

GOD THE ETERNAL FATHER

Psalm 90:2 declares: “From everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.” On February 5, 1840, Joseph Smith observed: “I believe that God is eternal. That he had no beginning, and can have no end. Eternity means that which is without beginning or end.”¹ However, just a few years later, Joseph Smith reportedly stated: “We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea.”² How can these both be true? What is affirmed in the first statement is refuted in the second. Now I am open to the possibility that Joseph Smith asserted contradictory statements. He was, after all, a prophet and not a systematic theologian. Perhaps we should see such statements as a paradox that can be resolved by seeing them as asserting that God is “God” in different senses. Perhaps we should see such statements as a *koan* that challenges us to transcend our limited perspective to achieve enlightenment. Yet there is something deep in me that holds that contradictory statements cannot both be true. Thus, the approach I want to explore here is whether these statements can be explained within the context of Joseph Smith’s beliefs about the one God and the plurality of gods. To do so, I adopt the scholastic dictum, “whenever a contradiction arises, make a distinction.”

For purposes of this discussion, I need to clarify a few terms as I will use them. While I believe that the way I use these terms is well within the family of meanings commonly used in Latter-day Saint discourse, I don’t pretend that Latter-day Saints speak this way in Sunday School.