows the early Christians' argument that enscripturated revelation was entirely Trinitarian. Yet, it is going too far to state that the doctrine of the Trinity was settled and established during the lives of the apostles. That is not to say that there is not an experiential Trinitarian assumption during this period. However, creedal Trinitarianism was still evolving. This topic will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

At the beginning of this chapter, it was stated that this section of research is necessary to answer one of the secondary research questions germane to the overall purpose of this project. That question, what is the systematic teaching of Scripture regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, has been addressed and answered in the following manner. First, it was demonstrated that the early biblical data regarding the worship of *Yahweh* was monotheistic rather than henotheistic. Certainly, the Israelite adherence to said monotheism could be debated; however, the revealed text of Scripture prescribes monotheism. This portion of research is critical to establishing the theoretical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity, monotheism. Second, the staunchly monotheistic context of Second Temple Judaism was presented as the backdrop for the birth of Christian theology. It was after the advent of Christ that the dynamic nature of God became evident. It was because of this direct contact with deity that Christians became experiential Trinitarians. How one reconciles the experience of God's plural-nature with the affirmation of monotheism is what leads to creedal Trinitarian theology (discussed in chapter four). Third, through the course of this chapter, it was demonstrated that the

text of Scripture repeatedly affords full recognition of deity to each of the persons of the Trinity. It is the unified assertion of the Old Testament authors that there is but one being who is qualitatively God. It is the unified teaching of the New Testament that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God, but there is only one God. As John Calvin (2008: 78) cautions, Christians must not understand the biblical language regarding persons and their names as denoting division, but distinction only. This is the very issue the early church wrestled with in understanding the nature of God. The Scripture demonstrates that the Father and Son are distinct persons who love one another (Jn. 3:35; 5:20; 14:31; 15:9; 17:23-26) and speak to one another (Jn. 11:41-42; 12:28; 17:1-26). Further, the Holy Spirit is a person, like the Father and Son, who can think and speak of His own accord (Jn. 16:13; Acts 1:16; 5:3; 8:29; 10:19; 11:12; 15:28; Rom. 8:26). Additionally, the Holy Spirit is a distinct person who is distinguishable from both the Father and the Son (Lk. 3:22; Rom. 8:27-34). Yet, how does one rectify, in creedal form, the plurality of persons revealed in Scripture with the affirmation of monotheism?

The data presented in this chapter answers the research question posited; however, it does not reveal how the early church codified their experiences with the scriptural witness into creedal, Nicene orthodoxy. Thus, what must come next is a thorough tracing of Trinitarian creedal development founded upon the witness of the Old and New Testaments throughout the life of the early church. This will then move beyond the basis of Nicene orthodoxy (the Scriptures) to the historical development of Nicene Trinitarianism.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF NICENE ORTHODOXY

#### 4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter sought to establish the basis for Nicene orthodoxy rooted in the exegesis of enscripturated revelation. This chapter will endeavour to answer the following research questions: First, what is the historical, orthodox position on the Trinity and how early was it established? Second, how is the doctrine of the Trinity currently being addressed among orthodox theologians? These questions will be answered by interacting with important theological works in the early church leading up to the time of Augustine (A.D. 354-430). Moving into the modern era, prominent theological expressions of the Trinity doctrine from the perspective of Nicene orthodoxy will be examined.

Any Trinitarian exploration must begin with Scripture, followed by an assessment encompassing the historical developments pertaining to the Trinity. This logic is based upon two observations: First, contemporary theology has been directly influenced and grounded by the theological development and struggles of the early church. In short, the theology of the early church directly influences the theology of today. All contemporary, theological dialogue takes place in light of a long history of theological struggle. To ignore this fact is to assume that theology occurs within a vacuum, which it does not. Theology develops and contours itself in response to the questions being asked during a given time period. This theological struggle and reshaping is true even of contemporary theology. Every few decades a new or revived theological trend pushes orthodoxy further in definition and application. In short, this theological fine-tuning is an organic process that will and should continue with each new generation of theologians. Second, the issues that dominated the Patristic period matter because, whether consciously acknowledged or not, the way Christians read Scripture has been influenced by formulas and decisions birthed in the early church.

The scriptural case for a belief in three persons, yet only one God, has already been presented. Therefore, it should be abundantly clear to the reader that the doctrine of the Trinity is not an attempt to transcend the bounds of the Scriptures' straightforward teaching, but to echo it in creedal form. The development of creedal Trinitarianism is a result of the early church seeking to make sense of two distinct questions. First, given that Jesus was God incarnate, what must the nature of God be like? Second, if Jesus was God incarnate, how can monotheists make sense of the Father and the Son both being divine? (McGrath, 1990:169-170; cf. Allison, 2011:231). It is precisely because of the incarnation and direct contact with the divine being that the early church had to re-conceptualise their understanding of God's nature. In a sense, members of the early church became experiential Trinitarians, and it is that experience with the incarnate Jesus that acted as the driving force for the resultant creeds (Coppedge, 2007:13; cf. Pelikan, 1975:226).

Moreover, the doctrine of the Trinity does not originate within the bounds of the fourth century. The New Testament church always afforded the triune God His due worship. Because the tri-personal nature of God is found throughout the entirety of the New Testament, it could never be said that the early church (post-New Testament) ever lacked impetus to understand God as triune in some sense (Horrell, 2007:45). In addition, although the vocabulary used to describe the Trinity required some time to develop, this extended timeframe does not seem to be born from an absence of Trinitarian conviction. Rather, the early church lacked a conceptual basis upon which to give full disclosure concerning the triune God's substantive hierarchy (Horrell, 2007:46). The early church faced a linguistic disadvantage when expressing the Trinity to the world around her. For instance, explaining the unity of God without discounting the plurality of persons became problematic. For those with a Stoic background, such as Tertullian, explaining the unity of God as resulting in the persons being *unis substantiae* (one substance) was deemed too crudely materialistic (Kelly, 1960:113-114). Much of the issue in using substance to describe that which anchors the unity of persons while giving rise to the plurality of persons, is in the fact that substance conveyed the idea of "matter" (Kelly, 1960:114). A similar designation for the unity of God was that of "essence" or the divine nature. Even though this terminology was preferred by some in the early church, and even among theologians today (see Horton,

2011:280-281), by the time of Nicaea substance and essence became largely interchangeable terms. Still, it must be admitted that linguistically, the definitional barrier between these terms remained strong between the Latin and Greek speaking churches. Given the difficulty within the church in defining terms and agreeing upon adequate designations for what God is in His being, it became all the more troublesome to explain these concepts to a pagan world. Regardless of this difficulty in language, the church needed descriptions and defences of biblical doctrine in order to survive (Soskice, 2007:128).

A progressive development of Trinitarian doctrine based upon questions being asked of the church occurred during the first few centuries of history. This doctrinal evolution was a result of increasingly complex answers to questions the church faced concerning the triune God. The inquiries posed to the church resulted from the influences of Gnosticism, Platonism, and Neo-Platonism. What becomes apparent is that while the basis for theology—revealed Scripture—does not change, the complexity and clarity of doctrines change as the community of faith systematises what is demonstrated within the revealed text.

#### **4.2 The Context of the Early Church**

In an overview of the early church fathers, it seems that the issues of specific doctrinal formulations are not related solely to the authority or reliability of enscriptured revelation, but also to the proper hermeneutical approach to the text of Scripture (Fairbairn, 2009:1-2). All issues pertaining to heresy and orthodoxy centred not on contemporary issues of narrative accuracy (see Erhman, 2007), but rather on the issue of how to understand the descriptive narrative details in distinction to prescriptive theological statements (Vanhoozer, 2005:566-570; cf. McKim, 2007:1-13).

This is not to say that the early church was entirely free from speculation regarding the content of eventual canonical text. There were certainly books (*Antilegomena*) whose inspiration was debated in some circles. Additionally, not all of the early church fathers from whom there are extant writings had direct access to all of the New Testament. As Lee Martin McDonald (2007:298) has observed, the data available would lead one to

assume that by the close of the second century, most churches had general access to the canonical Gospels and Paul's Epistles, but not the entirety of the New Testament corpus.

In the previous chapter, the New Testament data pertinent to Nicene Trinitarianism focused upon these two generally accepted segments of Scripture (the Gospels and Pauline writings). Therefore, this present chapter will not centre upon canonical debates or secondary doctrinal issues concerning which there is much scholarly disagreement. Rather, without ignoring interpretive nuances among the early church fathers, this chapter will purpose to examine the development of Nicene Trinitarian thought through the time of Augustine of Hippo. The rationale for focusing upon the time period described is due to Trinitarianism finding a rather settled explanation in the writings of Augustine. Certainly, Trinitarian theology has undergone changes through the centuries following the life of Augustine, but the core content of Augustine's theology has flavoured Trinitarian thought for the past sixteen centuries.

A framing of Trinitarian development must be made. As it will be demonstrated, the early church fathers were uniformly committed to monotheism and to the belief that the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct persons, but yet one God. Creedally, this acknowledgment took some time to develop. As with most theological matters, attempts to explain the nature of God that did not align with what is revealed in the text of Scripture did occur. These approaches to explaining the nature of God have historically been referred to as heresies. As Alister McGrath has argued, heresy is not generally intended to be destructive, but is always meant to be subversive. Heresy is an attempt to answer theological questions outside the framework of previously accepted theological concepts (McGrath, 2009:33). Given what will be discussed in the life of Arius later in this chapter, McGrath's contention would appear correct. When those who became prolific leaders in sub-orthodox or unorthodox movements taught ideas about God that contradicted the text of Scripture, Christian theologians pushed the clarity of orthodox doctrine further. In short, the development of heresy presses orthodoxy to greater levels of creedal clarity.

During the developmental period of Trinitarian doctrine, the danger of tritheism (as exemplified in Joseph Smith's teaching) was rarely seen, due to the strong emphasis upon monotheism in the early church. However, throughout the course of doctrinal development, the first few hundred years of church history were littered with heresies that emphasised the oneness of God to the detriment of distinction among the divine persons (adoptionism and modalism). The most potent or successful of these unorthodox systems was known as Arianism. As will be discussed later, Arianism pushed the already developed Trinitarian dogma to a new level of coherence at the Council of Nicaea.

A second factor in the progressive development of Trinitarianism must be seen as state-sanctioned persecution. The pagan, theological attacks from the Roman state led many Christian writers to explain the Christian understanding of God in detail when defending the church to government officials. Further, due to the violent nature of persecution, Christian adherents needed to increasingly understand what doctrines were worth dying for in the course of persecution. Nevertheless, persecution also served to hinder, in many ways, theological development. Even though the core content of orthodoxy was gaining clarity, the details of orthodox doctrine remained somewhat muddled. In the midst of persecution, Christians were more concerned with understanding and holding to monotheism and a belief in three persons than being able to describe in detail how such beliefs can be consistent (Gonzalez, 1999(1):31-57; Frend, 1966:35-45, 69-82; Cairns, 1996:86-94; Latourette, 2007(1):81-89). In summary, both heresy and persecution served to further doctrinal perspicuity, while at the same time hampering deep theological exploration.

### **4.3 The Apostolic Fathers**

The impetus to examine the scriptural representation of the triune God, and to express this mystery in creedal form, did not arise for nearly a century after the completion of the New Testament. Admittedly, no explicit Trinitarian doctrine was offered by the Apostolic Fathers; however, the triadic schema is still implicit in their writings (Rusch, 1980:3). For example, in his first letter, Clement (c. 45-99) writes of there being only one God. He states further that there is but one Christ and one Spirit (*I Clem.* 46:6)

(ANF(9):243). This triadic schema appears again in the same letter with the phrase, “For, as God lives, and as the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost live...” (*I Clem.* 58)(ANF(9):246). Throughout the text of *I Clement*, the author references the Father as deity (19:2; 35:1-3), the Son as deity (16:2; 59:2), and the Holy Spirit (22:1; 45:2). While not an explicitly Trinitarian letter, *I Clement* is littered with triadic language (Olson & Hall, 2002:17).

A similar formulation appears again in the works of Ignatius (c. 50-117). In his *Letter to the Magnesians*, Ignatius encourages his readers to unity by invoking a triadic schema stating that his readers should prosper in the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (*Mag.*, 13. ANF(1):64). The formula appears again in his *Letter to the Ephesians*. In section thirteen, Ignatius addresses the issue of false doctrine, and praises those in Ephesus for resisting false teachers. Ignatius utilises the triadic concept by likening the Father to stones upon which a building is built; Christ, through the cross, is the instrument of building, and the Holy Spirit is the rope by which believers ascend the building unto God, through faith. Throughout the remainder of the letter, Christ is addressed as God, and prayer to Him is assumed (Rusch, 1980:3). Although not explicitly described, the Apostolic Fathers recognised, at least in the redemption of mankind, the triune nature of God.

It must be pointed out that first-century letters were not penned to provide a codified theological statement of faith; rather, they were written to address contemporary concerns (Rusch, 1980:3). Therefore, attempting to find a fully-orbed and systematised theology in the late first and early second centuries would be a futile exercise. The reason for this scenario is that the question of Trinitarian ontology and relational action was rarely, if ever, expressly asked or answered. Therefore, the apostolic writings did not substantially advance Trinitarian theology; instead, they served to synthesise some of the evidence presented in Scripture. As J.N.D. Kelly has noted, this does not mean that they were unequivocally Trinitarian; however, recognition of God’s plurality in persons and unity in being is apparent throughout their writings (Kelly, 1960:95).

#### 4.4 The Apologists

With the dawn of the second century came the rise of the Apologists, and a new era in Trinitarian discourse. In assessing how early Trinitarian theology developed, the age of the Apologists is of prime importance. The needs of the period demanded further exploration into the nature of God. Confronted by a pagan society, charges of atheism, and the challenge of Greek philosophy, the Apologists sought to explain the nature, function, and interaction of the Godhead. This was in part attempted to distinguish the God of the Christians from pagan gods. Specifically, the Apologists made the first attempt to provide a detailed explanation of the relationship between the Father and the Son in distinction to the pagan concept of divine beings (McGrath, 1990:172). The Holy Spirit's relationship to both the Father and the Son received less attention in these writings due in large part to the fact that few outside of the church challenged Christian theology as it relates to pneumatology. Instead, the issue of prime importance was the relationship and distinctions between the Father and the Son. Therefore, the data provided by the Apologists reveals that by the early to middle of the second century, a robust Trinitarianism was beginning to take formal shape. This information serves to answer the primary research questions of this chapter by demonstrating identifiable nascent Trinitarianism very early following the close of the New Testament text.

The single greatest contribution to the Trinitarian conversation by the Apologists was the designation of Christ as the *logos*. Utilising John's concept, the Apologists capitalised on a notion already pervading in the philosophy of the day. Craig Blomberg (1997:162) explains that *logos* is the concept through which many ancients understood the communication of God (or gods for that matter) to human beings. In a very general sense, ancient people understood *logos* to refer to spoken forms of communication, but not words in general. Instead, *logos* was the content or meaning conveyed via the spoken words (Tenney, 1981:28) However, John's meaning appears to transcend this term's functional usage, intended instead to delve into the ideas of current and past philosophical discussion. In the pre-Christian apocryphal text, Wisdom of Solomon (7:21-22, 25-29; 9:1-2, 9; 18:4-6), wisdom is endowed with attributes unique to God. There is a personification in which the mind of God takes upon attributes unique to a person. This phenomenon is exemplified in the Jewish targums, specifically the *Targum*

*Onqelos*. In this targum, the *memra* (Aramaic equivalent of *logos*) represents a direct expression of God's mind, and is often used in place of God's name (*Targum Onqelos* to Exodus 4:12). John has taken these pre-Christian ideas and infused them with not just the notion of personification, but actual personhood. It is John's contention that the *logos* is not just the mind of God in some abstract sense, but that *logos* is actually God Himself (Mounce, 2006:803; Verbrugge, 2003:342-343; Bock, 2002:410-411). Thus, John has taken what was at one time viewed as merely personified attributes of God and actually applied them to a distinct person, Jesus of Nazareth (Morris, 1995:104; Bock, 2002:412; Blomberg, 1997:210-213). This linking of Christian to pre-Christian concepts establishes John's understanding of Jesus as having a role in both creation and divine communication to mankind (Bock, 2002:412-413). Further, John's use of *logos* rather explicitly designates Jesus of Nazareth as co-eternal with *Yahweh* (Rogers & Rogers, 1998:175; Schreiner, 2008:258; Bock, 2002:413). Therefore, the *logos* epitomises the manner in which Christ is to be equated with God as a co-eternal, divine person.

#### **4.4.1 Justin Martyr**

Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165) is the apologist who most frequently utilises the *logos* concept. As Jaroslav Pelikan has argued, Justin possibly adopts this language due to both his philosophical background and a desire to have Christian doctrine taken seriously by thinking peoples (Pelikan, 1975:188-189). It is impossible to definitively interpret Justin's motivations, yet Pelikan's theory is consistent with what is known of Justin and his theology. For instance, Justin believes that Greek philosophy is rooted in the works and theology of Moses (*I Apol.*, 59)(*ANF*(1):182). Therefore, Justin has no issue with connecting Greek philosophy with the content of Scripture. Such an observation sheds light on why Justin is comfortable with using the *logos* concept to explain the eternal Jesus.

In examining how Justin explains his *logos*-Christology, it is important to note that according to Justin, the *logos* is not just the first-begotten of God, He is God (*I Apol.*, 63)(ANF(1):184). Additionally, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin declares that the *logos* is in fact, God. As Justin explains, the *logos* is one with God the Father but remains distinct in the same manner that a ray of light is distinct from the sun (*Dial.*, 61)(ANF(1):227). For Justin, the rationale behind a multiplicity of divine persons seems elementary. Because the Father conversed before creation with another divine person, there must be a multiplicity of eternal, divine persons while there is but one God (*Dial.*, 61)(ANF(1):227).

Perhaps Justin's view is best represented by the following analogies. Justin understands fire as analogous to the Father-Son relationship. He states that when one flame brings forth another flame by ignition, the first flame is not decreased in its nature as a true flame. Rather, the second flame is distinct and independent but its existence is grounded in the first flame (*Dial.*, 61)(ANF(1):227). As J.N.D. Kelly (1960:96-98) has argued, for Justin, this distinction in number does not mean that there is a division of essence. Thus, the word is in a sense distinct yet inseparable from the being speaking the word. Within Justin's theology, the "birth" of the *logos* represents a distribution of God but not a severing of the divine nature (Kelly, 1960: 96-98). Yet, it would seem that for Justin there was a tendency toward subordination. Even though this may not have meant that Justin viewed the Son and Spirit as lesser deities in a qualitative sense, he did see them as economically subordinate to the Father.

#### **4.4.2 Athenagoras**

Another noteworthy work, *A Plea for the Christians*, was written by Athenagoras of Athens (A.D. 133-190) to defend the church against the charge of atheism. The significance of this letter is that it was sent to Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. Therefore, it represents a formal defence of Christian theism directed toward the pagan Roman state. In this text, Athenagoras states quite emphatically that the early Christians were not atheists because they were monotheists; that is to say that they acknowledge one divine being, God. Further, Athenagoras states that Christians recognise and worship the Son of God, Jesus. Nonetheless, Athenagoras is careful to point out that the

Son of God spoken of by the early Christians should not be understood in the same manner as pagans define “sons” of gods. Instead, the Son of God is the *logos* of the Father, eternal and uncreated, because the Son and the Father are one (*Plea.*, 10)(*ANF*: (2):133).

Not only did Athenagoras dispute the charge of atheism, but he also thoroughly undermined the claim that Christians believe Christ to be the biological Son of God. In writing to a pagan emperor, Athenagoras used highly developed Trinitarian language that avoided the pitfalls of subordinationism to plead his case (Richardson, ed., 2006:296; cf. Barnard, 1972:182). At the same time as he pleaded for Christianity, Athenagoras provided an argument for monotheism that appears directed toward dualism (*Plea.*, 8)(*ANF*(2):132). For Athenagoras, the absolute unity of the divine persons is necessitated by the fact that it is the person of the Spirit who maintains absolute unity (Barnard, 1972:110). This stands, in Leslie Barnard’s (1972:111) view, as the distinguishing factor that prevents Athenagoras from slipping into a form of modalism. Because a plurality of persons is seen as intrinsic to unity, the absolute unity of the Godhead does not diminish the plural persons.

#### **4.4.3 Irenaeus**

For some within this period, including Irenaeus of Lyon (A.D. 115-199), salvation depended upon the distinction among divine persons. Within Irenaeus’ theological system, the Father literally extrapolates the Son and Spirit from within Himself. According to Irenaeus, man’s redemption is founded upon the triunity of God. Irenaeus would argue that salvation comes *from* the Father, *through* the Son, and is *by* the Holy Spirit (*Dem.*, 2010:7). As a result, salvation is impossible without the work of the triune God. In Irenaeus’ estimation, the content of Scripture revealed the triune nature of God progressively as necessitated in accomplishing the divine plan for salvation (Lohse, 1985:44; cf. Torrance, 1996:75).

The nuanced nature of Irenaeus' approach to the Godhead could lead some to see him as theologically inclined to Justin's subordinationist tendencies. However, this conclusion is incorrect (Minns, 2010:67). Irenaeus tended to borrow heavily from Justin's thought and theology due to his admiration for Justin's intellectual contributions to Christianity. This borrowing, in part, is what has led some to classify Irenaeus as a subordinationist (Minns, 2010:59-60). However, as Denis Minns (2010:60) has argued, the thrust of Irenaeus' theology was not meant to speak directly to the issue of subordination. Instead, Irenaeus focused the majority of his theological musings and writings to the problem of heresy.

The largest emphasis of Irenaeus' works was on the role of the Son in revealing the Father. Because Irenaeus stressed the notion that when one looks upon the Son they are seeing the full deity of the Father, there is little ground upon which to categorise Irenaeus as a decidedly subordinationist theologian (Minns, 2010:61). Instead, it is most accurate to classify Irenaeus as seeing the Son and the Spirit as the "hands of the Father" (Osborn, 2001:91-92) rather than lesser beings (Minns 2011:49; cf. Shelton, 2010:43). This analogy is in distinction to the analogy of the spoken word used by Justin. For Irenaeus, the image of the spoken word is less than appropriate (Rusch, 1980:7).

Irenaeus proposes that there is a clear distinction among the persons of God, but this distinction does not necessitate there being three individual deities (*Haer.*, 2.1.2) (*ANF*(1):359-360). In short, Irenaeus assumes that there are economic distinctions between the persons of the Godhead, but not in terms of essence or nature. While there may be a plurality of divine persons, there is not, nor could there logically be any God but the God of Christianity.

Additionally, Irenaeus was one of the first Christian thinkers to speak explicitly of the Godhead as being one in nature or essence (*Dem.*, 2010:47). As some have observed, if anything, Irenaeus stresses the unity of the Godhead with such ferocity that one could almost mistake him for a modalist (Lohse, 1985:44; cf. Kelly, 1960:86). However, explicit statements on the part of Irenaeus that contradict a modalistic framework are found throughout Irenaeus' writings. One instance worth noting occurs in *Against*

*Heresies*. In the process of arguing that Jesus is not a lesser being than the Father, Irenaeus contends that the Son was co-eternal with the Father, as a distinct person, prior to the incarnation (*Haer.*, 3.18.1)(*ANF*(1):444-445). Such a line of argumentation is not consistent with modalism. While Irenaeus was certainly not a modalist, he insisted that Christians are monotheists (Shelton, 2010:43; cf. Pelikan, 1974:177). Yet, this monotheistic emphasis did not diminish his belief in three divine persons (see *Dem.*, 5). In summary, Irenaeus provides a clear and cogent second century Trinitarian description of God. Even though his Trinitarianism is not overly developed, it is without question, nascent Trinitarianism.

#### **4.4.4 The Apologists: Summary**

In summation, the Apologists strove to explain God's plurality within unity through the conception of the *logos*. They endeavoured to do so while at the same time maintaining a distinction between the Father and *logos* that does not divide the divine essence (Rusch, 1980:5). Furthermore, they attempted to use imagery that stressed the eternal generation of the Son, rather than any language implying origination. The works of the Apologists provide a necessary element in establishing how early Nicene orthodoxy began to take shape. Given the content of their writings, the extant works from the Apologists demonstrate that informal Trinitarian assumptions pervaded their theology. As fruitful as this century of discourse was, an entire formula of Trinitarian orthodoxy would not be adopted as the rule of faith until the fourth and fifth centuries.

#### **4.5 Early Theologians: Origen**

One of the most prolific writers in the early church was Origen of Alexandria (A.D. c. 184-254). A devoted Platonist and allegorical interpreter of the Scriptures, Origen possessed one of the keenest theological minds in the early church (Liftin, 2010:123). In his theological framework, Origen strives to explain the appearance of three divine persons with the term *hypostases* (*Joh.*, 1989:2.6). While believing that the three *hypostases* or persons eternally sprang forth from the same fountain of deity (Lohse, 1985:46), Origen nevertheless acknowledges both their distinctions and unity (*Princ.*, 1.3.7)(*ANF*(4):254-255; cf. Lyman, 2011:120).

Michael Haykin (2011:71) asserts that Origen saw the need to express a distinction between the Father and Son, but held firmly to their absolute unity because Origen believed the deity of the Son was dependent upon divine unity. It appears that Haykin's summary is accurate, given the fact that just such a proposition is explored in Origen's *Dialogue with Heraclides* (1-4). It is Origen's contention that there is not just an economic relationship among the persons of the Trinity, but also a genuine ontology as expressed in his designation of the three persons as *homoousios*. Even though this ontology does not suggest separation, it does necessitate a distinction among the persons of the Trinity. This distinction, however, is not indicative of any order based upon existence. That is to say, there is not a progression of persons in terms of coming into existence within Origen's theology. For Origen, the Son and Spirit are co-eternal (Pelikan, 1975:191). Although not as clearly expressed as his understanding regarding the deity and unity of the Father and Son, Origen provides a rejection of any notion that the Spirit had a time-space origination (*Princ.*, 1.3)(*ANF*(4):251-252). What does seem to be at least an underlying concept in Origen's theology is that there is some form of subordination among the persons of the Trinity. Specifically, it would appear that the Son and Spirit, for Origen, are subordinate to the Father (Fairbairn, 2009:45).

Moreover, Origen's concept of the Holy Spirit is somewhat confused. While on the one hand declaring the Spirit to be uncreated and eternal, Origen also appears to insinuate elsewhere that he is a "creature" of the Son (*Joh.*, 1989:2.10). However, as Michael Haykin has noted, such a confusion was not uncommon due to linguistic shortcomings. It is Haykin's (2011:73-74) contention that prior to the formal explanation provided by the Council of Nicaea, writers rarely make necessary delineation between *agenētos* (uncreated) and *genētos* (created). Therefore it is better to understand Origen's theology in light of his explicit statements regarding the Godhead rather than the unclear statements. Such an approach takes into account definite statements of triune eternity found in Origen's *Commentary on Romans* (1969:6.7). Yet, it could be argued that Origen maintains categorical confusion throughout his theological writings regarding the distinction between the *logos* as incarnate being and the *logos* as identified with the second person of the Trinity. What this means for Origen is that he can at once declare that the Son as *logos* is eternal and the *logos* as incarnate had a beginning. In assessing Origen's contribution to Trinitarian development, it becomes

apparent that Origen thought deeply regarding the Trinity but rarely wrote or spoke definitively regarding God's Trinitarian nature.

#### **4.6 Early Theologians: Tertullian**

Perhaps the most prolific Ante-Nicene Trinitarian developments resulted from the works of Tertullian (A.D. c. 160-225). He is the first person to use the Latin word *trinitas* in describing the Godhead. The development of his terminology comes as a result of his attempt to defend the personhood (*persona*) of the Trinity's members without dividing their essential substance (*substantia*) (see especially *Apol.*, 21) (*ANF(3):33-36*)(*Prax.*, 25)(*ANF(3):621*). For Tertullian, the oneness of God is rooted in His simple, unified nature or substance and not a coming together of separate beings (Dunn, 2004:35-36; cf. Osborn, 2003:117).

Tertullian explains that the triunity of God springs forth from the Father because of His economic role and greatness as the Father. This does not mean that the Son and Spirit are not equally great, but merely that in the theology of Tertullian they are economically submissive to the Father in action and role (Osborn, 2003:130-131). While they are functionally distinct, the divine nature is wholly shared so that there is but one divine being or substance (Osborn, 2003:131).

In his work *Against Praxeas*, Tertullian explains his use and understanding of the language he implements in describing God's triunity. Tertullian asserts that the Father, Son, and Spirit are inseparable from one another. Tertullian goes on to explain that the Father, Son, and Spirit are unified as one being (by implication). Yet, Tertullian emphasises that this unity or oneness does not diminish their distinction, because each person is genuinely distinct from one another (*Prax.*, 2)(*ANF(3):598*).

In writing *Against Praxeas*, it was Tertullian's goal to combat the heresy of *patripassianism*. In order to demonstrate that this form of modalism was false, Tertullian uses a series of images from nature. In Tertullian's estimation, one must understand the Son as coming forth from the Father but not separate from Him. Tertullian likens this to a root pushing forth a tree, a spring giving rise to a river, and

the sun which gives off rays of light (*Prax.*, 8)(*ANF*(3):602-603). It is Tertullian's position that the differentiation within the Godhead is not qualitative as it relates to deity but is rather distinctive in terms of role or aspects of deity (Lohse, 1985:45). This type of language provides a foundation for contemporary Trinitarian discourse.

Attempting to speak with formal language when describing the triune God, Tertullian borrows heavily from the popular argot of his era's legal system (Latourette, 2007(1): 145). Despite his linguistic contributions to Trinitarian theology, Tertullian's terminology was not warmly received by the church at large for two reasons. First, his concepts are largely material in nature. An example of this material conception is Tertullian's description of the Trinity in Latin, *tres personae, una substantia*. The Greek-speaking church initially questioned the orthodoxy of such a statement. In the centuries following Tertullian's writings, it became evident that his theology was not heretical, but rather that the language barriers between Greek and Latin inhibited lines of theological communication. Second, his eventual conversion to Montanism caused many to look upon him as a heretic. Regardless of these issues, his language in describing the triune God set the stage for what would be discussed at Nicaea.

#### **4.7 The Council of Nicaea**

Throughout the second and third centuries, the works of the Apologists served to engage both the church and her critics in dialogue by explaining the nature of the Christian God. Despite the accomplishments of previous centuries, the fourth century brought with it seeds of controversy. Lewis Ayers proposes that the following question was the impetus for the fourth century Trinitarian controversy: How should one understand the distinction between the Father and the Son (Ayers, 2004:3)? The answer to this query introduced a standard for orthodoxy which has remained virtually unchanged to this day. Although the preceding centuries furthered Trinitarian theology, it is the codified statement that comes from Nicaea that provides much of the theological centre for this research. The information examined thus far demonstrates that Trinitarian elements were present in the writings of the early church. Yet, for nearly two millennia it has been Nicaea that has stood as the lens by which to assess

orthodoxy. Therefore, in order to adequately evaluate the tritheism of Joseph Smith, the issues that gave occasion to the Council of Nicaea must be explored.

In the midst of the turbulence in which the church found itself at the start of the fourth century, one controversy emerged as more potent than the rest. Sparked by the works of an Alexandrian presbyter named Arius (A.D. 250-336), the issue that took centre stage became known as the Arian controversy. According to Arius, Christ was not unbegotten; that is to say, there was a time when He did not exist (Hanson, 1988:6; cf. Davis, 1990:51-53). Arius argues that the Son is not eternal but had an origin. Therefore, He is different from the Father not just in person but also in nature, because unlike the Father, the Son was created (Erhman, 2004:167). Arius believed that the doctrine of eternal generation would render God divisible and composite. Thus, Arius envisioned the God of the Scriptures not as progressively revealed to be Father, Son, and Spirit but as progressively becoming as much due to the creation of the Son (Lohse, 1985:49; cf. Fairbairn, 2009:45).

The goal in Arius' writings is not to challenge orthodoxy, but rather to uphold it in the face of teachings he believed were tantamount to polytheism. As Bernard Lohse (1985:48) has argued, for Arius, the developing Trinitarian creedalism was diminishing the transcendence of the Godhead. After a series of letters and of local Egyptian councils, the church was left with no choice but to confront Arius at Nicaea. The council, convening from May to July A.D. 325, was attended by approximately 300 bishops. No official description of the proceedings exists. However, from fragmentary accounts one may ascertain that much of the discussion surrounded the terms *homoiousios* (like substance), and *homoousios* (same substance). It was the latter term that was in the Nicene Creed: "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father." The creed formulated at Nicaea was not the final formulation, but rather a first ecumenical effort in combating Arianism. The creed itself underwent a number of revisions in order to counter the ever-changing forms of Arianism. It was amplified and found its final form at the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381. Immediately following Nicaea, Arianism received a surge of support which lingered for a few centuries (Chadwick, 1993:133).

This continual spread of Arianism seemed to have less to do with Christians actually agreeing with Arius after a period of theological reflection but was largely attributed to a lack of theological cogitation and a generally anti-Nicene attitude (Ferguson, 2005:200). The struggle for theological clarity borne in the fourth century was not a result of doctrinal confusion, *per se*. It was a struggle principally centred on linguistic and semantic differences rather than substantively differing doctrines. Still, Arius sought to defend his understanding of orthodoxy by establishing a genuinely competing understanding of Christ as creature. Yet, by the close of the fourth century, heresy did not derail orthodoxy but instead served as the stimulus for doctrinal clarification (Gonzalez, 1999(1):162-167).

#### **4.8 Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa**

Gregory (A.D. 335-386) penned his work *On Not Three Gods* in response to the claim that Christians worship three gods. In the text, he confronts those failing to acknowledge a distinction between the conceptual persons of the Trinity and the linguistic descriptions of those persons (Ayers, 2004:347). In effect, he accomplishes what Tertullian could not. As Lewis Ayers (2004:348) has demonstrated, for Gregory, the seemingly three separate works of the Godhead only appear as such; they are actually a single work flowing from a single essence. Gregory summarises this position by describing the power and activities of God coming from the Father as water comes from a spring. Even so, it is the Son who brings what is seen into operation and it is the power of the Spirit who acts in perfecting grace (*Tres dii*)(*NPNF-2*(5):334).

Interestingly enough, it is argued that Gregory of Nyssa differs from other church fathers who see the unity of the Godhead being grounded in the Father. Rather, Gregory sees unity being based in the Father but completed or upheld in the Spirit (Maspero, 2007:179-180). Although Gregory does employ a variety of analogical and descriptive terminologies in assessing the power and action of the Godhead, in no way does he conceive a division in their essence. For him, the Godhead is not a partnership, but an absolute unity (Ayers, 2004:360). In the final estimation, it would seem that Gregory's argument is that while the actions of the Godhead could appear to demonstrate three gods, this assumption comes from a misunderstanding of the triune nature. Rather than

defining themselves individually as do human persons, the persons of the Trinity are distinguished by different economic roles, yet their actions are wholly indivisible. In short, although distinctions exist among the persons, the persons are not separate individuals acting as one. They are, in actuality, one being.

#### **4.9 Post-Nicene Fathers: Augustine**

The Trinity is most clearly expressed in the works of Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430). Augustine describes the Father and the Son as distinct from one another, yet entirely unified when he writes in triplicate of the Father and Son being not just one in but actually being one greatness, truth and wisdom. Moreover, Augustine goes on to clarify that the Father and Son are distinct. They are not both the Word or the Son but remain distinct in the midst of unity (*Trin.*, 7:1.3)(*NPNF-2(3):107*). Continuing this pattern of thought, Augustine writes that the Son is distinct from the Father in person but is in all things like the Father and equal to the Father. Augustine conveys this equality in deity by stating that if the Father is God then the Son is God. If the Father is Light then the Son is Light. If the Father is Wisdom then the Son is Wisdom. This unity in description is true because the Father and Son are of one essence or substance. That is to say that everything the Father is as deity the Son is also. Still, the Son is not the Father and the Father is not the Son. In Augustine's theology, they are-wholly distinct but entirely one (*Trin.*, 15:14.23)(*NPNF-2(3):213*). This oneness and distinction is tied in large part to Augustine's theology of the Spirit. As J.N.D. Kelly (1960:275) has described, despite being confused regarding the procession of the Holy Spirit, Augustine is certain that the person of Spirit acts as the bond of love or communion between the Father and the Son (*Trin.*, 5.12; 5.15-17)(*NPNF-2(3):93-96*).

For Augustine, deity is not attributed to any one person of the Trinity. Rather, in so far as each person is a person, as the Trinity they are deity (Hill, 2003:87). This is due to their co-equal sharing of divine attributes (*Trin.*, 5.9. *NPNF-1(3):92*). So, deity for Augustine is inextricably tied to a single, shared, divine triune nature rather than a mere combination of divine individuals (Hill, 2003:87). This emphasis serves to maintain clarity regarding the unity of persons, rather than elevating the distinctions between the persons beyond that with which would accord with monotheism (Hill, 2003:88).

In his book of *Confessions*, Augustine presents a case for God's simplicity and immutability (*Conf.*, 4.16.28)(*NPNF-2*(1):77). In another work, he states that God is three persons, yet a single essence; therefore, one should not think of three gods, but a triunity (*Fid.et.Symb.*, 9)(*NPNF-2*(3):327-331). Lewis Ayers has noted that Augustine cannot envision anything but three co-eternal and co-substantial persons. That is to say, in no way does Augustine believe that the divine essence or being gives rise to the persons, but that the plurality of persons are intrinsic to the divine being (Ayers, 2004:381).

While Augustine's assertions are certainly true and aid in clarifying the orthodox position, his greatest contribution to Trinitarian discourse is his use of analogy. Of all his analogies, the most valuable is his picture of love. Motivated by a question about the Trinity posed by one of his students (Stump & Kretzmann, 2001:92), the latter Augustine begins to see the Trinity as the model for all relationships and specifically, love (Smither, 2008:219-220). Augustine demonstrates that love requires no less than three aspects: "When I, who make this inquiry, love anything, there are three things concerned—myself, and that which I love, and love itself" (*Trin.*, 9.2)(*NPNF-2*(3):125). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are analogous to one who loves, the one being loved, and the power of love (Rusch, 1980:26; cf. Ayres, 2010:283-284). This analogy is useful as there is one substance, love, but three distinct aspects of that love, all of which are necessary for love to exist. A further analogy utilised by Augustine is that of the mind. In Augustine's estimation, the Trinity could be likened to the workings of a mind. In brief, the inner workings of the Triune God are analogous to *memoria*, *intellegentia*, and *voluntas* (Morgan, 2010:30). The Father, Son, and Spirit interact in a manner likened to memories, wisdom, and exertion of the will. For Augustine, both the unity of the persons and their distinctions are demonstrated by the analogy of the mind. In the mind there are specific operations or processes that occur which are distinct from another, however, not one of these processes could occur apart from the mind. Thus, with the mind there is memory, wisdom, or will. Yet, memory itself is not mind, nor is wisdom or will. Therefore, the unity of the mind with its distinct operations is, for Augustine, analogous to the nature of the Trinity (Morgan, 2010:30; cf. Ayres, 2010:275-296).

#### 4.10 Summary of Early Trinitarian Thought

The purpose of this exploration in early Trinitarian thought is to establish how early in the history of the church, nascent or proto-Nicene orthodoxy developed. It has been demonstrated that the doctrine of the Trinity in its creedal form evolved slowly and gained clarity as time progressed. During the apostolic period, Clement and Ignatius penned letters to remedy issues within the church. Despite the fact that each stresses the unity and deity of the individual members of the divine triad, their views are still primitive and lack a conceptual explanation of God's triunity. With the advent of the Apologists, greater attention is given to the nature of the triune Godhead. Defending the deity of Christ in the face of Greek philosophy and heretical movements, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus utilise the *logos* concept. While the *logos* was beneficial in explaining the eternal nature of Christ and his procession from the Father, it does not provide the detail needed to explicate the economic nature of the triune God. It was at this juncture that Tertullian introduces terminology describing the economy of the Trinity.

Tertullian's teaching lays the groundwork for the language used within the Nicene Creed. This language proved advantageous in combating the heretical doctrines of the presbyter Arius. Much of what the council concluded to constitute orthodoxy comes as a product of the previous century's struggle with communicating the nature of the triune God. Even though Nicaea is significant in thwarting the heresy of Arius, it serves mostly to solidify the lines of theological divide (Erhman, 2004:157). The greatest expression of Trinitarian theology was still to come in the works of Augustine. For the first time, a theologian would paint an unambiguous word picture of God's triunity. Employing a vast array of analogies, Augustine succeeds where others fall short, describing the necessity of God's triune nature. It is through his effort to synthesise the Trinitarian works of men before him that results in a bridging of theology between the church in the east and west.

Summarising much of the balancing act that took place in Trinitarian development during the early church (and throughout the rest of church history), Allan Coppedge (2007:82) notes that early Trinitarians travelled a narrow theological course between two pitfalls. First, there was a potential over-emphasis upon the distinction in persons within the Godhead that could lead to tritheism. This theological danger was very real and ever-present in the early church due to the pagan context in which Christian theology was being explained and espoused. The guardrail for the early church (and modern Nicene Christians) in preventing tritheism was the monotheism of the Old Testament. Yet, this adherence to monotheism also provided an avenue for error. In an attempt to prevent a lapse into tritheism, there was a tendency toward modalism. So, throughout the writings of the early church fathers, there is an evident attempt to find a biblical balance between the oneness of God and the plurality of person.

In conclusion, in order to fully appreciate historic, orthodox Christianity one must examine the historical development of its doctrine of God. Such an investigation should focus upon the patristic struggle to formulate an orthodox creed that expresses the triunity of God without violating Christianity's commitment to monotheism (Coppedge, 2007:27). The early church did not engage in speculative theology in order to develop Trinitarian convictions; rather, they simply developed an understanding of God that was faithful to the Scriptures' teaching that there is but one God and He is three persons. In short, the data engaged in this chapter thus far answers the first of two research questions that necessitate the writing of this chapter as whole: What is the historical, orthodox position on the Trinity and how early was it established? What has been demonstrated is that proto-Nicene orthodoxy becomes evident in the writings of the church fathers by the late first or early second centuries.

#### **4.11 Trinitarianism in the Modern Era**

Nicene Orthodoxy has found revival among many modern theologians. While one could argue that Nicene doctrine never left the forefront of Christian theology, the emphasis upon its Trinitarian aspects has recently become quite popular. The factors for this Trinitarian renewal need not to be discussed at the present, but trends in Trinitarian explanation and understanding should be given due attention. The second research

question motivating this chapter of investigation is as follows: How is the doctrine of the Trinity currently being addressed among orthodox theologians? Therefore, what comes next must be an interaction with prominent Nicene theologians from a variety of theological traditions. Just as there were a variety of perspectives among early proto-Nicene and Nicene Christians in the early church, modern Nicene Christians are also highly nuanced in their understandings of the Trinity. In looking forward to providing a Nicene assessment of Joseph Smith's tritheism, it is not only necessary to engage Smith's theology by using fourth-century Nicene orthodoxy, but also contemporary application and interpretations of Nicene orthodoxy.

#### **4.12 The Trinity in the Reformed Tradition**

In the Reformed tradition there has always been an emphasis upon the Trinitarian characteristics of salvation, worship, and life in general. In fact, when John Calvin first published his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), he dedicated an entire chapter to the topic. In terms of contemporary definition, a generally agreed upon definition the doctrine of the Trinity could be summarised as follows: There is one God. This one God is Father, Son, and Spirit. Each person is distinct and fully God without being separate gods (Frame, 2002:621-622; Ryken & LeFebvre, 2011:20-21; Horton, 2011:273-275; Grudem, 1994:226; White, 1998:26).

##### **4.12.1 The Trinity in the Reformed Tradition: Frame**

In his work, *The Doctrine of God*, John Frame (2002:621) states that he believes that the Trinity is an obvious doctrinal position given the content of Scripture. The threefold teaching of the Scripture, most directly expressed in the Gospel, that God is Father, Son, and Spirit demands a Trinitarian interpretation of the Scriptures (2002:621). For Frame, the key to understanding Trinitarianism is the scriptural affirmation of monotheism (2002:622). While not denying that beings other than the God of Scripture are referred to as gods by some (Ex. 18:11; 20:3, 23; 23:13; Deut. 29:26; Judg. 11:24; I Sam. 26:19), Frame (2002:625-627) insists that the content of Scripture recognises there to be only one God qualitatively.

In Frame's understanding of the Trinity, certain particulars of the divine being can be ascertained from logic and philosophical inquiry. These philosophical deductions could lead one to conclude that God must be simple, that is to say He is lacking parts or composition (Frame, 2002:325-330). However, in Frame's system, philosophical deduction is not enough. Alternatively, the doctrine of the Trinity necessitates a self-revelation on the part of God (Frame, 2002:690). With that in mind, it comes as no surprise that Frame's doctrine of the Trinity is not defended or explained by leaning heavily upon philosophy, but instead on the content of Scripture. This makes sense, given Frame's (2002:696) conviction that attempts to explain the nature of God should take care to not exceed concepts found in the revealed text.

Regarding the "plurality of persons" and the "single divine substance," Frame notes that such terminology is extra-biblical but nevertheless serves the purpose of explanation at this point in church history because these designations best encapsulate the content of Nicene orthodoxy. However, Frame (2002:697) holds that at some point in the future, terms which more clearly describe the content of the revealed text may be devised. This approach is based upon Frame's (2002:698) contention that the concepts of Scripture should not be superseded, but that the work of theology is to connect human conception and biblical propositions into a digestible form. Frame's methodological assumption is admirable and allows for some differentiation among Nicene thinkers such as seen in Michael Horton's preferred terminology (see Horton, 2011:280-281). Bearing in mind these caveats, Frame (2002:700) understands *substance* to mean who God is qualitatively. Regarding the issue of divine persons, Frame (2002:700) questions the validity of Boethius' historically applied definition. Instead, Frame envisions an understanding of the divine persons in which each represents the full attributes of the divine substance or essence. So, as Frame (2002:702) asserts, when one comes into contact with any of the divine persons, it could be said that they come into contact with the Trinity.

Careful to distinguish this understanding from modalism, Frame (2002:702) expresses the conviction that there is a distinct and beautiful complexity among the persons of the Trinity as their relations are revealed in the Scripture (particularly the Gospels). Nevertheless, Frame believes that the persons of the Trinity are true persons and not mere relations. To reduce them to merely distinguishable based upon their relations, in Frame's (2002:703) thought, is less than true to the biblical text. It is in the persons and their relations to one another that aspects of the divine nature are revealed (Frame, 2002:703). This makes sense inasmuch as Frame identifies personality as an attribute of the divine nature. For Frame (2002:704), this is how one could look at the Old Testament and see a sense in which God is portrayed as one person but complex. Notwithstanding, Frame (2002:704; cf. Reeves, 2012:34-35) denies the implication that understanding personality as an attribute of the divine substance posits a fourth "person" into the Godhead. Instead, he believes that the attribute of personality is necessitated precisely because of the plurality of persons. Yet, philosophically speaking, this seems to be a shortcoming of Frame's understanding of the Trinity. Although Frame denies that the "personhood" attribute of the divine substance posits a fourth person in the Trinity, it seems difficult not to come to the conclusion Frame seeks to avoid. If personhood is merely a shared attribute among the persons of the Trinity, it means that Frame's theology does in fact reduce the persons of the Trinity to mere relations. However, to state that each person is genuinely a person in a meaningful sense, then would not the divine substance (as the bearer of the personhood attribute) in a sense become a fourth divine person? Perhaps not. At least not in the same sense as the Father, Son, and Spirit are persons but nevertheless the description provided by Frame does have its shortcomings. In the end, Frame approaches the doctrine of the Trinity as it is rooted in the content of Scripture prior to extrapolating any philosophical concepts.

#### **4.12.2 The Trinity in the Reformed Tradition: Grudem**

Wayne Grudem represents the Reformed Tradition theologically, but not in the same sense as John Frame. Grudem's theology is more of a broadly evangelical Reformed approach rather than a specifically distinct Reformed theology. However, given his prominence as a theologically Reformed thinker, Grudem's understanding of the Trinity should be categorised as Reformed.

First, Grudem (like Frame) grounds his belief in the doctrine of the Trinity in the progressively revealed text of Scripture. In his view, the text of the Old Testament serves to provide hints of the doctrine of the Trinity but focuses mainly upon the call to monotheism (Grudem, 1994:226-230). With the incarnation of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, comes a greater level of revealing both ontologically and in the written text. Therefore, the New Testament represents a fuller expression of God's nature, rooted in monotheism, which reveals the plural persons of the Godhead (Grudem, 1994:230-239). Based upon his interpretation of plural-complexity and monotheism being taught within the text of Scripture, Grudem (1994:240-241) believes that one cannot understand God as being composed of parts or persons (if one understands the persons as separate beings). In fact, Grudem (1994:248) argues that one of the theological deficiencies in the modern Nicene tradition is an unconscious tendency toward tritheism. It is Grudem's (1994:248) contention that tritheism renders the biblical teaching on the nature of God as confusing and contradictory. This confusion arises because tritheism causes a potential scenario in which a worshipper could prefer one of the "gods" of the Trinity over another. In other words, there would be no central being who is the object of worship.

For Grudem (1994:248-249), the persons of the Godhead must be unified as one God but distinguishable as they relate to the created world. Further, he believes that these economic roles are not just temporally revealed, but exist eternally. Therefore, in Grudem's (1994:249-250) understanding, the Father, Son, and Spirit all eternally occupy those relations.

When it comes to the matter of persons and substance, Grudem (1994:252-253) chooses to use the traditional term “person” but utilises “being” rather than substance or essence of God. This is interesting, given the discussion provided by Frame regarding the deficiency of such language. Grudem avoids the distinctions in terminology and instead presses forward, using traditional Trinitarian terminology without providing any qualification regarding its deficiency. However, because Grudem does not qualify or define his use of Trinitarian terminology, much of his otherwise helpful exposition of the Trinity becomes ambiguous. Without defining one’s terminology, especially terms that have been dated throughout the course of church history, a theologian’s efforts at clarity can actually lead to confusion. In Grudem’s case, confusion does not abound, but certainly a lack of definition is troublesome.

In Grudem’s understanding, all the attributes of the divine being are equally exercised by each of the persons. In other words, there is no person that has an attribute advantage over another (Grudem, 1994:253). Rather, the uniqueness of each person is in how they relationally interact with one another. To put it another way, Grudem (1994:254) sees the Son as the Son because that is how He interacts with the Father, etc. Yet, Grudem does not explore or explain how, in his understanding, the economic roles of the persons are understood in light of what attributes they demonstrate in the redemption of mankind. To state it in another way, while Nicene orthodoxy has long-held that each person of the Trinity shares equally in the attributes of the divine being (Grudem’s preferred term), Nicene thinkers have also distinguished what attributes are most revealed in the actions of each of the persons. Given the manner in which Grudem describes the economic roles of the persons, a discussion that focuses upon the roles of each person in demonstrating the attributes of the divine being would have proved most helpful. This does not mean that the persons are not, in fact, distinctively Father, Son, and Spirit, but that these roles are revealed primarily in their relations, not essence of being.

#### 4.12.3            **The Trinity in the Reformed Tradition: Horton**

Michael Horton explains his understanding of the Trinity from two lines of information. First, a classical, philosophical understanding regarding the nature of God and second, the revealed text of Scripture (this is not to say that philosophy precedes the Scripture, but this is merely based upon the order given in his systematic theology). Affirming the classical understanding of God as possessing certain incommunicable attributes such as simplicity, aseity, immutability, and impassability, Horton (2011:226-227) cautions against dismissing these concepts simply because they have historically been shared by non-Christian philosophical systems. The rationale for this caution is due in part to the fact that Scripture, in Horton's (2011:227) estimation, portrays these attributes as being true of God. Regarding simplicity, Horton explains that God is not the sum of His attributes and has no parts. Instead, He is simultaneously all of His attributes and yet complex without composition (Horton, 2011:228). In short, God's existence is identical to or with His attributes (Horton, 2011:229). This first observation is critical to the remainder of Horton's theology, because without simplicity Horton's understanding of the Trinity is not consistent.

As it relates to the text of Scripture and the creeds of Christendom, Horton sees the creedal affirmation of "One God in three persons" as being the natural summation of scriptural content (Horton, 2011: 274). Further, Horton (2011:277) rejects the notion that there is no pragmatic impact upon a believer's life if God is tri-personal. Horton (2011:278) argues that prescribed Christian worship such as baptism and communion makes little sense apart from a Trinitarian understanding of God.

In examining Horton's discussion of Trinitarian development, it appears that he prefers referring to the essence or being of God as substance. Moreover, following in the Cappadocian tradition, he proposes *hypostasis* as a more theologically consistent term than "persons" (Horton, 2011:280-281). However, Horton himself does employ the common designation "person" when referring to the Father, Son, and Spirit. Horton (2011:299-300) goes to great lengths to clarify that all designations regarding "persons" are merely analogous and not directly equivocal. Although Horton attempts to take the theological high-ground by espousing the use of *hypostasis* over the loaded term

“person,” it seems that he actually fails to accomplish his goal. The use of *hypostasis* among the Cappadocians lends itself more toward a division of persons than actually using the admittedly insufficient designation of “person.” Perhaps, a better direction for Horton to take in his use of Trinitarian terminology is to define what he means by person rather than assimilating a debated and somewhat ambiguous theological term from the early church.

Even though Horton acknowledges that each of the persons of the Godhead fully share in the divine substance and are therefore each fully God, Horton perceives nuanced differences that are not shared among the persons and give rise to their distinctions. In his understanding, Horton (2011:301) proposes that the Son alone is the *hypostasis* who can be incarnate and the Spirit alone is the *hypostasis* indwelling believers. This nuanced approach to the persons and their roles in revealing the divine attributes is noticeably different than Wayne Grudem’s position. Thus, in Horton’s view, the differences between the persons are economic, yet more than economic. These differences are substantive without giving rise to a substantive hierarchy.

#### **4.12.4 The Trinity in the Reformed Tradition: Ryken & LeFebvre**

Philip Ryken and Michael LeFebvre’s recent work on the Trinity, *Our Triune God*, seeks to ground the doctrine of the Trinity in soteriology. For Ryken and LeFebvre (2011:19-26), Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus demonstrates that salvation is a triune exercise. The Father administers salvation, the Son accomplishes salvation, and the Spirit applies salvation (Ryken & LeFebvre, 2011:21). Thus, for Ryken and LeFebvre, all Christians are experiential Trinitarians.

Ryken and LeFebvre (2011:20) summarise the content of Scripture as it relates to the Trinity as follows: The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. There is only one God, but eternal, plural distinctions exist in God. The Father is not also the Son and Spirit, the Son is not the Father or Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father or Son. Based upon this scriptural content, Ryken and LeFebvre define the doctrine of the Trinitarian in a staunchly Nicene fashion: There is one God who is three persons. In fact, Ryken and LeFebvre believe that one key text in gaining an appreciation for this

scriptural content is found in Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. In this letter, Paul calls his readers to remember the Hebrew affirmation of monotheism, the *shema* (Deut. 6:4). Yet, Paul applies the *shema* not to the Father alone, but to the relationship of the Father and Son (I Cor. 8:4-6).

As Ryken and LeFebvre attempt to explain the logical strength of Trinitarianism, they propose that those who see the Trinity as incoherent have no basis for doing so on the grounds of logic. In other words, a lack of coherence is not the issue in explaining the Trinity, but rather human finite experience fails to provide an adequate analogical basis for understanding the Trinity (Ryken & LeFebvre, 2011:40). This is not to say that there are no suitable analogies for the Trinity. However, all analogies will ultimately fail to exhaustively communicate triunity (Ryken & LeFebvre, 2011:40-43). Unfortunately, this is precisely the area in which Ryken and LeFebvre's work fails in accomplishing its intended purpose.

While furnishing a sufficient survey of biblical evidence for the triunity of God, the authors merely dismiss logical issues by pushing the problem of coherence in the realm of analogy. Rather than admitting the limitation of analogies and then proceeding to identify the most helpful analogical descriptions of the Trinity, the authors attempt to use seemingly illogical anomalies in astrophysics to demonstrate that something which is logical may appear illogical to the uninformed (Ryken & LeFebvre, 2011:43-46). The rationale they provide for pinning the problem on analogical issues is sound but does little to further their understanding of the Trinity. Ryken and LeFebvre represent one extreme in contemporary Nicene thought that holds a genuine aversion to analogical language. The other end of the spectrum relies far too heavily upon analogy in describing the Trinity. It seems that the best approach is to strike a balance of scriptural language and analogy. So, Ryken and LeFebvre ultimately fall short in contemporary, fully-developed Nicene explanation of the Trinity.

#### **4.12.5 The Trinity in the Reformed Tradition: Summary**

The Reformed perspective of the doctrine of the Trinity is demonstrably grounded in a biblical theology. That is to say that the theologians assessed base their theology less on creeds and more on the biblical content of Scripture. Further still, while not abandoning philosophical approaches to the Trinity, those within the bounds of the Reformed tradition see philosophy as secondary to revelation. Therefore, the Reformed tradition provides a perspective on modern Nicene theology that is distinctly driven by the text of Scripture. In piecing together the mosaic of contemporary Nicene thought, Reformed theologians mostly adhere to a rigidly revelational-minded Trinitarianism. Thus, understanding modern Nicene orthodoxy necessitates an interaction with the most-text driven element of contemporary orthodoxy.

#### **4.13 The Trinity in Mainstream Traditions**

Standing distinctively in the Nicene vein but often in contradistinction to both Reformed theology and evangelicalism as a whole, is what has been called neo-orthodoxy. Although this designation is not without its definitional shortcomings, it represents a wide swath of theological systems that are Christian but stand on the fringes of historic, conservative orthodoxy. Still, the positions on the Trinity taken by these writers have influenced not just mainstream or liberal Nicene Christians, but also Reformed theology and evangelicalism. Further, while coming to conclusions on the Trinity that differ quite a bit from other Nicene Christians, the following theologians agree on one key facet of Nicene orthodoxy: tritheism is a theological error. Therefore, some of their most influential proposals that have helped shape contemporary Nicene thought should be considered.

#### **4.13.1 The Trinity in Mainstream Traditions: Schleiermacher**

Influential German theologian Friederich Schleiermacher takes an interesting approach to the doctrine of the Trinity by proposing it to be irrelevant. According to Schleiermacher (1986:399-400), the doctrine of the Trinity is something purely academic and of little value to everyday Christian life. Thus, it is a virtually meaningless proposition. Such a proposal is generally rejected by Nicene Christians (see Sanders, 2010). Further, this proposition fails to account for the highly personal nature of the Trinitarian presentation of each of the Gospels. In the Gospels, the Father sends the Son and the Son dies in the place of sinners. Further, the Son then sends the Holy Spirit to indwell believers. Thus, even a very rudimentary understanding of the gospel message demands a highly applicable and effectively life-changing understanding of God based upon the doctrine of the Trinity.

On the surface, Schleiermacher's dismissal of the practical value of Trinitarianism could lead to the conclusion that he finds the doctrine of the Trinity to be unorthodox. However, given what he has written elsewhere, Schleiermacher's (1986:399-400) greatest concern is not the orthodoxy of Trinitarianism, but his fear that it could lead to tritheism. It is his contention that Trinitarian speculation and theological inquiry is futile due to the unknowability of distinctions among the persons of the Godhead in eternity past (Schleiermacher, 1986:739). Yet, the potential extremes to which a person or group could take a doctrine should not be a deterrent to believing or espousing a given doctrine. Varying groups throughout church history have taken orthodox doctrines beyond their intended content to heretical extremes, but does this mean that said doctrines should be concealed or dismissed? For instance, the Children of God movement took the Christian understanding of love as a license to engage in various illegal and unethical sexual activities. Given Schleiermacher's logic for discounting the doctrine of the Trinity, it would be appropriate to dismiss the need for biblical, Christian love.

For Schleiermacher (1986:745), much of the trouble regarding the eternity of persons arises from his belief that persons are in fact subordinate to one another in a way that precludes tri-personality in a genuine sense. Yet, very little attention is given by Schleiermacher to interact with robust Trinitarian models for economic roles that do not diminish co-equality among the persons of the Trinity. Ultimately, Schleiermacher's (1986:750) concern (like many in his theological vein) is not that the plurality of persons and monotheism is incompatible, but that such a doctrine could lead to tritheism, which he clearly views as a theological error.

#### **4.13.2 The Trinity in Mainstream Traditions: Barth**

Theologically distinct from Schleiermacher, Karl Barth represents theological thinking meant to bridge the gap between orthodoxy and liberal theology. Interestingly, Barth, although affirming the Trinity, holds reservations to some of the traditional terminology. According to Barth (2004(2):1:268), the oneness of God needs to be maintained over and above the plurality of persons.

While distinct from modalism, Barth (2004(1):1:361) advocates an understanding of the plural persons as modes of being rather than the modalistic affirmation of modes of existence. Still, the position taken by Barth, including his preferred theological lexicon, is virtually indistinguishable from modalism. Barth's preoccupation with the oneness of God can be directly traced to his resistance to referring to the Father, Son, and Spirit as persons. In his estimation, using the term persons could lead one to the error of tritheism, a theological position Barth (2004(1):1:357) uniformly rejects. Although Barth's desire to maintain the oneness of God is admirable, his reasoning for avoiding the use of "persons" is rather inconsistent. For instance, Barth nowhere objects to referring to God as Father. However, is not a father also a person? Is not a son a person? Then why would God the Father and God the Son not be genuine persons? While it is difficult to use this logic to demonstrate that Barth should recognise the Spirit as a person, the content of Scripture applies the same personal language to the Spirit as it does to the Father and Son. In conclusion, Barth maintains the historic Nicene aversion to tritheism, but only at the cost of inconsistently dismissing the scriptural data for the persons of the Godhead.

#### **4.13.3 The Trinity in Mainstream Traditions: Summary**

Even though Schleiermacher and Barth do not understand the Trinity in a traditionally Nicene manner, their reservations are grounded in an insistence upon monotheism. So, although representing a move away from Nicene creedal theology, Schleiermacher and Barth stand opposed to utilising the persons of the Trinity to make a case for tritheism. In the end, Schleiermacher and Barth desire to uphold the oneness of God to the detriment of plurality of God in avoiding the error of tritheism. This information aids in accomplishing the research goals of this chapter by demonstrating that even those who are not traditional Nicene Trinitarians believe that tritheism is decidedly outside the bounds of Christian orthodoxy.

#### **4.14 The Trinity in Evangelical Thought**

Evangelicalism is a broad category within the Nicene spectrum. In a sense, it encompasses both approaches to the Trinity previously examined and in another sense it is a distinct movement within Nicene orthodoxy. What will be evident from the data to come is that evangelical thinkers hold more to historic orthodoxy than do those within liberal or neo-orthodox circles. Additionally, evangelicals emphasise the role of philosophy in Trinitarianism more than their Reformed counterparts. This information is important to gain perspective in how modern Nicene Christians are still attempting to further clarify Trinitarian orthodoxy by continually synthesising the content of Scripture and the musings of philosophy.

##### **4.14.1 The Trinity in Evangelical Thought: Geisler**

Norman Geisler is by training a philosopher first and a theologian second. Nevertheless, his systematic theology has become one of the standard-bearers for evangelical theology in the modern-era. So, it is significant to note that his doctrine of God begins by acknowledging and arguing for the classical definitions of the divine being. Geisler (2003:30-157) dedicates a great deal of energy to defending essential concepts such as divine simplicity, aesity, necessity, and immutability. Geisler argues that simplicity and unity go together in such a manner as to preclude the possibility of multiple gods existing. Therefore, there is but one God. However, it is a philosophical

possibility to have a plurality of persons; therefore, the unity and simplicity of God should be understood in connection with the trinity of God (Geisler, 2003:269-270). Geisler envisions these concepts as flowing naturally from the text of Scripture, but begins his explanation by arguing from philosophical standpoint.

Regarding the unity of God, Geisler contends that the divine being must be pure actuality. The argument Geisler (2003:270) presents is that multiple divine beings could not exist because pure actuality can only be found in one divine being. His reasoning for this proposition is based upon the understanding that differentiation has to be understood as it relates to “being.” Therefore, Geisler proposes there could be only one being who is pure actuality. Thus, this being must be absolute unity (Geisler, 2003:270-271). Admittedly, this line of argumentation is logically consistent; however, it is also less than convincing. Geisler’s logic is consistent with what he proposes on the whole as his model for the Trinity, but the equating of pure actuality to the necessity of one divine being is not very compelling. Worse still is that Geisler offers only brief rationale in making his case. In fact, he dedicates the majority of this section to demonstrating that his explanation is consistent with itself rather than demonstrating his model to be necessarily true. In considering his contribution to Trinitarian theology, the failure to make his case on this point is substantial. Much of what he insists upon regarding his philosophical explanations for the Trinity assumes that this argument is necessarily true.

In congruence with classical thinking, Geisler understands unity and simplicity as being fundamentally connected to one another. Thus, what differentiates the God of the Scriptures from the bare monotheism of philosophy is found within the revelation of Scripture (Geisler, 2003:279-292). Geisler (2003:292) freely uses the designation “persons” when speaking of the Father, Son, and Spirit but adopts the more modern conception of essence over and above the Nicene designation of substance. It is his contention that the unity of God in no way necessitates there being just one person in the Godhead. Alternatively, Geisler sees the creedal affirmations and scriptural teaching regarding three persons as consistent with philosophical conceptions of monotheism. He argues that it is possible to have three persons and yet only one divine being if one understands person as a subjective centre of volitionality and essence as the objective

centre of essential properties inherent to the divine being (Geisler, 2003:293). Geisler (2003:293) admits that such a distinction does not fully explain the “one and the many” problem, but it does not fail to adhere to the basic laws of logic.

#### **4.14.2 The Trinity in Evangelical Thought: Thiessen**

Henry Thiessen handles the issue of the Trinity in a similar fashion to Norman Geisler. For Thiessen (1990:75), one must recognise that when speaking of God, one is not just referencing a personal being but is actually referring to a divine essence or substance (he sees these terms as interchangeable). Although Thiessen (1990:75-77) speaks of God’s essence as “substance,” he is careful to note that the biblical concept of this term necessitates an immaterial interpretation. For Thiessen (1990:78-88), the essence of God entails all of his attributes (which he borrows largely from classical definitions), including his moral attributes. All that God is as a being, and as persons, is represented in the attributes shared in the divine essence. While asserting numerous classical concepts describing his view of the Trinity, Thiessen rarely provides substantial rationale or argumentation to demonstrate his philosophical assertions.

Thiessen (1990:89-91) undergirds his approach to the Trinity by noting its staunchly monotheistic foundation in the Hebrew Old Testament. It is the uniformly monotheistic background of the Old Testament, according to Thiessen (1990:91-99), that provides the framework for understanding the incarnation and Trinitarian statements made in the New Testament. In Thiessen’s (1990:99) theology, the plurality of persons presented in the New Testament illuminates the plural intimations seen in the Old Testament text. Further, in trying to understand the two affirmations of Scripture (that there is one God, yet this one God is tri-personal), Thiessen (1990:99) prefers to use the analogy of the human mind. Just as there is one mind in each human being, this mind can deliberate, pass judgment, and come to conclusions in one mind at the same time (Thiessen, 1990:99). Such an analogy is surely taken in the historical tradition of Augustine but has generally fallen out of use among contemporary theologians due to the weakness of the analogy. Overall, Thiessen’s Trinitarianism is rather under-developed. He provides little argumentation pertaining to the problematic passages for Old Testament

monotheism and does not provide overly sophisticated philosophical defence of his Trinitarian model.

#### **4.14.3 The Trinity in Evangelical Thought: Sanders**

Similar to Ryken and LeFebvre, Fred Sanders grounds his understanding of the Trinity in the experience of the Trinity through the Gospel (Sanders, 2010:10). It is Sanders' (2010:10; 96-99) belief that the Gospel message comes from the Trinity and ultimately points toward the Trinity. Despite the fact that evangelicals are all experiential Trinitarians, in Sanders' (2010:11-12) view, evangelicalism has become weak in its Trinitarian commitment. He proposes to remedy this situation by emphasising the Trinitarian nature of the gospel message (Sanders, 2010:13; 103-125). According to Sanders (2010:34-35), Trinitarianism must be less about merely affirming a doctrinal creed but more experiential. This assertion is grounded in Sanders' (2010:35) proposal that attempting to explain the Trinity through analogies is a somewhat vain exercise. Sanders (2010:35-36) sees analogies and complex Trinitarian arguments leading away from experience, the heart of Trinitarian theology. It is his concern that Trinitarian arguments can lead to little more than intellectual endeavours for the sake of being intellectual (Sanders, 2010:35).

Even though Sanders' caution regarding analogies and argumentation is well-intended, this approach would do little to prevent Nicene orthodoxy from slipping into a heresy such as tritheism. Theoretically, tritheism could be just as experiential as Trinitarianism. So, the question of truth should not be solely about experience. Instead, experience should be valued in so far as it accords with what makes sense of the scriptural content, while at the same time remaining logical. Sanders does not deny that experience and Scripture must cohere; however, his approach could be taken to an extreme that leads to valuing experience over revelation.

Sanders' goal (2010:36-37), which he readily admits, is to free Trinitarianism from the grip of high church theology/liturgy and to instead provide an experiential framework for low church evangelicalism. Yet, such an approach is exactly the weakness of Sanders' model. As will be seen in the next chapter, divorcing Trinitarian theology from a deep, well-developed creedal theology generally leads to what has been historically deemed as heresy. This is not to say that Sanders is advocating a wholesale divorce, but his overall thesis, although well-meaning, is problematic.

The background of Sanders' approach is actually connected to the work of Friederich Schleiermacher. Sanders (2010:38-39) believes that the waning of Trinitarian conviction, or at least Trinitarian proclamation among evangelicals, is directly attributable to Schleiermacher's views regarding the Trinity. Because Schleiermacher fails to see the experiential value of Trinitarianism, he jettisons dogmatic creedal affirmation from his own system. However, in remedying Schleiermacher's damage, Sanders appears to be following a similar, albeit more orthodox course. Sanders (2010:141-166) still maintains a robust theology of the Trinity in the midst of his experiential Trinitarianism, but his emphasis is largely experiential and less creedal.

When it comes to the persons of the Trinity, Sanders (2010:45) affirms the co-equal sharing of the divine nature among the persons. This is why Sanders (2010:45) can assert that anyone who has come into contact with Jesus has experienced the Trinity. Even though Sanders is heavily focused upon the experiential, he does profess to believe that the Trinity is the Trinity regardless of the existence of creation. By implication, this means that Sanders (2010:62) affirms the eternity of the relational roles among the persons. A picture of this, for Sanders (2010:80), as well as one of the clearest proofs for Trinitarianism, is the Father to Son communication seen throughout the Gospels. For Sanders (2010:81-83; 133-136), these eternal roles are put on display by the narrative providing the reader with a glimpse into the inner-life of the Godhead.

One of Sanders' best descriptions of the Trinity pertains to the eternality of tri-personality. Sanders proposes that if God were merely one in person but manifested Himself as three persons (i.e. modalism), then He would not actually be revealing anything about Himself at all (Sanders, 2010:90). In fact, He would be revealing exactly what He is not. These eternal relationships, contends Sanders (2010:92-92), are eternally originated in the Father. It seems that Sanders (2010:93) sees the unity of the persons flowing from their procession from the Father.

In the final analysis, Sanders does advance contemporary Nicene thought by redirecting that theology toward experience in everyday life. Further, in the Nicene tradition he envisions the redemption of mankind as a Trinitarian mission and inseparable from Trinitarian conviction. However, his emphasis upon experience over deep doctrinal affirmations and explorations is problematic for preventing error.

#### **4.14.4 The Trinity in Evangelical Thought: Summary**

Many evangelical thinkers address the doctrine of the Trinity from two distinct places: the biblical text and philosophy. This trend is quite interesting because it reveals some of the motivations of contemporary Nicene Christians. These motivations are to remain faithful to the biblical data of monotheism and the tri-personality of God, while at the same time presenting a coherent, philosophical explanation for the coexistence of these concepts. Evangelical explorations into Nicene Trinitarianism provide this research with a modern equivalent to the approach of the Apologists. Just as the Apologists attempted to blend both philosophy and Scripture in describing the Christian God, modern evangelical thinkers do much of the same. Demonstrating this congruence in approaches accomplishes one of the tasks of this chapter: Connecting the method of development for Nicene orthodoxy among the Apologists to contemporary Nicene discourse. The contributions of other evangelical thinkers will later be examined when appraising the coherence of Joseph Smith's tritheism.

#### **4.15 Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter is to answer the following research questions: First, what is the historical, orthodox position on the Trinity and how early was it established? Second, how is the doctrine of the Trinity currently being addressed among orthodox theologians? Only by engaging with primary sources from the early church fathers can the first question be adequately addressed. A synopsis of the detailed interaction with the early church, supplied throughout this chapter, will be provided below. This information is necessary for understanding Nicene orthodoxy in the history of the church and especially among contemporary theologians. It is only by understanding orthodoxy prior to Joseph Smith that his theology can be assessed from a historical perspective. Yet, to assume that contemporary Nicene thinkers could critique Smith's tritheism apart from their own Trinitarian milieu is quite foolish. Therefore, the manner in which the Trinity is being conceived among contemporary Nicene theologians has been assessed. Thus, the data contained in this chapter demonstrates the historical basis upon which to engage Smith's tritheism, while at the same time providing the reader with transparency regarding contemporary, Nicene trends.

To reiterate the content of this chapter, for Nicene Christians, the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly taught within Scripture. The ensuing Trinitarian creedal formulations resulted from historical meditation upon the Scriptures. When the church was born, she eagerly awaited the return of Jesus Christ. The expectation of the early church was that Christ would return within the lifetime of those who had seen Him ministering on earth. This conviction precluded any significant theological exploration. However, the rise of various heretical groups pushed forward the development of standards for orthodoxy. Out of this theological progression came descriptions and defences that demonstrated the coherence of a triune God. This data has served to answer one of the primary research questions of this project: What is the historical, orthodox position on the Trinity and how early was it established? The information provided in this chapter demonstrated that although creedal Trinitarianism developed steadily from the second to fourth centuries, nascent Trinitarianism was present in the writings of Christian thinkers immediately following the close of the New Testament era.

Further, this chapter served to answer the second major research question presented on this topic: How is the doctrine of the Trinity currently being addressed among orthodox theologians? The theologians analysed spanned three distinct veins within bounds of Christian orthodoxy: Reformed theology, neo-orthodoxy/liberalism, and broadly evangelical thought. The interaction with these theologians, despite their radically different approaches to numerous theological issues, reveals a number of consistent lines of thought among modern Nicene Christians. First, there is a genuine desire among contemporary Nicene thinkers to remain true to the text of Scripture. It is the revealed text that dictates theology, rather than theology dictating the approach with which Nicene Christians come to the text. Second, philosophy is helpful in explaining the coherence of Trinitarian monotheism, but the analogies presented from philosophy will ultimately fall short in providing an exhaustive description of the divine essence. Third, while there is a consistent theological lexicon that is shared among Nicene Christians, there still exists debate on how to properly define and use terms such as person and substance. Last, contemporary Nicene thinkers tend toward an overemphasis upon the unity of God rather than the plurality of persons. This is in no way meant to dismiss the distinct persons of the Godhead so often discussed in Nicene orthodoxy. However, as some of their own words reveal, there is a fear among Nicene theologians that placing too much of an emphasis upon the plurality of persons could lead to tritheism. Given that the theologians evaluated are living or lived in a post-Joseph Smith world, this fear is quite understandable.

While the information presented in this chapter goes further in answering the research questions motivating this project, there are still more questions to be explored. Many of the remaining questions focus upon Joseph Smith, his context, theology, and the results of his theology. The next chapter will begin (in light of the data presented in the present chapter) to examine the theological context in which Joseph Smith broke from Nicene orthodoxy and developed his own brand of tritheism.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### JOSEPH SMITH'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT

#### 5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter traces the development of Nicene orthodoxy leading up to the time of Augustine of Hippo. Further, chapter five also provides the reader with an assessment of contemporary Nicene thinking as it relates to the doctrine of the Trinity. The purpose of the present chapter is to answer the following two research questions: First, what was the historical context in which Joseph Smith formulated his tritheism? Second, in what manner did Joseph Smith's theological environment encourage theological innovation? In order to properly address these questions, orthodoxy in eighteenth century, the North American context has to be engaged. This data will establish that the rise of revolutionary ideals among the colonies coincided with a growing sense of theological freedom apart from historic, Nicene orthodoxy. This process sets the stage for the varying influences upon Joseph Smith's life and theological development. The potential and even probable influences upon Joseph Smith's theology and self-designation as a prophet will be demonstrated to be quite numerous.

#### 5.2 The Eighteenth Century Setting

It must be stated from the outset that at numerous times throughout history, those seeking freedom have often been associated with at least seemingly unorthodox theology. Prior to the establishment of the colonies in the New World, religious oppression at the hands of the state was a common occurrence in Europe. Furthermore, quite often, those groups most devout in espousing the virtue of liberty were outside the mainstream of Nicene Christianity. For instance, the Quakers of Germany held to a belief in continuing revelation, and as result found themselves under pressure from Lutheran churches in the region (Sweet, 1973:23). Because of this persecution from churches sanctioned by the state, William Penn wrote an essay on religious liberty, proposing the need for separation between governmental and ecclesiastical authority (Cairns, 1996:363; Sweet, 1973:23; Noll, 1992:65). Eventually, the Quakers began

immigrating *en masse* to colonise Pennsylvania, in the hope of finding religious freedom.

Throughout the Old World, religious persecution against Protestant groups abounded. Roman Catholicism sought to squelch the spread of the Reformation through governmental processes (Cairns, 1996:343-346). Interestingly, those same Protestants who sought freedom from the oppression of Roman Catholicism and the Church of England, after rising to dominance in a region, often established equally oppressive regimes (Cairns, 1996:347). Moreover, upon reaching the New World for the purpose of freely expressing their religion apart from the regulation of Old World authorities, many groups (including the Puritans) established their own blending of ecclesiastical and governmental powers (Cairns, 1996:358-361; Sweet, 1973:50-51; Noll, 1992:41-53). These authorities, although generally localised, were rather hostile to belief systems outside of their understanding of Nicene Christianity (Noll, 1992:65). Further complicating the matter was the perceived excesses in religion that occurred in colonies holding to absolute religious liberty, such as Rhode Island (Gaustad, 1990:71). Thus, while many came to the New World in search of religious freedom, the colonies were still permeated with a blend of religious and governmental authority meant to uphold historic, Nicene orthodoxy (see Cornett, ed., 2011). The general perception among those endorsing a restrained form of religious freedom was that those who allowed any and all religious expression gave occasion to unorthodox expressions of Christianity (Gaustad, 1990:71).

During the middle of the seventeenth century, Old World institutions holding to Nicene orthodoxy flourished in the colonies, especially Virginia (Gaustad, 1990:45; cf. Noll, 2005:20). In fact, at the middle of the eighteenth century, Virginia alone had thirty Anglican churches (Gaustad, 1990:45). By the close of the century, that number would rise to over sixty (Gaustad, 1990:45). Still, Anglicanism did not hold absolute theological sway over the colonies. As the eighteenth century began to take shape, an influx of Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians began to spread throughout the colonies (Gaustad, 1990:46).

The growth of these Protestant groups was due in large part to the Declaration of Religious Toleration issued by William and Mary in 1689 (Gaustad, 1990:46; Beneke, 2006:33-34). This declaration ensured the general right of individuals to worship as they see fit. Differing from Anglicanism on a number of points (i.e. state sanctioned religion), these Protestant groups remained solidly committed to historic orthodoxy (Noll, 2005:19-30). However, it should be noted that the assertion that the colonies represented a “Christian America” is patently false (see Cornett, ed., 2011). In fact, prior to the Great Awakening, the number of colonial citizens who were members of local churches hovered around no more than twenty percent of the population (Sweet, 1973:5). In spite of the rather low percentage of citizens faithfully attending church, the Protestant movement that exerted the greatest level of theological influence over the colonies was that of Puritanism (Noll, 2005:19).

### **5.3 Puritan Influence**

Perhaps the primary reason for the influence of the Puritans over the colonies at-large has to do with the sheer number of their published works. More than any other North American group at the time, the Puritan thinkers throughout New England wrote and published books and pamphlets that espoused a staunchly orthodox, Calvinist theology (Noll, 2005:21). While some theological particulars differed from one Puritan theologian to another, Calvinistic theology, rooted in Augustinian thought, remained the anchor of all Puritan theology (Noll, 2005:21).

Not all Puritans were academics, but the most influential and outspoken Puritans were generally well-educated (Ahlstrom, 1972:130). This emphasis upon the role of the mind in a Christian society led the Puritans to develop highly detailed doctrinal treatises, along with rigorous catechetical procedures (Ahlstrom, 1972:130). The influence of Puritan theology and lifestyle practices cannot be overstated. By the time of the American Revolution, Sydney Ahlstrom argues that close to three-fourths of the colonial population had been influenced in some manner by Puritanism (Ahlstrom, 1972:124). Therefore, the theological landscape of this period was largely dominated by Nicene orthodoxy.

## 5.4 The Great Awakening

Interestingly enough, the period that marked the collapse of Puritan influence and theological sway, was a time of revival centred upon the very doctrines espoused by the Puritans. This time of revival, called the Great Awakening, began to take shape late in the winter of 1734. Under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), a devoted Trinitarian (Edwards, 2003:109-148), the church in Northampton, Massachusetts experienced a renewed response to the gospel message (Gonzalez, 1999(2):228). By early 1735, the enthusiasm experienced in Northampton for the gospel had spread to surrounding towns and counties (Noll, 2010:77-78; Latourette, 2007(2):959). Declining sharply after its peak in the spring of 1735, the revival (witnessed and perhaps instigated by Jonathan Edwards) spread across twenty-five communities in Massachusetts and Connecticut (Kidd, 2007:21; Noll, 2010:78; cf. Ahlstrom, 1972:282-283). By 1737, the frontier revival, as Edwards called it, had waned significantly (Ahlstrom, 1972:282-283; Hill, 2006:332). It was at this time that Edwards penned an account of the revival entitled *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (Kidd, 2007:13, 21).

Following the publications of Edwards' account of the revival, George Whitefield (1715-1770) returned to the colonies from England. Sharing Edwards' commitment to historic orthodoxy, and specifically Reformed theology (Gonzalez, 1999(2):228-229), Whitefield commenced a preaching tour that would take him from New York to Georgia (Ahlstrom, 1972:283; Latourette, 2007(2):959; Hill, 2006:332). Whitefield's energetic preaching, coupled with the expectations that flowed from the publication of Edwards' narrative, led to anticipation for revival among many colonists, especially New Englanders (Kidd, 2007:22; Ahlstrom, 1972:287; cf. Sweet, 1973:131). Whitefield's preaching tour through the New England colonies and the South, and the resultant revivals, led to a growing sense of commonality among the colonies, as well as deep interest in spiritual matters (Gonzalez, 1999(2):229-230).

The results of both Edwards' and Whitefield's revivals were transformative for the colonies for a number of reasons. First, there was a development of an attitude of disregard for established church traditions (Noll, 2010:107). More than Edwards, Whitefield typified this attitude in both his preaching style and his evangelistic methodology (Noll, 2010:107). Even though Edwards marked a break from some of the traditions of the Puritanical past in New England, it was largely Whitefield who brought a radically new approach to both preaching and church life to the forefront (Ahlstrom, 1972:286-287).

The second notable outcome of the Great Awakening, as led by Edwards and Whitefield, was a splintering of ecclesiastical structuring (Noll, 2005:48-49; Noll, 1992:98; cf. Sweet, 1973:134). Given the themes of revival preaching, especially in the case of Edwards, there arose a variety of approaches in how to understand "church." For some, a separatist path seemed necessary, while for others a more social approach to understanding the covenant that defines a church body was a more suitable course. In short, in the wake of Edwards' and Whitefield's preaching, the traditional church structure ceased to dominate the New England landscape (Noll, 2005:48-49).

The third most pertinent effect of the Great Awakening, for the purpose of this research, was a new American religious ideal. While the Puritans of the past sought to establish a deep, rigid theology founded upon the content of Nicene orthodoxy, many coming out of the Great Awakening were drawn to what could be called a Christian Republicanism (Sandoz, 2006:6; Shelley, 2008:349; Noll, 2005:49). As will be explored, the blending of republicanism and theology gave rise to a volatile mix of political, social, and religious thought that contributed to both the American Revolution and theological innovation (Noll, 1992:116).

## 5.5 “Christian” Republicanism

In the decades leading up to the Great Awakening, there were clear and significant divides among churches and denominations (Sweet, 1973:172). Essentially, prior to the efforts of Edwards and Whitefield to establish the gospel message as the dividing line among churches, there was a considerable disconnect even among Protestants. Following the Great Awakening, a new level of cooperation began to develop among many, but not all Protestants (Sandoz, 2006:57; Sweet, 1973:172).

This new cooperation paralleled the political sentiments among many colonists. If republicanism represented a united, political resistance to British tyranny, Christian Republicanism represented both a sanctified form of political resistance, as well as an aversion to the perceived tyranny of traditional religious institutions (Gonzalez, 1999(2):240; Sweet, 1973:172; Noll, 2005:55; Noll, 1992:151; Latourette, 2007(2): 961-963). In essence, the Great Awakening ushered the colonies, especially in the Northeast, away from traditional religion grounded in institutions. In place of institutionalised religion, there arose individualised expressions of religiosity, embracing emerging modernist thought (Kidd, 2010:21; Noll, 2005:4). Such a transition had far-reaching effects.

First, religion became seen as something to be driven by laity rather than clergy (Mathisen, ed., 2006:150; Noll, 2005:44; Beneke, 2006:53, 56). Second, there emerged a tendency to view piety and religiosity as of greater value than doctrinal precision or clarity (Noll, 2005:44). This type of religious environment is not surprising, considering the fact that throughout history, religious institutions and statism have tended to blend into one tyrannical system (Gaustad, 1987:6). In the context of Old World religion, governmental powers aligned themselves with either the Church of England or Roman Catholicism. Essentially, if one were to express religious beliefs outside those sanctioned by these institutions, governmental as well as ecclesiastical retribution would occur (Kidd, 2010:20). Thus, the doctrinal emphasis of powerful, civil, religious and state religious movements became suspect in a post-Great Awakening, colonial America (Gaustad, 1987:6). This scenario inspired attitudes of religious freedom from both institutional and doctrinal constraint in a similar fashion to

the freedom from political oppression that the colonists pursued (Mathisen, ed., 2006:149; Gaustad, 1987:6). While only in limited form, during this period in colonial America there were some state-sanctioned religious entities. However, with the rise of republicanism and in light of what occurred in the Great Awakening, there formed a codified body of religious dissenters who desired to see the colonies institute laws guaranteeing the individual freedom of citizens to choose their own religion (Lambert, 2003:208).

What was once a political desire for liberty took on a religious exuberance. This attitude made the cause of freedom from governmental oppression also a movement bent on dismantling ecclesiastical institutions deemed oppressive in some form or another (Hatch, 1974:87). Nathan O. Hatch (Hatch, 1974:86) described this sentiment as “Civil Millennialism,” meaning that American freedom was seen as on a par with the commencement of the millennial reign of Christ. What typified the Civil Millennialist ideology was a move away from seeing the evangelisation of the world as the chief goal of the Christian religion, and in its place the dismantling of tyrannical powers, be they governmental or religious (Gonzalez, 1999(2):240; Mathisen, ed., 2006:162; Hatch, 1974:87; Kidd, 2010:16; Sandoz, 2006:17-18).

Those who opposed the assimilation of religion into republicanism as a political theory, did so because they believed that this approach to society and religion would undermine historic, orthodox Christian doctrine (Noll, 2005:56-58). These concerns seemed justified when orthodox Christians, who became ardent supporters of republicanism, began to disavow historic orthodox doctrines such as the Trinity (Noll, 2005:59-61). Moreover, popular publications stressing the virtue of republicanism advocated the abandoning of religious dogma in favour of autonomous human reason (Noll, 2005:61).

The connection between republicanism and anti-orthodox religious movements has been documented at length by J.C.D. Clark. As he observed, there is an undeniable link between unorthodox, anti-orthodox, and heterodox religious movements and republicanism (Clark, 1994:38-39; Mathisen, ed., 2006:150). Given the subject of the present research, Joseph Smith’s tritheism, it is significant that there is a historical connection to the rise of republicanism in colonial America with Arianism,

Socinianism, and Deism (Clark, 1994:38-39). All of these systems are vehemently opposed to historic Nicene orthodoxy on the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity.

As stated in the previous chapter, Arianism proposed that God the Son is not eternal; rather, He is the first created being (Hanson, 1988:6; cf. Davis, 1990:51-53). Taking for granted that the previous chapter engaged with Arianism and its founder, Arius, it would be prudent to briefly explore what is meant by Socinianism and Deism. Both of these systems assume Unitarianism, which is the belief that God is not just one being but also one person (Nichols, Mather & Schmidt, 2006:308-311; cf. Gomes, 1998:9). Socinianism began as a reaction to the Protestant Reformation. Its founder, Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), was firmly committed to traditional orthodox beliefs such as the virgin birth of Jesus and the reliability of Scripture (Nichols, Mather & Schmidt, 2006:308). However, he ardently opposed the historic, Nicene position on the doctrine of the Trinity (Gomes, 2008:42-53). Instead, Socinus believed in a fallible, monad God who lacked foreknowledge and the ability to create *ex nihilo* (Gomes, 2008:40).

Similar to Socinianism in its denial of the Trinity, Deism is a little more difficult to define. As a system, Deism does not appear consistently throughout history. The Deism referenced in this research is a specific form that gained popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Cairns, 1996:379-380; Sire, 2009:50). Among many of the leading thinkers behind republicanism and the ideas of liberty that undergirded the American Revolution, there was a belief in a sort of disconnected, divine watchmaker who is a solitary person (Latourette, 2007(2):1006-1007; Sire, 2009:50).

Among the Founding Fathers there were a variety of approaches to Deism. For John Locke, the solitary divine person could reveal Himself via special revelation but remained distant from the created world (Sire, 2009:49-50). Benjamin Franklin went beyond Locke in espousing a level of knowability to the divine person in such a manner that he should be worshipped in some fashion or form (Holmes, 2006:55; Sire, 2009:50). Certainly more could be said about both Deism and Socinianism, but the core content of their systems is what must be emphasised: they both (along with Arianism) denied Nicene orthodoxy as it related to the doctrine of the Trinity. Given the penchant

appeal of republicanism to those who advocated unorthodox and heretical positions on the nature of God, the concern of orthodox religious institutions regarding the pervasiveness of republicanism becomes quite understandable (Noll, 2005:63).

Going further, the development of republicanism, and its mingling with religion, led directly to an anticlerical attitude among the leadership of those dissenting from England (Robbins, 1968:116). There was a general suspicion of those representing established, orthodox religion because of historical connections between Nicene Christianity and those leading tyrannical regimes (Robbins, 1968:124; cf. Lambert, 2003:207). Thus, organised religion with its emphasis upon established dogma became somewhat of a spectre of tyranny in the minds of many colonists.

It would seem that what contributed to this suspicion was the blending of multiple ideologies into an American, republican movement. Leading up to the American Revolution, the idea of religious tolerance shifted from mere tolerance to absolute freedom and individual autonomy (Gonzalez, 1999(2):240). This notion became blended with the ideal of individual liberty as it related to established, governmental influence. So, what were at one point parallel ideas of freedom became blended into a new American virtue that espoused contempt for beliefs or lifestyles imposed by outside forces (Noll, 2005:90-91; Noll, 1992:151-152; Hatch, 1989:6-7, 34).

## **5.6 American Religion and the Revolution**

As indicated by the background information previously assessed, the intellectual and theological currents giving occasion to the American Revolution were turning into a religiously unstable mix. So, what exactly did Christianity look like in a theological sense at the time of the American Revolution? What trends had emerged?

Even though many churches and denominations continued to maintain the key elements of Nicene orthodoxy, a great deal of theological innovation began to take shape in the decades surrounding the American Revolution (Latourette, 2007(2):1007; Noll 2005:114-138). Among the Congregationalists arose a faction intent on breaking from Reformed theology and moving toward a more liberal understanding of Christian

doctrine (Gonzalez, 1999(2):240; Noll, 2005:139). The changes that occurred were first a rejection of the necessity of special revelation, found in the Christian Scripture, for knowing God (Noll, 2005:139). Second, there was a renewed belief in the goodness of humanity and its ability to determine its own spiritual fate (Noll, 2005:139). Third, the liberal Congregationalists espoused a new way of interpreting Scripture designed to free the reader from the constraints of context and historic interpretations (Noll, 2005:140-141).

In broad terms, there was an increasing, populist disdain for the recitation of and adherence to “inherited creeds” of Christendom (Gonzalez, 1999(2):240; Noll, 2005:151). Such an attitude called traditional doctrine and orthodoxy into question in light of revolutionary ideals. Early in the present chapter, the effects of the Great Awakening were presented as contributing to some of the theological trends being discussed. The connection becomes all the more clear when it is noted that many of the unorthodox theological trends of the revolutionary period were instigated by those directly influenced by the Great Awakening. For instance, leaders within the Shakers and Universalist movements had been “converted” under the preaching of George Whitefield (Guttek & Guttek, 1998:32-33; Foster, 1984:270; Noll, 2005:153). In evaluating the overall themes that remained constant throughout the theology of these Great Awakening converts, Mark Noll (2005:154) notes that one constant is a belief in the continuing occurrence of special revelation. These theological innovators generally advocated a belief in special revelation occurring outside the text of traditional Scripture and being ascertained by spiritual practices, dreams, visions, and hermetic rituals (Guttek & Guttek, 1998:40; Foster, 1984:66-67; Noll, 2005:154).

Sydney Ahlstrom has identified a number of growing theological tendencies during the revolutionary era. In his estimation, the theological innovations of the period were marked by the desire for redefinition. Ahlstrom (Ahlstrom, 1972:356-357; Gonzalez, 1999(2):240; Latourette, 2007(2):1046) sees the first of these reformulations coming in the form of an outright Arminian insistence upon the inherent goodness of mankind. This insistence produced a theological bias in which it was assumed that the will of the individual is the defining factor for redemption. Further, a common theme in theological reformulations relied heavily upon the assumption that history, tradition,

and creeds were of little value (Ahlstrom, 1972:356-357). The institutions that proposed adherence to such ideas were considered suspect. Additionally, a widespread theological emphasis was a move away from understanding God as Trinity and to merely the “Deity” (Ahlstrom, 1972:358; Cairns, 1996:429; Gonzalez, 1999(2):240).

During the period immediately following the American Revolution, traditional religious institutions affirming Nicene orthodoxy experienced a depression of sorts (Ahlstrom, 1972:365). The colonial interest in established religion began to wane from what Sydney Ahlstrom (1972:365) describes as “spiritual exhaustion.” So, while new religious freedom and republican ideals called into question traditional institutions of government and religion, including religious doctrine, theological innovation flourished throughout the newly formed nation.

In the decades following the American Revolution there emerged a new religious vigour among those throughout New England (Latourette, 2007(2):1037; Gonzalez, 1999(2):245-246; Butler, Wacker & Balmer, 2011:142). However, this did not translate into a new commitment to historic, Nicene Christianity. By the close of the revolutionary era, only about twenty percent of the population, across the newly formed nation, were members of churches in the Nicene tradition (Butler, Wacker & Balmer, 2011:145). This was due in part to the negative sentiments that developed throughout the revolutionary period toward the idea of a single religious orthodoxy dominating a people or region (Butler, Wacker & Balmer, 2011:158). In fact, the general feeling of the American public at-large was negative towards what was seen as the “heavy hand” of historic, Nicene religion (Butler, Wacker & Balmer, 2011:165; Latourette, 2007(2): 1035). The consequence of these trends in public feeling was the rise of anti-Trinitarian thought among many in academia (Latourette, 2007(2):1043; Butler, Wacker & Balmer, 2011:166-167). Moreover, it encouraged some to pursue non-traditional religious expressions outside of the bounds of Nicene orthodoxy (Butler, Wacker & Balmer, 2011:167-168).

## **5.7 Summary**

The early colonial period of American history was dominated by the theological influence of the Puritans. This is not to say that every so-called Christian or church followed in the Puritan heritage of Reformed doctrine or Nicene orthodoxy; rather, the prevailing theological frame of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century theology was generally Nicene. The Great Awakening brought with it a resurgence of appreciation for Christian doctrine, and even historic Nicene orthodoxy. However, the Great Awakening also gave rise to a new, personal way of viewing religion. This situation deadened the sense of necessary adherence to the orthodoxy that existed in communities of faith. This scenario was further complicated by the surge of republicanism. Although republicanism espoused the freedom of religion, it carried with it an incipient disdain for established, historic Christian institutions and teachings. So, as the enthusiasm for political freedom reached a fever pitch, the distrust of established, Nicene orthodoxy also grew. Eventually, for many in the general population, a scepticism developed toward all things associated with tyrannical rule, even Nicene orthodoxy as seen in the established church.

This information provides a necessary introduction to the world in which Joseph Smith would develop his theology. Further, this data answers the first research question motivating this chapter: What was the historical context in which Joseph Smith formulated his tritheism? In short, Joseph Smith was born shortly after a period of major religious upheaval that led to a growing lack of commitment to Nicene orthodoxy. Further, the new emphasis upon personal religion, anti-Trinitarian religion, and freedom to create new religious societies provided fertile ground in which to develop innovative and ultimately anti-Nicene theology.

## **5.8 Joseph Smith's Context and Environment**

The theological context in which Joseph Smith was born was undergoing drastic changes. A new emphasis upon personal religion and a move away from institutional, Nicene orthodoxy was underway. What influence did this have upon the theological development of Joseph Smith? While there is no definitive answer to this question, probable influences can be discerned.

### 5.8.1 Joseph Smith's Family: Grandparents

Certainly, Joseph Smith's family life influenced his theological development. So, what exactly did Smith's family believe about God? Were they aligned with Nicene orthodoxy?

Joseph's mother, Lucy Mack Smith (1775-1856), was born to Solomon and Lydia Mack. Lucy recounted that Solomon Mack was driven by the desire to be wealthy (Bushman, 2007:30). Spending most of Lucy's formative years away from home, Solomon bounced from one business venture to another in an attempt to obtain riches (Bushman, 2007: 30). At the age of fifty-six, Solomon returned home to his family on a permanent basis (Bushman, 2007:31). Throughout his life, Solomon was prone to experience "fits," as he ambiguously described these events, which were probably some form of seizure (Riley, 1902:345-346; Brodie, 1995:3-4). Despite growing up rather free of religious influences, late in his life Solomon experienced some form of religious conversion (Bushman, 2007:31; Brodie, 1995:4). Following this conversion, Solomon looked back upon his periodic fits with a new, religious understanding.

Solomon's conversion to religion was one that Fawn Brodie (1995: 4) typified as little more than mysticism. Supposedly, Solomon Mack experienced visions of lights and heard disembodied voices (Riley, 1902:15-16; Brodie, 1995:4). Such occurrences are not necessarily outside of the Nicene tradition. However, they have not been historically associated with Nicene orthodoxy.

The majority of religious influence that Lucy Mack experienced came from her mother Lydia and her brother Jason Mack (Bushman, 2007:33; Jessee, *et al.*, 2008:xviii). Lydia, the daughter of a deacon in a congregational church, joined a congregational church shortly after marrying Solomon (Bushman, 2007:33). It was under her influence that the Mack children, including Lucy and Jason, were exposed to organised religion. Lucy's brother Jason became a self-identified religious seeker at the age of sixteen and a lay-preacher at twenty (Remini, 2002:11-12; Bushman, 2007:33; Smith, 1853:21-22). However, Jason's pursuit of religion was far outside the bounds of Nicene orthodoxy.

Jason would eventually set up a small, communistic community of approximately thirty families in New Brunswick (Gibbs, 1909:34; Brodie, 1995:4).

In modern terminology, Jason Mack's religious community could be deemed either a cult or an alternative religious community. For the purpose of the present research, the terms cult and cultic should be defined. The designation "cult" is meant to describe an exclusivistic group that has a prophetic figure in leadership that professes special or unique knowledge outside of the Christian Scriptures. This special knowledge is meant to correct traditional Christianity (Tucker, 2004:16). Generally, the social tendencies of such a group include authoritarian control by the prophetic figure, prescribed lifestyle practices, and a consistent aversion to historic, Nicene orthodoxy (Tucker, 2004:16). Groups for whom these social tendencies appear to be true but who lack a clearly defined prophet would fall under the general designation of cultic rather than cult.

The reasons for categorising Jason Mack's community in this fashion centre around three facts. First, Jason Mack's followers trusted him alone as their religious authority (Brodie, 1995:4). This in itself does not mean his community was cultic. However, when coupled with the last two facts it becomes somewhat self-evident that this group could at least be described as cultic. The second reason for identifying the New Brunswick community as a cultic sect is fact that Jason Mack was given charge of the community's economic well-being (Brodie, 1995:4). That is to say that Jason Mack directed the finances of the roughly thirty families in his religious movement. Third, Jason Mack emphasised faith healing and ecstatic, and spiritual gifts (Kauffman & Kauffman, 1912:19-20; Bushman, 2007:33; Smith, 1853:21-22). Beyond the data provided, not much is known of Jason Mack's religious community. However, the information examined demonstrates that Jason Mack's efforts for establishing a new religious sect were outside the mainstream of Nicene orthodoxy.

On his father's side, Joseph Smith's grandparents may have also had direct influence upon his eventual theological shape (Marsh, 2005:53). Joseph's grandfather Asael and his grandmother Mary were wed in 1767 (Bushman, 2007:34). Asael was an American patriot, having served in the American Revolution (Bushman, 2007:34; Brodie, 1995:2). While identifying himself as a Christian, Asael was admittedly rather

irreligious (Brodie, 1995:2). Shortly after the American Revolution ended, Asael drifted from his basically Nicene affiliation with the Topsfield Congregational Church (Bushman, 2007:36). As Richard Bushman (2007:36) has noted (himself a member of the LDS church), Asael Smith moved from Nicene orthodoxy because of his affinity with the Universalist teaching of John Murray. Asael became convinced that Christ died for every sinner and thereby secured their salvation, regardless of their beliefs (Bushman, 2007:36-37). In 1785, Murray's followers would coalesce into a movement called the Universalist Society (Bushman, 2007:37). The moderator for this new society was Asael Smith (Bushman, 2007:37). Bushman (2007:37) himself has stated that Asael's family slowly moved from Universalism back to Nicene Christianity before eventually converting to Mormonism (Remini, 2002:13). However, throughout the religious development of Asael's family, Universalism flavoured all of the Smith family religion (Kauffman & Kauffman, 1912:18).

### **5.8.2 Joseph Smith's Family: Parents**

Provided that both of Joseph Smith's grandfathers were engaged in or interested in religious factions either outside of or opposed to Nicene orthodoxy, what affect did they have on Smith's parents? What exactly were the religious leanings of Joseph Smith Sr. (1771-1840) and Luck Mack Smith? Was their theological affiliation different from their own parents or were they, also, outside of Nicene orthodoxy?

In her own history of her son, Lucy Mack Smith (1853:36-37) attested that even as a young woman she believed that all of the churches of her time were in error. It was her conviction that all of the denominations of the day were very much unlike the early church in doctrine or practice (Smith, 1853:36-37). Such was her attitude toward established Nicene Christianity prior to her marriage to Joseph Smith Sr.

Much of what is known of the elder Joseph Smith's theological ideas comes after his marriage to Lucy Mack (Davidson, *et al.*, 2012(1):30). As previously mentioned, Lucy was convinced that all Protestant denominations were in error of some kind. This is a sentiment generally agreed upon by Joseph Smith Sr. (Kauffman & Kauffman, 1912:17-18; Brodie, 1995:5). He was rather indifferent to religion as an institution

except for his early, albeit brief, foray into Universalism (Persuitte, 2000:25; Bushman, 2007:44; Kauffman & Kauffman, 1912:18). This assessment of organised Nicene religion was exemplified in his feelings towards Lucy's involvement in the Second Great Awakening. For Smith, the revival in which he witnessed Lucy engage with demonstrated that those immersed in organised religion knew less about the things of God than those of the "world" (Kauffman & Kauffman, 1912:20; Brodie, 1995:5).

After a bout with illness in 1803, Lucy became preoccupied with the subject of religion (Remini, 2002:13; Bushman, 2007:45; Kauffman & Kauffman, 1912:18-19; Jessee, *et al.*, 2008:xviii-xix). She eventually found her way to a Presbyterian church, only to be dismayed that, in her opinion, the minister knew nothing of the Word of Life (Smith, 1853:48). In time, Lucy desired to be baptised, but only did so after finding a minister willing to baptise her without the promise that she intended align herself with a particular theology or denomination (Smith, 1853:48; Kauffman & Kauffman, 1912:19). As Richard L. Bushman (2007:45) describes her, Lucy became a seeker after the pattern of her older brother Jason.

Sometime thereafter, Lucy became interested in the revival growing among the Methodist churches (Remini, 2002:15; Brodie, 1995:5; Bushman, 2007:45). Despite his aversion to religion, Joseph Smith Sr. agreed to attend a few Methodist meetings with Lucy (Bushman, 2007:45; Jessee, *et al.*, 2008:xviii). However, Joseph Sr.'s interaction with the Methodists was brief. Shortly after hearing of his son's loose association with Methodism, Asael Smith rather angrily demanded that Joseph Sr. read Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* (Bushman, 2007:45). Asael, still associated with Universalism, believed it to be utterly unfathomable that his son could give consideration to evangelical or Nicene orthodoxy (Bushman, 2007:45).

As Joseph Sr. attended the Methodist meetings of 1810 with Lucy, he became marginally interested in religion, just not organised religion (Bushman, 2007:46; cf. Smith, 1853:55). Instead, as Lucy recounts, Joseph Sr. had a series of dreams in which he believed he was given insight to understand that the religion of the day, in established (Nicene) churches, was no religion at all (Bushman, 2007:46; cf. Smith, 1853:55-56). This attitude toward established churches would suit Lucy quite well

because of her belief in a personalised religion free from the constraints of institutional dogma (Brodie, 1995:5). It was during this period of religious upheaval in the Smith home that Joseph Smith Jr. was born (December 23, 1805).

## **5.9 Joseph Smith's Early Life**

During Joseph Smith's (1805-1844) early life, the Smith family moved often. They eventually traversed Vermont, New Hampshire, and parts of New York before finally settling near Palmyra, New York in 1816 (Abanes, 2003:8; Davidson, *et al.*, 2012(1): 11,204). It was during these travels that Joseph Smith Sr. had many of his dreams and visions that supposedly revealed the error that the religion of the day perpetuated (Smith, 1853:56-59; cf. Remini, 2002:20). In fact, as Lucy Smith recounts (1853:56-59), it was during their time in New Hampshire that Joseph Sr. had a vision in which his children participated in the downfall of spiritual Babylon (established religion).

Acknowledging the Smith family's diverse and rather unorthodox theological heritage, Richard L. Bushman (2007:45-47) notes that during the Smiths' migration across Vermont, New Hampshire, and New York, Joseph Sr. began to practice folk-magic of various kinds. In fact, in one instance, Joseph Sr. claimed to have been a firm believer in occult practices and even boasted of having raised his family to believe in such things (Abanes, 2003:29). In a rather broad sense, "occult practices" simply means any and all rituals and practices meant to engage the practitioner with secret, supernatural knowledge or power (Nichols, Mather & Schmidt, 2006:428). Moving forward, all references to the occult or occult practices are meant to convey this definition. While Joseph Sr.'s involvement with the occult and magic practices during the family migration period is somewhat unclear, by the time of the family's arrival in Palmyra, New York, Joseph Sr.'s magical practices were undeniable (Bushman, 2007:46-47; Jessee, *et al.*, 2008:xix) and were certainly passed on to his son Joseph.

The Smith family interest in occult practices and folk-magic was not the norm for most Americans of this period, but it was certainly not unheard of among New Englanders. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, New England was littered with occult practitioners and publications encouraging the use of magic (Quinn, 1998:16-23). Yet, as will be seen, these interactions with magic among the Smith family provide a greater context for understanding Joseph Smith Jr.'s antipathy toward Nicene Christian orthodoxy. However, to summarise the data presented thus far: by the time the eleven year-old Joseph Smith Jr. arrived in Palmyra, New York, he had been directly influenced by his grandfather Asael's Universalism, Solomon Mack's end of life mysticism, both Joseph Sr. and Lucy's aversion to established orthodoxy, their emphasis upon highly personalised religion, and Joseph Sr.'s constant visions and dreams. Moreover, one could safely assume Joseph Jr. was familiar with his uncle Jason Mack's attempts to establish an alternative religious community. So, by the time Joseph Jr. began practicing magic with his father in Palmyra, New York, he had already been exposed to a variety of unorthodox, and in some cases anti-Nicene ideologies.

#### **5.10 Joseph Smith in Palmyra, New York**

After arriving in Palmyra, New York, the Smith family began to establish itself in the fabric of the local community. Palmyra was a small town with little to make it a place of note other than the fact that it was at the centre of Second Great Awakening, religious enthusiasm (Brodie, 1995:14). Many of the towns and villages that experienced repeated revivals and became popular stops for travelling evangelists were eventually referred to as "the burned-over district." This designation was due to the way in which religious enthusiasm and revivals burned over that region (Howe, 2007:173; Remini, 2002:31; Foster, 2000:94). Palmyra, New York was at the epicentre of an increasingly dynamic and religiously diverse region of pre-Civil War, New England (Foster, 2000:96). Consequently, this region of the United States became quite replete with new religious movements and self-proclaimed prophets (Stone, 2011:494-495).

Amidst this post-revivalist culture, the Smith men began a business venture that made use of their interest in the occult: money-digging (Remini, 2002:32; cf. Abanes, 2003:28-29; Davidson, *et al.*, 2012(1):83, 87-88). During the Smiths' life in Vermont, it is possible that they became acquainted with using occult sciences and ritual magic for locating buried treasure (Quinn, 1998:25). Michael Quinn (1998:25) notes that during the 1700's, Vermont was a hot-bed for money-digging activities. Further, Palmyra, New York was one of numerous towns whose young people experienced a great deal of interest in magic and the practice of money-digging (Quinn, 1998:25; cf. Remini, 2002:32). Often, those participating in magical rituals blended folk-level Christian theology with occult practices, thereby creating, in essence, a new and distinct form of "Christianity" (Quinn, 1998:27).

Regardless of the regional interest in money-digging and magical practices, the Smiths (including Joseph Jr.) forged a reputation among their contemporaries for claiming special skill in such activities (Caswall, 1848:29-30; Jessee, *et al.*, 2009:3; cf. Davidson, *et al.*, 2012(1):309,405-413). While money-digging and occult practices do not necessarily lead one to conclude that Joseph Smith was destined to develop and codify anti-Nicene theology, it certainly establishes that many of his spiritual activities ran counter to Nicene orthodoxy. This information is just one more piece of a larger puzzle that reveals Joseph Smith's theological propensity for that which is outside the bounds of Nicene orthodoxy.

## **5.11 Religious Dissent**

The religious landscape of the post-revolutionary era was a fertile ground in which to grow new religious movements (Fuller, 2004:69). Numerous unorthodox and anti-Nicene sects began to take form in the decades following the American Revolution, and many of the areas in which Joseph Smith and his family resided were known for such activity (Newman, 2010:184). As this data will indicate, it is quite possible that these religious dissenters influenced the thought of Joseph Smith.

### **5.11.1 Religious Dissent: Isaac Bullard**

During Joseph Smith's lifetime, a number of unorthodox movements seemed to cross his path or come into close proximity of his dwelling place. For instance, Isaac Bullard's "Pilgrim" movement originated just a short walking distance from the Smith family residence in Woodstock, Vermont (Brodie, 1995:12). Admittedly, this movement formalised in the months following the Smith family move to Palmyra, New York, but the period in which this group began to establish itself is unclear. However, it is probable that this movement was known prior to the Smith family exodus.

Isaac Bullard's most distinguishing characteristic was his proclivity for avoiding baths, shaving, and his custom of wearing only a bearskin garment (Brodie, 1995:12; cf. Tucker, 2004:43). Theologically, Bullard pursued commitments to free-love and communistic practices (Tucker, 2004:43). Dubbed "Mummyjum" by the Shakers, Isaac Bullard professed himself to be a prophet (Newman, 2010:210). While few of Bullard's theological beliefs are known, what can be ascertained is that Bullard preached the imminent end of all things and his appointing by God as the prophet for the end of the world (Newman, 2010:210). Perhaps more interesting than the group's rise near the Smith family farm in Woodstock is the fact that Vermont is the migration path on which Bullard took his followers as he led them toward Missouri. Isaac Bullard led his followers on the very same path of migration from Vermont as Joseph Smith Jr. would take, including stops throughout Ohio before ending in Missouri (Tucker, 2004:43; Brodie, 1995:12; Newman, 2010:210-211).

So, did Isaac Bullard directly influence Joseph Smith? A sound answer is difficult to ascertain without much speculation, although Woodbridge Riley (1902:45-46) refers to the Pilgrim movement as a prototype for Mormonism. What can be established is that a self-proclaimed prophet arose within walking distance of the Smith family farm in Vermont (Riley, 1902:46). This prophet proclaimed that the end of the world was near and that those seeking salvation must follow him and his teaching. Additionally, this same prophet led his followers through New York and Ohio before setting his sights on Missouri, which was also to be the site of Smith's promise land. Although not a direct

parallel to the eventual claims of Joseph Smith Jr., the presence of such an individual in close proximity to a young Joseph Smith is notable.

### **5.11.2 Religious Dissent: Jemima Wilkinson**

As Ruth Tucker (2004:42) writes, the Universal Friends movement, founded by Jemima Wilkinson, established itself not far from Palmyra, New York. Jemima Wilkinson began her career as a prophetess shortly after she supposedly died and experienced subsequent resurrection (Hudson, 1821:21; cf. Tucker, 2004:42). Initially, she began practicing faith healing, prophesying, and engaged in dream interpretation (Wisbey, 2009:21). By the time Jemima founded her community in New York, she had abandoned faith healing and instead was known for being a self-proclaimed prophetess (Wisbey, 2009:21).

Some of the established details of Wilkinson's belief system included her disregard for traditional marriage and her urging of followers to abandon their spouses if they did not join with the Universal Friends (Tucker, 2004:42). Furthermore, there is substantial confusion regarding whether or not Wilkinson claimed to be Jesus Christ in female form, something her followers were quick to assert (Tucker, 2004:42-43; cf. Brodie, 1995:13). What is clear is that Wilkinson was accompanied by two other prophets claiming to be Daniel and Elijah, prophesying in "these latter days" (Tucker, 2004:43).

Even though Wilkinson's Universal Friends society was not in Palmyra, New York, nor adjacent to it, this "Jerusalem" was only twenty-five miles from Palmyra (Brodie, 1995:13). Moreover, it was not uncommon for the Palmyra newspaper to publish articles critical of Wilkinson and the Universal Friends (Brodie, 1995:13). As with Bullard, Wilkinson's proximity to Joseph Smith does not necessarily mean that she had direct influence upon Smith. However, it is again significant that a movement emphasising unorthodox teachings, prophecies, and alternative communities was near to and known in Smith's town of Palmyra, New York.

### 5.11.3 Religious Dissent: Ann Lee

One of the most popular, alternative religious sects during Joseph Smith's lifetime was that of the Shakers. Following the death of her four children (three during birth and one in early childhood), Ann Lee began to undergo a theological evolution (Guttek & Guttek, 1998:33). Having once sat under the preaching of George Whitefield, Ann Lee finally came to the conclusion that all sexual activity was sinful (Guttek & Guttek, 1998:33). Consequently, Ann believed that God revealed to her that the sin for which Adam and Eve were found guilty was actually sexual intercourse (Guttek & Guttek, 1998:33). After facing relentless persecution in her native England for her beliefs, Ann Lee led a group of her devoted followers across the Atlantic Ocean to establish a new religious community in New York (Stein, 2003:52; cf. Tucker, 2004:41). The eventual location of this new community was New Lebanon, New York, only a day's journey from Palmyra, New York (Tucker, 2004:40).

Taking on a millennial fervour, the Shakers became convinced that Ann Lee was actually Jesus Christ, now ushering in the millennial kingdom (Guttek & Guttek, 1998:33-34). Following the death of Ann Lee in 1784, the Shakers continued to thrive in New Lebanon, New York (Guttek & Guttek, 1998:37-38). Much of their theology centred on the belief that Ann Lee was Jesus Christ returned in female form, and that prophets were needed to lead God's people (Tucker, 2004:42). As previously stated, the existence of such a group near Joseph Smith does not mean that Smith's rise as a self-proclaimed prophet outside the bounds of Nicene orthodoxy was a result of living near the Shakers. Still, the fact remains that Joseph Smith would have been familiar with the Shakers and their attempt to establish an alternative religious society opposed to Nicene orthodoxy. This proposition is confirmed by the inclusion of a reference to the Shakers in the LDS collection of prophetic revelations called *Doctrines and Covenants* (D&C 49:1). This revelation, dated to 1831, is meant to deal with the problem of Shakers converting to Mormonism, but still remaining loosely connected to Shaker communities. Thus, by 1831, Joseph Smith not only knew of the Shakers but was initiating efforts to convert them to Mormonism.

#### 5.11.4 Religious Dissent: John Humphrey Noyes

Unlike the previous religious leaders mentioned, John Humphrey Noyes (1811-1886) came to prominence following the publication of the *Book of Mormon*. Yet, Noyes represents a religious dissenter, of the same era as Joseph Smith, who lived in the same region. Therefore, his theology and community are worth evaluating.

In 1831, John Humphrey Noyes was converted to Christianity under revivalist preaching and subsequently enrolled in Andover Theological Seminary (Stein, 2003:62; cf. Tucker, 2004:43). Shortly thereafter, Noyes became disenchanted with Nicene Christianity and turned from orthodoxy to pursue his belief in perfectionism. That is to say, Noyes taught that the long-held Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity, handed down from the Puritans, was incorrect (Guttek & Guttek, 1998:127-128). Instead, according to Noyes, human beings of their own will and exertion could attain a morally perfect state before God (Guttek & Guttek, 1998:127-128).

Noyes further moved beyond the bounds of Nicene orthodoxy by proclaiming that God spoke to him alone (Newman, 2010:183). In addition, Noyes rejected the traditional Christian view of monogamous marriage for what he called complex marriage (Stein, 2003:62; Jenkins, 2000:31-32). This view of marriage mixed polygamy and the generalised sharing of sexual partners among the religious community (Foster, 1984:74).

Noyes' community, the Oneida Community (Stein, 2003:62), is noteworthy because of the following factors. First, Noyes (1811) and Smith (1805) were born just a few years apart from one another and both Noyes and Smith spent a number of their formative years in Vermont (Stein, 2003:62). Second, both men began their ascendancy as leaders of new religious communities in New York (Guttek & Guttek, 1998:131; Jenkins, 2000:31-32). Third, both men would eventually espouse complex marriage arrangements (Foster, 1984:74). Fourth, both claimed to be the mouthpiece of God (Newman, 2010:183). Thus, while John Humphrey Noyes began his move away from Nicene orthodoxy after the publication of the *Book of Mormon*, the beliefs and history

of the Oneida Community demonstrate that Smith's religion bore striking similarities to other alternative religions within the same region and timeframe.

### **5.11.5 Religious Dissent: Visionaries**

Not all religious dissenters were attempting to initiate new religious movements. Some merely professed for themselves a spiritual or religious experience that must be considered outside the norm of Nicene orthodoxy. A number of the elements undergirding the following experiences would find their way into Joseph Smith's account of his own divine encounter (Bushman, 2007:60).

Many conversion, salvation, and commissioning narratives penned from the late eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century contained explicit claims by the one experiencing the religious epiphany to having seen either angels, God the Father, or Jesus Christ (Quinn, 1998:14). As former Brigham Young University history professor, Michael Quinn (1998:14) has pointed out that some of these accounts most assuredly were known by Joseph Smith and his family. One such narrative that Quinn (1998:14) believes to be worth mentioning is that of Richard Brothers. Brothers held a place of prophetic importance while associated with an English prophetess named Joanna Southcott (1750-1814) (Allan, 2006:213). Today, Brothers is still held in high regard among a small prophetic sect referred to as the Jezreelites (Allan, 2006:214-215). According to Brothers, he was carried to heaven on a cloud where he met God and was given direct, divine instruction (Quinn, 1998:14). In Quinn's (1998:14) opinion, it is clear that Smith's family had access to the various accounts written by Brothers during the 1790's and distributed throughout Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts.

Another vision bearing similarity to Joseph Smith's own purported experience is that described by Elias Smith. In 1816, Elias Smith published an account of a supposed encounter with Jesus Christ. According to Smith (1840:57-59), at the age of sixteen, while walking through the woods, Jesus Christ physically appeared to him. Certainly, the similarity in age to Joseph Smith when he reportedly experienced his own encounter with Jesus in the flesh, as well as the woodland setting, is striking. Further adding to the

possibility of potential influence upon Joseph Smith's claims is the fact that Elias Smith alleged that this event occurred not far from Joseph Smith's own sphere of dwelling in Woodstock, Vermont (1840:48-59).

The account of a vision experienced by Asa Wild was published in the Palmyra newspaper in 1823 (Bushman, 2007:60; cf. Quinn, 1998:14). In this account, Asa Wild reported to have seen God and to have been told that all the churches of the earth were false (Bushman, 2007:60; cf. Abanes, 2003:21). Both of these elements found their way into Joseph Smith's retelling of his own vision and divine commissioning.

In 1825, while preaching in Palmyra, New York from January to March (Quinn, 1998:14), Universalist minister John Samuel Thompson shared stories of his own visions (Abanes, 2003:21). Thompson would report that while living in England he experienced a vision of Jesus Christ returning to earth (Bushman, 2004:60; Quinn, 1998:14; Brodie, 1995:22; Abanes, 2003:21). For Thompson, this dream meant that in some sense Jesus had actually returned to earth (Quinn, 1998:14).

Michael Quinn (1998:15) goes on to note that in 1808, a newspaper less than ten miles from Joseph Smith's home featured a front page article regarding Emanuel Swedenborg's supposed encounter with God in the flesh. Further, circulating throughout New York as early as 1805, there were copies of Benjamin Abbott's supposed experience with both Jesus and God the Father (Quinn, 1998:15). Thus, for Michael Quinn (1998:15), it was rather commonplace in Joseph Smith's era and region of residence for religious zealots to claim face-to-face experiences with both Jesus Christ and God the Father.

## **5.12 Joseph's Vision**

While the specifics of Smith's tritheism will be discussed in chapter six, it is important to present now the foundation of Smith's theology: his purported experience with Jesus Christ and God the Father. The importance of understanding Smith's First Vision in its historical context cannot be overstated. As the late Mormon president Gordon B. Hinckley (1910-2008) (1997:226) has said, the entirety of the LDS faith stands or falls

on the validity of Joseph Smith's First Vision. Given what has been described above regarding religious excitement, potential influences upon Smith, and the Smith family penchant for unorthodox religion, the details of the First Vision must now be assessed.

### **5.12.1 The First Vision**

In his own account of his First Vision, Joseph Smith (1902:5; Davidson, *et al.*, 2012(1):6) states that this event occurred early in the spring of 1820. After a time of religious revival and subsequent soul searching, Smith experienced a sense of spiritual depression (Smith, 1902:2-3). As Smith would claim (1902:4), he felt the deep desire to be extricated from his spiritual confusion, so he called upon God to impart wisdom to him. Praying out loud for the first time, Smith retired to a wooded area near his home (Smith, 1902:5). After reaching a secluded portion of the woods, Smith (1902:5; Davidson, *et al.*, 2012(1):6) implored God for guidance regarding which denominations were correct. As Joseph prayed, he recounts that suddenly he lost the ability to speak, and a thick darkness surrounded him (Smith, 1902:5). It was then that Smith (1902:5) cried out for deliverance from what he perceived as impending doom.

As Joseph Smith silently cried out for help from God, he claims to have seen a pillar of light descending from heaven (Smith, 1902:5). That pillar of light eventually fell upon Joseph Smith. As the pillar of light drove away the darkness, suddenly Smith saw two personages, shining brightly, and floating in the air above him (Smith, 1902:5). According to Smith (1902:5), the personages were God the Father and God the Son. It was the Father who spoke first, pointing toward the Son, commanding that Joseph hear what the Son had to say.

Joseph claims to have regained his ability to speak and at once asked which of the sects of Christianity were correct (Smith, 1902:6), to which the persons responded by saying that all the creeds of Christendom were corrupt and their doctrines were false (Smith, 1902:6). As Smith (1902:6; Davidson, *et al.*, 2012(1):214) reported, he was then commanded not to join with any of these sects of Christendom. Then, after telling Joseph things he could not share with his readers or future audiences, the personages disappeared (Smith 1902:6-7).

### 5.12.2 Confusing Details and Accounts of the First Vision

Joseph Smith (1902:7) admitted that his account of the First Vision brought immediate backlash upon him from the clergy in his community. The first official publication of Smith's First Vision appeared in the LDS publication *Times and Seasons* in 1842. According to Richard Bushman (2007:39), the first account given by Joseph regarding the First Vision occurred in 1832. While Smith's late attestation to his First Vision may not warrant any feelings of disbelief regarding his claims, the rather confusing nature in which the First Vision was initially communicated does demand some caution in accepting Smith's report.

For instance, in the original 1832 account of the First Vision, Smith makes no claim of God the Father commanding him to listen to what the Son has to say (Jessee, 1989:5-7). In fact, Richard Abanes (2003:16) states that the early publications of the First Vision in 1832, twice in 1835, 1840, and in 1841 contain a number of contradicting assertions. In the first report (1832) and in the 1841 account, Smith claims to have been fifteen years of age when he had his First Vision (Jessee, 1989:5-7, 402-425). Yet, the versions given twice in 1835 and once in 1840, attest to Smith being fourteen at the time of the vision (Jessee, 1992:79; cf. Pursuitte, 2000:22-23). Further, the 1832 version has Smith as the one who determines, through Bible study, that all sects of Christianity are incorrect (Smith, 2002:5; cf. Abanes, 2003:16; Jessee, 1989:5). However, from 1840 onward, all retellings of the First Vision include the assertion that God the Father and God the Son inform Joseph that Christendom had been corrupted (Abanes, 2003:16-17). What is more, it was not until the 1842 account of the First Vision that Joseph Smith mentions that his spiritual pursuits were inspired by revivals in and around Palmyra, New York (Abanes, 2003:16-17). Although Smith dated these revivals as having occurred in 1819-1820, reports written by Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the *Messenger and Advocate* date these revivals and the subsequent First Vision to 1823 (Cowdery, 1834:42, 78-79).

What is more interesting, given that the First Vision establishes the basis for Smith's eventual theology, is that the persons who Smith saw in the First Vision are not definitively identified until the 1840's (Abanes, 2003:16-17). In the first few incarnations of Smith's story, the persons appearing are identified as the Lord (1832), angels (1835), glorious beings (1840), and heavenly beings (1841) (Jessee, 1989:5-7; 1992:68-69, 79). Furthermore, Smith violated the command to avoid aligning himself with any of the sects of Christendom when in 1828 he began attending Methodist Bible studies (Newell & Avery, 1994:25; cf. Tucker, 1867:18).

W. Jeffrey Marsh, an LDS adherent, has catalogued the initial ten accounts of the First Vision. Marsh (2005:84-99) does note many of the differences and nuances in the accounts, but he sees these differences as merely fleshing out the larger narrative rather than raising questions of reliability. In a different manner, Richard Bushman (1988:56) also makes light of the apparent problems with the First Vision story asserting that Smith most likely did not understand the significance of this event. Moreover, Bushman (1988:61-62) believes that Smith understood the First Vision in terms of his own conversion event and therefore initially relayed details as they seemed important to his conversion story. Marsh and Bushman's dismissal is difficult to accept when considering the substantive differences existing between the original accounts of the First Vision. As Kathleen Flake (2004:117-118) has stated, the First Vision stands as the basis of Smith's theology of God, specifically his tritheism. Yet, as the data examined demonstrates, the basis of Smith's theology, the First Vision, is as an account riddled with contradicting versions and ever-changing details.

### **5.13 Conclusion**

The purpose of the present chapter is to answer the following two research questions: First, what was the historical context in which Joseph Smith formulated his tritheism? Second, in what manner did Joseph Smith's theological environment encourage theological innovation? The data presented answered the first research question by providing a number of important details.

First, the orthodoxy that pervaded the American colonies came under attack from a variety of avenues. The established church, along with its creeds, became viewed by many as aligned with Old World tyrannical rule. The rise of republicanism, and specifically Christian republicanism, gave way to a sense of freedom from established orthodoxy.

Second, the events of the Great Awakening, although promoting orthodoxy, led to a radical shift in understanding religious experience. There arose among the colonies a desire for new and expressive forms of religion that were highly individualised. This further weakened the strength of creedal Christianity as the necessary defender of Nicene orthodoxy.

Third, the ideals of religious freedom that permeated the American Revolution gave impetus to novel, unorthodox religious movements coming to the new American nation. This information provides the groundwork for answering the second research question driving the content of this chapter: In what manner did Joseph Smith's theological environment encourage theological innovation? As discussed, the post-revolution American theological landscape was still largely orthodox, but there were a rapidly growing number of unorthodox factions throughout New England just prior to and during the life of Joseph Smith. His own family either embraced or dabbled in varying forms of anti-Trinitarian religion, mysticism, and occultism. Further, Joseph's own uncle attempted to found and lead an alternative religious community meant to restore ancient Christianity. In some manner, these influences impacted the thought of Joseph Smith.

Additionally, the locales in which the Smiths lived in Vermont and New York were in close proximity to a number of unorthodox teachers and sects. Among these possible influences were Isaac Bullard, Jemima Wilkinson's Universal Friends, and Ana Lee's Shakers. Similarly, in Smith's own context there emerged religious communities that rivalled Mormonism, including the Oneida Community. This would certainly seem to provide an environment in which theological innovation and deviation from Nicene orthodoxy was well-established. However, the potential influences upon Smith exceed even these religious movements.

During Smith's formative years, he was exposed to a number of visionaries proclaiming either unorthodox, anti-orthodox, or heterodox concepts. Smith had either direct access to or lived in close proximity to a number of visionaries who proclaimed to have seen God the Father (as Smith later claimed), the end of the world was near, and that Christendom was corrupt—concepts similar to these made their way into Smith's First Vision story. It was further revealed that the foundation of Joseph Smith's theology (discussed in chapter six), the First Vision, was disseminated in a number of contradicting forms. Throughout the course of recounting his encounter with God the Father and God the Son, Smith would change, rearrange, add, or omit details depending upon his audience. Thus, the very basis of his tritheism stands on rather suspect ground.

All of this information answered the questions guiding the research for this chapter by establishing that Joseph Smith was born into a time of great religious change. Further, his religious context was one that naturally encouraged individual religious expression and the questioning of historic orthodoxy. Even Smith's family life was one that favoured individual vision, revelation, and religious expression over and above orthodox creeds. What is more, Joseph Smith grew up in a region littered with unorthodox or anti-orthodox movements, teachers, and self-proclaimed visionaries. Therefore, the development of Smith's tritheism is rather unsurprising and stands merely as one of many unorthodox and anti-Trinitarian movements of the early nineteenth century, originating in either Vermont or New York.

## CHAPTER SIX

### JOSEPH SMITH'S TRITHEISM

#### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated that Joseph Smith's theological environment was one that included a variety of potential and probable influences. Some of the popular theological proclamations of the day appear to have been adapted into the basis of Smith's own theology, the First Vision. It was this First Vision that grounded the entirety of Joseph Smith's theology, including his eventual adoption of tritheism. The purpose of the present chapter is to answer the following research question: What was Smith's doctrine of God and how has this doctrine been revised or clarified by LDS leadership over nearly two centuries into its modern formulation?

The answer to this question will be arrived at by the following route: First, theological elements of Smith's holy book, the *Book of Mormon*, will be examined. Second, Smith's own words, as revealed in *Doctrines & Covenants* will be assessed. Last, notable or major changes in the LDS doctrine of God, since the time of Smith, will be engaged.

#### 6.2 The Golden Plates

In the previous chapter, it was noted that published accounts of Smith's First Vision did not appear until after the publication of the *Book of Mormon* in 1830. Yet, as demonstrated in chapter five, according to Smith it was his First Vision that began the spiritual journey that would result in being directed to find the *Book of Mormon*. As Smith recounts, on the night of September 21, 1823 an angel named Moroni appeared to him (Smith, 1902:9-11; Smith, 1853:81-86; Bushman, 2007:44; Givens, 2002:11; Gutjahr, 2012:14; Reynolds, 1898:409-410; Jessee, *et al.*, 2008:88-89, 100; Davidson, *et al.*, 2012(1):13-14). Joseph had spent most of the night awake and praying then Moroni appeared and proclaimed to him that his sins were forgiven. Moreover, Moroni informed Smith that he was being commissioned by God to retrieve and translate an ancient book, inscribed upon golden plates, that detailed the early inhabitants of the

New World (Smith, 1902:12; Bushman, 2007:44-45; Givens, 2002:11; Anderson, 2009:3; Davidson, *et al.*, 2012(1):13-14). This record, as described in the preface to the *Book of Mormon*, covered a span of time from 600 B.C. to A.D. 421 (Givens, 2009:3). Furthermore, Smith is the instrument by which God would restore true doctrine to the world through a renewed church founded upon the life and work of Joseph Smith (Marsh, 2005:49-50; Smith, 1958:75; Gutjahr, 2012:14).

Moroni continued to appear before Joseph, culminating in the command to locate what would become the *Book of Mormon*. The location of the plates, upon which the book was inscribed, were in a hill called Cumorah, about three miles from Joseph Smith's home (Peterson, 2008:92; Bushman, 2007:45; Givens, 2002:11; Reynolds, 1898:407). Smith put forth great effort in trying to locate the golden plates. He found them stored in a stone box, buried deep in the hillside (Smith, 1902:15-16). As Joseph attempted to take the plates from the stone box, Moroni appeared and forbade him because of the greed that filled Joseph's heart upon seeing the gold upon which the writings were etched (Brodie, 1995:40).

According to Smith (1902:16), he was told to return one year later to Cumorah, but he again did not take possession of the plates. Joseph reportedly made an annual return to Cumorah across a span of four years, each time failing to gain access to the plates (Gutjahr, 2012:14). However, Joseph was finally given the plates by Moroni in September of 1827 (Smith, 1902:18; Peterson, 2008:122; Fuller, 2004:76; Reynolds, 1898:411). Mormon tradition holds that there were four types of metallic records present: the larger and smaller Plates of Nephi, the Plates of Mormon, the Plates of Ether (which reportedly contained textual comments made by Moroni), and the Brass Plates of Laban (Hardy, ed., 2005:656). While these continued failures to retrieve the plates seem to be a debacle to some, Mormons have traditionally understood the numerous interactions with Moroni to have been especially valuable in shaping Joseph Smith for his role as prophet (Marsh, 2005:46). Having been forbidden from showing the plates to anyone, under the threat of destruction, Smith undertook a translation of the plates until they became finalised as the *Book of Mormon* (Smith, 1902:12-13).

### 6.3 Sources of LDS Theology

Describing in detail the sources from which LDS adherents develop their theology is no easy task. Because Mormons believe in continuing revelation, as well as modern apostles and prophets, ascertaining what is authoritative is somewhat problematic. As Robert Millet has noted, LDS doctrine is a “living” theology that experiences change. This means that what was believed in the past to be official doctrine may no longer be binding (Millet, 2003:17-19). Furthermore, the lack of professional clergy, sanctioned systematic theology texts, and no official catechism renders the fine details of LDS doctrinal parameters a shade of grey rather than black and white. Additionally, according to LDS apostle D. Todd Christofferson, the pronouncements of a prophet or apostle may or may not be doctrinally binding (Salt Lake City Tribune, 2012). Therefore, holding as closely to what is considered authoritative in some sense is helpful in examining LDS theology.

Generally, the LDS doctrine of God is derived from three types or groups of sources. First, LDS Scripture is authoritative (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:73-74). The corpus of LDS revealed texts include the *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine and Covenants*, and that which is collected in *The Pearl of Great Price*. Second, the statements of Joseph Smith recorded throughout Mormon publications, although not officially Scripture, are instructive for LDS adherents and leadership in discerning doctrine (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:57-58). Third, the statements of Mormon leaders, apostles, and prophets carry weight in settling or establishing LDS orthodoxy (McConkie, 1979:765).

This final source group mentioned for understanding LDS theology includes Brigham Young University scholars who routinely speak out on matters of LDS doctrine. Such consultation is necessary because of the manner in which contemporary leaders interpret LDS doctrine. The contours of Mormon theology are ever-changing and are routinely reshaped (Oman, 2006:1-19). Thus, while certain beliefs and concepts are central to the LDS doctrine of God, the way in which LDS scholars speak of these doctrines today must be engaged in order to have the most current understanding of Mormon tritheism.

#### 6.4 Monotheistic Theology in the *Book of Mormon*

Throughout the text of the *Book of Mormon* (1830), there appears to be a consistently monotheistic motif. However, by 1844 Joseph Smith was espousing his belief in a plurality of gods (Smith, 2009:370). Therefore, laying aside the issue of Joseph Smith as author rather than translator of the *Book of Mormon* (see Cowdrey, Davis, & Vanick, 2005), the content of the *Book of Mormon* must be examined prior to assessing the changing statements of Smith as prophet.

Early in the *Book of Mormon*, a seemingly Trinitarian approach is taken in describing the Godhead. The most explicitly Trinitarian presentation of the Godhead comes in III Nephi 11:27 where the author represents Jesus as saying that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all “indwell” one another and are therefore one God. This statement, which the narrative presents as coming from Jesus Christ, does not lead one to assume Trinitarianism within the *Book of Mormon*. However, elsewhere in the text, vaguely Trinitarian verbiage abounds. For instance, in I Nephi 13:41 the author states that there is only one shepherd over all the earth and that this shepherd is the one God. Similarly, in II Nephi 31:21, it is declared that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not a plurality of gods but are one God.

In the opinion of Joseph McConkie and Robert Millet, this latter reference is merely denoting the need for unity among LDS believers, as there is unity among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to act as one God (McConkie & Millet, 1987:365). Likewise, George Reynolds and Janne Sjordahl argue that this passage is meant to convey a notion of unity among the persons of the Godhead, rather than a unity in nature or essence (Reynolds & Sjordahl, 1976:1909). This interpretation succeeds in maintaining the Mormon belief in a plurality of gods while adapting monotheistic language.

Throughout the *Book of Mormon*, numerous superficially orthodox descriptions of God are present. For instance, in Alma 11:26-31 the author writes that there is only one God. While the interpretation of “oneness” language such as that put forth by Reynolds and Sjodahl (1976:1909) can be proposed, it simply falls short of being a persuasive argument. Certainly, as will be seen, contemporary LDS thinkers reference the plural persons of the Godhead as one in purpose (Millet, 2005:117), but to dismiss this oneness, found repeatedly throughout the *Book of Mormon*, as mere unity in purpose is less than convincing. The weakness of such an interpretation is that it requires later revelation (Roberts, 1980:476), not interpretation, to provide a basis for the approach taken by Reynolds and Sjodahl (1976).

Elsewhere in the *Book of Mormon*, there appears to be a modalistic understanding of God. For instance, in Mosiah 15:1-5, the author writes that at the incarnation, God the Father came to earth as Christ. Upon coming to earth as Christ, He became known as God the Son. Further, once God became the Son, His previous existence became recognised as divine Fatherhood. Essentially, this text presents God as functioning in modes of existence rather than being simultaneously Father, Son, and Spirit. The author of Mosiah 15:1-5 further notes that this change in roles reveals how one can say that there is one God but a multiplicity of persons.

Moreover, Mosiah 3:5-8 recounts the incarnation of Christ by routinely using Father and Son as designations for the deity coming to earth to dwell among men. Dan Vogel has proposed that these texts, among others, demonstrate that the early *Book of Mormon* and LDS doctrine as a whole had undeniably modalistic overtones (Vogel, 1989:17-33). However, observations of modalism in the *Book of Mormon* do not undermine LDS doctrine. Because of the rather fluid and evolving nature of LDS revelation, the evolution from modalistic imagery in the *Book of Mormon* to tritheistic language in the teaching of Joseph Smith is seen as nothing more than progress in revelation (Vogel, 1989:17-33).

While LDS commentaries do little in commenting on the passages mentioned or providing in-depth, analytical studies, there is nevertheless a consistent understanding of these passages: the Godhead is one in purpose but not in being. The question then is this: did Joseph Smith initially understand these passages as referring to persons who are one in purpose and not in essence? Smith's own teachings reveal the evolution in his theology.

## **6.5 Monotheism to Tritheism in LDS Publications**

While the *Book of Mormon*, if authored by Joseph Smith, may be of some value in exploring the doctrinal development of Smith, the most explicit theological statements come from the LDS text *Doctrines and Covenants*. This collection of sermons and prophetic announcements provides a clear picture of what Smith taught and when he taught it. Again, as in the *Book of Mormon*, it appears that the early prophetic career of Joseph Smith had some monotheistic elements.

In section twenty of *Doctrine and Covenants*, Joseph Smith states that there is a God who is in heaven and is unchangeable, eternal, and the creator of all things (*D&C* 20:17). He goes on to explain that this God is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; all of which are eternal and without end (*D&C* 20:28). At least on the surface, this language seems to be blatantly orthodox and even Nicene in orientation. All the more intriguing is the interpretation provided in the LDS commentary on this section of *Doctrine and Covenants*. The explanation advanced is that Smith intends to convey that there are three persons in the Godhead who are united in essence (Smith & Sjodahl, 1923:108). The comments supplied by Smith and Sjodahl (1923:108) are quite confusing when combined with what appears just a few lines below this statement. Commenting further, Smith and Sjodahl (1923:108) state that the scriptural teaching regarding the Godhead does not lead to the conclusion of three persons who are one in being as found in historic orthodoxy.

In 1830, Smith began re-translating the book of Genesis under the title, *The Book of Moses*. Portions of this translation would eventually be incorporated in the *Pearl of Great Price*. Notably, in this early translation, Smith translates references to God in the singular at least fifty times in chapters two and three of *The Book of Moses*. However, it seems that Smith's view of God took an explicitly plural turn at some point between 1832 and 1833. It was during this period that Joseph began teaching that human beings themselves can become gods (*D&C* 76:50-60). On the surface, this change in teaching appears to be significant. Regardless, Joseph Smith asserted that a plurality of gods had always been at the foundation of his theology and public teaching (Roberts, 1980:6:474). Moreover, Smith went on to profess, at least in spirit form, that human beings have always existed, in some undefined sense, alongside of God and are therefore uncreated (*D&C* 93:29).

The traditional LDS interpretation is that Jesus is the chief spirit child of *Elohim* and that Jesus (along with the other spirit children) has eternally pre-existed with *Elohim*, awaiting a body in which to dwell (Smith & Sjodahl, 1923:573). This data reveals, by 1833, that Smith's initially heterodox understanding of the Godhead began to descend into radically unorthodox categories far outside the bounds of Nicene orthodoxy (Kirkland, 1989:36). By 1838, Smith was exclaiming that Mormons worship *Elohim* as the highest God above the council of gods (*D&C* 121:32). Therefore, even though many gods do exist, Smith exhorted LDS adherents to worship *Elohim* as the supreme God for this world.

Given this change in theological direction and provided the subsequently established content of Smith's First Vision experience, it would then appear to be a natural progression to teach that God the Father and God the Son are not spirits but are instead flesh and bone (*D&C* 130:22). Consequently, by 1843, the date of this teaching, Smith had developed a full-fledged notion of plurality not just in persons but a plurality of beings in the Godhead. This proposition is further confirmed by Smith's 1842 translation of the Book of Abraham which is found alongside *The Book of Moses* within the *Pearl of Great Price*. Beginning in the fourth chapter, Smith's translation ceased to speak of a singular God and instead used the designation "gods." In fact, in

chapters four and five, Smith's (1842:721-722) translation refers to the God of Abraham as "gods" no less than forty-eight times.

While it could be argued that Smith was merely translating the Book of Abraham and was therefore not responsible for its substituting gods in place of God, Joseph Smith's 1844 statements regarding the Godhead leave no room for ambiguity. Official LDS history records that on Sunday, June 16, 1844, Joseph Smith delivered a sermon on the nature of God (Roberts, 1980:473). As Smith preached, Elder Thomas Bullock recorded his notable assertions. In his opening comments, Smith declares that he has always held to a belief in a plurality of gods and that this had been the unified LDS teaching for more than fifteen years (Roberts, 1980:474). However, to claim that tritheism was at the core of Mormon doctrine dating to as early as 1829 would directly contradict the extant data examined in the present chapter. For instance, as previously mentioned, in section twenty of *Doctrine and Covenants*, Joseph Smith states that there is a God who is in heaven and is unchangeable, eternal, and the creator of all things (*D&C* 20:17). He goes on to explain that this God is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; all of which are eternal and without end (*D&C* 20:28). These revelations are officially dated to have been received and spoken in 1830. In short, Joseph Smith's contention that he had been teaching a plurality of gods since 1829 is demonstrably false based upon the evidence found within official LDS publications. The most explicitly tritheistic elements of Smith's theology do not appear in official church records until 1838, at which point Smith explains that *Elohim* is the highest God above the council of gods (*D&C* 121:32).

When this pronouncement is taken in connection with an article issued in 1844 in the LDS publication *Times and Seasons*, Joseph Smith's vision of tritheism becomes abundantly clear. In *Times and Seasons*, Smith writes that *Elohim* is now the highest God of our universe, but this was not always the case (Smith, 2009:349). Instead, *Elohim* became God much like LDS followers can also become gods (Smith, 1844:613-614; Smith, 2009:345,349). In the *Journal of Discourses*, Smith is recorded as explaining that God the Father once dwelled on earth in the same manner as Jesus Christ (Smith, 1844:3-4).

In essence, Smith established outright polytheism as a system of thought, but he adhered to tritheism in application. The gods who reign over this present world come from an eternal progression of beings who also became gods in the same manner that LDS adherents strive to attain. In actuality, it was during this period of time that Joseph Smith himself admitted that he developed his belief in an eternal regression of gods (Roberts, 1980:476). Therefore, even though elements of Joseph Smith's move from orthodoxy and into tritheism could be identified throughout his career (Hale, 1989:8), his embracing of tritheism had come to full fruition by the early 1840's.

## **6.6 Tritheism after Joseph Smith: The Nineteenth Century**

Since the death of Joseph Smith, LDS leaders and thinkers have clarified doctrinal teachings regarding the Godhead. In the early decades following the reign of Joseph Smith as prophet, Brigham Young (1801-1877) began to expand upon the doctrinal foundation laid by Joseph Smith. In 1859, Brigham Young (1859:333-334) explained that there have always been gods, and that the number of these gods is unknown. Yet, what is known is that God the Father was once a man who, through right action, became exalted to the position of God (Young, 1859:333-334).

In addition, according to Young (1859:23), LDS adherents can also attain this type of deified position among the gods. This doctrinal assertion was echoed by two early LDS apostles, Parley Pratt (1807-1857) and Orson Hyde (1805-1878). Pratt (1893:33, 37, 44) explained that because of their progression into godhood from their previous positions as mortal men, God the Father and God the Son both possess bodies of flesh and bone. Similarly, in 1853, Orson Hyde stated that God was once a mortal man who grew from childhood to adulthood, ever advancing toward his eventual position as deity (Hyde, 1853:124). These pronouncements demonstrate that from 1844 to 1859, the idea that *Elohim* is merely a high God above many other gods was well established among LDS leadership. Moreover, Smith's vision of an infinite regression of gods as former men who attained a deified state, but remained as flesh and bone, was at this point well accepted among LDS leadership.

## **6.7 Tritheism after Joseph Smith: The Twentieth Century**

As time progressed in the post-Joseph Smith LDS world, the descriptions of the Godhead expanded at some points and streamlined at others. In the present, it has become standard practice for leading Brigham Young University professors to utilise historical Nicene terminology, but to infuse that language with LDS meaning (see Robinson, 1991 & Millet, 2005). The following represents some of the major reaffirmations and even reformulations of Joseph Smith's tritheism.

### **6.7.1 Tritheism after Joseph Smith: The Twentieth Century, James Talmage**

In 1916, LDS apostle James Talmage (1862-1933) wrote that *Elohim* and Jehovah are two separate and distinct gods (Talmage, 1916:466-467). According to Talmage (1916:466-467), the teachings of Joseph Smith and the LDS church as a whole lead to the conclusion that *Elohim* is the highest God, as God the Father, and Jehovah is a lesser God identified with Jesus Christ. Likewise, Talmage (1899:13) explains that in looking at all three persons of the Godhead, one must understand them as three gods who are one God in unity and purpose.

Additionally, Talmage (1899:48) denounces the orthodox position on the doctrine of the Trinity as utterly inconsistent. It is Talmage's (1899:37-39) contention that the three persons of the Godhead are not persons as understood by Nicene orthodoxy. Instead, they are three distinct beings (materially), as distinct from one another as any other individual human being. Thus, for Talmage (1899:48), the only way to consistently interpret the text of Scripture is to adhere to the tritheism of the LDS church.

### **6.7.2 Tritheism after Joseph Smith: The Twentieth Century, Bruce McConkie**

In the 1970's, LDS apostle Bruce McConkie (1915-1985) wrote that there are an infinite number of gods. These gods progressed from a former state on other "worlds" into exaltation as gods (McConkie, 1979:576-577; cf. Skousen, 1953:355-356). As McConkie (1979:321) explains, the God of this world or universe, *Elohim*, must have

progressed to His position as deity on a previous world as well. According to McConkie (1979:317; cf. Hunter, 1945:104), the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct and individual gods. Although there are an infinite number of gods in existence, from the LDS perspective, the three gods of the Godhead are the only beings who can be rightly worshipped (McConkie, 1979:163, 576). Moreover, McConkie asserts that there can be no salvation for those who worship a God who is a “spirit essence” lacking a body or parts (McConkie, 1984:82). This last statement is meant to contrast Nicene theology with that of Mormonism.

### **6.7.3 Tritheism after Joseph Smith: The Twentieth Century, Robert Millet**

Most recently, LDS thinkers have begun to actively engage with Nicene Christians on issues relating to the nature of the Godhead. These exchanges provide valuable insights into the current theological trends among LDS leaders in explaining their view of the Godhead. For instance, LDS scholar Robert Millet (1947-) has written a book entitled *A Different Jesus?*, in which he compares the traditional Mormon view of Jesus with that of Nicene Christianity. While attempting to build bridges of communication with Nicene Christians, Millet (2005:20) admits that LDS doctrine envisions multiple gods, one is Jesus, who as a mortal achieved exaltation as a deity.

Furthermore, God the Father, according to Millet, attained His deified state following His own death and resurrection on another world (Millet, 1998:29-30). Millet explains that the means by which God the Father acquired the attributes associated with deity occurred through a process that encompassed a long, albeit undefined, period of time (Millet & Reynolds, 1998:32-33). This description is interesting given Millet’s claim that LDS adherents do, in fact, accept the doctrine of the Trinity (Millet & McDermott, 2007:78). However, Millet is quick to add the caveat that Mormons believe in the doctrine of the Trinity—but not in the creedal doctrine clarified in the early church (Millet & McDermott, 2007:78).

It is Millet's opinion that reading the content of Christian Scripture, along with the use of sound reasoning, does not and could not lead to the Nicene understanding of the Trinity (Millet & McDermott, 2007:79-80; Millet, 1998:188). In fact, Millet sees no basis at all for postulating the Nicene position on the doctrine of the Trinity (Millet, 1998:188). In a rather telling statement Millet concludes that if agreeing with Nicene orthodoxy is necessary to describe one as a Christian then, based upon the Nicene definition of the Trinity, Mormons could not be considered Christians (Millet, 2005:171).

Denying that LDS adherents are polytheistic, Millet argues that Mormons hold to a belief in one God, but that this God is a community of divine beings acting together (Millet & McDermott, 2007:80-81; Millet, 1998:28; cf. Anderson, 1983:248). To put it another way, Mormons worship a single group of gods acting as one God (Millet, 2005:117). This interpretation is corroborated by Millet's Brigham Young University colleagues Daniel Peterson and Stephen Ricks (1998:67; cf. Hale, 1989:10) when they state that to refer to the LDS doctrine of God as tritheism would be accurate. Provided that Millet (2005:141) at one point acknowledges that the LDS Godhead is comprised of three gods, Millet's desire to avoid the term tritheism by opting to use the word Trinity seems disingenuous. Thus, while taking a more nuanced approach to tritheism than early LDS leaders, Millet still affirms the central tenants of Joseph Smith's tritheism.

#### **6.7.4 Tritheism after Joseph Smith: The Twentieth Century, Stephen Robinson**

Another notable contemporary Mormon theologian is Brigham Young University professor Stephen Robinson (1947-). In his book, *Are Mormons Christian?*, Robinson goes straight to the heart of the issue when he states that Mormons reject Nicene orthodoxy for three reasons. First, LDS adherents believe Nicene Trinitarianism to be unbiblical. Second, the linguistic categories necessary for describing the doctrine of the Trinity are not found within the text of Christian Scripture. Last, Nicene Trinitarianism utilises elements of Greek philosophy which Robinson sees as incompatible with a revelatory approach to theology (Robinson, 1991:72; cf. Millet, 1998:188).

Further explaining the LDS position on the Godhead, Robinson asserts that Mormons believe that God the Father and God the Son both have material bodies (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:78). Additionally, Robinson explains that this belief is based solely upon the experience of Joseph Smith (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:78). Robinson clarifies that this doctrine necessarily comes from Smith because there is no basis for such a belief in Christian Scripture (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:78). In distinction to Robinson's position, LDS scholar Robert Millet (1998:188) argues that this belief, the material nature of the Godhead, is found within the text of Christian Scripture.

Regardless of the difference in opinion between Robinson and Millet, the doctrine of a corporeal Godhead is why Mormons have traditionally understood the biblical statement that God made mankind in His image (Gen. 1:26-28), to mean His own physical image (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:80; cf. Robinson, 1991:80). Because humans are like God, Stephen Robinson argues that they can eventually become more like God in terms of a deified position (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:80). Simply put, the LDS doctrine is that humans are divine in nature and species (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:82,85-86). Consequently, human beings, in a sense, are non-actualised gods.

When addressing Nicene Trinitarianism, Robinson elucidates his understanding of LDS doctrine. According to Robinson, LDS adherents readily affirm the Nicene formulation "one God in three persons;" however, Mormons reject the notion that this oneness has anything to do with ontology or essence (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:129). Instead, the LDS approach is to envision three distinct beings who are merely one in purpose, mind, and intentions (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:129). For Robinson, the doctrine of the Trinity is not a problem for Mormons; the issue arises when the "one God" of Nicaea is defined as one being and not just one God in purpose (Robinson, 1991:71).

In explicating the LDS position on three gods acting as one God, Robinson (1991:68) writes that these gods are not "absolute being" as classical definitions of God would imply. Alternatively, these beings are each contingent in some sense. Robinson (199:68) rationalises this differentiation from classical formulations by claiming that classical

definitions cannot be sustained from the Christian Scripture, but only from Greek philosophy.

Going further, Robinson asserts that LDS adherents are absolutely committed to subordinationism (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:130-131). Therefore, Robinson's statement that Mormons could be called Trinitarians, but not in the sense intended by the Nicene tradition, is rather misleading because it veils LDS tritheism in orthodox-sounding language (Blomberg & Robinson, 1997:130). So, in the case of Robinson, there is a clear attempt to employ Nicene language while applying LDS definitions. Rather than enabling communication between Mormons and Nicene Christians, this borrowing from the Nicene lexicon seems to lead to a greater level of confusion.

#### **6.7.5 Summary**

Throughout the history of the LDS church, Mormon prophets, apostles, and scholars have sought to clarify, explain, and expound upon the doctrine of God put forth by Joseph Smith. These discussions have been successful in reaffirming central elements of Joseph Smith's theology. These core tenants are as follows: First, there are many gods, but Mormons worship one group of three gods who act as a single God. Second, these gods progressed to their state as deities from a previously mortal condition. This means then that there is an eternal progression and regression of mortal beings who are now gods (White, 1987:59-62). Third, Mormons seek to correct the Nicene understanding of the Trinity by supplanting it with the tritheism of Joseph Smith. In the course of these corrections, Mormons leaders and scholars make use of Nicene terminology that has been infused with LDS meanings. Therefore, pointing out the necessary distinctions between LDS doctrine and Nicene orthodoxy has become fundamentally important.

#### **6.8 The Great Apostasy**

According to LDS authoritative works, shortly following the apostolic age, what is referred to as the Great Apostasy occurred and the Christian church became corrupt. As a result, the doctrines clarified in the early church are null and void because they come out of a church that is inherently false. This attitude arises directly from the text of the

*Book of Mormon*. The author of I Nephi writes that all the churches of Christendom became corrupted and are an abomination to God (I Nephi 13:5-6).

In *Doctrines and Covenants*, it is recorded that Joseph Smith called the Protestant church the “whore of the earth,” declaring that this abominable institution will be thrown down (*D&C* 29:21). Moreover, LDS adherents are taught that Joseph Smith did not introduce the most correct form of Christianity to the world; rather, Smith introduced a restored and corrected form of Christianity meant to replace Nicene Christianity (Ludlow, ed., 1992:1:270). Therefore, the LDS adoption of tritheism is seen as a restoration of apostolic doctrine rather than a fundamentally new religion.

The LDS justification for professing to believe that true doctrine had been abandoned in the early church is primarily based upon a prophecy in the book of Amos (Amos 8:11-12). According to LDS luminaries, this prophetic utterance predicted that there will come a time when the doctrine of the Apostles is lost and there would be no true church found anywhere (Talmage, 1909:26). As Bruce McConkie commented, following the life of the Apostle John, there was a total and complete falling away from true doctrine that lasted until the time of Joseph Smith (McConkie, 1990:529). The LDS First Presidency publication, *True to the Faith* (2004:13), explains that while churches have been established throughout history since the time of the apostasy, the true church did not return until the time of Smith’s First Vision. To summarise Parley Pratt’s opinion of this period, the church ceased to exist after the death of the Apostles, and what remained was a perversion of true (LDS) doctrine (Pratt, 1893:67-68).

The LDS method for avoiding the implication that tritheism is a new and innovative doctrine introduced by Joseph Smith is to posit an early corruption of all Christian doctrine. By implication, Nicene orthodoxy is merely the culmination of pagan ideals infiltrating originally pure, Christian doctrine. In light of the data presented in chapter four, it would be difficult to propose that Trinitarian concepts were foreign in the early church. However, in order for Smith’s doctrine to be a viable alternative to Nicene orthodoxy, LDS apologists must propose that it came prior to Trinitarianism.

## **6.9 Assessing Joseph Smith's Tritheism**

The rationale for adhering to Nicene orthodoxy, based upon the text of Christian Scripture, was thoroughly argued in chapter three. While the present chapter will not seek to repeat all of the data previously discussed, the reader is invited to hold the theological claims of Joseph Smith against the case presented in the aforementioned chapter. Additionally, we will recall issues such as the the Great Apostasy and the historical progress of Nicene orthodoxy found in chapter four. Without fundamentally repeating the same information, pertinent details from chapter five will be referenced when necessary.

### **6.9.1 The Evolution of Smith's Theology**

The proposition that Smith's theology evolved from that which was either heterodox or superficially orthodox fits the extant data. Even though Smith (1902:5) professed to have experienced his First Vision in 1820, the details of that First Vision did not become public and widely known until 1832 (Bushman, 2007:39). As previously mentioned, the *Book of Mormon* was first published in 1830. This means, as of 1830, that the only published LDS Scripture contained numerous references to the Godhead that seemed to teeter between orthodoxy and modalism.

The proposal that during this period Smith was at least comfortable with Nicene Christianity makes sense, in light of the fact that as late as 1828 Joseph was actively participating in Methodist Bible studies (Newell & Avery, 1994:25; Tucker, 1867:18). In 1830, Smith was still publicly using Nicene language to describe the Godhead as a single, eternal, and unchangeable God (*D&C* 20:17). Furthermore, in an attempt to correct the book of Genesis, Smith produced a translation that through the first three chapters contains references to God in the singular no less than fifty times (*Moses* 1:1-3:25).

In the mid-to-late 1830's, Joseph Smith began espousing an explicit belief in a plurality of gods (*D&C* 121:32). By the time of his 1842 translation of the Book of Abraham, Smith's theology was undeniably anti-Trinitarian (Roberts, 1980:474). As previously noted, in the fourth and fifth chapter of the Book of Abraham, Smith (1842:721-722)

refers to the Godhead as “gods” forty-eight times. In 1844, following the publication of the Book of Abraham, Smith repeatedly spoke of and wrote about there being a plurality of gods in the universe and specifically within the Godhead (Smith, 1844:3-4, 613-614; Smith, 2009:345, 349). Thus, the publication of the Book of Abraham, while not inaugurating Smith’s adoption of tritheism, represented the Scriptural support necessary for Smith’s teaching regarding a multiplicity of gods. As a result, the basis of his translation has to be examined.

In 1835, Smith acquired the scroll from which he translated the Book of Abraham. This document was obtained from a travelling Egyptian artefacts exhibit that passed through Kirtland, Ohio (Peterson, 2008:1; Jessee, *et al.*, 2008:57, 71; Davidson, *et al.*, 2012(2): 86). Tragically, it was long believed that the document from which Smith based his detailing of the Book of Abraham had been destroyed in the Chicago fire of 1871 (Fletcher, 2006 xi). However, in 1967, while visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, University of Utah professor Aziz Atiya discovered much of the original material Joseph Smith used for his translation of the Book of Abraham (Fletcher, 2006:xi; Tucker, 2004:61).

Shortly after the discovery of the papyri segments, a translation of the documents was undertaken and found that the text was little more than a common, Egyptian funerary description (Tucker, 2004:61; Baer, 1968:111). In fact, the content of the papyri proved to be sections of the Egyptian *Book of Breathings* and the *Book of the Dead*. The stories found in each of the extant facsimiles describe the following: Facsimile one, featuring Osiris and Horus, is a representation of the Egyptian understanding of progress into the afterlife (Baer, 1968:116-118).

The second facsimile describes the process by which Osiris Sheshonk’s soul will move to and live on in the afterlife (Rhodes, 1977:265). The third facsimile once again refers to Osiris and Horus but also includes references to other Egyptians gods: Maat and Anubis (Baer, 1968:126-127). Surprisingly, LDS scholar Hugh Nibley validated these translations in his own work on the facsimiles, while at the same time arguing that there must be other papyri which undergird the content of the Book of Abraham (Nibley, 2005). Although this proposition is less than persuasive, it is a necessary adjustment in

understanding the Book of Abraham if the LDS church is to uphold its position as Scripture. Outside of the revelations given directly to Joseph Smith, the content of the Book of Abraham is the major scriptural basis for ascribing to a plurality of gods. In light of the fact that the Book of Abraham has been demonstrated to be based upon Smith's faulty translation of Egyptian funerary texts littered with references to Egyptian gods, it seems not only plausible, but also quite likely that Smith's tritheism originated from the bounds of his own imagination.

### **6.9.2 Joseph Smith's Tritheism: A Definition**

Based upon Joseph Smith's varying, often vague, and somewhat contradictory statements on the nature of the Godhead, it can be difficult to credally ascertain how Smith understood his own tritheism. If one pieces together statements made by Smith regarding the nature of the Godhead, the following can be established. First, Smith informs his followers that he believes there to be a high God (*Elohim*) who rules over a council of gods (*D&C* 121:32 cf. Smith, 1842:721-722). These gods are former human beings who progressed to godhood by adhering to and following Mormon doctrine and law (*D&C* 76:50-60; Smith, 1844:3-4,613-614; Smith, 2009:345,349). Second, these gods (including *Elohim*) have retained their bodies of flesh and bone (*D&C* 130:22). Third, for this world, a plurality of three gods exist (Roberts, 1980:474) and God the Father (*Elohim*) reigns as the highest among these three gods (Roberts, 1980:474-476). Fourth, these three gods act as one God and should be worshipped as one God (Roberts, 1980:474). This last point is the primary means upon which LDS adherents can explain the explicitly monotheistic language used by Smith throughout his personal journals (See Jessee, et al., 2008; Hedges, et al., 2011), many of his sermons, and even in his translations of LDS sacred texts. Arising naturally from this definition of Smith's tritheism would be a variety of questions regarding the theological viability of Joseph Smith's proposals. As a result, the theological consistency of Joseph Smith's tritheism must be assessed.

### 6.9.3 Joseph Smith's Tritheism: A Theological Assessment

One of the primary considerations in engaging Joseph Smith's underdeveloped tritheism is the assumptions one must make in believing that three divine beings (gods) can act together as one divine being (God). Historically speaking, orthodox descriptions of the Godhead (See chapter four) have denied that the persons of the Godhead are unified merely in the shared intentions of their mutually exclusive wills. Instead, the unity of the persons is genuine and substantial (Ayers, 2004:360). This genuine, substantial unity could be described through a variety of avenues but for the purpose of the present research will be explored in three ways. First, the nature of God will be considered as it relates to problems arising by adhering to tritheism. Second, the necessity of divine *perichoresis* shall be considered.

To state that God is simple is to speak of His absolute unity. A Trinitarian understanding of the Godhead is that God is not composed of parts but is absolute unity (See Shedd, 2003:276-277; Horton, 2011:228-230; Beeke & Jones, 2012:61-62). In part, this belief flows naturally from the Scriptural doctrine of divine immutability (Mal. 3:6; Heb. 1:12; Jm. 1:17). Immutability is meant to convey the notion that God's nature does not undergo changes (Geisler, 2003:43 cf. Shedd, 2003:284-285; Beeke & Jones, 2012:64-66; Horton, 2011:235-242; Bray, 2012:149-153). This is an element of orthodox doctrine that Smith briefly affirms (*D&C* 20:17). Therefore, each of the divine persons of the Trinity do not begin their existence as deity and then engage in sharing in the the divine nature; instead, each of the persons of the Godhead have always shared equally in the divine nature or essence.

Considering the range of divine attributes exercised by God throughout the text of Scripture, it can be difficult to imagine the divine nature as being simple. However, even in the created order, it can be seen that a multiplicity of attributes are exhibited by a single, unified object. For instance, a stone can be described as hard and round. These are two distinct attributes that each accurately describe the same object. It is not logically necessary to have multiple objects in mind when speaking of multiple attributes. Herman Bavinck has expressed this proposition by affirming that God is identical with His attributes and His attributes are identical with His essence (Bavinck,

2011:175). To deny as much, according to Bavinck, is to posit a divine essence which can be shared by a multiplicity of beings. This would mean that attributes of God such as love, power, and majesty can be diminished or increased based upon the levels to which a deity is actively engaged in the use of the divine nature (Bavinck, 2011:175-176). Bavinck's argument would be a consistent and accurate criticism of Smith's belief that faithful LDS males can become gods (*D&C* 76:50-60). These potential gods, according to Smith, would be part of a hierarchy of gods based upon their attributes (*D&C* 121).

Moreover, absolute unity does not negate plurality or complexity. This fact is revealed within the created order. For Timothy Tennent (2002:158), complex, absolute unity can be seen in creation and is accurately communicated in the following illustration: A tiger is a creature that is both complex and an instance of absolute unity. While being internally differentiated, the tiger has a singular, unified essence. To state it succinctly, while complex, the tiger is indivisible. Any attempt to divide the tiger in accordance with its plurality or complexity would actually destroy the tiger rather than creating two separate tigers. This illustration demonstrates that complexity and absolute unity in being or essence are not mutually exclusive propositions. The weakness of this illustration is that it attempts to utilise a material being to illustrate a divine, immaterial reality. This kind of illustration runs counter to the essential nature of Trinitarian theology. However, it is a useful illustration for the purpose of engaging LDS theology, precisely because of Joseph Smith's teachings on the material nature of the divine persons. One way in which orthodox, Nicene Christians have attempted to explain this plural unity in theologically consistent terms is via the concept of *perichoresis*.

Within orthodox Christianity, the term *perichoresis* is used to communicate the notion that the three divine persons (who are simple in being) necessarily contain one another (Letham, 2004:178). This doctrine is what constitutes one of the primary, substantive differences between Trinitarianism and Joseph Smith's tritheism. *Perichoresis* is inextricably linked with divine simplicity. Letham quite persuasively argues that the concept of a simple divine essence/nature, shared among three divine persons that co-inhabit one another, speaks to the necessity of no more than three divine persons (Letham, 2004:178 cf. Torrance, 1994:35-36). As Letham correctly notes, to diminish

the co-inhabiting of the divine persons posits distinctions similar to those among human persons. While human persons share in the nature inherent to being human, this is radically different from Trinitarianism and the sharing of the divine nature among the persons of the Trinity. Specifically, the sheer number of human persons sharing in human nature fluctuates based upon worldwide population. Conversely, within Nicene thought, the number of divine persons remains eternally the same (Letham, 2004:178). If the number of divine persons does not remain constant, then the presence of the divine nature and the execution of attributes inherent to the divine nature would never be consistent.

In the case of Joseph Smith's tritheism, three persons who have attained access to the divine nature are to be worshipped as one God by those occupying this world (Roberts, 1980:474). Interestingly, one of the theological shortcomings of Smith's tritheism is that, while only these three gods are to be worshipped by faithful LDS adherents, an ever-increasing number of beings are gaining access to the divine nature (*D&C* 76:50-60). This last point is the prime example of the inconsistency of tritheism. This inconsistency can be stated quite simply: the gods of tritheism are beings who either are or have been in need. One could argue that, due to the material nature of these three gods, they are perpetually in need because their mere existence depends upon the continued existence of matter. However, the point at-hand is that in the distant past, or presently, lacked access to the divine nature. Based upon the hierarchy mentioned by Smith (Roberts, 1980:474), these gods continue to vary in their ability to access or exercise divine attributes and are, as a result, in need. The dependent nature of these divine beings is further exemplified in Joseph Smith's description of eternal god regression (*D&C* 76:50-60; Smith, 1844:3-4,613-614; Smith, 2009:345,349). That is to say that each of these gods would inescapably be dependent upon the existence and progress of previous beings for both their own deity and their sheer existence.

This last point brings up another issue of theological significance: divine necessity. While difficulties pertaining to the logical contradictions of eternal god regression will be examined later (see section 6.9.5), arguments for divine necessity also provide theological insight on these matters. The doctrine of divine necessity is derived from the philosophical reality that all that exists has a cause for its existence. Thomas

Aquinas is the most well-known proponent of this argumentation as it relates to the nature of God. According to Aquinas, the divine nature is the necessary being, and this is evident from the natural world and philosophical inquiry (Aquinas, 2013:229-230). John Frame agrees with the theological proposition that Aquinas presents; however, he views divine necessity as flowing naturally from the text of Scripture rather than being derived largely from philosophy (Frame, 2002:224). Regardless of one's starting point, be it Scripture or philosophy, the logical nature of the assertion made by Aquinas is self-evident. First, everything known to exist has a cause. Second, there could not be an infinite number of causes spanning an infinite number of past events, because such a scenario would render the present impossible (see Geisler & Corduan, 1988:184; Moreland, 1987:29). Thus, there must be one uncaused, necessary being. That being, according to Aquinas (2013:229-230) is the divine essence/nature shared among the persons of the Trinity. The gods described by Smith's tritheism are not necessary beings but are entirely contingent and dependent upon previous causes for their own existence.

Moreover, Joseph Smith's admonition that LDS adherents should worship these three gods as a single God is rather unintelligible. If these three beings were equal in every fashion, then such a command would be logical. However, if the beings are each equal in every capacity, then differentiation among the beings would not exist in terms of their deity, but instead in their personhood and relationships. If this were the case, then Smith's tritheism would actually be a poorly-developed explanation of Trinitarianism. Still, the difficulty of divine differentiation remains: how can faithful Mormons worship these three gods as one God when each of the beings do not share equally in the divine nature? Each of the beings possess differing attributes inherent to deity, and each is progressing further and further into their godhood. As a result, it seems rather theologically untenable to worship three beings of varying states of godhood as one God. The three beings of tritheism would each be distinguishable from another not in just relationship and role but in how much worship and adoration they deserve based upon their particular share of the divine nature.

Even more theologically difficult to comprehend is the problem of worship and unified will. Joseph Smith's explanation for worshipping the three gods as one is based upon their actions as one God, grounded solely in their unified will. To state it another way, because each of these gods voluntarily chooses to direct the efforts of their will toward the same end as the other two divine beings, their individual wills are unified as one will. The implications for this description are substantial. When a LDS adherent, following Smith's leading (Roberts, 1980:474), worships the three gods as one God, they are actually directing their worship to the unified will of the three beings. Within the bounds of Smith's tritheism, the only unifying aspect of the three divine persons is the unified desires and efforts of their individual wills. Therefore, the aspect of these beings and their relationships that can be remotely described as "one God" would be the oneness found in their unified will. Thus, any effort to worship these beings as one God is merely adoration for the unified will of the beings, not deity as deity.

Historic, Nicene Trinitarianism pursues a different and theologically satisfying approach to the nature of God. As described previously, orthodox Christianity proposes that God's nature is simple or indivisible. However, this does not negate the fact that He is plural in persons. As William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (2003:590-591) have argued, plurality in persons is philosophically and theologically sound in so far as one assumes that tri-unity is intrinsic to the divine nature or essence. This argument proposes that the three divine persons of the Trinity would not exist without one another. Thus, while the Father can rightly be called God, this is not an absolute statement of identity, because the Father is not God alone but is deity in so far as He is the Father of God the Son. The weakness of this argument is that it can be construed in such a manner as to imply that the persons of the Trinity are substantive parts of the Trinity. That is to say that the Triune God is composed of beings in a material sense. Craig and Moreland (2003:590-591) overcome this potential pitfall by noting that this proposal assumes a part-whole relationship among the persons of the Trinity, without dividing the persons into individual instances of deity. Each person shares equally in the divine nature and must do so because tri-unity is intrinsic to the divine essence (Craig & Moreland, 2003:590-591). The implication of this description of the Godhead is that Nicene Christians direct their worship to the divine essence or nature, which is

by definition tri-personal. As result, Nicene Christians worship deity as deity, which includes the divine persons of the Godhead.

In the final analysis, the only manner in which tritheists worship “one God” is by addressing their worship toward a unified set of individual, divine wills. Nicene Christians direct their adoration and worship to the divine nature, which is inherently Triune and tri-personal. In summation, Joseph Smith’s tritheism results in the worship of either one being over another due to their level of divine attributes, or the adoration of a non-personal, immaterial collection of wills.

#### **6.9.4 The Great Apostasy Considered**

Joseph Smith’s charge that a correct understanding of the Godhead had been lost by the early Christian church, and consequently absent for nearly 1800 years, is contingent upon a great falling away from truth among the first Christians (Davidson, *et al.*, 2012(1):544). As previously stated, the biblical basis for this claim is considered to be rooted in the prophecy given in Amos 8:11-12. Yet, as will be seen, the aforementioned LDS interpretation does not withstand a careful approach to the text.

The context of this prophecy provides helpful information for understanding the intent of the author in penning this prophecy. Thomas McComiskey has written a rather compelling argument stating that the occasion of this prophecy surrounded the divided kingdom of Israel around 760 B.C. (McComiskey, 1985:275; cf. Wood, 1998:283-284). According to McComiskey, the failure of the prophecy to mention the Assyrians as those being used to fulfil this prophecy speaks strongly to the date proposed. Further, Amos does not recognise or mention the rise of Tiglath-Pileser III (McComiskey, 1985:275; cf. Bullock, 1986:59-60, 81-82). These omissions fit within the framework of McComiskey’s argument.

Furthermore, Amos only references Uzziah as reigning over Judah (McComiskey, 1985:275; cf. Feinberg, 1977:86-86). This is significant because around 750 B.C., Uzziah's son Jotham ascended to the position of regent (McComiskey, 1985:275). Thus, a 760 B.C. date for the time of this prophecy fits the known chronology of the period (Archer, 1994:353).

Throughout the narrative, Amos announces the impending judgment of God upon both ends of the divided kingdom (Amos 1:3-2:16; cf. Heschel, 2007:30-31). In the context of Amos 8:2-12, the same theme continues. According to Amos, the judgment to fall upon the people was for their failure to repent and turn from their sins. As James Luther Mays commented, the claim of Amos (8:11-12), following the judgment of God, is that the people of Israel would search for a word of promise and comfort from *Yahweh* but will find none (Mays, 1969:149). In context, the prophecy from Amos asserts that those desiring to hear from God will look from the “north to the east” (Amos 8:12). The intent of this message being that although Judah would rise from judgment and its central city of worship, Jerusalem, will be acted upon by *Yahweh*, the northern kingdom has no such hope (Mays, 1969:149).

Similarly, Thomas Finley sees this entire process of seeking comfort from *Yahweh* as occurring from 745-722 B.C. (Finley, 2003:268). Finley's interpretation differs slightly from that of Mays, but both take into account the geographical cues found in the text. Both note that the language of the prophet, claiming that wandering occurs from the “north to the east,” presents this search as taking place in a genuine geographical region during a specific time period. Likewise, Jorg Jeremias notes that the exiles from Israel should have travelled from the north to the east (Jeremias, 1998:151). Additionally, F.F. Bruce writes that the steady encroachment of Assyria into the northern kingdom of Israel came from both the north and the east (Bruce, 1997:44).

Finley believed that while the judgment may have long-term ramifications, the focus of the prophecy is specifically fulfilled during the period of 745-722 B.C. (Finley, 2003:268; cf. Sweeney, ed., 2000:267-268; Matthews, 2005:127-129; Bruce, 1997:51-58). This interpretation is consistent with known language used to denote the latitudinal boundaries of the northern and southern kingdoms (Walton, Matthews &

Chavalas, 2000:773-774). The implication of this interpretation is that the prophet assumes that the southern kingdom, Judah, will continue in having access to the words and blessings of *Yahweh* (Paul & Cross, eds., 1991:266). This data is confirmed by the fact that Amos also mentions Samaria, Dan, and Beersheba as the focus of this judgment. These locations had become centres of pagan activities among the kings in the north (Matthews, 2005:113). Moreover, these named cities are generally associated with the idolatrous religious practices of the northern kingdom (Walton, Matthews & Chavalas, 2000:773-774).

The ramifications of this understanding of the prophecy delivered by Amos, which takes into account geographical and historical factors, are enormous. First, if the LDS interpretation is correct, then the Great Apostasy should have begun with the Assyrian captivity. However, this option for interpreting the prophecy is rather problematic because it would render the works of prophecy following the lifetime of Amos as having occurred during the era of apostasy. Moreover, the period of the incarnation and the apostolic age must also be tainted by the Great Apostasy. This most assuredly means that the entire New Testament and the latter portions of the Old Testament are corrupt.

Second, if the interpretation provided in this research is correct, then the LDS proposition of a Great Apostasy lacks the strength of its primary proof-text. Although this does not diminish the ability of prophetic LDS figures such as Joseph Smith to claim that there was, in fact, a period of apostasy following the apostolic age, this claim has to be supported by supposed continuing revelation, not enscripturated revelation. Consequently, the LDS insistence upon disregarding Nicene orthodoxy clarified in the early church lacks a basis in Christian Scripture.

The interpretation of Amos provided in contrast to the LDS understanding is most plausible when considered in conjunction with the argumentation supplied in chapter four. Despite claims to the contrary, Trinitarian theology has been present, at least in nascent form, since the apostolic age. Apostolic Fathers such as Clement speak of the existence of only one divine being (*I Clem*, 46:6)(*ANF*(9):243) who is revealed as Father, Son, and Spirit (*I Clem.*, 58)(*ANF*(9):246). By the end of the apostolic age and

with the dawn of apologetics writers, such as Justin Martyr (*Dial.*, 61)(*ANF*(1):227), there was a concerted effort by Christian thinkers to defend the faith by asserting the oneness of God in being but plurality in persons (*Haer.*, 2.1.2)(*ANF*(1):359-360).

The advent of explicitly creedal, Trinitarian language is to be found in the writings of Tertullian (*Apol.*, 21)(*ANF*(3):33-36). The first to use the Nicene term Trinity, Tertullian (*Praxaes*, 2)(*ANF*(3):598) stresses the uniqueness of each person of the Godhead while denying their substantive distinctions in terms of being. Furthermore, by the time of the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, the Trinitarian understanding of the Father, Son, and Spirit being co-equal was considered standard orthodoxy. The issue at Nicaea was not the establishment of a new orthodoxy over an older theological tradition; instead, Nicaea served to solidify the authority of historic orthodoxy over and above the new teachings of Arius (Lohse, 1985:49; cf. Fairbairn, 2009:45). The content of “Nicene” orthodoxy did not find its genesis at Nicaea; instead, at Nicaea orthodoxy was clarified (Gonzalez, 1999(1):162-167). The consistent teaching of the Christian church has been Nicene in nature from its inception. The evolution in doctrine has resulted not from innovation, but clarification as creedal precision has occurred.

### **6.9.5 The Problem of Eternal Regression**

One of the primary faults of LDS tritheism rests in a philosophical absurdity to which its system inevitably leads. This absurdity is the inescapable conclusion of infinite god-regression. To state it simply, because God the Father is not the necessary, uncaused, cause of all things but is rather a finite creature who became exalted into a position of deity, there must be other gods who have experienced the same processes prior to *Elohim*. The LDS framework requires the existence of some type of eternal, material universe in which all other material universes exist. As will be demonstrated, this scenario results in LDS theology suffering from the impossibility of an actual infinite.

An actual infinite cannot exist in a tangible, genuine sense. A good analogy of this fact is seen within the illustration known as Hilbert’s Hotel. The premise of Hilbert’s Hotel is that there exists a hotel which contains an infinite number of rooms for an infinite number of guests. This well-known illustration is historically argued as follows: Upon

arriving at Hilbert's Hotel, guests find an infinite number of rooms; however, the guest seeking a room is informed that all of these rooms are in fact full because the infinite number of rooms are currently occupied by an infinite number of guests (Higgins, 2011:85-86; Craig, ed., 2002:96; Craig, 1998:26; Oppy, 2006:8-9). But the clerk is most accommodating and asks that all guests shift over by one room, thereby freeing one room for this new guest (Oppy, 2006:8; Craig, 1998:26). Because there is an infinite number of rooms, it becomes possible to shift every person filling these rooms and there still be more rooms (Higgins, 2011:85-86; Craig, 1998:26-27; Clark, 2007: 94; Oppy, 2006:8).

As William Lane Craig points out, the strange thing about this illustration is that such a process of accommodation could be repeated for an infinite number of guests and yet the hotel would never gain any more guests (in terms of total numbers) than were present upon the arrival of the first guest mentioned above (Craig, ed., 2002:96; Craig, 1998:27-28). Stranger still is the fact that even if guests leave the hotel, all of the rooms remain full because of the infinite number of guests occupying the infinite number of rooms (Craig & Copan, 2004:201-203). In short, Hilbert's Hotel can in one instant have empty rooms yet be entirely full! It is an absurdity. This demonstrates that an infinite regression of aggregative finite structures cannot exist in a material universe (Spitzer, 2010:200; Craig, ed., 2002:97-101).

Just as the preceding illustration indicates the absurdity of an actual infinite, so does the reality of the present. The reader will readily agree upon the reality of their existence in the present. However, if an actual infinite regression of gods is true, and if the universe is also infinite, then the present could never have become a reality. The logic behind this proposition is simple: one could never span the successive and infinite series of events that preceded today (Moreland, 1987:29; Craig, ed., 2002:97-101). As J.P. Moreland (1987:29) noted, if an individual attempts to span an infinite number of days from the past to reach the present, that individual cannot help but fail. Why? Because in an infinite regression of days, one could never move in reverse to the beginning of days or from the beginning to the present, because there exists an infinite number of days between the two points.

Applying this logic to the problem at hand reveals the following: if there are an infinite number of gods, each one material and bound by time, who preceded *Elohim* in the progression to godhood? In this scenario, *Elohim* never becomes a god and today never becomes a reality. The cause of this dilemma is rather straightforward: an infinite progression requires an infinite number of gods and an infinite number of days between the infinite past and the present (see Geisler & Corduan, 1988:184; Moreland, 1987:29).

Since the gulf of time and gods could never be traversed because there would always be one more god that must come before *Elohim* or one more day before arriving at the present, then in fact *Elohim* could never become a god and today could never be actualised (see Beckwith & Parrish, 2000). In short, *Elohim* would be stuck in the absurdity of infinite regression with no hope of reaching the present. However, because the present is an actual reality, there cannot be an infinite regression of gods and days preceding the present.

## **6.10 Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to adequately address the following research question: What was Smith's doctrine of God and how has this doctrine been revised or clarified by LDS leadership over nearly two centuries into its modern formulation? The answer to this question has been arrived at through the following avenues. First, it was demonstrated that the sources of LDS doctrine are somewhat fluid but have their primary authority rooted in Mormon Scripture and the pronouncements of Joseph Smith. Second, it was revealed that the teachings of the LDS leadership, including prophets, apostles, and scholars, have had some influence in clarifying and expanding upon the tritheism proposed by Joseph Smith. The elements of theology discussed were those that reflected the central teachings of Joseph Smith. So, while the LDS leaders and thinkers cited often expand upon the words of Joseph Smith, they were referenced due to their core commitment to the core elements of Smith's tritheism.

Third, it was established that early LDS publications and Scripture seem to teach a modalistic understanding of the Godhead. Yet, this initially monotheistic and sometimes Trinitarian verbiage is not a problem for Mormonism. Because the Mormon system includes a commitment to ever-progressing revelation, the problem of the initially orthodox language in early Mormonism and the *Book of Mormon* can be readily dismissed. Fourth, contemporary LDS scholarship was engaged to provide current data regarding Mormon doctrinal discussions in the realm of academia.

A further foray was taken into the LDS belief in a Great Apostasy. This LDS position proposes that the need for Joseph Smith's tritheism arises out of the falling away of Christendom from genuine apostolic doctrine. According to LDS sources, the initial doctrine of God taught by the Apostles mirrors Smith's doctrine instead of that found in the Nicene tradition.

The information gleaned from answering the research questions guiding this chapter led to a threefold assessment of Smith's theology. First, it was demonstrated that Joseph Smith's theology underwent a period of development resulting in tritheism. This tritheism found its most explicit scriptural backing in Joseph Smith's supposed translation of the Book of Abraham. However, the 1967 recovery of the papyri, which were the basis for the Book of Abraham, revealed that what Smith translated from was a combination of fragments from the Egyptian *Book of Breathings* and the *Book of the Dead*.

Second, the basis for the supposed Great Apostasy was engaged at a textual level. It was indicated that the supposed prophecy of the corruption of Christendom was actually a prophecy regarding the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel. Based upon the references to pagan deities and geographical cues, the only consistent interpretation of the passage is that Amos had the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria in view. Additionally, the reader was reminded of the consistently Trinitarian theology of the early church as discussed in chapter four. While not always finely tuned with creedal language, from the apostolic age forward Christianity has always been Nicene in theology, if not in name.

Third, the corollary of Smith's tritheism is the eternal progression of human beings into positions of deity. These deities take for themselves worlds of their own to rule as gods. This proposition leads to an eternal regression of gods. It was demonstrated that although infinite regression can be proposed or theorised, an actual infinite regression cannot exist. In short, if there is an infinite regression of gods prior to the exaltation and deification of *Elohim*, then the universe in which *Elohim* is God would never be actualised. Why? Because if an infinite regression of gods is true, there must always be one more god needing to progress prior to the deification of *Elohim*.

In conclusion, the primary means of progress and the basis for Smith's tritheism is founded upon less than historically, scripturally, or philosophically strong ground. It has been demonstrated that Smith's theology is rather fluid in nature and unsound in argumentation. What remains to be accomplished is a necessary conclusion to the present research. In keeping with scholarly research procedures, the conclusion to come will provide a conservative estimate of what this project has succeeded in accomplishing and will note areas necessitating further research.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION

#### 7.1 Introduction

The central theoretical argument of this research is that Joseph Smith was just one of many in his region and era that abandoned historic, Nicene Christianity. Therefore, modern LDS formulations, as well as Smith's tritheism, should be evaluated and critiqued in light of historic, Nicene orthodoxy founded upon proper exegesis of Scripture. The content of this project has achieved its aim in carrying out the prescription encapsulated in the central theoretical argument by utilising church history, American history, exegesis, and philosophy in examining and critiquing the development of Joseph Smith's tritheism. The purpose of the present chapter is to synthesise the conclusions of the previous chapters in order to tie together the content and findings of this research project.

#### 7.2 Joseph Smith's Tritheism in Light of Nicene Orthodoxy Grounded in the Christian Scriptures

Much of what was uncovered in chapter three arises from answering the following questions. First, what is the basis of Nicene orthodoxy? Second, what is the clear, systematic teaching of Scripture regarding the doctrine of the Trinity?

The data examined demonstrates that the consistent biblical teaching delivered among the early Israelites was staunchly monotheistic. This insistence upon monotheism stands in distinction to the polytheistic milieu in which Hebrew religion took its shape (Rofe, 2002:19; Miles, 2010:59-62). Thus, much of the theological content of the Pentateuch is focused upon the affirmation of monotheism (Walton, 2009:230, 456; Sailhamer, 1992:285; Frame, 2002:622-623).

Nicene Christians have historically interpreted numerous Old Testament references as being direct allusions to the triune nature of the Godhead. Instances of note include both plural and triadic references to deity found throughout the Old Testament (Gen. 1:26; 11:7; Num. 6:24-26; Isa. 6:3; 33:2; Hag. 2:5-7; Dan. 7:9). Historically, the Nicene position maintains that the Old Testament references to God only make consistent sense if understood in light of the explicit, New Testament doctrine of the Trinity (Warfield, 1981:141-142; Calvin, 2008:77).

In Nicene tradition, the Old Testament reveals the doctrine of the Trinity implicitly while the New Testament teaches the doctrine, largely via narrative, explicitly. Perhaps the clearest demonstration of the shift from Old Testament theism to narrative revealed Trinitarianism is seen in the distinction between the Father and the Son (Cooper, 1998:108). With the incarnation of Jesus as God the Son, there is an identifiable plurality of persons who are the one God of the Old Testament (Deut. 6:4). In fact, the Father-Son relationship of persons in the Godhead is referenced in all but three letters of the New Testament (Coppedge, 2007:24). In the Gospel narratives alone, this relationship between Father and Son is noted 275 times. The prime example of this Father-Son relationship is seen in the unique way in which Jesus addressed the Father in prayer (Jeremias, 1989:57).

Beyond merely the familial relationship of the Father and Son presented in the New Testament, the portrayal of the Son as God is quite compelling. In the prologue of John, the Word (Jesus) is referred to as *theos* or God (Jn. 1:1). In fact, John 1:1-3 refers to the Word as *theos* but then also states that the Word was with God (*pros ton theon*); the implication is that while there is only one God, He is multi-personal. Throughout the Synoptics and John's narratives, the deity of Jesus is either taught or implied. For instance, the account of Jesus walking on water (Matt. 14:25; Mk. 6:48; Jn. 6:19) is found in three the Gospels. This particular account implicitly points to the deity of Christ because the Old Testament clearly states that *Yahweh* alone has power over the sea (Ps. 107:23-32; Isa. 43:16), and *Yahweh* alone can walk on the waters (Job 9:8). Elsewhere in the New Testament, Jesus is spoken of as *eikōn tou theou tou aoratou* (Col. 1:15). He is literally the mirror image of God the Father. Yet, the New Testament authors are careful to note that the Father-Son relationship and the shared nature of

deity does not imply a time-space, biological origination of the Son. Rather, the relationship of the Son to the Father speaks of the one-of-a-kind relationship that Jesus has with God the Father. This is why the Son's relationship to the Father is described as *monogenēs* and not *monogenetos* (Carson, 1996:30; Rogers & Rogers, 1998:185; Thielman, 2005:154; Mounce, 2006:1214).

The biblical authors go beyond assigning deity to just the Father and the Son by also referring to the Holy Spirit as deity. Matthew's Gospel connects the role of the Spirit as equal in the baptismal formulation occurring in Matthew 28:19. Mark records Jesus preaching against blaspheming the Holy Spirit, even though Scripture only describes blasphemy as committed against God (see Frame, 2002:686). Additionally, the Spirit is described as exercising attributes that only deity can possess (I Cor. 2:10-11; Ps. 139). Thus, with the background of Old Testament monotheism, there is a new dynamic in the completion of the text of the New Testament: a multi-personal God.

### **7.3 Joseph Smith's Tritheism in Light of Nicene Orthodoxy Grounded in the Christian Scriptures: Conclusion**

Because it is foundational, the importance of this data in assessing the tritheism of Joseph Smith cannot be overstated. Even though this information serves to provide a brief summary of the arguments presented in chapter three, it is valuable to recount the same in the present chapter. What can be ascertained from the textual data is that the authors of the Christian Scripture argued for the existence of one deity, God. However, they further attributed tri-personality to this being in the persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Without question, there is a tension present in the affirmation of one God (qualitatively) and three persons (relationally). Yet, this is precisely what the content of Scripture naturally leads the reader to understand as being descriptive of the divine being. Therefore, the content of historic, orthodox, the Christian Scripture provides the necessary revelatory support for Nicene orthodoxy.

#### 7.4                    **Joseph Smith's Tritheism in Light of the Historical Development of Nicene Orthodoxy**

The interaction with the Christian Scripture as the basis for Nicene orthodoxy demonstrates the theological ground in which creedal, Nicene orthodoxy grew. As argued in chapter four, the creedal formulations of Nicene orthodoxy took shape over an extended period of time. However, the earliest Christians held to the central elements of Nicene orthodoxy as revealed in the Christian Scripture. This means that historical inquiry indicates that there has never been a time in which Nicene orthodoxy (at least in nascent form) was not synonymous with apostolic doctrine (Rusch, 1980:3).

Prior to A.D. 100, both Clement (*I Clem.* 46:6; 58)(*ANF*(9):243, 249) and Ignatius (*Mag.*, 13)(*ANF*(1):64) wrote to Christians, speaking of there being only one God while referring to Him using a triadic schema. By the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr was actively defending Christianity by arguing for the persons of the Godhead as sharing in the divine nature (*I Apol.*, 63)(*ANF*(1):184), while remaining one being and distinct in personhood (*Dial.*, 61)(*ANF*(1):227). In the same period, Athenagoras defended Christianity against paganism by arguing that orthodox Christians are monotheists (*Plea.*, 10)(*ANF*(2):133). By the close of this century, Irenaeus argued that the triunity of the one God is a necessarily belief, because the plan of redemption is grounded in the tri-personality of God (Lohse, 1985: 44; cf. Torrance, 1996:75).

Moving beyond the second century and into the third, it is noteworthy that even theologians such as Origen spoke of God as a plurality of *hypostases*, but only one in being (*Joh.*, 1989:2.6; *Princ.*, 1.3.7; cf. Lyman, 2011:120). During this same period, Tertullian would coin the term Trinity and enter it into the orthodox theological lexicon. Similar to Origen, Tertullian (*Apol.*, 21)(*ANF*(3):33-36) argued that there is one being (God) but there are three persons who share equally and totally in the nature of that one being (*Prax.*, 25)(*ANF*(3):621; cf. Dunn, 2004:35-36; Osborn, 2003:117). Thus, prior to the council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 Christians adhered to a rather developed form of Trinitarianism.

Following the Council of Nicaea's affirmation and restatement of historic, apostolic Christian doctrine, orthodox theologians reached new levels in creedal explanations of the Trinity. Significantly, Gregory of Nyssa penned a work, *On Not Three Gods*, specifically aimed at curtailing the accusation that Christians were tritheists. Gregory asserted that the persons of the Godhead are not merely unified in purpose but derive their nature as deity by being one in essence (*Tres dii.*)(*NPNF-2*(5):334). While Gregory acknowledges that some misunderstand the biblical teaching of three persons to imply three gods, Gregory argues that such an interpretation fails to coherently synthesise the full content of Scripture (Ayers, 2004:360). Augustine further describes the orthodox understanding of the Trinity by stating that no single person of the Godhead could be called God (Hill, 2003:87). Rather, triunity is intrinsic to deity in such a way that only a single being that is plural in persons could ever be rightly referred to as God (*Trin.*, 5.9.)(*NPNF-1*(3):92). Therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity revealed in Scripture is not a mere collection of deified individuals acting as one God, but one God revealed in three distinct persons (Hill, 2003:87-88).

#### **7.5 Joseph Smith's Tritheism in Light of the Historical Development of Nicene Orthodoxy: Conclusion**

The weight of history stands over and against the charge of Joseph Smith that early Christians were actually tritheists. The conclusion that must be derived from the content of chapter three when combined with chapter four is simply this: Christian orthodoxy has always been Nicene. Trinitarianism, at least in nascent form, has been the orthodox approach to understanding the Godhead since the advent of the church. Because Christianity has been Nicene in its theology proper from the apostolic era, any attempt to understand or explain the Godhead that does not adhere to the bounds of orthodoxy established in the Old and New Testaments, and creedally affirmed in the early church, ought to be understood as an unorthodox and distinct break from historic Christianity.

## **7.6 Joseph Smith's Tritheism in Light of His Historical Context**

Taking into consideration the conclusions presented thus far, what specific factors could be pointed to in establishing how and why Joseph Smith broke from historic, Nicene orthodoxy? The bulk of this information was examined in chapter five. However, it is pertinent to present a synthesis of this data and its resultant conclusion.

Joseph Smith's tritheism must be recognised as developing, somewhat naturally, from his historical context. With the dawn of the eighteenth century in North America came a renewed desire for liberty. Colonists had begun resenting the unfair taxation they were enduring under the rule of Great Britain, and for some the total freedom from the Old World was necessary. In the midst of this scenario, the theological rule of the day was largely orthodox, due in part to the influence of the Puritans. However, there arose an anti-orthodox sentiment resulting from the mingling of ecclesiastical and governmental powers in the Old World.

A pivotal change in North American religion occurred in early eighteenth century with the outbreak of the Great Awakening. While initially precipitating under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards (Noll, 2010:77-78; Latourette, 2007(2):959), it was to be the itinerant preaching of George Whitefield (Ahlstrom, 1972:283; Latourette, 2007(2):959; Hill, 2006:332) that would carry the excitement and religious enthusiasm of the Great Awakening across North America. A number of the results of the Great Awakening were positive and included a renewed interest in the gospel. However, some of the transformative results were a disregard for traditional orthodoxy (Noll, 2010:107) and an emphasis upon moving from a clergy-centred to a laity-centred ecclesiology. (Noll, 2005:48-49; Noll, 1992:98; cf. Sweet, 1973:134). The most significant consequence was the development of Christian Republicanism (Sandoz, 2006:6; Shelley, 2008:349; Noll, 2005:49). It was Christian Republicanism that galvanised religious institutions in their support of independence. However, the blending of religiosity with the ideals of republicanism led to a negative outlook upon the perceived tyranny of traditional, Nicene institutions (Gonzalez, 1999(2):240; Sweet, 1973:172; Noll, 2005:55; Noll, 1992:151; Latourette, 2007(2):961-963). For the purpose of this research, one of the most significant findings is that many of the religious movements

fuelling Christian Republicanism were either heterodox at best, or anti-Trinitarian at worst (Clark, 1994:38-39; Mathisen, ed., 2006:150).

In the years following the American Revolution, there were an increasing number of alternative and unorthodox religious movements (Ahlstrom, 1972:356-357; Gonzalez, 1999(2):240; Latourette, 2007(2):1046). The influence of these movements, Christian Republicanism, and new religious attitudes had a lasting impact upon Joseph Smith's family. In all, Smith's grandparents (Riley, 1902:15-16; Brodie, 1995:4), uncle Jason (Remini, 2002:11-12; Bushman, 2007:33; Smith, 1853:22-23), and parents (Kauffman & Kauffman, 1912:17-18; Brodie, 1995:5) all adhered to, dabbled in, or were committed to unorthodox and even anti-Trinitarian movements.

Furthermore, in the same areas in which Joseph Smith and his family frequented, there were numerous anti-Nicene sects (Newman, 2010:184). Briefly, these groups included Isaac Bullard's "Pilgrims," who organised their movement within a few minute walk from the Smith residence in Vermont (Brodie, 1995:12). Bullard, who claimed to be a prophet (Newman, 2010:210), encouraged free-love (Tucker, 2004:43), preached the imminent end of all things (Newman, 2010:210), and eventually led his followers on the same migration path that the Latter Day Saints travelled under Smith's direction (Tucker, 2004:43; Brodie, 1995:12; Newman, 2010:210-211).

Another probable influence upon Smith's theological formation is that of Jemima Wilkinson. While possibly claiming to have been Jesus in female form (Tucker, 2004:42-43; Brodie, 1995:13), Wilkinson clearly believed herself to be a prophetess (Wisbey, 2009:21) who disregarded traditional marriage and was bent on restoring true doctrine to the earth (Tucker, 2004:42-43). What is more striking is that Wilkinson's community existed just twenty-five miles from Smith's Palmyra home and was often referred to in the Palmyra newspaper (Brodie, 1995:13).

Beyond the probable influences of Bullard or Wilkinson, Joseph Smith was admittedly familiar with the Shakers (*D&C* 49:1; Davidson, *et al.*, 2012(2):38). Holding to an unorthodox view of sexuality (Guttek & Guttek, 1998:33), the Shakers established their community in New York, not far from Palmyra (Tucker, 2004:40). As a group that

rejected much of traditional, historic orthodoxy, the Shakers undoubtedly influenced the young Joseph Smith.

Perhaps even more compelling than the known and probable influences of alternative movements upon Joseph Smith, were the popular visionaries of the day with whom he had contact. Many of these supposed visionaries would either pass through Palmyra, adjacent towns, or have their visions published and available in Palmyra, New York. The central elements of many of these visions are found in Smith's own First Vision. Included in these details are reports of seeing the Father and Jesus (Quinn, 1998:14) while praying in the woods (Smith, 1840:57-59) and being informed that all the churches of the Christendom are corrupt (Bushman, 2007:60; cf. Abanes, 2003:21).

#### **7.7 Joseph Smith's Tritheism in Light of His Historical Context: Conclusion**

It is rather inconceivable that Smith was not directly shaped by the beliefs of his own family. Varying degrees of unorthodox theology and anti-Nicene sentiments permeated the Smith bloodline. Moreover, throughout Joseph's formative years, he was in consistent and close proximity or contact with anti-Nicene movements and teachers. Additionally, Smith's First Vision account borrows heavily from details of supposed visions that were widely reported in his area. Therefore, Smith's tritheism must be understood as an inevitable consequence of Joseph's family influence and historical, religious context.

#### **7.8 Joseph Smith's Tritheism in LDS Literature**

The scriptural support for Smith's tritheism is rooted in the *Book of Mormon* and *The Pearl of Great Price*. Yet, as discussed in chapter six, the contents of the *Book of Mormon* reflect a somewhat orthodox or Nicene understanding of the Godhead. In the *Book of Mormon*, much of the material on the nature of God alternates between Trinitarian language and modalism (Vogel, 1989:17-33). Given that Smith's theology evolved over a period of time, this confusion fits with the previously mentioned conclusions derived from the data examined in previous chapters.

Near the time of the publication of the *Book of Mormon*, Smith was still espousing a somewhat orthodox understanding of the Godhead (*D&C* 20:17-28). In fact, Smith's attempt to re-translate the book of Genesis, in 1830, was heavily monotheistic when referring to the Godhead. It was not until the period between 1832 and 1833 that Smith began explicitly denying orthodoxy as it related to the nature of God (*D&C* 76:50-60; Kirkland, 1989:36). By 1838, Smith was routinely proclaiming a tritheistic understanding of the Godhead by asserting his belief in a plurality of gods (*D&C* 121:32). To validate this decisive move from orthodoxy, Smith posited a great falling away, in the early church, from apostolic doctrine. According to Smith, Amos 8:11-12 represents a prophecy regarding a Great Apostasy, which was fulfilled shortly after the death of the Apostle John. Further bolstering his claims against orthodoxy, Smith produced a new text supporting his theology. In 1842, Smith began "translating" ancient papyri that he claimed were written by Abraham. In the course of his translation, Smith referred to the Godhead as "gods" forty-eight times. Then in 1844, an article appeared in the LDS publication *Times and Seasons*, where Smith expressly taught tritheism as the orthodox Mormon position (Roberts, 1980:474).

The translation of the Book of Abraham represented the textual support Smith needed in order to dogmatically prescribe the worship of three gods who acted as one God while existing among a plurality of divine beings. However, as was explored in chapter six, the content of the papyri translated by Smith as the Book of Abraham were actually Egyptian funerary texts (Tucker, 2004:61; Baer, 1968:111; Rhodes, 1977:265). Therefore, Smith's much-needed scriptural support for his tritheism has been demonstrated to be an utter forgery.

## **7.9 Joseph Smith's Tritheism in LDS Literature: Conclusion**

Provided that Smith's theology underwent a clear and historically identifiable evolution, the material uncovered in chapter six confirms the conclusion derived from the previous chapters. The aforementioned conclusion of chapters three through five is that Smith's tritheism was a result of his own fertile imagination and his life-long influences that were well outside the bounds of Nicene orthodoxy. Smith's claims regarding the prophecy of Amos 8:11-12 have been demonstrated to be radically untrue

(Amos 1:3-2:16; cf. Heschel, 2007:30-31; Mays, 1969:149; Finley, 2003:268; Sweeney, ed., 2000:267-268; Matthews, 2005:127-129; Bruce, 1997:51-58). The fact that this prophecy is verifiably fulfilled in the Assyrian captivity undermines Smith's entire premise for "restoring" supposedly apostolic doctrine. Additionally, the clear and coherent Nicene content of Christian doctrine from the time of the Apostles and beyond (chapter four) is consistent with the conclusions of this research, but not with the claims of Joseph Smith. Furthermore, Smith's theology is philosophically and theologically incoherent. As discussed in chapter six, the necessary implication of Smith's theology is that of an eternal regression of gods. However, the existence of an actual infinite is both impossible and demonstrated to be false by the existence of the present. Moreover, Smith's urging of his followers to worship the three gods of tritheism as one God, fails to provide a consistent object of worship. Therefore, the conclusion of this section of data is that Smith's move from orthodoxy to heterodoxy and then eventually to tritheism was fuelled by his own desire to create a religion to rival Nicene orthodoxy.

#### **7.10 Final Conclusions**

This research project has achieved its aim in establishing that Nicene orthodoxy is grounded in the consistent teaching of the Christian Scripture on the nature of God. Decisively monotheistic in content, the Scriptures also reveal a plurality of divine persons. Nicene orthodoxy has historically sought to express this truth through creedal affirmations of the biblical content. The resulting Nicene theology has stood as the core of orthodoxy for nearly 2,000 years. Leading up to and following the American Revolution, there was a development of anti-Nicene attitudes and alternative religious movements. Joseph Smith was born into a period where people were preoccupied with religious excitement and unorthodox theology. Much of what Smith would later espouse can be directly and historically traced to a variety of theological contacts and influences during this period. He eventually attempted to ungird his theological proclamations via philosophically incoherent prophetic utterances and translative forgeries. Therefore, the result of prudent research reveals that Joseph Smith is neither a unique prophet nor a skilled theologian. Instead, the final analysis demonstrates Joseph Smith to be merely one of many would-be unorthodox religious founders of his era.

Yet, the success of his unorthodox community and its impact upon religion in North America cannot be denied.

### **7.11 Objectives Fulfilled**

Based upon the conclusions that organically arise from the material engaged in each of the chapters of this study, the initial objectives have been met (1.4.2). In fulfilling the objectives prescribed in chapter one, the contributions of this study to scholarly engagements with Joseph Smith and his theology should be noted. First, the findings of the present research serve to bridge the gap between historical treatments of Smith's life (Bushman, 2005; Remini, 2002; Smith, 1853; Caswall, 1843) and of those that interact with his theology (Abanes, 2003; Tucker, 2004; Tucker, 1867). As previously discussed, connections have been successfully established between Smith's historical context, theological influences, life experiences, and his eventual theological evolution. Second, this study fulfils its intended objectives by engaging with Smith's theological innovations from a Nicene position, rooted in the text of Scripture and affirmed throughout early church history. While this investigation focuses upon a rather well-researched historical figure, Joseph Smith, the approach and emphasis of this project has been unique. The effective integration of multiple disciplines in this project, focused primarily upon church history and historical theology, provides substantive gains in scholarly knowledge regarding Joseph Smith's tritheism.

### **7.12 Further Research**

A number of disciplines and investigative approaches have been employed throughout the course of this project. However, no single research effort can entail all of the necessary avenues of study for thoroughly engaging any topic. Therefore, areas necessitating further inquiry beyond the contents of the present project ought to be briefly mentioned.

### **7.12.1 Further Research: The Origins of the *Book of Mormon***

Important details of Joseph Smith's evolving theology have been scrutinised. Further, the rather orthodox theology in the *Book of Mormon* has been noted. Still, much more can and should be done in terms of researching the theological content of the *Book of Mormon* as it relates to the theological convictions of Joseph Smith during the period of its compilation. Two volumes of note are David Persuitte's *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon* (2000) and Cowdery, Davis, and Vanick's *Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon* (2005). While both of these volumes go to great lengths to uncover the possible literature from which Smith derived the content of the *Book of Mormon*, neither text attempts to trace the theological themes of the *Book of Mormon* in connection to Smith's own theological development in researchable, historical datum. In order to adequately address Smith's theological evolution, this area of research has to be engaged.

### **7.12.2 Further Research: Smith's Philosophy of Religion**

The present project explores the lack of philosophical coherence inherent to Smith's tritheism. In the past, Nicene Christian Francis Beckwith (2000) has undertaken a full-fledged attempt to evaluate LDS theology in regards to philosophical coherence. Recently, Beckwith acted as one of three editors for a volume entitled, *The New Mormon Challenge* (2002). The latter title briefly interacts with the philosophical basis of a number of elements inherent to the LDS worldview. As helpful as Beckwith's efforts have been, there needs to be a thorough engagement of Smith's theology and worldview based upon its philosophical coherence. Such an endeavour should further provide insights into the potential influences upon Smith's own theology and worldview. Additionally, the results of this proposed area of investigation would be beneficial in further solidifying the stark contrasts between the theology and worldview of Nicene Christianity and that of Joseph Smith.

### **7.13 Final Thoughts**

The findings of this project will serve as a reminder of the dramatically unorthodox claims of Joseph Smith and his attempt to develop a religious system intent on supplanting Nicene Christianity. However, as the suggestions for further research demonstrate, the range of potential research regarding Joseph Smith's theological development has not been exhausted. Nicene thinkers must continue to interact with Joseph Smith's theology, life, and worldview in order to provide meaningful appraisals of both Smith and the church he founded.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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