**The Doctrine of Exaltation in Latter-day Saint Theology: Origin, History, and Development**

**1. Introduction: Defining Apotheosis in Latter-day Saint Theology**

**1.1. Defining Exaltation/Apotheosis**

Within the theological framework of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), the concept of **exaltation** represents the ultimate potential for humanity, extending far beyond conventional notions of salvation. It is explicitly defined not merely as escaping damnation or achieving a state of heavenly rest, but as attaining "eternal life," which is understood as "the kind of life God lives".1 This state signifies dwelling eternally in the presence of God the Father and Jesus Christ, achieving perfection, living in "great glory," possessing "all knowledge and all wisdom," and inheriting divine attributes, including the power to create and become a "Father [or Mother] of spirit children".1 Exaltation is thus presented as the process of becoming like Heavenly Father, the culmination of mortal and post-mortal progression, and is described as the "greatest gift that Heavenly Father can give His children".1

**1.2. Report Objective and Scope**

This report aims to provide a comprehensive, historically grounded, and doctrinally nuanced analysis of the origin, development, scriptural basis, and evolving presentation of this distinctive Latter-day Saint doctrine of human deification, apotheosis, or exaltation. It will trace the concept from its nascent expressions and potential antecedents through its formal articulation by the movement's founder, Joseph Smith, particularly in key revelations and sermons. The analysis will encompass its elaboration by subsequent Church leaders like Brigham Young and Lorenzo Snow, its foundation within the Latter-day Saint scriptural canon (the Standard Works), its intricate connection to core doctrines such as pre-mortal existence and eternal families, and its contemporary interpretation and presentation by the Church through official manuals, curriculum, online resources like the Gospel Topics Essays, and addresses by general authorities. The report will also acknowledge related complexities and historical points of controversy as reflected in the available source materials.

**1.3. Centrality and Uniqueness**

The doctrine that humans can progress to become like God holds a unique and central position within the Latter-day Saint understanding of the "plan of salvation," also referred to as the "plan of happiness" or "plan of progression".1 While echoes of divine potential can be found in the concept of *theosis* within some early Christian traditions 14, the Latter-day Saint formulation is distinct in its literalness, scope, and integration into a comprehensive cosmology. It fundamentally shapes the understanding of God's nature, humanity's identity and potential, and the overarching purpose of mortal existence.17 Indeed, God's own "work and glory" is explicitly defined in Latter-day Saint scripture as bringing about this very potential in His children: "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39).1

The definition of exaltation not merely as a final destination but as the very *purpose* of God's plan 7 and the ultimate potential offered to His children—the "greatest gift" 1—imbues the concept with profound motivational force within the faith. This framing elevates the significance of religious observance beyond mere compliance for heavenly reward. Adherence to commandments and participation in sacred ordinances 1 are thus understood not just as meeting requirements for entry into heaven, but as essential steps in a transformative, developmental journey toward godliness. This journey is often described as a gradual, "step by step" progression 1, a process of "becoming" like God.1 This perspective contrasts sharply with theological systems where salvation is primarily viewed as rescue from a fallen state or the attainment of a static, unchanging heavenly existence. For Latter-day Saints, mortality and the entire gospel plan are oriented towards this ultimate goal of divine potential.

**2. Foundational Concepts: Pre-mortal Existence, Eternal Intelligence, and Divine Potential**

The Latter-day Saint doctrine of exaltation rests upon a unique theological foundation concerning the nature of human existence before mortality and the inherent potential derived from humanity's relationship with God.

**2.1. Eternal Intelligence**

A cornerstone of this foundation, articulated most explicitly by Joseph Smith in the latter part of his ministry, particularly around the time of the King Follett Discourse, is the concept that the essential core of human identity—referred to as "intelligence," the "mind of man," or the "immortal spirit"—is eternal and uncreated.18 Smith taught that this intelligence "exists upon a self-existent principle" and is "coequal [or coeternal] with God himself".31 This teaching directly challenges the traditional Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), positing instead that intelligence, like God, has always existed.33 Smith employed the analogy of a ring, which has no beginning or end, to illustrate this eternal nature, arguing that anything with a beginning must logically have an end, thus linking the concept of eternal intelligence to the hope of immortality and refuting annihilation.31 He asserted, "God never had the power to create the spirit of man at all. God himself could not create himself. Intelligence is eternal".31 While intelligence itself is eternal, Smith taught that these intelligences or spirits are "susceptible of enlargement".31

**2.2. Spirit Children of Heavenly Parents**

Building upon the concept of eternal intelligence, Latter-day Saint doctrine teaches that prior to mortal birth, all humans existed as individual spirit beings, organized from eternal intelligence or spiritual matter.40 Crucially, these spirits are understood to be the literal offspring of divine parents—a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother.1 The existence of a Heavenly Mother, while less frequently elaborated upon in scripture, is affirmed in official Church documents like "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" and the Gospel Topics Essay "Mother in Heaven".22 This pre-mortal existence was a period of learning, development, and agency, where spirits grew and made choices that would influence their mortal experience.18 A "Council in Heaven" was held where God presented His plan for progression, which involved gaining a physical body and mortal experience.12 Jesus Christ was chosen as the Savior within this plan, while Lucifer rebelled and was cast out along with his followers.18

**2.3. Inherent Divine Potential**

The combination of eternal intelligence and literal divine parentage forms the theological basis for the doctrine of human potential to become like God.1 Because humans are God's offspring, created in His image spiritually and potentially physically 18, they possess inherent "seeds of divinity" 15 and the capacity for eternal "enlargement" 18 and infinite progression.4 Joseph Smith taught that God the Father, finding Himself "in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself".17 This relationship places humanity in a position to continually advance in knowledge, power, and glory.18

This synthesis of eternal intelligence and divine parentage constitutes a significant departure from traditional Christian anthropology. Rather than viewing humanity primarily as created beings, inherently fallen and wholly dependent on divine grace for existence and salvation from sin, Latter-day Saint theology posits humans as eternal beings possessing an innate divine nature and potential. Mortality is thus framed not solely as a fallen state requiring rescue, but as a crucial, planned stage of development—a "second estate" following the "first estate" of pre-mortal life 18—designed to provide experiences necessary for progression toward godhood. This perspective offers a fundamentally different understanding of human nature, purpose, and ultimate destiny compared to many other Christian traditions, emphasizing inherent potential and developmental progression rather than solely creaturely dependence or recovery from a fall.

**3. Joseph Smith and the Articulation of Exaltation**

While the foundational concepts of pre-mortal life and divine potential were developing, the specific doctrine of exaltation—becoming Gods—received its most forceful and explicit articulation during the later years of Joseph Smith's ministry, particularly through key revelations and sermons.

**3.1. Early Seeds and Revelations (D&C 76)**

A pivotal moment occurred in February 1832, when Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon received a vision, now canonized as Doctrine and Covenants section 76.47 This vision arose while they were working on the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, specifically pondering John 5:29 regarding the resurrection of the just and the unjust, and contemplating the nature of heaven.47 The vision revealed a multi-tiered heaven with three main kingdoms of glory: celestial, terrestrial, and telestial.7

While D&C 76 does not use the term "exaltation" in the specific way it would later be defined, it laid crucial groundwork. It described the inhabitants of the highest kingdom, the celestial, in terms that clearly pointed toward divine potential. These individuals, who received the testimony of Jesus, were baptized, kept the commandments, and were sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, would become members of the "church of the Firstborn".47 The revelation declared that the Father gives "all things" into their hands, that they become "priests and kings," receive of God's "fulness, and of his glory," and, most significantly, are "gods, even the sons of God".5 They would dwell eternally in the presence of God and Christ and inherit all things.47 This revelation established the principle of graded rewards in the afterlife and explicitly introduced the concept that the most faithful could attain godhood, setting the stage for later elaborations.

**3.2. The King Follett Discourse (April 1844)**

Perhaps the most famous and direct public explanation of exaltation by Joseph Smith came in his sermon delivered on April 7, 1844, commonly known as the King Follett Discourse.33

**3.2.1. Historical Context**

The sermon was delivered during a general conference of the Church in Nauvoo, Illinois, less than three months before Smith's martyrdom.38 Ostensibly given as a memorial for King Follett, a Church member who had recently died in an accident, Smith used the occasion to address profound theological themes concerning the nature of God, the origin and destiny of humanity, and the meaning of death and resurrection.33 The audience was estimated at around twenty thousand people, gathered outdoors in a tense period marked by internal dissent and external threats against Smith and the Church.36 Smith himself seemed aware of the sermon's significance, asking for "profound attention".34

**3.2.2. Transmission and Textual Issues**

No verbatim transcript of the two-hour-plus sermon exists.34 Our knowledge of its content relies on notes taken contemporaneously by at least four individuals: Willard Richards, Wilford Woodruff, Thomas Bullock, and William Clayton.33 Bullock's account, utilizing a personal shorthand, is considered the most detailed.33 Several versions have been created by amalgamating these notes. The first published version appeared in the Church newspaper *Times and Seasons* on August 15, 1844, primarily based on Bullock's and Clayton's notes.33 A later amalgamation, prepared in the 1850s by Church historian's clerk Jonathan Grimshaw, integrating all four accounts, has often been regarded as the standard or "official" version, having been reviewed and approved by Church authorities like Brigham Young, though it contains some editorial additions and redundancies.33 Despite the lack of a single perfect source text, scholars note a remarkable consistency in the core doctrines reported across the different accounts and subsequent amalgamations.33

**3.2.3. Key Doctrinal Assertions**

The King Follett Discourse contained some of Joseph Smith's most startling and explicit teachings on God and human potential:

* **God as an Exalted Man:** Smith declared unequivocally, "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret... If you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form".28 He taught that God the Father "dwelt on an earth, as Jesus Christ himself did".28 This directly countered the prevailing theological tradition of God as an immaterial, wholly other being.34
* **The Path to Godhood:** Smith directly instructed the Saints on their own potential: "you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead".4 He presented Jesus Christ as the exemplar, following the path His Father took.33
* **Eternal Intelligence:** The sermon reiterated the teaching that the fundamental "mind of man," the "intelligent part," is uncreated and coeternal with God.31
* **Creation as Organization:** Smith explicitly rejected creation *ex nihilo*, stating that God organized the world from pre-existing "chaotic matter" or "element" which is eternal.33

**3.2.4. Status and Reception**

Although considered by many Latter-day Saints and historians as perhaps Smith's greatest sermon and a defining statement on these doctrines 33, the King Follett Discourse is not part of the canonized Standard Works.33 However, its influence has been immense. It synthesized concepts Smith had introduced earlier into a powerful, cohesive narrative.34 Its teachings were immediately controversial; dissident members who published the *Nauvoo Expositor* just two months later cited the sermon's doctrines (plurality of gods, God progressing from manhood) as blasphemous and a justification for their opposition to Smith, an action that directly precipitated the events leading to his death.34 Despite the controversy and its non-canonized status, the Church continues to teach the core doctrines presented in the discourse, and modern official resources, including the Gospel Topics Essays and lesson manuals, reference it as a key source for understanding humankind's divine potential and the nature of God.14

**3.3. Eternal Marriage and Exaltation (D&C 132 - Recorded July 1843)**

Another crucial text for understanding the Latter-day Saint doctrine of exaltation is Doctrine and Covenants section 132, recorded in July 1843, though likely reflecting teachings related to temple ordinances introduced earlier.55

**3.3.1. Context**

The revelation was given through Joseph Smith and explicitly addresses the "new and everlasting covenant," which encompasses eternal marriage.55 Its recording was prompted by questions regarding the practice of plural marriage among biblical patriarchs like Abraham, and potentially by the questions and concerns of Joseph Smith's first wife, Emma, regarding the practice being introduced in Nauvoo.56

**3.3.2. Eternal Marriage as Requirement for Exaltation**

D&C 132 establishes a direct and indispensable link between eternal marriage and the highest degree of celestial glory, or exaltation. It states that to obtain this highest level, "a man must enter into this order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]; And if he does not, he cannot obtain it" (referencing D&C 131:1-4).2 The revelation details that any marriage covenant not made and sealed for time and eternity by the proper priesthood authority ("him who is anointed") and ratified by the "Holy Spirit of Promise" will not be valid after death.55 Conversely, a marriage performed by God's law and sealed appropriately will endure eternally.2 The revelation warns, "except ye abide my law ye cannot attain to this glory" 55, making celestial marriage a non-negotiable requirement for the fulness of exaltation. This reinforces the teaching that while salvation (overcoming death) may be individual, exaltation (achieving godhood) is inherently familial.8

**3.3.3. Promise of Godhood and Eternal Increase**

For those who enter into and abide by the covenant of eternal marriage, D&C 132 makes the explicit promise of godhood: "Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them".1 This state of godhood is directly linked to the concept of "eternal increase" or the "continuation of the seeds forever and ever".1 This phrase is consistently interpreted within Latter-day Saint theology as the ability of exalted, married couples—as gods and goddesses—to procreate spirit offspring in the eternities, organize worlds for them, and thus perpetuate the pattern of eternal families.3

Joseph Smith's later teachings, particularly the King Follett Discourse and the revelation recorded in D&C 132, represent a significant culmination and synthesis of earlier concepts. While D&C 76 introduced the possibility of becoming "gods," these later pronouncements provided the most explicit public articulation of the nature of God as an exalted man, the specific pathway for human exaltation to mirror God's progression, and the essential, covenantal role of eternal marriage in achieving that ultimate potential. The timing and content strongly suggest these teachings form the apex of Smith's revelations on the subject, integrating previously separate threads—pre-mortal life, divine nature, priesthood ordinances, eternal families—into a cohesive, though undeniably complex and, for many, controversial, doctrine of apotheosis.

Furthermore, the historical context reveals an inextricable link between the doctrine of exaltation and other distinctive, and often controversial, teachings of the Nauvoo period. D&C 132, the primary scriptural text promising godhood through eternal marriage, is simultaneously the foundational text justifying and commanding the practice of plural marriage.55 Access to the sealing ordinances required for exaltation was contingent upon participation in temple rituals, which were themselves new, developing, and initially practiced privately among a select group (the "Anointed Quorum").34 The fact that critics like those behind the *Nauvoo Expositor* denounced both the plurality of Gods and plural marriage in the same breath underscores this connection.34 Consequently, a thorough historical understanding of the doctrine of exaltation necessitates acknowledging its close association with these other challenging aspects of the Restoration during the Nauvoo era; attempting to separate them historically obscures the context in which the doctrine was fully articulated and received.

**4. Development and Elaboration in the 19th Century**

Following Joseph Smith's death in 1844, the foundational doctrines of exaltation were further elaborated, emphasized, and sometimes controversially interpreted by his successors, most notably Brigham Young and Lorenzo Snow.

**4.1. Brigham Young's Teachings**

Brigham Young, Joseph Smith's successor as President of the Church, frequently taught and strongly reinforced the concept of eternal progression towards godhood.6 He declared that the very purpose for which humankind was created was "of becoming Gods like Himself".6

**4.1.1. Nature of God and Man**

Young echoed and amplified Joseph Smith's teachings on the nature of God. He taught that God the Father, Elohim, was once a mortal being who lived on an earth, progressed, "obtained His exaltation, attained to thrones, gained the ascendancy," and then commenced the work of creation.60 He emphasized the kinship between God and humanity, stating that God is "of the same species as ourselves," differing primarily in His exalted, perfected state.60 Young asserted that humans lived with God as spirits for ages before mortality and are His literal offspring.60

**4.1.2. Adam-God Theory**

Perhaps the most controversial teaching associated with Brigham Young is the "Adam-God theory".39 In several discourses, Young identified Adam, the first man of Genesis, as "our Father and our God, and the only God with whom we have to do".65 The teaching suggested that Adam was a resurrected, exalted being (possibly Michael the Archangel) who, along with Eve (one of his celestial wives), came to this earth, partook of mortality to become its physical progenitors, and then returned to his divine status.39 This doctrine connected directly to themes of exaltation, viewing Adam not just as the first man but as the embodiment of the pattern of godhood achieved through mortal experience.38

**4.1.3. Status and Rejection of Adam-God**

While Brigham Young clearly taught this concept on multiple occasions, often claiming it as revelation, it was never fully systematized, reconciled with conflicting scriptural accounts (like the distinct roles of Elohim and Jehovah/Christ in the temple endowment narrative introduced under Young), or formally presented to the Church membership for a sustaining vote, which is the process required for establishing official doctrine.65 Consequently, the Adam-God theory never achieved the status of binding Church doctrine. His successors did not perpetuate the teaching publicly, and by the early 20th century, Church leaders were actively censuring its promotion.65 In 1976, President Spencer W. Kimball definitively stated that the Church does not endorse the Adam-God theory.65 The apologetic organization FAIR Mormon acknowledges Young taught the theory but emphasizes its non-doctrinal status, viewing it as an "anomaly" that is not fully understood and has been officially set aside by the modern Church.65

**4.1.4. Journal of Discourses**

Many of Brigham Young's teachings, including those on Adam-God, are recorded in the *Journal of Discourses*, a 26-volume compilation of sermons delivered primarily by Church leaders in Utah between 1854 and 1886.66 The precise status of this publication is debated. The current official Church website states it is "not an official publication".66 However, historical context shows it was initiated with the approval and endorsement of the First Presidency (including Brigham Young), published by Church leaders (often mission presidents who were also apostles), and intended to disseminate teachings to members, particularly in Europe.66 Brigham Young allowed himself to be listed as the author for all volumes.66 This ambiguity necessitates careful consideration when evaluating the doctrinal weight of statements found within the *Journal of Discourses*. While containing valuable historical insights into the teachings of early leaders, its contents are not considered canonized scripture and may include personal opinions or teachings later clarified or rejected.

**4.2. Lorenzo Snow's Couplet**

Lorenzo Snow, who served as the fifth President of the Church from 1898 to 1901, is credited with formulating perhaps the most famous and succinct expression of the doctrine of exaltation.

**4.2.1. Origin**

In the spring of 1840, years before becoming an apostle, Snow reported having a profound spiritual experience while listening to a friend, Elder H. G. Sherwood, explain a passage of scripture.28 Snow recalled, "the Spirit of the Lord rested mightily upon me—the eyes of my understanding were opened, and I saw as clear as the sun at noonday, with wonder and astonishment, the pathway of God and man".27 This led him to compose the couplet:

As man now is, God once was:

As God now is, man may be. 14

Feeling it was a "sacred communication," Snow initially shared it only with his sister Eliza R. Snow and later, confidentially, with Brigham Young.29 He reportedly refrained from teaching it publicly until he learned that Joseph Smith had already taught the underlying principles.29 According to accounts preserved by Snow's family, when he later shared the couplet with Joseph Smith, the Prophet affirmed it, saying, "Brother Snow, that is a true gospel doctrine, and it is a revelation from God to you".29

**4.2.2. Meaning and Impact**

Snow's couplet became a powerful and widely recognized mnemonic device, encapsulating the dual concepts central to the doctrine of exaltation: the belief that God the Father progressed from a state similar to mortal humanity, and the belief that mortal humans possess the potential to progress to a state of godhood.14 For Snow himself, this understanding became a driving force and "inspiration" throughout his life.28 Its simplicity and memorability contributed significantly to the popularization and persistence of the doctrine within Latter-day Saint culture.

**4.2.3. Status**

Like the King Follett Discourse, Lorenzo Snow's couplet itself has never been canonized as part of the official scriptures of the Church.14 However, its content, particularly the second line ("As God now is, man may be"), aligns closely with principles found in canonized revelations like D&C 76 and 132 and is widely accepted and taught as doctrine.27 The first line ("As man now is, God once was") draws its primary support from Joseph Smith's King Follett Discourse and Snow's own revelatory experience.14 While historically significant and reportedly endorsed by Joseph Smith, modern Church leaders and publications sometimes express caution regarding speculation about the specifics of God's pre-godhood existence, stating that "Little has been revealed about the first half of this couplet, and consequently little is taught".14

The historical trajectory of teachings like the Adam-God theory, alongside the varying interpretations of the *Journal of Discourses*' authority 66 and the non-canonized status of Lorenzo Snow's influential couplet 14, illustrates a dynamic within Latter-day Saint history regarding the relationship between pronouncements by Church leaders and formally canonized doctrine. Teachings promulgated by prophets, even Presidents of the Church, if not subjected to the formal process of canonization through common consent, remain open to later clarification, de-emphasis, or, as in the case of Adam-God, explicit rejection by subsequent leadership.65 This suggests a clear hierarchy where the Standard Works (Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price) hold ultimate doctrinal authority, and even teachings from respected historical figures require careful contextualization regarding their official standing and potential for later refinement or reinterpretation by living prophets guided by ongoing revelation.

Furthermore, Lorenzo Snow's couplet exemplifies how a memorable phrase can effectively popularize a complex theological concept, potentially overshadowing more nuanced scriptural passages or official statements. Its very simplicity, while making the doctrine accessible 28, may also inadvertently contribute to simplified or caricatured understandings, such as the notion of individuals "getting their own planet".14 The couplet's brevity lacks the detailed context and qualifications found in scriptures like D&C 76 and 132, or in longer expositions like the King Follett Discourse, regarding the stringent requirements, the indispensable role of Jesus Christ's Atonement, the communal nature of exaltation within families, and the emphasis on developing divine attributes rather than merely achieving a status.30 The fact that modern Church resources, like the "Becoming Like God" essay, explicitly address and seek to correct "cartoonish" interpretations 15 suggests an awareness that such popularizations, while impactful, can sometimes require careful contextualization to prevent misunderstanding.

**5. Scriptural Underpinnings Across the Standard Works**

While the most explicit statements regarding exaltation and becoming gods are found in the Doctrine and Covenants and the teachings of Joseph Smith, Latter-day Saints find support and context for this doctrine across their entire scriptural canon, interpreting passages through the lens of the Restoration.

**5.1. Bible (King James Version)**

Latter-day Saints frequently cite various passages from the Bible, particularly the King James Version (the Church's official English Bible), as supporting the foundational principles of exaltation:

* **Divine Parentage and Likeness:** Genesis 1:26–27 ("Let us make man in our image, after our likeness") is seen as literal evidence of humanity's divine heritage and potential.18 Acts 17:29 ("Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God") is similarly interpreted to support a literal parent-child relationship.18
* **Potential for Godhood/Divine Nature:** Psalm 82:6 ("I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High"), famously quoted by Jesus in John 10:34, is often referenced, though acknowledging its complex interpretations.16 More direct support is found in 1 John 3:2 ("Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him") 7 and 2 Peter 1:4, which speaks of becoming "partakers of the divine nature".7
* **Perfection and Fullness:** Matthew 5:48 ("Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect") is understood as a divine command pointing towards the ultimate goal of godliness.7 Ephesians 4:13 speaks of attaining "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" 23, and Ephesians 3:19 expresses the hope of being "filled with all the fulness of God".16
* **Inheritance and Joint-Heirship:** Romans 8:16–17 is a key text, stating that as children of God, believers are "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ," destined to inherit all things if they suffer with Him.6 Revelation 21:7 promises, "He that overcometh shall inherit all things," and Revelation 3:21 offers the faithful the chance to "sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne".16
* **Knowing God:** John 17:3 ("And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent") is linked to the idea that understanding God's true character is essential for the progression towards eternal life/exaltation.7

**5.2. Book of Mormon**

The Book of Mormon, while primarily focused on the testimony of Jesus Christ and the history of ancient American peoples, contains passages that Latter-day Saints connect to the broader themes of eternal progression and becoming like God:

* **Eternal Life as the Goal:** Characters like King Benjamin describe the "blessed and happy state" of those who keep God's commandments, promising they will "dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness" (Mosiah 2:41).7 Nephi exhorts readers to "press forward... feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end," promising "ye shall have eternal life" (2 Nephi 31:20).7
* **Becoming Sons and Daughters of Christ:** Through faith, repentance, and covenant, individuals can become the spiritual "sons and daughters" of Christ, born again as "new creatures" (Mosiah 27:25–26).32
* **Perfection through Christ:** Moroni urges readers to "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him," so that "by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ" (Moroni 10:32).73 He also prays that believers may become "sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him" (Moroni 7:48).32
* **Purpose of Existence:** The famous phrase "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25) is often linked to the "fulness of joy" associated with exaltation and eternal families.1
* **Mortal Preparation:** Alma teaches that "this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God" (Alma 34:32), emphasizing the importance of mortal choices for eternal destiny.7

**5.3. Doctrine and Covenants**

This volume of modern revelation contains the most explicit scriptural declarations on exaltation:

* **Eternal Life as Greatest Gift:** D&C 14:7 repeats the theme that "eternal life... is the greatest of all the gifts of God".1
* **Celestial Glory and Godhood (D&C 76):** As previously discussed, verses 50-70 and 92-96 describe celestial beings becoming "gods, even the sons of God," inheriting "all things," dwelling with God, and receiving His fulness.1
* **Inheriting All (D&C 84):** Verses 36-38 promise that those who receive the Father receive "all that my Father hath".7
* **Eternal Nature of Intelligence (D&C 93):** Verse 29 states, "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be".31
* **Eternal Marriage Requirement (D&C 131):** Verses 1-4 clearly state that the "new and everlasting covenant of marriage" is necessary to obtain the highest degree of the celestial kingdom.1
* **Promise of Godhood through Marriage (D&C 132):** Verses 19-23 contain the direct promise that eternally sealed couples who are faithful "shall be gods," possessing "all power" and the potential for "continuation of the seeds".1

**5.4. Pearl of Great Price**

This collection of translated and revealed texts provides crucial context for the plan of salvation and human potential:

* **God's Purpose (Moses 1):** Verse 39 defines God's work and glory as bringing about human "immortality and eternal life," framing His entire purpose around humanity's ultimate potential.1
* **Premortal Life and Plan (Abraham 3):** This chapter details the pre-earth existence of spirits as intelligences of varying degrees, the Council in Heaven, the presentation of the Father's plan, the foreordination of individuals (including the choosing of a Redeemer, Jesus Christ), and the purpose of the mortal "second estate" as a test of obedience.18
* **Creation Narrative (Moses 2-3, Abraham 4-5):** These accounts describe the creation, emphasizing humanity being made in God's image.74
* **Need for Purity (Moses 6):** Verse 57 states, "no unclean thing can dwell there [in God's kingdom], or dwell in his presence," highlighting the necessity of purification through Christ's Atonement for exaltation.73

The Latter-day Saint use of the Bible, in particular, demonstrates how foundational concepts revealed through Joseph Smith—such as pre-mortal existence, the eternal nature of intelligence, God's embodied nature, eternal progression, and restored priesthood authority—function as an interpretive lens. This lens unlocks meanings in biblical passages that often differ significantly from traditional Christian exegesis. Familiar verses speaking of being "children of God" (Acts 17:29), "joint-heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17), becoming "like him" (1 John 3:2), or being "perfect" as the Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48) are interpreted literally and expansively within the framework of exaltation.7 This interpretive approach is explicitly linked to the knowledge gained through the Restoration.18 The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible itself was undertaken with the belief that plain and precious truths had been lost and needed restoration.47 Therefore, the scriptural basis for the doctrine of exaltation within Mormonism relies not solely on the biblical text *in isolation*, but heavily on the specific theological framework provided by the Restoration, which reinterprets familiar passages in light of the unique revelations contained especially in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price.

**6. Exaltation, Eternal Life, and Eternal Families**

The concepts of exaltation, eternal life, and eternal families are deeply intertwined in Latter-day Saint theology, forming a cohesive vision of humanity's ultimate destiny.

**6.1. Defining the Connection**

In Latter-day Saint discourse, the term "eternal life" is frequently used as a synonym for exaltation.1 It signifies more than simply living forever, which is termed "immortality" and is considered a universal gift granted to all humankind through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.7 Eternal life, in contrast, denotes the *quality* or *kind* of life that God Himself lives—a life of perfection, glory, knowledge, power, and ongoing creation within an eternal family structure.1 Achieving this state is the ultimate goal of God's plan.

**6.2. The Indispensable Role of Eternal Marriage**

A central and defining feature of the doctrine is the requirement of eternal marriage, also known as celestial marriage or temple sealing, for achieving the *highest degree* of the celestial kingdom and thus the fulness of exaltation and godhood.1 Doctrine and Covenants 131:1–4 explicitly states that entry into the highest celestial degree requires entering into "this order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]".2 This ordinance must be performed by one holding the specific priesthood authority (the sealing power, restored by the prophet Elijah 58) within a dedicated temple, and the covenant must be kept faithfully and sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise to be valid beyond mortality.2 This requirement underscores the teaching, emphasized by leaders like Russell M. Nelson, that "salvation is an individual matter; exaltation is a family matter".8 While individuals can achieve salvation and a degree of glory based on their personal righteousness, the ultimate potential of godhood is presented as achievable only within the context of an eternally sealed marital relationship between a man and a woman.

**6.3. Eternal Families and Increase**

Exaltation is intrinsically linked to the concept of the eternal family. Those who achieve this state are promised they will be "united eternally with their righteous family members".1 The family unit, established through temple sealing, is believed to persist beyond the grave.2 Central to this eternal family structure is the doctrine of "eternal increase" or the "continuation of the seeds forever and ever," promised in D&C 132.1 This is understood within the Church as the capacity of exalted couples, functioning as gods and goddesses, to have spirit children of their own, organize worlds, and provide a plan for their offspring's progression, thus perpetuating the divine pattern established by Heavenly Father.3 The family is therefore viewed as "central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children" 8, and marriage is considered the primordial and only mortal social institution destined to endure into the eternities.78 The sealing power restored by Elijah serves not only to seal spouses but also to link children to parents across generations, ultimately connecting the entire faithful human family back to Adam and, through covenants, to God.8

**6.4. Modern Emphasis**

Contemporary Latter-day Saint teaching places strong emphasis on the eternal nature of the family, often encapsulated in the phrase "Families Are Forever".78 Temple worship focuses heavily on sealing ordinances that bind spouses, children to parents, and individuals to their deceased ancestors.8 This focus provides significant comfort, hope, and motivation for members to engage in family history research, perform vicarious temple ordinances for the dead, and strive to build strong, righteous families in mortality.45 The doctrine of eternal families is presented as a source of strength and perspective in navigating the challenges of life and the reality of death.45

The consistent linkage of exaltation with eternal family units and procreative potential reveals a concept of godhood distinct from many traditional theological views. Where some traditions might envision ultimate salvation as an individual's absorption into the divine essence or a state of contemplative rest, Latter-day Saint exaltation is fundamentally defined by eternal kinship and participation in the ongoing divine work of creation. Godhood is not a solitary achievement but an inherently relational and generative state, realized within an eternally expanding family structure. The promise is not merely to *be* like God in attributes, but to *do* what God does—create, nurture, and provide pathways for the progression of spirit offspring—within the covenantal bonds of eternal marriage.1 This unique integration of cosmology, kinship, and soteriology makes the doctrine of eternal families inseparable from the doctrine of exaltation itself.

**7. Modern Understanding and Presentation**

In contemporary times, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues to teach the doctrine of exaltation while navigating how best to present this profound and sometimes challenging concept to both its members and the wider world.

**7.1. Official Definitions and Requirements**

Current official Church materials, such as the *Gospel Principles* manual (used widely for decades) and the *General Handbook* (guiding Church administration and policy), consistently define exaltation as achieving eternal life—the quality of life God lives—in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom.1 These resources reiterate the essential requirements for attaining this state: exercising faith in Jesus Christ, repenting of sins, receiving sacred ordinances (including baptism, confirmation/gift of the Holy Ghost, priesthood ordination and magnification for men, the temple endowment, and eternal/celestial marriage), making and keeping the associated covenants, and enduring faithfully to the end of one's life.1 The blessings promised to the exalted include dwelling eternally with God and Christ, becoming gods, eternal family unity, eternal increase, and receiving a fulness of joy and all that the Father has.1

**7.2. The "Becoming Like God" Gospel Topics Essay**

Recognizing the need for accessible and accurate information on complex or sensitive historical and doctrinal topics in the digital age, the Church began publishing a series of "Gospel Topics Essays" on its official website around 2013.24 These essays, approved by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, aim to provide straightforward, in-depth treatments based on reliable sources, countering misinformation found elsewhere online.80

One key essay addresses the doctrine of exaltation, titled "Becoming Like God".7 Based on references to it and related discussions, the essay:

* Acknowledges the doctrine's historical roots in Joseph Smith's teachings (specifically mentioning the King Follett Discourse) and Lorenzo Snow's couplet.14
* Connects the Latter-day Saint concept to biblical passages (e.g., being children of God, joint-heirs with Christ, partakers of the divine nature) and draws parallels with the early Christian theological concept of *theosis* or deification.14
* Affirms the core teaching that humans are literal spirit children of Heavenly Parents (including a Heavenly Mother 24) and possess divine potential to progress toward perfection and become like God, made possible through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.15
* Explicitly addresses and seeks to correct common misrepresentations, particularly the "cartoonish image of people receiving their own planets." It emphasizes that the goal is to become *like* God, particularly in acquiring His perfect attributes (goodness, love, etc.), and to realize the "creative potential" hinted at by the wonders of creation, rather than focusing on literal planetary inheritance.14

The reception and handling of these essays have sometimes drawn comment. Some observers have noted that the essays, while publicly available, are not always prominently featured or frequently referenced in mainstream Church curriculum or discourse, leading to perceptions of them being somewhat "hidden in plain sight".14 The "Becoming Like God" essay itself became the subject of online discussion and speculation in mid-2021 when the link to it on the Church's website temporarily redirected to a different essay or became inaccessible.24 While the essay was subsequently restored, the incident highlighted the ongoing sensitivity surrounding the public presentation of this particular doctrine and fueled speculation, particularly among critics and former members, about whether the Church might be subtly attempting to distance itself from its more controversial aspects.24

**7.3. Contemporary Teachings (General Conference, etc.)**

Teachings from modern Church leaders, particularly in General Conference addresses, continue to affirm the fundamental doctrine of exaltation and divine potential:

* **Continued Affirmation:** Leaders consistently teach that the purpose of God's plan is to enable His children to become like Him and receive eternal life, the kind of life He lives.1 The potential to become "gods" is still referenced, often citing D&C 132.1
* **Emphasis on Process and Attributes:** There is a notable emphasis in contemporary discourse on the *process* of becoming like God. Talks often focus on the journey of conversion and the development of Christlike attributes—such as faith, hope, charity, patience, humility, and love—as the means by which individuals progress toward godliness.14 Elder Dallin H. Oaks, for instance, emphasized that the gospel challenges individuals not just to *know* something but to *become* something, and that the Final Judgment reflects "what we have become".32
* **Distinction: Salvation vs. Exaltation:** The crucial distinction between general salvation (immortality and a kingdom of glory for nearly all) and exaltation (the highest state, requiring specific covenants and ordinances) continues to be clearly articulated.8
* **Nuance and Caution:** While affirming the core doctrine, leaders often exercise nuance. Regarding the "God was once a man" aspect derived from the King Follett Discourse and Snow's couplet, leaders may acknowledge its historical teaching but emphasize that little has been officially revealed about the specifics of God's past.14 They actively counter caricatured interpretations, such as the "getting your own planet" idea, shifting the focus to inheriting God's attributes and creative potential in ways perhaps beyond current mortal comprehension.15
* **Centrality of Christ:** Above all, modern teachings consistently and forcefully emphasize that exaltation is entirely dependent upon the Atonement and grace of Jesus Christ. It is not something humans can earn independently but is made possible only through faith in Him, repentance, and adherence to the covenants He established.1

The Church's contemporary presentation of exaltation, as seen in official publications like the Gospel Topics Essays and the nuanced statements of its leaders, suggests a strategic approach to communicating this foundational yet complex doctrine. There is a clear affirmation of the core belief in human potential to become like God through Christ's Atonement.15 Simultaneously, there is a discernible effort to manage elements that are easily misunderstood or have historically generated controversy. This involves several tactics: grounding the teaching firmly in scripture, including passages from the Bible 23; drawing parallels with related concepts in broader Christian history like *theosis* 14; emphasizing the gradual, lifelong (and beyond) process of spiritual development and the acquisition of divine attributes 14; and consistently centering the entire possibility of exaltation on the saving grace of Jesus Christ.7 Concurrently, more speculative or literalistic interpretations—such as detailed scenarios of planetary inheritance or the precise nature of God's own progression—are often downplayed, contextualized, or explicitly refuted as caricature.14 The very creation of the "Becoming Like God" essay 80 and the public attention surrounding its temporary accessibility issues 24 underscore the perceived need for careful management of how this doctrine is presented to ensure doctrinal integrity while minimizing potential misunderstandings and external criticism.

**7.4. Distinguishing Salvation and Exaltation**

To clarify the unique position of exaltation within Latter-day Saint soteriology, the following table contrasts it with the broader concept of salvation:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Feature** | **Salvation** | **Exaltation** |
| **Definition** | Being saved from physical death (resurrection) and spiritual death (separation from God due to sin).8 | Attaining "eternal life," the kind of life God lives; becoming like God.1 The highest state of happiness and glory.7 |
| **Scope** | Universal potential for resurrection (immortality); varying degrees of glory based on righteousness.8 | Conditional; requires meeting specific requirements; the highest degree within the Celestial Kingdom.2 |
| **Key Requirements** | Faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism.8 | All requirements for salvation PLUS receiving the Holy Ghost, Priesthood (for men), Temple Endowment, Eternal (Celestial) Marriage, keeping all covenants, enduring to the end.1 |
| **Outcome/Blessings** | Resurrection; immortality; inheritance of a kingdom of glory (Telestial, Terrestrial, or lower Celestial).7 | Godhood; eternal life in God's presence; eternal family unity; eternal increase (spirit children); fulness of joy; inheriting all that the Father has (power, glory, dominion, knowledge).1 |
| **Nature** | Primarily an individual matter.8 | Primarily a family matter, requiring eternal marriage.2 |
| **Relevant Scriptures** | John 3:16; Acts 24:15; D&C 76 (general resurrection, different glories).7 | D&C 76:50-70; D&C 131:1-4; D&C 132:19-23; Romans 8:17; 1 John 3:2; Moses 1:39.1 |

**8. Conclusion: The Enduring Significance of Apotheosis**

The Latter-day Saint doctrine of exaltation, or the potential for humans to become Gods, represents one of the most distinctive and ambitious tenets of the faith. Its historical trajectory reveals a gradual unfolding and articulation, beginning with foundational concepts introduced by Joseph Smith regarding humanity's eternal nature and divine parentage. These ideas found their most forceful expression in Smith's later revelations and sermons, particularly the 1832 vision of the degrees of glory (D&C 76), the 1843 revelation on eternal and plural marriage (D&C 132), and the 1844 King Follett Discourse. These pronouncements synthesized earlier threads, explicitly teaching that God the Father is an exalted man and that humans, through faithfulness to the gospel covenants and ordinances administered by priesthood authority—especially eternal marriage—can follow a similar path of progression to achieve godhood.

Subsequent leaders like Brigham Young and Lorenzo Snow vigorously propagated this doctrine, with Snow's famous couplet ("As man now is, God once was; As God now is, man may be") providing a memorable, albeit non-canonized, summary that deeply permeated Latter-day Saint consciousness. While certain elaborations, such as Young's Adam-God theory, were later officially rejected, the core doctrine of exaltation remained central.

The essential components of this doctrine, consistently taught from the 19th century to the present, include: humans as literal spirit children of Heavenly Parents, possessing eternal intelligence and inherent divine potential; exaltation, synonymous with eternal life (the life God lives), as the ultimate goal of God's plan; the Atonement of Jesus Christ as the indispensable means by which exaltation is possible; and the necessity of obedience to gospel laws, participation in sacred ordinances (baptism, Holy Ghost, priesthood, temple endowment, and crucially, eternal marriage), and enduring faithfulness to covenants. The promised blessings encompass becoming like God, dwelling in His presence eternally within a family unit, possessing divine attributes and powers, and participating in "eternal increase"—the creation of spirit offspring and worlds.

The modern Church continues to affirm this doctrine while employing careful communication strategies to emphasize its core principles—progression, divine attributes, the centrality of Christ, the importance of family—and to counter potential misinterpretations or caricatures. Official resources like the Gospel Topics Essay "Becoming Like God" attempt to provide nuanced, authoritative explanations grounded in scripture and history.

Ultimately, the doctrine of exaltation profoundly shapes the Latter-day Saint worldview. It provides a unique answer to fundamental questions about human identity ("Where did we come from?"), purpose ("Why are we here?"), and destiny ("Where are we going?"). It imbues mortal life with immense significance as a crucial phase in an eternal journey of progression. It elevates the importance of family relationships, viewing them as potentially eternal and central to divine identity. It presents a view of God not as a static, distant creator, but as a literal Father who has paved the way for His children to achieve the same glory He possesses. While demanding unwavering commitment and lifelong striving, the doctrine of exaltation offers Latter-day Saints a vision of boundless hope and infinite potential, made accessible through the grace of Jesus Christ and adherence to His restored gospel. It remains a key distinguishing feature of Latter-day Saint theology, underpinning much of its practice and perspective.

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